



WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

THE NOVELS VOLUME ONE

HUNT FOR VOLDORIUS | HELSREACH | RYNN'S WORLD
FALL OF DAMNOS | BATTLE OF THE FANG | LEGION OF THE DAMNED
WRATH OF IRON | DEATH OF INTEGRITY | MALODRAX | PANDORAX

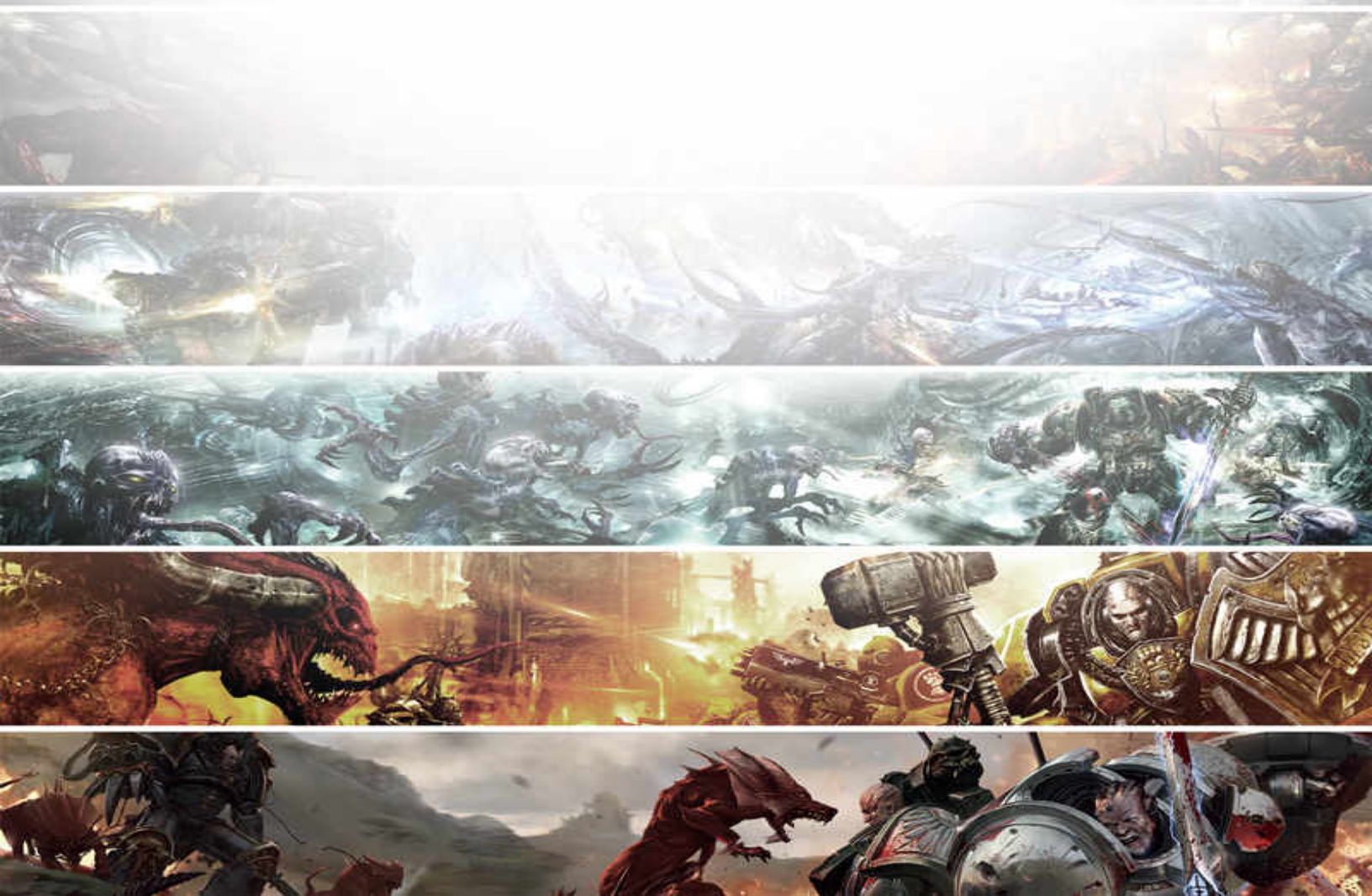


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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He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

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

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



HUNT FOR VOLDORIUS

ANDY HOARE



MAGULANOX

❖ SECTOR ❖

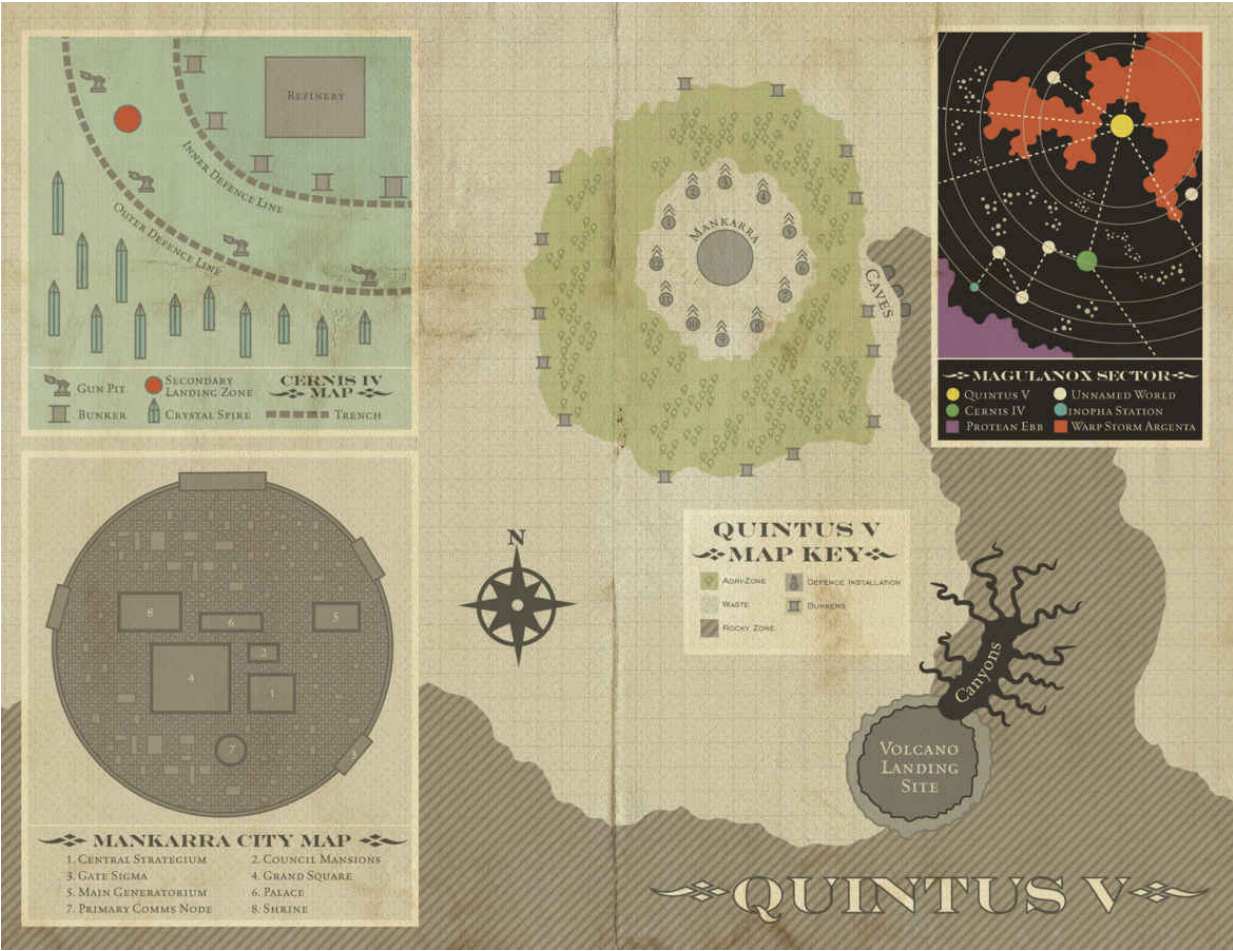
QUINTUS V MAPS

CERNIS IV

MANKARRA CITY

WHITE SCARS

3RD COMPANY TASK FORCE NOMAD



WHITE SCARS, 3RD COMPANY TASK FORCE NOMAD

FLEET



3RD COMPANY

CAPTAIN
KOR'SARRO KHAN,
MASTER OF THE HUNT
ON MOONDRACKAN



COMMAND SQUAD ON BIKES,
INCLUDING CHAMPION JHOGAI,
STANDARD BEARER YEKU,
APOTHECARY KHAGUS AND
BROTHERS TEMU AND KERGIS



TACTICAL SQUADS WITH BIKES -
TAURA, PATHA, CHAGAN, TEGUS,
UNEGHAN AND GHARAGHAL

ASSAULT SQUADS
SUHK, TUKAHN AND
SURENGHAN

DEVASTATOR SQUADS
CHULUUN AND
KHEREN

ATTACHED UNITS

LIBRARIANS



STORMSEER QAN'KARRO.
CODICIERS ILKHAN, SUBAS
AND ODAKAI

CHAPLAIN



CHAPLAIN XIA'GHAN

10TH COMPANY



SCOUT SQUAD KHOLKA



RHINOS -
FROM THE GLORIOUS HOST
OF THE MASTER OF
THE HUNT



PREDATOR BATTLE TANKS -
DESTROYER SOUL,
UNCONQUERED LORD AND
INDOMITABLE STORM



VINDICATOR SIEGE TANK
THUNDERHEART,
COMMANDER BY
SERGEANT KIA'KAN

HUNT FOR VOLDORIUS



Andy Hoare

'Once in every quarter century, the masters of the White Scars Chapter gather in the highest spire of their Chapter-Fortress, high atop the Khum Karta Mountains, to conduct the auspicious Rites of Howling. During this most solemn of rituals, the names of all those foes that have yet to be slain are read aloud, lest the proud and savage Sons of Chogoris ever forget their sworn duty to hunt down the enemies of the Emperor and of their mighty primarch, the honoured First, Lord Jaghatai Khan.

The fell deeds of each enemy are recounted, and great and terrible oaths are sworn. But no vow ever undertaken has been as binding, nor as solemn as that made by Kor'sarro Khan, fifty-first Master of the Hunt and Captain of the Third Company of the White Scars. For it was upon the centennial feast of the ascension of the Chapter's current Great Khan, the honoured Kyublai, that the name of Kernax Voldorius was read aloud for the final time.

The name of this most vile of daemon princes appears in the forbidden histories and the folklore of a thousand and more worlds, though none save the most highly placed amongst the Lords of the Imperium know the truth of his deeds. So too was he known by other names upon a thousand more planets. On Kento he was called the Vindictor; on Loran, the Unyielding Storm; and on cursed Blindhope, the Executioner. The Elder-Lords of the Seven Outer Marches named him the Hand of Night; the Sentinels of the Eye, the Curse of Lost Gods. It is said that only the Hidden Masters of the Ordo Malleus know the daemon's true name, and that seven of their number have fallen to his blade attempting to use it to gain power over him.

But of all of the evils this being had committed, the name of one is whispered across a hundred sectors. It was the deed that caused the mortal Kernax to be granted ascension by the fell powers of the empyrean, and to

take his place as a daemon prince of Chaos. Two thousand years ago, Voldorius brought about the wholesale slaughter of billions of souls, when he invoked the power of an ancient weapon created by madmen during the long lost Dark Age of Technology.

That weapon was the Bloodtide.

And so, Kyublai commissioned Kor'sarro to bring him the head of Kernax Voldorius, that it might be taken back to Chogoris, where according to the ancient ways of the White Scars, it might be encased in living silver and mounted upon a lance to be set upon the road to Khum Karta. Only then would the name of Kernax Voldorius be struck from the hunt. Only then would Kor'sarro Khan's duty be done.

Thus, Kor'sarro Khan, Master of the Hunt, undertook the greatest of challenges, a hunt that had defeated so many of his forebears, a hunt that would take him to every corner of the Imperium and beyond, over the course of a decade and more.

The Hunt for Voldorius.'

– Omniscienti Bithisarea, *Deeds of the Adeptus Astartes*, Volume IX, Chapter XXV, M.40 recension (suppressed)



CHAPTER 1

Thunder in a Clear Sky

‘Release in ten,’ the pilot announced calmly over the vox-net. ‘Drop bay portal opening.’

Kor’sarro Khan, Captain of the Third Company of the White Scars Chapter of Space Marines, and holder of the honoured rank of Master of the Hunt, turned his gaze from the command terminal to the scene outside the Thunderhawk’s canopy. Flashing red lumens made the inside of the strike cruiser’s drop bay appear as a scene from the underworld, putting Kor’sarro in mind of the tales the Chapter’s Stormseers told at the great feasts. The sound of wailing sirens added to the hellish impression, sounding like the lamentations of the damned. With a grinding rumble transmitted through the hull of the gunship directly to Kor’sarro’s bones, the great doors below the Thunderhawk ground open. In seconds, a deep, metallic boom passed through the strike cruiser and the doors were fully open, the Thunderhawk suspended by its drop cradle above the yawning opening.

‘Portal bay open,’ the pilot reported. ‘Release in five.’

With the drop-portal open, Kor’sarro saw for the first time the surface of Cernis IV. From this height, the land appeared white and serene, glistening

with scintillating reflections of the violet lights that danced in the upper atmosphere. As captivating as the lights were, the Master of the Hunt knew that what created them represented a terrible danger to the drop mission his force was about to undertake.

‘Release!’

An instant after the pilot’s announcement, the huge metal claws holding the Thunderhawk above the portal sprang apart. The gunship dropped through the opening with gut-wrenching force, the surface of Cernis IV leaping upwards to meet it. Kor’sarro fought against the staggering G-force to raise his head and look upwards at the rapidly receding form of the strike cruiser, *Lord of Heavens*. He noted with satisfaction the release of the other four gunships, each holding its place in the formation.

The Thunderhawks levelled out. Rather than dropping straight downwards, each now arrowed prow first towards the surface. Already, bright flames began to lick the leading edges of the gunships’ blunt forms.

‘Gravimetrics picking up turbulence, as predicted,’ the pilot said, addressing Kor’sarro directly. The Techmarines had warned of the disturbance the gunships would meet as they undertook the drop, an effect caused by the complex interactions of Cernis IV’s many natural satellites.

‘Compensate as you see fit,’ Kor’sarro replied. ‘But keep us on target.’

The cockpit began to shudder, wisps of flame dancing across the outside of the armoured canopy. The Thunderhawks were effecting their drop on a heading that no ordinary human troops could undertake, for the gravitational forces would overcome them long before the drop vessels touched down. The White Scars were no mere humans, however; they were superhumans, genetically enhanced Space Marines whose augmented physiologies could withstand such forces and more.

‘They’ll never see us coming,’ Kor’sarro growled, his words drowned out by the roaring of the upper atmosphere as it burned against the gunship’s hull. Kor’sarro longed to feel the earth beneath his feet, to

breathe the air of the world below, to engage his enemy and complete the hunt. Though masters of the lightning strike, the White Scars preferred to fight across the wide spaces of a planet's surface. Kor'sarro always felt a notion he imagined was akin to helplessness during a planetary drop. As the buffeting increased still further and the cockpit shook with mounting violence, the captain gripped the arms of the grav-couch fiercely.

'Approaching overlap point alpha,' the pilot reported. Kor'sarro caught the note of concentration in the warrior's voice, the only hint of the tension the Space Marine must have been experiencing.

As the gunship dived on and the surface of Cernis IV swelled to fill the view from the cockpit, the shuddering reached a new pitch. Kor'sarro saw that six of the planet's small moons were rising, and it was this that was inflicting the violent disturbance as the Thunderhawks raced onwards. Although the Techmarines had predicted the effect, there was still a risk that the titanic forces might prove too strong for even the mighty Thunderhawks. At a single word, Kor'sarro could order the gunships to change course, coming about to a new heading that would avoid the worst of the gravitational pressures. Yet to do so would be to abandon the best chance of taking the target by surprise, for none could expect an attack to come from the vector the White Scars were taking. The target was far too valuable to lose, and Kor'sarro would take any risk to achieve victory. His honour, and that of the entire Third Company, depended on it.

'Entering point alpha!' the pilot called out, his voice barely audible over the roaring against the hull and the violent shaking of the cockpit. The turbulence increased by an order of magnitude as the gunship entered the point where the gravitational influences of the moons converged. Kor'sarro imagined his body was being pulled in several different directions at once, and knew that it was only his genetic enhancements that kept him conscious. He knew too that his survival relied not only on the Thunderhawk resisting the immense pressures that strained its armoured

hull to breaking point, but also upon the pilot's own efforts not only to remain conscious, but to keep the vessel on its heading.

'Terminal point alpha reached,' the pilot announced through gritted teeth. There was no turning back now, even if Kor'sarro had been willing to order a change in heading. He mouthed a silent prayer to the Emperor of Mankind and to Jaghatai Khan, revered Primarch of the White Scars.

The view through the canopy was now entirely obscured by rippling white flame as the atmosphere of Cernis IV burned against the armoured panels. Kor'sarro's enhanced vision protected his eyes from damage. Warning klaxons wailed as the forces outside took their toll on the gunship's hull, which groaned audibly as it was wrenched in multiple directions. The temperature inside the cockpit rose to that of a furnace as the vessel's cooling systems laboured to maintain survivable conditions. Sweat ran from Kor'sarro's brow, obscuring his vision as he looked to the pilot.

'Brother Koban,' Kor'sarro addressed the pilot. The Space Marine's face was a mask of determination as he battled with the gunship's controls. Kor'sarro knew that the pilot was nearing the bounds of his endurance. 'Draw your strength from your ancestors,' Kor'sarro shouted over the roaring winds and the wailing alerts. 'Have faith in the primarch!'

'Honoured be his name!' the pilot replied by rote, visibly emboldened by his captain's words. The Space Marine redoubled his efforts, mastering the bucking control column, and the gunship responded instantly. The buffeting calmed, and in moments the white flames licking the outside of the canopy faded and danced away.

'My thanks, brother-captain,' the pilot said, nodding his head towards Kor'sarro.

'You have but yourself to thank,' Kor'sarro replied. 'And the Great Khan, honoured be his name.'

As the last of the flames engulfing the Thunderhawk's blunt, armoured prow flickered and died, the surface of Cernis IV became visible again. The entire view from the cockpit was now filled with the pure, glittering whiteness of the planet's northern polar region. Where before the surface had appeared to shimmer with reflected light, Kor'sarro could discern individual points of jagged, violet-hued brightness. Each of these was a towering crystalline formation, some as tall as a man, others rearing hundreds of metres in the cold air. Each crystal tower reflected the violet auroras that pulsed in the skies above, casting the entire region in an unearthly light.

The Techmarines had been unable to identify the material from which the crystals were formed, but warned that they were clustered so densely across the northern pole that they presented a significant threat to a successful planetfall operation. The remote likelihood of any force attempting such a mission in the perilous region had simply added to its desirability, as far as Kor'sarro was concerned, and the order had been given.

'Landing zone identified,' the co-pilot announced.

'Altering course,' the pilot replied, bringing the gunship around to the coordinates scrolling across his command slate. 'Brother-captain?'

Kor'sarro confirmed that the other four Thunderhawks of the strike force were in formation. One was trailing a line of thick black smoke from its starboard engine. None of the Thunderhawks had come through the drop untouched and there was little that could be done now. He could not even risk a vox-transmission to determine the extent of the gunship's wound. Only faith in the Great Khan would see them through.

'Final approach,' Kor'sarro ordered.

On his word, the gunship banked before diving for the frozen surface. The landscape rushed upwards dramatically as the Thunderhawk's air brakes shed the vessel's momentum. In minutes, the largest of the crystal

towers were discernable, their multi-faceted, mirror-smooth flanks reflecting light in all directions.

‘Beginning approach run,’ the pilot said, his attentions focused on the closing towers. As the Thunderhawk levelled out the pilot fed power to the engines. Crystals the size of cathedrals flashed by on all sides, and for an instant Kor’sarro was assailed by the sight of a thousand gunships flying in an insane formation all about. There was no way of telling which were the real vessels and which were reflections on the mirrored surfaces of the crystal towers.

‘Adjust three-nine in eight point five,’ the co-pilot said, not taking his eyes from the augur screen before him.

The pilot merely nodded, before yanking hard on the control column. Kor’sarro’s seat restraints tensed as his weight was thrown suddenly to port, but to his relief they held. The largest crystal tower Kor’sarro had yet seen flashed by the gunship’s starboard. Due to its multiple, reflective faces, the crystal had not been visible by eyesight. Only the co-pilot’s augur warning had saved the vessel from being smashed to atoms against its sheer side.

‘That was too close,’ breathed the pilot. ‘My apologies, brother-captain.’

‘None needed,’ Kor’sarro replied. ‘Attend to your duty.’

The pilot returned his attentions to the fore, bringing the gunship into a wide turn that brought it around a huge crystal tower that Kor’sarro had not even seen amongst the riot of reflections. Leaving the tower behind, the pilot corrected the heading, Kor’sarro craning his neck to ensure that the other vessels were doing likewise.

‘Delta twelve!’ the co-pilot called out suddenly.

The pilot heeded his battle-brother’s warning with instinctive speed. The Thunderhawk was thrown violently to starboard as the pilot avoided a needle-like tower that reared out of nowhere as if seeking to skewer the vessel. For the briefest moment, Kor’sarro caught sight of his own

reflection in the needle's mirrored surface as the formation flashed by mere metres away.

Kor'sarro had no need to turn his head to look through the rear of the canopy in order to follow the progress of the other four gunships, for their reflections were all about, mirrored in a thousand glassy crystal flanks. One Thunderhawk pitched to starboard, while two went to port, the needle flashing by between. The last gunship, still trailing smoke from the engine damaged during the planetfall, was not so fast to react. To his great honour, the vessel's pilot almost managed to avoid the crystal spire, but his starboard wing grazed it nonetheless. In an instant, the end of the stubby wing was shorn away, and the entire needle exploded into a million shards. The devastation was reflected from a thousand surfaces at once. Kor'sarro's senses were all but overwhelmed as innumerable shards, both real and reflected, cascaded in all directions, impacting on the hull of his own gunship like anti-aircraft fire.

'Hunter Three's going down!' the co-pilot called out. 'I can't get a reading, there's too much interference from the shards.'

Kor'sarro processed the terrible decision in an instant. Just as quickly, his mind was made up. 'Maintain vox-silence,' he ordered. 'But keep the channels open.'

The mission was all.

'You are sure it is him?' Kor'sarro had asked when informed that the object of his years-long hunt had once again been located. 'You are sure this is not another of his traps?'

'Yes, my khan, I am sure it is Voldorius,' the Scout-sergeant replied. 'Whether or not it is a trap, however...'

'I understand, Kholka. You will forgive my impatience in this matter,' Kor'sarro said. Taking a deep breath, he reined in his eagerness to resume the pursuit of this ancient nemesis of his Chapter. The Master of the Hunt must be keen-eyed and measured in all he does, Kor'sarro reminded

himself, lest he blunder into a trap of his target's making. 'Please, deliver your report.'

Scout-Sergeant Kholka looked from Kor'sarro to the black void beyond the strike cruiser's armoured viewing port at which he stood. Kor'sarro allowed the veteran a moment to gather his thoughts, knowing that Kholka shared his own feelings in the matter. The stateroom in which the two warriors met was dark, its walls lined with the trophies of a score of victories. Displayed above the viewing port was the polished skull of a tyrannid hive tyrant, a mighty beast which Kor'sarro himself had bested in lethal one-on-one combat. Lethal for the beast itself, Kor'sarro mused, memories of the climax of the Siege of Mysibis flooding back, but almost for him too. Even now, two decades later, the scars earned in that titanic confrontation still pained him.

'We picked up his trail at Sinopha Station, on the fringes of the Protean Ebb,' Kholka began. 'The survivors' accounts left us in no doubt that the attackers were Alpha Legion.' The Scout-sergeant paused, evidently calling to mind the scenes of carnage and butchery at the station.

'Go on, my friend,' Kor'sarro urged. 'How did you identify the traitors as belonging to Voldorius's band?'

'At first we had only the accounts to go by,' Kholka continued. 'But these were... unclear, as I am sure you can imagine.'

Indeed I can, Kor'sarro thought. The Alpha Legion, erstwhile brothers of the Space Marines, had turned against the Imperium ten thousand years ago, and ever since their defeat in that galaxy-wide civil war they had waged a bitter campaign of terror on the peoples of the Imperium. The treacherous Alpha Legion were masters of insurrection and disorder, spreading the poison of rebellion wherever they went. They only left survivors when they intended accounts of their actions to spread panic across a wide area.

‘Those victims who were not killed in the attack were driven beyond sanity by the cruelties inflicted upon them,’ the sergeant said. ‘Others had been reduced to gibbering imbeciles by the traitors’ sorceries. Most were able to tell us very little. But one, who had served in the station’s watch-militia, had displayed the foresight to commit the initial stages of the attack to the archivum, and this we were able to retrieve.’

‘What of this man?’ Kor’sarro asked, even though he knew what the sergeant’s reply would be.

‘We granted him the Emperor’s peace,’ Kholka responded gravely. ‘His duty was done, and it was all we could do for him.’

Kor’sarro nodded for the sergeant to continue.

‘The station’s archivum logs confirmed the identity of the attackers’ vessel.’

‘*The Ninth Eye*?’ Kor’sarro interjected. If it was indeed that hated ship that had delivered the Alpha Legion attackers to Sinopha Station, then the hunt for the daemon lord Voldorius was truly back under way, after so many galling months of cold trails and frustration.

‘*The Ninth Eye*,’ the sergeant confirmed. Kor’sarro watched Kholka as he paced before the viewing port, and paused before the skull of a fearsome ambull. ‘We set out immediately, and were able to pick up the vessel’s signature as it made for the jump point. Our astropath was able to track its jump, and our Navigator able to shadow it without our enemy becoming aware of our presence.’

‘You know this?’ Kor’sarro interrupted. ‘You are sure Voldorius was unaware of your pursuit?’

‘Salpo is, as you know, my khan, one of our most skilled Navigators. I have this on his word.’

Kor’sarro allowed himself a feral grin, feeling his blood rise at the prospect of resuming the hunt. It had been almost a decade since Kyublai, Great Khan of the White Scars Chapter, had declared that the vile one

Voldorius would be hunted down and slain in the name of the Emperor. As Captain of the Third Company and Master of the Hunt, it had fallen to Kor'sarro Khan to turn the Great Khan's words into deeds. He had gone before the Great Khan and his court on the Chapter's home world of Chogoris, and made a terrible oath.

By Kor'sarro's honour, the daemon prince Voldorius, he who had unleashed the Bloodtide and reaped a thousand billion innocent souls, would be brought to justice. As befitted the Chapter's traditions, the traitor would be slain by the hand of the Master of the Hunt. His skull would be masked in silver and mounted at the tip of a lance. The trophy would be placed along the road to the White Scars' fortress-monastery, alongside thousands more, high in the Khum Karta Mountains, where it would remain for all time as warning to those who would betray their oaths and turn their hand against the Emperor.

Despite his savage desire to finally corner his foe, Kor'sarro bade the sergeant continue.

‘We tracked *The Ninth Eye* through three systems. It laid over at none, merely recalibrating before pressing on. Twelve days after the last jump, it entered the Cernis system, where it made for the fourth planet.’

Kor'sarro had no knowledge of this star, for it was but a single, unremarkable system amongst over a million claimed by man. ‘What of this place?’ he asked.

‘Cernis IV is home to a small population of convicted sinners and petty transgressors, those whose sentences have been commuted from death to servitude.’ Kor'sarro scowled at the mental picture the sergeant's description brought to mind. Scum, undeserving of a second chance. ‘Most eke out a nomadic existence as krill farmers, chasing the seasonal drifts along the coasts.’

‘And the rest?’ Kor'sarro asked, inferring that the Alpha Legion would have little interest in the convicts the sergeant described.

‘The rest are indentured to a substantial promethium refining operation at the world’s northern pole.’

‘And it is to this place that the enemy has retired,’ Kor’sarro growled, a statement, not a question. The sergeant’s expression confirmed his suspicion. Voldorius and his band of traitors had no doubt infiltrated the criminals that laboured at the promethium plant. That being the case, he could only assume that the world’s government, no doubt seated at the refinery, had been compromised, if not completely overthrown. He had to assume that the entire work force had been bribed, corrupted or coerced into serving the daemon prince, and it had probably not taken much effort to do so. The White Scars would be entering hostile territory as they closed on their foe.

‘My thanks, brother-sergeant,’ Kor’sarro said. ‘Your deeds do us all great honour, and the Great Khan shall hear of them.’ Kholka bowed deeply in response to the captain’s affirmation.

‘The word is given,’ Kor’sarro growled. ‘The hunt is on.’

As the Thunderhawk banked past another great crystal tower, Kor’sarro caught sight of the target. The Cernis IV promethium plant loomed on the horizon, a vast stain upon a wide, frozen plain studded with smaller crystal formations. Even from twelve kilometres out, the plant was imposing. Vast storage tanks and processing stacks reared into the cold sky, the tallest belching dark fumes or flaring with alchemical burn-off. The plant was the size of a city, its buildings sprawling across the plain, each connected to the next by a complex web of pipes and conduits carrying raw promethium. With an expert eye, Kor’sarro assessed two rings of defence thrown up around the plant, each punctuated by squat bastions mounted with heavy ground and anti-air ordnance. Scout-Sergeant Kholka’s reports had been characteristically accurate.

‘Ten kilometres,’ the pilot reported. ‘Confirm attack pattern?’

‘As the moon swoops,’ Kor’sarro replied, using the battle-cant of the White Scars Chapter. As the Thunderhawk dived towards the white plain,

the sun glinted from the ice, the glare masking the defenders from Kor'sarro's sight. He still had only estimates of the defenders' strengths to go on, and the attack pattern would allow the gunships to reconnoitre the plant's defences before committing to a final run.

The Thunderhawk levelled out as it streaked across the plain, the pilot jinking expertly to avoid the smaller crystal formations. At an altitude of only thirty metres, Kor'sarro could now discern the defence lines. Crudely fortified trenches had been dug into the snow, recently by his estimation. As the first line flashed by below, a storm of small-arms fire erupted, las-bolts pattering harmlessly against the gunship's armoured hull.

Kor'sarro activated his command terminal and invoked the view from a spy-lens mounted to the Thunderhawk's rear. The pict-slate showed the view of the trench the gunship had just passed over, and Kor'sarro could make out troops manning its ramparts. There were hundreds of them packed into the makeshift position, yet it was immediately clear that they were not professional soldiers, in any sense of the word. For a start, they showed no discernable uniform, each wearing a ragged ensemble of rubberised work suit, with crude armour fashioned from steel plates. Many wore rebreathers, originally intended no doubt to protect against the fumes belched out by the refinery but pressed into service against the biting cold beyond the plant's limits. For an instant, Kor'sarro thought he saw a fell rune of the Chaos powers, daubed crudely upon a soldier's chest plate, but the view receded before he could be sure.

'Closing on the second line,' the pilot intoned. 'Brace for heavy fire.'

The second defence line was more heavily fortified than the first. The trenches were reinforced with armour plating, and rockcrete bunkers stood every two hundred metres.

'Brace!' the pilot called out.

A searing line of fire suddenly cut through the air as an autocannon mounted on one of the bastions opened up. The shot was poorly aimed,

passing clean through the White Scars' formation without inflicting any damage.

'That was just a ranging shot,' Kor'sarro growled, and immediately three more weapons, each mounted on a different bastion, opened fire.

This time, the shots passed by far closer, inscribing a deadly web across the air space the gunships flew through.

'That plotting is far too coordinated to be the work of recidivist scum,' Kor'sarro said. 'The Alpha Legion have been here before.' How long, he could only guess, but certainly long enough to have overseen the construction of the inner line of trenches and to plot a highly effective air defence net. As the full extent of the defences revealed themselves, the autocannons barked again. This time, the air blazed with over a dozen bursts, and the Thunderhawk rocked violently as it was struck.

'Taking effective fire!' the pilot called out. 'Implementing evasive manoeuvres.'

Alarms blared out as the gunship's aggrieved war spirit described its wounds. The Thunderhawk shook as the pilot undertook a series of jarring evasions, throwing the enemy gunners' aim, for a brief moment at least.

'Starboard control vanes compromised,' the pilot announced as he fought the shaking control column.

'And we're bleeding fuel from engine beta,' the co-pilot added.

'Stand by,' Kor'sarro ordered as he opened a vox-channel to the formation. There was little to be gained by maintaining vox silence now. 'All Hunters, report.'

'Hunter Two, Hunter One,' the response came back immediately. 'The arrow's flight, shrouded by mist.'

'Hunter Four, Hunter One,' the next report came in, after the speaker had allowed an optimistic chance for Hunter Three to report. 'The trail, winter rises.'

‘Hunter Five, Hunter One,’ the last gunship responded. ‘The crest by dawn.’

‘Damn them,’ Kor’sarro spat in response to the battle-cant reports. Hunter Two’s augurs were damaged, Four had lost pressure in at least one compartment and Hunter Five’s forward landing gear had taken a glancing hit. There was no word of Hunter Three.

Kor’sarro opened the vox-channel again, but before he could speak a further salvo of fire erupted from every bastion within a kilometre. The channel erupted with howling feedback as the very air burned.

‘All Hunters,’ Kor’sarro said, not knowing whether his transmission would penetrate the sudden interference but sure he had no choice but to try. ‘The arrow turns, the deluge.’

‘Coming about on new heading,’ the pilot announced, obeying the battle-cant order. In seconds, the Thunderhawk was banking over the outer defence line, pursued by angry autocannon bursts. With great relief, Kor’sarro noted the other vessels doing likewise.

Kor’sarro fought down the galling frustration at encountering such an effective air defence grid. It could only have been erected under the oversight of one of Voldorius’s lieutenants. The Alpha Legion were adept at corrupting lesser forces, and would easily have established themselves as masters over the treacherous convicts that laboured in Cernis IV’s promethium refinery. He consoled himself with the knowledge that such scum could never have mounted such a stout defence themselves. It was a timely reminder of just how dangerous a foe the Alpha Legion were. Furthermore, as fearsome as the defenders’ fire had proven, the White Scars pilots were superior. Although minor damage had been sustained, the strike force was still effective, even with the loss of Hunter Three.

And besides, Kor’sarro thought, the White Scars never relied on a single battle plan. Even now, the Thunderhawks were closing on the secondary landing zone where Kor’sarro and his warriors would disembark and

approach the target by the alternative route, planned for just such an eventuality.

‘Touch down in thirty,’ the pilot announced.

‘Enemy position at sigma-seven,’ the co-pilot interjected.

Kor’sarro saw the secondary landing zone up ahead, but nearby, in the shadow of a jagged cluster of crystals, was a hurriedly dug enemy gun pit. Several of the defenders were armed with shoulder-mounted missile launchers.

‘Neutralise it,’ Kor’sarro ordered.

The air between the Thunderhawk and the gun pit was split asunder as the vessel’s heavy bolters opened up. Hundreds of rounds had been expended in seconds, the snow all around the target vaporised into an obscuring mist. Surely, nothing could have survived such a torrent of fire.

As if to mock the White Scars, a missile streaked out of the roiling mist, passing within a handful of metres of the gunship’s armoured canopy.

‘I cannot resolve a target,’ the co-pilot said.

‘Target the crystal,’ Kor’sarro ordered. ‘Hellstrike.’

A moment later, a missile lanced from beneath the Thunderhawk’s stubby wings towards the gun pit. But instead of disappearing into the vapour created by the heavy bolter fire, the projectile sped towards the crystal overhead. The impact came mere seconds later.

In a repetition of the incident on the approach run, the crystal exploded into a billion shards. The vapour cloud was blown away, the ground for a hundred metres all about studded by countless micro-impacts. Those defenders who had survived the heavy bolter fire were torn apart as the crystal shards ripped through their bodies. At the last, only the jagged remains of the crystal formation and a wide red stain upon the frozen ground marked the formerly enemy-held position.

‘Take us in,’ Kor’sarro ordered.

Even as Kor'sarro powered his roaring bike, Moondrakkan, down the Thunderhawk's ramp, Hunters Two, Four and Five were touching down nearby. Screaming retro jets vaporised the ice, before the mighty gunships settled upon hissing, flexing landing struts. Hunter One, Kor'sarro's command platform, was a conventional Thunderhawk specially modified to carry the Command squad's beloved bikes. Hunter Five was likewise modified, and carried the task force's other two bike-mounted squads. The other ships, including the missing Hunter Three, were transporters, and carried between the three vessels four Rhino-borne Tactical squads, two Rhino-borne Devastator squads and three jump pack-equipped Assault squads. A pair of Rhino transport vehicles was cradled below each transporter, their engines growling as if in anticipation of churning up the frozen plain.

As the two transporters settled, the sturdy arms holding the Rhinos in place released, and, accompanied by the angry hiss of hydraulics, retracted upwards. Almost in unison, the launch jets of both transporters fired up again, and both lifted perfectly vertically, leaving a pair of Rhinos on the ground beneath each. In a moment, all four Thunderhawks had cleared the landing zone, streaking away to establish a holding pattern until called upon.

'All units,' Kor'sarro spoke into his helmet vox-link as he slewed Moondrakkan to a halt. 'Converge on me.'

Behind him, the five bike-mounted warriors of Kor'sarro's Command squad formed up. These men were his brothers, for they had travelled by his side for the last decade, never wavering in the hunt for Voldorius. Kor'sarro's company champion, Brother Jhogai, removed his helmet having brought his growling mount to a halt, and took in a great lungful of the freezing air. Beside him, Brother Yeku bore the standard of the Third Company, an honoured banner adorned with the lightning-strike symbol of the White Scars Chapter, and topped with a fluttering mane of black horsehair. Apothecary Khagus halted his bike beside the standard bearer, and behind him came Brothers Temu and Kergis.

‘Is there any word?’ Kor’sarro addressed Brother Temu, knowing the warrior would understand his meaning.

‘There is none, my khan,’ Temu replied. ‘*Lord of Heavens* reports heavy atmospheric sensor interference, but assures us they will keep up their sweeps until Hunter Three’s fate is known.’

‘Understood,’ Kor’sarro replied, forcing his concern for his brethren to the back of his mind, for all of his attention would be needed in the coming attack. It was only moments before the entire strike force would be assembled before him, ready to move out upon his word.

Following his company champion’s example, Kor’sarro reached up and unlatched his helmet. As he lifted it clear, the cold air struck his scarred face. Even through the cold, he could taste the underlying chemical pollution caused by the activities at the promethium plant – it did not take the enhanced senses of a Space Marine to detect it. Squinting against the breeze, Kor’sarro regarded his force with fiercely burning pride.

Four Rhino transports, set down in pairs by Hunters Two and Four, idled. Each one carried a ten-man Tactical squad. With the loss of Hunter Three, two more vehicles were missing, and the absence of the heavy weapons of the Devastator squads they had carried might well be felt in the coming battle. Twenty more Space Marines stood nearby, each equipped with a bulky jump pack, marking them out as the Third Company’s Assault squads. A third Assault squad had been carried on the missing Hunter Three. Lastly, two squads of White Scars bikers had formed up to either side of the Rhinos, having been set down from the modified troop bay of Hunter Five, their engines growling and the cold air shimmering around their exhausts.

The sight of his warriors stirred fierce pride in Kor’sarro’s savage heart. These men were the sons of the steppes of Chogoris, the windswept home world of the White Scars Chapter. They were born of the nomadic tribes that lived, fought and died across the trackless plains. They were hunters

one and all, born in the saddle and had none become a White Scar, each would have been a king of a noble tribe. These men of the Third Company had earned Kor'sarro's trust and loyalty a thousand times over. They had shared with him every peril and every horror the galaxy could conjure.

This last decade, they had followed him in the hunt for one of the Chapter's most hated enemies, indeed, one of the Imperium's most despised sinners. The daemon prince Voldorius – Kor'sarro spat as he conjured the name of his foe – would be run to ground by these men, and by the hand of the Master of the Hunt, would be slain.

Savouring the moment for a few seconds more, Kor'sarro filled his lungs with air. Then, raising Moonfang, his ancient and revered blade, high above him, he uttered the war cry that his men had heard a thousand times before, on a thousand battlefields, before a thousand victories.

‘For the Khan, and for the Emperor!’

The cry was echoed in the throats of four score warriors. Kor'sarro opened Moondrakkan's throttle, its engine roaring deafeningly in the manner of its namesake. The bikes of Kor'sarro's Command squad and of the other two groups of riders took up the savage cry, and were followed an instant later by the deeper, throaty roar of the Rhinos. Then the Assault squads gunned their jump packs to a high-pitched scream, putting Kor'sarro in mind of the deadly avian predators of Chogoris. With the roar of the proud, noble tribesmen of his home world, Kor'sarro span Moondrakkan around to face the distant refinery, and opened the throttle fully.

Moondrakkan leapt forwards, Kor'sarro's long cloak billowing in the cold air behind him. Without turning to look, he knew that his warriors were following, and instead focused on the objective. The outer defence line was only two kilometres distant, and the inner line another two beyond that. Another kilometre past the inner trench line lay the outer edges of the refinery itself and beyond that, Kor'sarro's foe, the target of

his ten-year hunt. Kor'sarro's attack plan was simple and audacious, and entirely in keeping with the martial heritage of his people. If the bastions of the inner defence line were so heavily armed that the Thunderhawks could not penetrate to the refinery, then his warriors would ride those defences down, smashing them aside in an unstoppable assault none could withstand.

But Kor'sarro's attack would not be the maddened charge of an unreasoning berserker, for the White Scars were well schooled in the subtleties of the arts of war. The strike force would break into three bodies as it closed on the outer line. One would mount a feint against one length of the trench line, drawing in reinforcements from nearby sectors. Only when Kor'sarro was sure the enemy had taken the bait would the second body strike at the weakest section. Even as that group was consolidating its victory and the first breaking off, the third body would be racing towards the inner fortifications, and the process would be repeated.

The strike force was well-practised in such assaults, for their people had been undertaking similar actions since time immemorial. As Moondrakkan closed on the outer line and the cold air whipped up Kor'sarro's long, braided, black moustaches, he was put in mind of his first ever charge against an enemy. He had been barely in his twelfth summer, yet considered a man by his people. That day he had spilled his first blood, claimed his first life and earned his first honour scar. Many more had been traced across his craggy face since becoming a Space Marine. He prayed that more still might be added, yet in truth, only one counted. The scar earned by the death of Voldorius.

A missile streaked past, billowing an ugly black contrail, and Kor'sarro snapped back to the present. He traced the trail back to a concealed gun pit dug hastily into the snow nearby, and veered Moondrakkan towards it before the firer had a chance to load a second projectile.

Moondrakkan's front wheel hit the spoil pile in front of the pit, and Kor'sarro hauled back on the handlebars, gunning the engine as he did so. The bike launched into the air above the pit, and in an instant, Kor'sarro had drawn his bolt pistol. In the two seconds in which the bike was airborne, the Master of the Hunt located his target, a refinery worker bedecked in filthy brown rubberised overalls and wearing an insect-like gas mask, drew a bead on the man's weapon, and pulled the trigger.

Moondrakkan slammed to the frozen ground on the far side of the gun pit, kicking up a spray of ice. Kor'sarro heard the crack of the bolt as it struck the freshly-loaded missile launcher, followed an instant later by a sharp detonation as it, and the launcher's ammunition, exploded. Stealing a glance behind him, Kor'sarro grinned savagely at the destruction he had wrought: the firer and the dozen or so other enemy warriors taking shelter in the pit lay scattered about, body parts strewn across the reddened snow for metres in all directions.

Turning his head back around, Kor'sarro saw that he was rapidly closing on the outer defence line. He scanned the fortifications, and immediately located the point where the feint attack should be aimed.

'Taura,' Kor'sarro addressed the sergeant of one of the Tactical squads over the vox-net. 'Noon, as the ram-hound strikes.'

The sergeant's confirmation came back over the net and two of the armoured Rhino transports peeled away from the body of attackers and arrowed for the point Kor'sarro had indicated in the battle-cant of his Chapter. As the squat transports ground up the frozen plain, one of the Assault squads screamed overhead, the ten Space Marines diving upon the enemy position with chainswords whirring angrily. The sounds of battle were audible over the vox-net, Kor'sarro keeping the channel open for a moment to gauge the intensity of the fight. There was little he could do to influence the outcome now, however, as more pressing concerns presented themselves.

Hauling on Moondrakkan's handlebars, Kor'sarro led the remainder of the strike force in a wide sweep, away from the point where Sergeant Taura's units were engaged. The White Scars made expert use of every scrap of cover, especially the man-high crystal formations studded about the plain. In minutes, the force was barrelling towards what Kor'sarro judged to be a less well-defended length of the trench line.

'Enemy reinforcements committed,' Kor'sarro heard Sergeant Taura call over the vox-net, the transmission punctuated with the sound of chainswords cleaving flesh and bolt pistols firing at point-blank range. Good, thought Kor'sarro: now is the time.

'Second wave,' Kor'sarro bellowed, for he had no need of the vox to give this order. 'With me!'

A savage war cry went up behind him as Kor'sarro steered Moondrakkan for the defence line. Knowing that the enemy had drawn off defenders in an attempt to repel Sergeant Taura's feint, he led his force directly down upon their foe, while the last third held back.

The White Scars' charge ate up the last hundred metres in seconds, and only at the last instant did the few defenders still manning this section of the line open fire. Kor'sarro and his Command squad leapt over the trench as he had done before, and upon striking the ground on the other side, slewed their mounts around. The stunned defenders were caught entirely off guard, few even having turned before they were cut down in a storm of bolt pistol fire.

Stowing his pistol, Kor'sarro drew Moonfang, and ignited its blade, its entire length crackling with barely contained energies. The dozen defenders not slain in the opening fusillade rose from the trench and threw themselves at Kor'sarro and his men, who as one leapt from their bikes to counter-charge. The melee was brief, the defenders not standing a chance against the superhuman Space Marines, but Kor'sarro was surprised by the vigour of the attack.

Though not disciplined or veteran troops, the defenders were fired up by a hatred that granted them the strength to face the White Scars, however brief and futile the effort. Only the lies of the Great Enemy could motivate such men as these, and he detected the unmistakable, bitter taint of blasphemy in the air. How tight was the grip of Voldorius on this place, and on these men? He would soon find out.

Even as Moonfang cleaved the last of the traitors in two, spilling the man's innards across the debris-strewn trench, the last body of the strike force was moving forwards. Two more armoured transports ground across the trench nearby, their tracks crushing defenders to a bloody pulp as a squad of Assault Marines soared overhead. Taking stock of the situation, Kor'sarro activated his vox-link.

'Taura,' he called to the leader of the first wave. 'Report.'

There was a brief pause before the sergeant's voice filled the channel, the background static laced with the screaming of chainswords as they cut through armour and flesh. 'Heavy resistance, my khan, and mounting. I have three wounded, but no ineffectives. Standing by.'

'Understood,' Kor'sarro replied, before switching back to battle-cant. 'The north wind turns.'

'The wind turns at moonrise,' the sergeant replied, his voice drowned out for a moment by gunfire.

Satisfied that Sergeant Taura's force would soon have extricated itself from the fighting, Kor'sarro swung into Moondrakkan's saddle and consulted the tactical slate mounted above the handlebars. Icons representing the units of the strike force winked green, and the enemy defence lines were etched in red, the data provided by the augurs of the *Lord of Heavens* in orbit high above. Three of those icons represented the constituent parts of the third wave, which was bearing down on the inner trench line. Even as Kor'sarro prepared to move out, he heard the unmistakable sound of heavy cannon fire, followed a moment later by a

rumbling explosion. In the distance, he saw a mighty cloud rise, and knew that the third wave had encountered heavy resistance.

‘Patha,’ Kor’sarro addressed the leader of the third wave. ‘What is your status?’

The vox-channel churned with interference, and a second explosion blossomed in the distance. Then Sergeant Patha’s voice cut in. ‘Repeat, coming under fire from a heavy-calibre battle cannon mounted in the bastion to our fore. I have two badly wounded, one ineffective, over.’

Rising in Moondrakkan’s saddle, Kor’sarro squinted towards the inner defence line. Against the glare reflected by the frozen plain, he could see the bastion of which Sergeant Patha spoke. As he watched, a low turret at the bastion’s top swivelled, the barrel tracking one of Patha’s Rhino transports. Before Kor’sarro could voice a warning, the cannon fired, the heavy shell impacting the ice scant metres from the carrier. As the projectile detonated, the rear of the vehicle was thrown several metres into the air, before it crashed down again. Incredibly, the Rhino continued on its course towards the gun tower.

The air all around was rapidly filling with gunfire, evidence, if any were needed, that the enemy were reacting to the White Scars’ attack. The strike force had been fortunate so far. Perhaps the defenders had not believed they would return and mount a ground attack so soon after determining the full extent of the air defence net. They would pay for their mistake, Kor’sarro swore, but only if the White Scars pressed home the attack for all they were worth, right now.

‘All commands!’ Kor’sarro bellowed over the roar of battle. ‘Engage that tower!’

Launching Moondrakkan forwards, Kor’sarro was joined by his Command squad and the two other squads of White Scars bikers. The vox-link was filled with terse battle-cant as the third wave closed on the bastion, the battle cannon continuing to bracket the Rhinos even as the

Assault Marines dived towards it from on high. For a moment, he considered calling on the Thunderhawks to engage it with their hellstrike missiles, but could not risk the gunships being struck by the defenders' heavy air defences again. To lose one Thunderhawk was bad enough, but to lose another would be unforgivable.

Kor'sarro sped across the plain, bikers to either side, Assault Marines overhead and Rhinos grinding onwards in his wake. He caught sight of Sergeant Taura, his helmet gone and a bloody gash cut across the warrior's forehead speaking of the ferocity of the resistance the feint attack had met. The turret on the bastion turned, this time in the direction of Kor'sarro's combined first and second wave. Imbeciles, he thought, seeing that the gunners were too ill-disciplined or inexperienced to continue their fire against the immediate threat, and were instead turning their weapon upon the larger foe. Despite the obvious danger, Kor'sarro was grateful for the brief respite the gunners' mistake would give Sergeant Patha and his men.

'Heads down and keep going,' Kor'sarro bellowed over the combined roar of the bikes, jump packs and Rhinos. 'For Chogoris!'

His warriors echoed the war cry as the cannon opened fire. From the angle of the barrel at the moment the weapon fired, Kor'sarro knew that the shell would strike true, if more by chance than the skill of the gunners. Gritting his teeth against the inevitable, Kor'sarro lowered his head, redoubled his grip on Moondrakkan's handlebars, and sped onwards. The shell lanced towards his force and exploded on its right flank, enveloping an entire biker squad in smoke and mist. Of the nine White Scars bikes enshrouded by the rapidly expanding plume of vaporised ice and debris, only eight emerged, and several of these bore obvious damage, the riders' armour blackened and scratched. Kor'sarro doubted that the missing rider could have survived, but knew that the Rhino-mounted squad following close behind would confirm their brother's fate, and if possible retrieve his body.

The weight of incoming small-arms fire increased still further, and although poorly aimed, stray las-bolts and bullets kicked up puffs of powdery snow from the ground in front of the White Scars. Shots whistled by Kor'sarro's head and several impacted on the armoured fairing of his bike. As the distance closed, a heavy bolter opened up, the staccato rhythm filling Kor'sarro's ears. A score of heavy rounds whipped past, the gunner correcting his aim as Kor'sarro bore onwards. A shell clipped the armoured fairing, tearing a chunk away in a shower of sparks, and another glanced from Kor'sarro's right shoulder plate. The armour's auto-reactive systems activated, dense fibre bundles compensating for the impact by moving rapidly in the opposite direction.

‘White Scars!’ Rage swelled in Kor'sarro's breast that any traitor would dare raise a hand against the chosen of the Emperor and the Great Khan. ‘Show no mercy!’

The air was solid with the defenders' fire, sparks flying from armoured bikes and battle-brothers alike. To Kor'sarro's left, a biker was thrown clear as what must have been a dozen heavy bolter shells slammed into his chest plate, the sheer weight of fire throwing him backwards as his bike ploughed on before slewing to a halt. To Kor'sarro's right, a lascannon seared a blinding line through the cold air, the blast striking one of the Rhino transports in its track nacelle. The stout vehicle ground to a halt having merely thrown a track. Despite the deep, black gash carved across its flank, the White Scars within all disembarked to continue the charge on foot.

A moment later and Kor'sarro and his warriors were closing on the beleaguered battle-brothers of the first wave, who were laying down a withering hail of suppressive bolter fire at the bastion, whilst attempting to take what cover they could against its heavy battle cannon in the midst of a low crystal outcropping.

‘Brother Kergis!’ Kor’sarro bellowed as he brought Moondrakkan to a skidding halt beside them. Seeing Brother Kergis dismount and race forwards, melta gun in hand, he leapt from Moondrakkan and pointed towards the armoured hatch of the bastion.

‘As you will, my khan,’ the Space Marine replied. Even though the man wore his helmet, Kor’sarro could well imagine the hunger for victory that he always showed in such situations. Kergis bore the scars of a hundred hunts, and was without equal with his chosen weapon.

‘Cover us!’ Kor’sarro bellowed as every Space Marine in the strike force able to do so opened fire on the bastion. Even though few of their weapons had any chance of penetrating its thick, rockcrete construction, the torrent of fire would force the defenders to keep their heads down, and throw the aim of any who dared raise their weapons against the White Scars.

Even before the suppressive fusillade had fully opened up, Kor’sarro was dashing towards the bastion’s armoured hatch, Brother Kergis following close on his heels. The Space Marines’ covering fire took full effect, explosive bolts tearing ragged holes from the bastion’s flanks. There was no return fire from the bastion itself, but other defenders further along the line were nonetheless attempting to engage the White Scars with small-arms fire, poorly aimed shots whistling by all too close.

As the pair closed on the bastion’s hatch, Kor’sarro ducked to the right, unclipping a frag grenade from his belt. He turned as he ran the last few metres, and slammed back first into the bastion’s rockcrete wall, in time to see Brother Kergis come to a halt, brace his feet wide before the hatch and raise his weapon.

There was a timeless pause as Kergis looked to his captain, awaiting the order, as per the ancient traditions of their people. Kor’sarro nodded once, and Brother Kergis opened fire. The melta gun’s blast was preceded by a brief distortion of the air between barrel and target, before a stream of concentrated nucleonic fire streaked forth. Anything other than the highest

grade of armour plating would have been vaporised in an instant, but the bastion's hatch was built with the intention of resisting such attacks. The hatch glowed orange, then blue, and then white as tremendous energies were absorbed and dissipated. The ground between Kergis erupted in vaporised ice. Kor'sarro felt an increase in the weight of fire all around, and saw that a company of enemy soldiers were making their way along the nearby trench lines, firing wildly as they went. He looked back to Brother Kergis, and saw a line of bullets stitch across his left arm and shoulder plate. Despite the fire, the warrior's aim never faltered as he unleashed a second blast from his weapon.

This time, the hatch's armour peeled away, falling in molten gobbets to the blackened ground. The ragged edges still glowing fierce orange, Kor'sarro pressed the detonation stud on the ready frag grenade, and tossed it into the smoking opening. He ducked back, pressing himself against the bastion's wall as Brother Kergis dived to the opposite side of the wrecked hatchway.

A moment later, the grenade detonated, razor-sharp shrapnel belching forth, followed by a great gout of flame and black smoke. Fierce warrior pride consuming him, Kor'sarro stepped before the opening and drew Moonfang, activating the ancient blade's crackling power field with a familiar flick of his thumb.

Diving into the black, smoke-wreathed interior, Kor'sarro relied on senses other than sight. His genetically enhanced body gave him a wealth of advantages over his foes, and though he could barely make out a thing through the smoke, his superior hearing, smell and even taste drew him down upon his foe. The first enemies he found were very obviously dead, their bodies torn to shreds by the fragmentation grenade.

At the base of what Kor'sarro judged by touch to be an access ladder leading upwards to the next level, he came upon a wounded enemy soldier. With a single, coldly economical motion, he broke the man's neck, ending

the traitor's blasphemy in a far more merciful way than he deserved. Allowing any survivors no time to regroup, Kor'sarro reached up and hauled open the hatch at the top of the ladder, readying another frag grenade as he did so. As the hatch rose, dull, red light shone through, and an instant later a torrent of bullets was unleashed, kicking up angry sparks from the metal of the hatch. Even as one bullet ploughed a deep furrow across Kor'sarro's brow, he pressed the detonation stud, threw the grenade through the gap and slammed the hatch shut.

The explosion rocked the entire bastion, sending dust and loose debris in all directions. It must have caught an ammunition store. Kor'sarro grinned and cautiously lifted the hatch to see the damage. The bright violet-tinged light of the outside replaced the red illumination and Kor'sarro guessed that a viewing port had been blown outwards. Seeing no immediate threat, he rose through the hatch, Brother Kergis following close behind. As the smoke cleared, Kor'sarro saw that no defenders had survived the blast. Although blood was smeared across every surface and ragged parts of severed limbs were flung about, he could not tell how many of the deluded recidivists had manned the room.

Striding to the wrecked viewport, Kor'sarro looked out across the war-torn plain. His warriors had turned their weapons upon the counterattacking defenders, and were forcing them back with a fusillade of bolter fire. He judged that the enemy would soon turn and run for the outskirts of the refinery, which lay only a couple of hundred metres beyond the inner defence line. As Brother Kergis moved in to stand beside him, Kor'sarro allowed himself a grim smile.

‘Order the warriors to mount up, brother,’ he said. ‘We have a hunt to complete.’



CHAPTER 2

Fire and Ice

His Command squad following close behind, Kor'sarro raced through the promethium plant's outer precincts. He himself had gunned down dozens of the recidivist defenders, and his companions scores more. The refinery resembled a vast machine, its innards laid bare and spilled across a hundred square kilometres of the frozen plain. There was scarcely any difference between the buildings and processing facilities, both enveloped with impossibly complex masses of pipes, vents and cables. Kor'sarro suspected the plant's original overseers drew no distinction, the convict work force no doubt sleeping beneath their workstations. They deserved no less, he thought.

What passed for streets were strewn with crates and barrels in a crude attempt on the defenders' part to keep the White Scars at bay. The hastily raised barricades were smashed aside as the Space Marines' Rhino transports ground barrels and defenders alike beneath their armoured treads. Many of the roadways were crossed at a height of about five metres by raised pipe runs, from which the White Scars were engaged on several occasions by recidivist snipers and fire bombers. The first sniper cost one of Sergeant Patha's men an eye, but the wounded Space Marine exacted his revenge, putting a bolt-round through the man's sneering mouth, the shell

exploding within his skull and vaporising his entire head. Forewarned that more snipers were likely to be lurking upon the raised pipe runs, Kor'sarro ordered the Assault squads to range ahead of the strike force as it ploughed through the streets, engaging and neutralising dozens more snipers as they went.

Although the Assault squads dealt with the snipers easily enough, the fire bombers proved a more demanding problem. One of the Rhinos was engulfed in chemical fire as it passed under one of the raised pipe runs, a fire bomber hidden amongst the conduits. The vehicle appeared to be utterly consumed by flame, but miraculously survived, its only damage cosmetic, the pure white livery of the White Scars Chapter reduced to charred black. The vehicle's war spirit would be much aggrieved and would have to be placated with repeated Rites of Appeasement before the transport could be considered battle worthy once more.

The fire bombers displayed no regard for their own safety, unleashing highly volatile, improvised explosives in the heart of a facility that refined one of the most combustible substances known to man. They were surely corrupted by the Alpha Legion, Kor'sarro decided, or perhaps drugged or mind-slaved in some way. Whatever the case, it was yet another example of Voldorius's many crimes against mankind. Kor'sarro ordered the fire bombers to be engaged as a matter of priority, and no more attacks came so near to success as that first ambush.

Several fire bombers were reduced to human torches as massed bolter fire cut them down and ignited their bombs in the process, sending them plummeting from the overhead pipe runs to the ground below. Their guttering forms were crushed beneath the tracks of the White Scars Rhinos and the wheels of their speeding bikes.

Passing under another of the overhead conduits, the strike force closed on the plant's centre. Kor'sarro's bike-mounted Command squad, accompanied by the other two bike squads from Hunter Five, ranged

ahead, while the four Rhino-mounted Tactical squads from Hunters Two and Four formed a column. The two Assault squads streaked overhead on contrails of fire. The street narrowed as the machinery on either side became more and more densely packed. The machine-like buildings became taller, until they reared many hundreds of metres into the sky, which was now barely visible through the web of pipes that connected each part of the vast refinery. Great vents appeared as gaping maws, acrid chemical fumes spewing forth, and it felt to Kor'sarro that his force was travelling through the bowels of a vast, mechanical beast.

‘Beware the fore, my khan,’ bellowed Brother Temu, as a pressure suit-encased defender rose from behind another of the makeshift barricades. The man hefted a bulky weapon, a locally manufactured heavy stubber by the looks of it. Kor'sarro hauled on Moondrakkan's handlebars as the defender opened fire, the fusillade of shells spitting past him. With a flick of his thumbs, Kor'sarro activated the twin bolters mounted on his bike's armoured fairing, and gunned the man down in a rain of shells. More of the defenders appeared from a side street, shouldering crude firearms as they attempted to draw a bead on the rapidly moving White Scars. Kor'sarro veered towards them, his Command squad close behind, and drew Moonfang as he closed on his target.

Kor'sarro beheaded the first of the defenders with a wide sweep of his power blade as he raced past and in the same motion gutted a second and sliced the arm from a third. The remainder were crushed beneath the heavy wheels of his companions' bikes, and the White Scars barrelled on down the street.

The environs were becoming too confined to continue along mounted on their bikes, so Kor'sarro hauled on Moondrakkan's brakes and his mount came to a halt.

‘Dismount!’ he called as his Command squad caught up. ‘We approach the heart. Spread out and continue the hunt on foot.’

‘Where to, my khan?’ asked Brother Jhogai, hefting his ceremonial power sword and combat shield.

Kor’sarro looked towards the central zone of the promethium facility, and located the towering structure that marked its centre. Voldorius had yet to reveal himself, and Kor’sarro knew from prior experience that the fiend preferred to draw his enemies in and lie in wait for them. Although wary of entrapment, Kor’sarro was determined to face Voldorius in his lair.

‘The tower,’ Kor’sarro replied. ‘But we continue with caution.’

Kor’sarro’s men nodded in agreement, for every one of them knew well the duplicity of the foe. The daemon prince would be in no doubt that the White Scars had come for him. Kor’sarro would have it no other way, but he would not walk blindly into a trap.

‘Taura, Patha, to me,’ Kor’sarro called, and within seconds the two sergeants stood before him, ready to receive his orders. ‘Taura, take your squads west of the central tower, Patha, you go east.’ Although brief, Kor’sarro knew that his orders would be fully understood, for these veterans had followed him for decades and fought at his side in countless battles. ‘Go, and the Great Khan be with you, honoured be his name.’

‘Honoured be his name,’ the two warriors repeated, before bowing to Kor’sarro and heading back to their commands. Kor’sarro heard their bellowed orders as they walked away, and smiled wryly to himself.

The men of Kor’sarro’s biker group had dismounted from their bikes, which would be stowed out of sight and rigged with booby traps in case the defenders attempted to interfere with them. Taking stock of his surroundings, Kor’sarro turned his gaze towards the distant tower. All of his past experience told him that the tower would be the place where he would find Voldorius. He steeled himself for the confrontation, eager to corner his nemesis once and for all, but fully aware of the scale of the challenge ahead. Voldorius was a fiend of nigh unimaginable proportions, and his crimes were of a galactic scale.

Many centuries ago, the daemon prince had harnessed the power of an ancient and terrible weapon, a relic of the all but forgotten epoch known as the Dark Age of Technology. The weapon was called the Bloodtide, and although none knew how it functioned, at Voldorius's word it had slain uncounted billions of the Emperor's subjects. In a single night, its curse had swept across a dozen worlds and reduced every one of them to a charnel house of desiccated corpses. All of this Voldorius did in the name of the fell Gods of Chaos, the ultimate enemies of mankind.

'Brothers,' Kor'sarro said, aware that the eyes of each man were upon him. 'Each of you has stood by my side throughout our hunt for the vile one.' The sound of gunfire rang out from nearby as the two flanking groups engaged more of the enemy. He continued, 'Each of us has lost battle-brothers by his hand, or those of his followers.'

'So far this day, we have only faced convict scum, turned from the Emperor's light by the lies of Voldorius. But we know that the vile one's companions must be here too. Be alert, my brothers.'

'Though I know not how many of us will see the next dawn,' Kor'sarro continued, 'I know for certain that those who do not shall ride upon the great hunt at the right hand of the Emperor for all eternity. We have earned that much!'

'Aye!' replied two dozen voices in unison, and Kor'sarro raised a hand to silence them.

'Later, we feast. Now, we hunt!'

At that, Kor'sarro turned and advanced along the narrow street, the central tower rising no more than a couple of kilometres distant. The small force adopted a well-practised formation that ensured that all sectors were covered and no enemy could engage the White Scars without warning.

A burst of angry gunfire sounded from the direction of the western flanking group, reminding Kor'sarro that Voldorius and his Alpha Legion followers were not the only enemy in the city-sized refinery. A moment

later, an explosion rocked the street, tangled pipes and twisted chunks of metal ricocheting down its length.

‘Opportunity fire,’ Kor’sarro growled. ‘The act of an undisciplined rabble.’

As the gunfire and explosions grew louder, Kor’sarro became aware of another sound amidst the tumult of battle. Concentrating as he advanced, Kor’sarro filtered out the noises all around. Discarding the sound of his own breathing, the beating of his hearts and the tread of his armoured boots upon the debris-strewn ground, he detected a low drone, and it was coming from up ahead.

‘The vile one’s sorceries...’ he muttered, looking towards the peak of the tower rising in the sky, silhouetted against the pulsating, violet-hued aurora. The sound grew steadily in volume, and soon it was clearly audible over the clamour of war. It was a plaintive drone that could only have been voiced by something other than human. Yet, though no human throat could have produced that sound, there was something in it that spoke of anger, pain and suffering in an all too mortal way. Kor’sarro was consumed with disgust, all of his senses piqued and alert for the danger the sound might preclude. It could only be Voldorius, unleashing some new nightmare upon the galaxy, damning himself still further if such a thing were possible.

The dirge became louder yet, until it pulsed from the tower’s summit, spreading outwards in palpable waves of grating doom. It echoed from the vast machineries of the promethium refinery, and structural damage was starting to appear in the stacks nearest to the plant’s centre.

Kor’sarro pressed on along his course. The face of his company champion was set in a grim mask, his eyes black pits of revulsion. Several of the battle-brothers made gestures of warding against evil, the ancient rites of the peoples of Chogoris as passed down by the seers and shamans for millennia. The droning, tuneless note revolted him and a dire feeling of uncleanness threatened to consume him. It put him in mind of a dying

predator, some leviathan thrashing in the deepest oceans as it bled its guts into the cold waters far from the cleansing sunlight and winds of the plains. He shook his head to clear the grim vision from his mind, and stepped up his pace towards the centre of the refinery. And not a moment too soon.

Less than a hundred metres ahead, in the cavernous mouth of a vast storage depot, Kor'sarro saw movement.

'The gnarl Drake rises, noon!' he called in battle-cant, indicating to his warriors the presence of the enemy waiting in ambush ahead. Kor'sarro and his Command squad peeled to one side of the narrowing street, moving steadily along its length while making use of the cover of tangled pipes and upturned barrels. With a simple gesture he ordered the other two squads to move along the opposite side of the street, one slightly ahead of him, one slightly behind.

'My khan,' Brother Kergis said from close behind. 'These do not appear to be the same defenders—'

Before Kergis could complete the sentence, a shot rang out from the depot's mouth. Kor'sarro knew instantly that these foes were not the recidivist convicts the White Scars had faced earlier. The weapon fired was not a locally manufactured autogun, but a boltgun, like those carried by the Space Marines.

'Alpha Legion!' Kor'sarro spat, as a burst of bolter fire erupted along the street.

Yet, the shots had not been aimed at Kor'sarro or his men, nor was the timing consistent with an ambush.

'White Scars!' a dry voice from up ahead shouted. Bile rose in Kor'sarro's throat. 'The scent of dung precedes you. Face us!'

A feral growl sounded from behind Kor'sarro as Brother Jhogai made to advance into the open. With a hand upon Jhogai's shoulder, Kor'sarro stopped his old companion. 'No, my friend. This is my burden.'

Kor'sarro stepped out into the open street.

Five figures stepped out from the yawning mouth of the storage facility. As they passed from the shadows into the violet-tinged sunlight, Kor'sarro knew that he had been correct. Each was a giant, wearing power armour of a similar design, only more archaic, to the White Scars. While Kor'sarro and his men wore armour bearing the white and red livery of the White Scars Chapter, the armour of these warriors was painted a greenish blue. Where the White Scars bore proudly the lightning bolt icon of their Chapter, these wore the writhing hydra device of the traitorous Alpha Legion.

'Nullus,' Kor'sarro growled. The name of this foe was like ashes in his mouth.

The warrior Kor'sarro had addressed stepped ahead of his companions. He was taller even than the other Alpha Legion warriors, and bore a long-hafted halberd, the blade blacker than night and radiating darkness. The traitor wore no helmet, forcing Kor'sarro to look upon his vile features. His head was hairless, and covered in a mass of scar tissue. But these were not the intricate tracery of the honour scars Kor'sarro and his kin wore with pride, each applied in remembrance of a great victory or a fallen companion. They were the result of countless years of exposure to the warping, unclean energies of Chaos. What from a distance appeared as a single, solid burn scar was upon closer inspection more like the scrawlings of a madman, each scar traced over the last in swirling runes and sigils until only an anarchic mess remained. The warrior's features were largely obscured by that mass of scar tissue, his lips thin, his eyes narrow slits. But those eyes were bottomless pits of blackness, radiating doom, as if not a man but a presence lurked behind them.

'You come for Voldorius,' the traitor said.

'Aye, and for you, Nullus,' Kor'sarro replied.

‘He awaits,’ Nullus said, indicating the tower with a sharp movement of his ravaged head. ‘But you must first pass me.’

‘Then face me,’ Kor’sarro growled, drawing Moonfang and taking a pace forwards. The traitor’s fellows spread out across the street and behind, his own warriors did likewise.

The fight would be uneven, two score of White Scars against a handful of the Alpha Legion traitors. The sound from the tower grew still louder, a subsonic rumble passing through the ground beneath Kor’sarro’s feet.

‘Not yet, hunter,’ Nullus replied, with a mocking grin.

‘What duplicity is...?’ Kor’sarro began, as a tide of figures appeared behind the traitors, stepping out from the dark entrance to the storage depot.

‘Did you think it so simple, White Scar?’ Nullus crowed as the narrow street behind him filled with armed soldiers. Instead of the drab, rubberised pressure suits and rebreathers worn by those at the defence lines, these men wore an unfamiliar uniform of grey and black, with military-issue armoured jackets and lascarbines. A deafening crack of thunder sounded from the peak of the central tower, and Kor’sarro glanced in its direction.

There, on a wide platform atop the rearing mass of tangled conduits, framed against the pulsating aurora, stood a shape as black as the void. Even at this distance and from the low vantage point, Kor’sarro could see the form of Voldorius. The figure was over two metres tall, and almost as wide across the shoulders. From his back stretched a pair of black, batlike wings, which cracked the air as they whipped back and forth. Kor’sarro’s blood rose, the feral desire to finally slay his nemesis all but consuming him.

But first he would have to pass the daemon prince’s followers. And his slaves.

In moments, over a hundred of the grey- and black-clad soldiers had emerged from the storage depot and lined up behind Nullus and his companions. The odds were now even.

I have not time for this, Kor'sarro seethed, feeling his chance to close on Voldorius slipping away.

'My khan,' the company champion stepped beside him. 'This may be a trap. You must continue.'

'No, Jhogai,' Kor'sarro interjected. 'I cannot ask this of you.'

'Then do not,' Jhogai replied. 'I take it upon myself. The duty is mine, by ancient law.'

Brother Jhogai was invoking his right as company champion to face the traitor Nullus in single combat. And he did so in the intention that Kor'sarro might face Voldorius, even if the champion was cut down affording his captain the opening.

'You are a man of honour, my friend,' Kor'sarro said. 'But our foe is a traitor to all that binds us to the Emperor and the Great Khan, honoured be his name.'

'The others will hold the rabble at bay, my khan,' Brother Jhogai said. 'You must allow them to do so.'

Before Kor'sarro could respond, the company champion drew his power sword and stepped forwards to stand a mere ten metres before the traitor. Nullus's wicked grin widened as he understood Jhogai's intent. Turning to his khan, the warrior said simply, 'Go.'

Another thundercrack sounded from the tower, and Kor'sarro knew he had no choice. He must face his enemy alone, and he must do so now, lest the daemon prince escape justice as he had so many times before.

'Go!' Brother Jhogai repeated, his voice proud, yet tinged by an undertone of anger or impatience.

'Honoured be your name,' Kor'sarro said, his words lost as Jhogai bellowed a war cry and launched himself forwards at his enemy. In an

instant, the mass of soldiers was spilling down the narrow street and the White Scars were unleashing a devastating fusillade of bolter fire that scythed the first rank down in a storm of blood and fire. Kor'sarro caught a last glance of the company champion as he squared off against his opponent, the anarchic tide of battle sweeping around them both until he could see no more.

A third peal of thunder rang out from the tower peak, sounding to Kor'sarro like an invitation or an announcement of coming doom. Resolved to face whatever awaited him, he set off towards the tower at a steady run, the sounds of the battle receding behind. He passed down narrow streets strewn with debris tumbled from the refinery stacks by the vibrations and quakes afflicting the entire plant, the tower looming before him all the way. Several times he caught sight of masked, pressure-suited defenders, and gunned every one of them down with his bolt pistol without pausing. He saw no more of the black- and grey-clad soldiers that had accompanied Nullus, but gave the matter no more attention, for he was rapidly closing on the base of the central tower.

The tower was made of thousands of conduits and pipes, all bound together in an impossible mass that appeared to have been grown rather than built. Vents and flues studded its flanks, some belching noxious fumes, others searing gouts of flame. Enveloped around the twisted pipes and machineries was a series of interconnecting ladders, walkways and platforms, up which, Kor'sarro knew, he would have to climb in order to reach the peak, and his foe.

Sorcerous energies swirled around the pinnacle, the violet aurora twisting from the sky as if reaching down to envelop the tower. Bitter experience told Kor'sarro that Voldorius was a master of many vile arts, and had made bargains with powers too terrible to name. Whatever evil he was calling upon would be halted, on Kor'sarro's honour.

With a grunt, Kor'sarro pulled himself up to the first platform, and ran along its length until he reached a ladder. His armoured boots rang loudly against the corroded metal grille of the walkway, but the sound was all but drowned out by the atonal dirge emanating from overhead and the clash of unnatural thunder shaking the tower.

With an effort of will, Kor'sarro filtered out the low drone, his genetically enhanced physiology granting him the ability where a normal man might be driven to madness by the deafening skirl. He hauled himself up the ladder, climbing twenty metres before he reached the next level. As he stepped out onto a swaying length of badly rusted tread plate, the entire tower shook as if the ground on which it stood was in the grip of an earthquake.

Kor'sarro was now high above the mass of the refinery. Below, a thin line of White Scars unleashed round after round at the massed black- and grey-clad soldiers while two figures circled one another in their midst. He paused as the two warriors closed on one another, his desire to see his champion strike Nullus down winning him over for a second. But it was not to be. Kor'sarro suppressed a bitter cry of anguish as the Alpha Legionnaire scythed Jhogai down with contemptuous ease, cutting the noble White Scar almost in two with a single sweep of his black halberd. A moment later, both groups of warriors charged headlong into one another, mingled war cries rising above the sound of explosions.

Kor'sarro buried his grief beneath his honour, and forced himself to continue his climb. As he rounded the tower he located the white-armoured figures of one of the flanking groups engaged in a bitter fight with a bellowing mob of the pressure-suit-clad convicts. But the sounds of battle were not confined to these two war zones, for the entire city-sized promethium refinery was gripped by conflict. Rearing processing stacks shook, entire lengths of piping peeling away to fall slowly to the ground where they crashed across the streets and crushed buildings. Explosions

blossomed across the plant, and already great belching columns of black smoke were rising into the cold sky. It seemed to Kor'sarro that the White Scars had not brought war to this place at all, they had simply arrived at the same time.

The tower shook again and lurched sickeningly to one side. Kor'sarro gripped the ladder to steady himself, before setting foot upon it and climbing another two dozen metres to the next platform. He was just about to mount the platform when a ten-metre length of conduit hurtled past, falling from further up the tower. Kor'sarro ducked backwards as it cleaved the air a metre from his head, pressing his back against the pipes behind. Then he leaned outwards to follow the huge chunk of broken pipe work as it plummeted, watching as it crushed an entire building with its impact.

The next walkway was narrow and lacked a guardrail. Either the tower's builders had given no concern for the safety of the convict-workers, or it had long since corroded and fallen away. Kor'sarro was forced to grab on to projecting conduits as he passed along its length, several coming away in his hand, belching fumes that stained his white armour. His filtering-out of the hellish drone from the tower's peak was less and less effective, the mournful dirge penetrating his mind even as he fought to push it out.

Reaching the ladder at the end of the narrow walkway, Kor'sarro craned his neck to look upwards. The ladder ran all the way to the tower's peak. Before committing his weight to the corroded steelwork, Kor'sarro tested it by pulling at a rung. The entire length of the ladder shook alarmingly, several rivets coming loose to fall past. Gathering his strength for this last climb and the inevitable confrontation at its culmination, he started upwards.

Kor'sarro was now a hundred metres up and climbing. The refinery-city sprawled outwards below towards the ice plains beyond. The distant crystal towers the strike force's gunships had flown through on their first

approach loomed at the horizon. The entire plant was now wracked with ever more violent tremors, which Kor'sarro knew in his heart were the work of his nemesis. The climb became a race to defeat Voldorius before the entire refinery was destroyed. He cared not an iota for the plant itself or for its criminal workforce, but had no desire to see the bulk of the Third Company slain as it crumbled. As he neared the top of the ladder, the dirge became almost unbearable in its intensity, the discordant keening cutting through his body and permeating his very soul. It was the sound of a billion souls, wailing their lamentations at an eternity of damnation. It was every one of Voldorius's victims, wallowing in eternal darkness and demanding retribution. He bellowed in denial, refusing to succumb to the overwhelming bitterness implicit in the wordless song.

His cry was drowned out by a wave front of cacophony, for before him stood its source. He had reached the tower's peak.

As Kor'sarro hauled himself onto the wide platform, he was confronted by the rearing figure of Voldorius silhouetted against the roiling skies. Actinic lightning arced from every surface, the pulsating, violet auroras twisting down from the cold skies to envelop the summit of the tower. Kor'sarro stood and drew Moonfang, steeling himself for the confrontation against the fiend he had hunted for the better part of a decade.

Voldorius was clad in baroque power armour. His mighty, batlike pinions were folded at his back and he spread his arms wide as if to welcome Kor'sarro as an old friend. In one clawed hand Voldorius bore a writhing blade, twisting and mutating as if eager to rend and cut the flesh of its enemy. The other hand was coiled into a fist, ready to smash and crush Kor'sarro's bones to dust.

All the while, the hellish keening continued, blasting from the beast's throat, threatening to push Kor'sarro backwards, over the precipice, where he would plummet to his death far below. With an effort, Kor'sarro took a step forwards, activating his power blade. This thing that stood before him

was responsible for the damnation of countless souls and for crimes against the Emperor rivalling those of Horus, the Arch-Traitor himself. Since the great betrayal ten millennia ago at the dawning of the Imperium, this cursed being had led a warband of the Alpha Legion in innumerable wars. His deeds were so unutterably vile that few if any accounts had been committed to record. Only memory prevailed, but the White Scars had never forgotten. They had marked this traitor for the hunt, and Kor'sarro would have his head on a pole or die in the attempt.

He took another step forwards, mouthing the words of an ancient Chogoran invocation against the evils that come upon the cold winds by night. Renewed strength flooded his limbs as the words emboldened him. Faith, in the Emperor and the primarch, honoured be his name, welled up within his heart, saturating him with the fierce, warrior pride of his people. He redoubled his grip upon Moonfang's worn leather haft, and planted his feet wide, in the ready stance of a warrior.

'I come for you, Voldorius,' he bellowed over the droning of the beast and the raging of the storm. 'I come for your head!'

An arc of fell lightning blasted the metal decking between them, casting the daemon prince's face in a white, hellish glow.

At the sight of that face, Kor'sarro's heart filled with rage. The daemon's mouth was a yawning chasm, ringed with a million lamprey teeth. Above the vile maw bulged two imbecilic eyes, which radiated not hatred, but unadulterated terror.

Cold anger flooded Kor'sarro's soul. The beast that stood before him was not Voldorius.

'Lies!' Kor'sarro bellowed, feeling the urge to abandon himself to a berserker rage. The bitterness and frustration of ten long years of hunting threatened to overwhelm him, to wash away his discipline and wisdom and leave only a core of unreasoning anger. The Stormseers of the White Scars cautioned against such a fate, and their words came to Kor'sarro even now,

in the cold storm of his rage. Those who trod that path never returned, they said. Turn from the Emperor's light, and you will know nothing but the darkness of an empty soul.

The beast lurched forwards, its steps clumsy and uncoordinated. It raised its writhing daemon-blade high, and brought it downwards in a crude motion that bore no resemblance to the swordsmanship Kor'sarro knew the true Voldorius possessed. It leaned forwards, the balled fist of its left hand dropping to the ground to support its weight, its vile sucker-mouth opening still wider as it redoubled the mournful dirge.

The thing's foetid breath blasted him, but Kor'sarro stood firm against the barrage. In an instant, all of the terrible threat, all of the doom and damnation in that siren wail was dispelled. As if the scales were lifted from his eyes, Kor'sarro saw the truth of the thing before him. This was no being of fell power, but merely some vat-grown monstrosity or a mutant ripped apart and reassembled to give it the appearance of the fiend Voldorius.

The reason why would have to wait, for the thing was rearing upwards, both arms raised to crash down upon Kor'sarro. There was no skill or art in the attack and Kor'sarro avoided it with contemptuous ease by sidestepping the powerful arms as they smashed into the deck where he had stood an instant before. The decking buckled where the impact hit home, the entire platform shaking violently beneath Kor'sarro's feet. The thing roared in anger as it realised that its left fist was ensnared in twisted metal, and Kor'sarro saw his opening.

'Vile as thou art,' he spoke the ritual Chogoran words, 'I condemn thee.'

Moonfang swept downwards in a glittering arc, but an instant before the blade would have struck the beast's neck, it freed its claw and staggered backwards. Instead of beheading the creature, the sword struck its left arm at the elbow, severing it with a jet of brackish, black blood.

For a moment, Kor'sarro found he was blinded as the thing's blood gushed over him, the vile liquid burning his eyes and flesh. Suddenly vulnerable, he threw himself across the decking sightlessly, hearing the rending of metal behind him as he moved.

The beast's dirge changed to a plaintive wailing, rising in pitch and volume. Kor'sarro wiped his gauntlet across his face, clearing his eyes of the thing's stinking blood and blinking as his vision returned.

The mutant was staggering backwards, the stump of its arm flailing back and forth as it continued to gush a fountain of dark, steaming liquid. With its every step, the metal decking buckled and shook, sections at its edge shaking loose to plummet to the ground far below.

Pressing forwards again, Kor'sarro raised Moonfang high to parry a crude overhead blow from the beast's writhing blade. The two weapons clashed with a titanic ringing of steel, and for a moment the two combatants were locked in a terrible contest of strength. The thing bore down with all its power, its vile, lamprey mouth rasping less than a metre from Kor'sarro's face. Row upon row of jagged teeth filled his vision, and he put all of his strength into pushing the beast's sword clear. With a final effort, the two sprung apart, but before the mutant could recover, Kor'sarro swung Moonfang about in a wide arc.

The blade hissed as it tore through the mutant-thing's midsection, scything through armour, then corded muscle, then innards. The bellowing was silenced as the beast's internal organs were pulverised by the energies unleashed at the blade's tip. Kor'sarro stepped neatly backwards as a tide of gore spilled out from the beast's gut, great loops of black intestine thrashing and writhing as they spread out across the decking.

The bulging, imbecilic eyes went dead even as Kor'sarro watched, the life fading from them as the beast collapsed onto its knees. With a deafening crash that cracked the metal platform in two, it fell forwards, its great, black wings falling across its massive form as a death shroud.

Kor'sarro drew in a great gulp of air, tasting the taint of burning upon the winds.

'My khan!' Kor'sarro's comm-bead came to life. 'Kor'sarro Khan, do you read me?'

'I hear you, Brother Temu,' Kor'sarro replied, scanning the complex below for any sign of his warriors. 'Report.'

'*Lord of Heavens* has detected a signal, my khan,' Temu said, as the tower beneath Kor'sarro's armoured feet shuddered violently and lurched to one side.

'What kind of signal, Temu?' Kor'sarro replied, suspicion rising within him.

'The Techmarines cannot be certain, my khan, but they have detected an energy spike deep below the refinery—'

'A command signal,' Kor'sarro interjected, bile rising in his throat. The tower... the thing disguised as Voldorius...

'Pull the company out, Temu, now,' Kor'sarro bellowed, turning for the ladder. 'We have blundered into another of his deceptions!'

Even as he spoke, Kor'sarro fought for balance on the shaking tower. A deep vibration travelled up its length, and then Kor'sarro's stomach was in his mouth as the tower dropped several metres and came to rest with a jarring impact. More detonations sounded from across the refinery, several of the mighty processing stacks dropping straight downwards, as if their foundations had been vaporised in an instant. Smoke and flame blossomed at the base of each, and within moments great gouts of liquid fire were belching into the air from a dozen ruptured promethium conduits.

Voldorius had lured the Third Company into a trap, using his own followers and the altered mutant-thing as bait. Bitter rage welled up in Kor'sarro's heart as he stood at the precipice looking down at the burning city-refinery. Yet, even consumed as he was by hatred of the vile one, he knew too that his warriors needed him. Kor'sarro had made an oath to the

Great Khan himself that Voldorius would be slain by his hand. He stepped back from the platform's edge as fragments of it shook loose and fell away. He made for the ladder, and with one last look at the slain mutant, began the climb down. He would not be claiming the thing's head, for there was no honour in doing so.

'Temu!' Kor'sarro called as he sped down the ladder, his feet thudding onto the first platform. 'Lead the warriors out. I will not be far behind.'

The answer came over the comm-bead a moment later. 'Aye, my khan. We are assailed by foes, but they attempt to break off the fight.'

'Then let them,' Kor'sarro ordered as he pounded along the platform to the next ladder. He was cut off before he could issue another order however, as a mighty explosion rocked the tower, throwing it violently to one side.

Kor'sarro was forced to take hold of a corroded pipe or be flung from the platform. The entire tower lurched sideways, and only Kor'sarro's iron grip kept him from plummeting dozens of metres as his body swung out into air. The whole base of the tower was wreathed in flames, a pool of burning promethium spreading outwards all around. With a metallic wail, the pipe burst, wreathing Kor'sarro in scalding hot steam. The pipe bent outwards, suspending him several metres from the tower's flank.

As if the situation could get any worse, Kor'sarro's ears were assailed by a new sound, a keening like some beast the size of a mountain roaring a challenge to the entire world. For an instant, he took it for the mournful sound of the altered mutant-thing that had drawn him towards the tower, but this was far lower in pitch, so low it was more felt than heard. And it was emanating from the ground, or from beneath it.

Pushing aside the sheer, unadulterated scope of Voldorius's evil, Kor'sarro knew that he had more immediate concerns. The tower shook again, this time swaying the other way and dropping a dozen metres into

the ground. For a moment, the open air below Kor'sarro was replaced by the inclined plane of the tower's conduit-wreathed flanks.

There was nothing for it. Kor'sarro let go of the pipe and dropped, striking the side of the leaning tower almost immediately. Gravity took over, and he slid down fifty metres of the steep slope, sparks flying from his armour as it scraped along the rusted conduits. The rapidly expanding lake of burning promethium loomed, black smoke pouring upwards to engulf him. His life depending on his timing, Kor'sarro braced himself ready to leap. Then he was entirely wreathed in black smoke, unable to see a thing. He bunched his muscles and pushed himself off against the conduit.

Kor'sarro passed weightlessly through billowing smoke, and then he was out of it and the ground beyond the raging promethium was racing up to meet him. He had but an instant to prepare for the impact, tucking his legs so that as he struck the ground he rolled. Then he was up, Moonfang drawn from its scabbard before he was even upright.

Burning promethium raging at his back, Kor'sarro gained his bearings. Explosions blossomed from nearby buildings, and the frozen, debris-strewn ground beneath his feet trembled. A quake wracked the street, and the ground lurched.

'Seismic charges,' Kor'sarro growled.

Activating his comm-bead, he hailed his command vessel. '*Lord of Heavens*, this is Kor'sarro.' The channel hissed and wailed with feedback for a moment, before the response cut through. '*Lord of Heavens* responding, my khan. Go ahead.'

'The vile one has planted some form of detonator beneath the plant. The entire facility is coming down. Have all Hunters deployed to extract us. Out.'

Not waiting for the response, Kor'sarro closed the channel and set out along the street at a fast run. The buildings and machinery to either side

were now burning, smaller detonations blasting shrapnel in all directions. The sky overhead was black, the violet aurora entirely obscured by clouds of smoke. As he ran, he scanned the alleyways and portals for signs of the enemy, but found only smouldering corpses, bandoliers crackling as ammunition cooked off. A part of him was stunned by the sheer scale of the destruction Voldorius had unleashed, shocked that the vile one would go to such lengths to ensnare his pursuers. How long had Voldorius schemed? Some time, that much was clear. The refinery had been fortified to draw the White Scars in. It had been extensively mined to ensure their destruction once they were mired in combat with the recidivists turned to serve the Alpha Legion.

He continued, pounding along streets now cracked and shifting as the ground disintegrated. The cracks widened into fractures, which Kor'sarro leapt over as he ran. He readied Moonfang as he closed on the building the White Scars had left their bikes in, slowing as he approached the hiding place. He doubted any of the convict defenders would be nearby, but was alert nonetheless.

As Kor'sarro passed through the dark opening, his boot thudded into something wet. At his feet was the blasted body of one of the black- and grey-clad soldiers that had accompanied the Alpha Legion. The man must have fallen foul of one of the charges set to defend the bikes. Kor'sarro's eye was caught by a symbol painted onto the blood-splattered shoulder armour, something he had not noticed any of the other enemy soldiers wearing. It was some kind of heraldic device, a red shield mounted with four stars. He did not know the significance of the device, but noted it nonetheless.

Then Kor'sarro's bolt pistol was in his hand and levelled at the darkness as he heard a sound.

'Brother-captain!' the voice of Brother Kergis came from the shadows. A moment later, the White Scar activated his bike's engine, which roared

to life, its headlights illuminating the interior of the building. In the harsh glare, Kor'sarro saw that Brother Kergis was not alone. His Command squad awaited, each upon their bikes, while Moondrakkan stood ready for him.

Kor'sarro grinned, but was struck an instant later by two competing concerns.

'I ordered you to leave...' he began. Then 'Brother Jhogai?' He feared he knew the fate of the company champion without the need to be told, but awaited the response nonetheless.

'He died with honour, my khan,' Brother Kergis said, his voice thick with grief.

Kor'sarro nodded silently. The warriors of his Command squad had fought together for years, and Jhogai was well loved and respected amongst the warriors of the Third Company. He might one day have risen to Kor'sarro's own rank, but for the traitorous Alpha Legion.

An explosion nearby brought Kor'sarro back to the here and now, dust and debris falling from the ceiling. He pushed his own grief to the back of his mind, resolving to honour his fallen comrade by ensuring the others survived to continue the hunt for Voldorius.

'I'll have words with those who disregard my orders,' he said as he mounted his bike and gunned its engine to life. Despite the harshness of his tone, his warriors would know he jested. He was eternally grateful they had waited for him.

'White Scars,' Kor'sarro bellowed over the roaring of his Command squad's bikes in the building's interior. 'It is well past time we were leaving!'

At that, Kor'sarro led the way out of the building as larger chunks of debris were torn from its roof to crash down around them. The street outside now resembled a warzone, as if opposing titans had battled one another with no regard for their environment. Oily black smoke enveloped

the refinery, the only illumination that of the raging promethium fires deep within. As they rode, they were forced to swerve as huge chunks of debris and falling buildings, massive conduits and processing stacks were cast down by the sheer destruction Voldorius had unleashed. The ground heaved, and several times cracks many metres wide appeared in front of the White Scars. They gunned their bikes' engines and leapt across blindly, for all too often the other side was wreathed in smoke and flame.

The streets finally widened and the Command squad raced through the refinery-city's outer limits, the smoke thinning noticeably. The bulk of the destruction was confined to the city's heart, marked by the now-collapsed tower upon which Kor'sarro had faced the mutant-thing proxy of Voldorius. The White Scars cleared the last of the machines and buildings of the plant and closed on the inner trench line.

The defences were now abandoned by all but the dead and the dying, the recidivist scum having shown their true colours and fled. They would not get far, for those not cut down by the White Scars would not survive long in the frozen depths of the polar wastes, and they could scarcely return to their city.

Passing the defence line, Kor'sarro brought Moondrakkan to a slewing halt that kicked up a spray of ice from the frozen ground. As his companions slowed to a stop, he looked back in the direction they had come from.

The central zone of the refinery-city was enveloped in roiling black clouds, which seethed and pulsed as if with a vile life of their own. Flashes from within illuminated the clouds, silhouetting something that Kor'sarro could not quite make out. A deep, subsonic lowing filled the air, echoing through the blazing city and out across the frozen wastes. The sound was almost that of an animal, a vast creature bellowing its hatred and pain at the universe.

And then another flash of lightning illuminated the roiling cloudbank, and Kor'sarro saw something terrible. Rising ponderously out of the cloud was what he first took for a warped and distorted conduit, perhaps thrown outwards by the explosions tearing the city's heart apart. Then he saw that it was no conduit; it was nothing made by the hand of man.

From out of the cloud rose what could only be described as vast, coiling tentacles. The animal keening rose to deafening volume, forcing Kor'sarro to don his helmet and activate its dampeners just to preserve his hearing. More of the tentacles appeared, until a nest of dozens writhed and thrashed as if in slow motion. The vast, coiling limbs quested blindly outwards, each languid movement felling a building or processing stack and causing untold destruction. Whatever the beast was, it appeared not to notice the flames that raged all about it as billions of litres of promethium burned.

'Xenos blasphemy...' Kor'sarro heard Brother Yeku, his company standard bearer mutter.

'Or worse,' answered Apothecary Khagus, his own voice thick with disbelief at the sight before them.

'What could be—' Brother Yeku said.

'Enough!' Kor'sarro interjected. Even as he spoke, more of the tentacles were writhing outwards from whatever hell mouth had spawned the beast. Several were moving in the direction of the Command squad. He gunned Moondrakkan's engine and brought his mount around. 'Brother Temu, raise the *Lord of Heavens*. I want a situation report.'

As Kor'sarro and his Command squad moved out again, Brother Temu reported back. '*Lord of Heavens* says they've lost contact with the gunships, my khan. I barely got through, and lost the channel soon after.'

Several of the vast tentacles were now reaching high into the air, and one was questing in the command group's direction. It was so large, even the fast-moving bikes could not hope to escape it.

‘All Hunters!’ Kor’sarro bellowed into the vox-link. ‘This is Kor’sarro, does anyone read me?’

Wailing feedback was the only reply Kor’sarro heard, before a second later the gargantuan tentacle loomed overhead and crashed to the ground a mere twenty metres away, pulverising ice and smashing apart crystal formations. The impact, had it come down upon the Command squad, would have crushed the whole group to a bloody smear.

As the tentacle rose again, Kor’sarro reopened the vox-channel. ‘All Hunters, whoever can hear me, converge on my position!’

The vast tentacle slammed down into the ground again, the force of the impact almost throwing several of the White Scars from their bikes. But it is said that the sons of Chogoris are born in the saddle, and they all maintained control of their machines. This time, the ice sheet cracked, and a nearby defence bastion was swallowed whole as a vast chasm opened up.

‘Does anyone read me?’ Kor’sarro called again, steering wildly to avoid a massive shard of ice flung across his path by the tentacle’s flailing. The animal howling continued, so loud now that even with his helmet systems engaged Kor’sarro was almost deafened.

‘Hunter One,’ the response came over the vox. ‘This is Hunter Three, inbound on your position. Stand by.’

‘Hunter Three?’ Kor’sarro replied, uncaring that his voice was tinged with incredulity. He heard a savage roar of joy from his companions, which was drowned out seconds later by the sound of a trio of hellstrike missiles streaking overhead from Hunter Three’s undamaged wing, before slamming into the writhing tentacle.

The monstrous organ was consumed in fire, two hundred metres of it tearing away under the missiles’ barrage. The separated appendage reared hideously into the air, standing upright for a moment before crashing down. The ice cracked, and the obscene tentacle collapsed through the wound it had made.

But the beast would not be killed simply by severing its limbs. Whatever lay at the heart of the writhing mass was still protected in the ground beneath the promethium plant.

‘Hunters,’ Kor’sarro said. ‘We shall draw the beast from its lair. When its body is exposed, strike it down.’

The bikers powered on across the icebound plains, the jagged crystal formations becoming denser as the ruined promethium plant was left far behind. The White Scars’ skills were tested to the full as they swerved around crystals as sharp as diamonds. A shadow passed over Kor’sarro’s band, and an instant later a rearing crystal stack shattered into a billion pieces, showering the White Scars with razor-sharp fragments.

The tentacle slammed down behind the racing bikers, its leathery hide pierced with countless shards of crystalline shrapnel. The tentacle reared and thrashed as it bled the clear liquid that must have served it as blood across the ice. Another tentacle arched high into the air and came down with a ground-shaking impact in a great loop in front of the White Scars, trapping their escape.

But the beast had overextended itself. Its vast, globular body had emerged from the smoking crater at the heart of the promethium plant as it had stretched itself further and further in pursuit of its prey. A pulsating mountain of unformed flesh rolled out of the chasm to flatten the buildings of the plant. Processing stacks toppled and machinery exploded as the creature tore down the works of man in its eagerness to catch those who fled it.

‘Now!’ Kor’sarro said. ‘All Hunters, strike for its heart!’

The skies were split by the sonic boom of the Thunderhawks soaring high overhead. Every weapon of every gunship was fired as one, hellstrike missiles, cannon shells and las-beams lancing out across the sky.

The pulsating core of the beast erupted in a fountain of vile ichor and was consumed in flames. The tentacles arched and thrashed, looping high

as if to shield the beast from its attackers. As the last of the tentacles sank into the banks of black smoke, Hunters One and Five came in to land near Kor'sarro and his warriors and the Master of the Hunt led his retinue up the access ramp of his command gunship and into the waiting bay. What remained of the plant was fully ablaze, a column of black smoke rising many kilometres into the atmosphere.

Just what vile sorceries Voldorius had enacted here Kor'sarro had no way of knowing, but it seemed to him that some creature from this world's pre-history that slumbered beneath the ice sheet had been awakened by seismic charges. The act had been timed so that the beast would arise at the very moment Kor'sarro was facing the mutant atop the city's highest peak.

As the ramp closed behind him and the Thunderhawk lifted into the air, Kor'sarro vowed he would not allow Voldorius a moment's respite. The image of the insignia on the dead soldier's armour came to mind once more. The four stars on the crimson shield. If he could discover the source of that insignia, the hunt would be back under way.

Kor'sarro swore that Voldorius would pay for the crimes he had enacted on Cernis IV. They would be added to the millennia-long litany. Justice would be done, by Kor'sarro's own hand. This was his oath, on his very life.

'Before the rise of the Imperium of Man, the greatest, most deranged minds created machines so small they could invade the very blood and make war upon their creators' enemies from within. Once released, those machines replicated, until they had invaded the blood of an entire planetary population. And then, at a single word, they arose. Ten billion bled as one, and an entire world drowned in the blood.

But something went wrong, as ever it will when man dabbles with such powers. The weapon escaped the shackles of its own being, and would not obey its masters. And so it came to pass that the world which the weapon had destroyed so spectacularly was set apart from the greater realm of man.

The Emperor came, and in time that world knew the tread of man once more. Yet, the weapon remained hidden for cold millennia, until a servant of the Machine discovered it, waiting, in the dust and ashes beneath his very feet. And that servant, who had been cast out by his brethren, brought his discovery to the vile one, his true master. At his word, the weapon was resurrected, and at his word, it was set free across not one world, but a thousand. Only when the weapon had invaded the bodies of countless billions did the vile one order it to rise up and turn upon its carriers. Such glorious slaughter was achieved that night that the vile one was granted apotheosis. He cast off his mortal heritage and became as a god. But he would be yet more.

The weapon was expended, reduced once more to a core of a trillion nanytes. These the vile one bound into the form of the prisoner, and held captive, until the time came to unleash the power upon the galaxy once more.

The sons of man sought to destroy all knowledge of the weapon, to deny its existence, as if by locking facts away they could starve reality and undo

that which had been done. But there are those who move in the shadows, who see what others do not. These benighted souls with eyes of black harbour such knowledge, and they wait, biding their time. Soon. That time is soon.'

– The Heretic Archivist of the Gethsemane Reclusiam,
Third Book of Quothes (redacted)



CHAPTER 3

Quintus

Ekit Skarl, equerry to Lord Voldorius, paused in the vestibule before stepping onto the bridge of *The Ninth Eye*. He took a deep breath, steeling himself to face his infernal master, to enter the baleful presence of the daemon prince that had ravaged the hated Imperium for so many long centuries. Skarl was but the latest in a long line of mortals Voldorius had employed to deal with the tiresome and mundane realities of administration, logistics and politics. He had not chosen the role for himself, though he accepted that he had certainly invited it by his dabbling in the forbidden doctrines of the Ruinous Powers. The equerry's continued existence relied solely on his fulfilling his master's needs, without doubt or hesitation. He could afford to show not a single iota of weakness.

Beyond the shadows in which the equerry lurked sprawled the bridge of the Desolator-class battleship that had served as Voldorius's flagship for three millennia, since the daemon prince had wrested it from the fleet of his rival Lord Commander Amexon of the Alpha Legion. A raised central walkway stretched a hundred metres forwards, terminating in armoured viewports ten metres tall. Below the level of the walkway were the bridge crew stations, in which hundreds of hard-wired crew-serfs spent every

moment of their tortured existence tending to the operation of the vessel's ancient systems.

Straightening his black robes and assuming a suitably meek stoop, Skarl stepped out from the vestibule's shadows and onto the decking plate of the bridge. Two dozen crew-serfs glanced upwards in his direction, their jealousy at his freedoms and privileges writ large across their scabrous faces. Fools, Skarl thought, all of them. They should count themselves blessed that they lived such uncomplicated lives, he mused bitterly as he stalked past.

As he walked the length of the walkway, Skarl reviewed in his mind the news he had come to deliver to his master. *The Ninth Eye* was closing on the world of Quintus, a planet that Lord Voldorius had invested much in subjugating, for it was the perfect base for his forthcoming plans. The daemon prince's followers had fought a month-long war to crush the planet's militias, crippling its contacts with the greater Imperium in short order so that no outside interference would be forthcoming. Now, that conquest was largely complete, allowing the next phase of his master's plans to begin.

The equerry bore other news too.

Approaching Lord Voldorius, Skarl assumed an even deeper bow, feeling the fell power that radiated from his master's huge form in sickening waves. Some were so afflicted that they would vomit, void their bowels or collapse upon the floor bleeding from every orifice. Skarl knew how pathetic his master found such displays, and it was one of the equerry's many tasks to ensure such weaklings were not allowed to enter the master's presence or his service, unless of course it served the daemon's own purposes to see his enemies reduced to vomiting, quivering wrecks at his feet.

Casting off such thoughts, Skarl sidled up to his master and assumed a posture of abject subservience. His forehead pressed to the corroded metal

decking, he awaited his master's acknowledgement.

'You may stand, equerry,' Voldorius said. The daemon prince had never once addressed Skarl by name.

Allowing himself to breathe, Skarl rose, though only to a low bow. He dared not stand fully erect in his master's presence lest the action be taken for insubordination.

'Speak, equerry,' Lord Voldorius ordered, his voice laced with ancient menace that filled Skarl with cold dread no matter how many times he heard it.

'My master, I bring word that the resistance on Quintus is all but crushed.' He was mindful to phrase the missive in such a way that it was not his own assessment of the situation on the world below, but someone else's. Someone who would bear responsibility were it proved incorrect.

Skarl awaited a response from his master, not daring to raise his gaze any higher than the daemon's power armour-encased feet. It was long moments before Voldorius replied. 'What of Nullus?'

'My lord Nullus has come aboard this past hour, my master. He and his warriors are returned from Cernis Four in glory.'

A palpable wave of displeasure washed over Skarl as his master reacted to this last statement. Dread welled up inside the equerry. 'Why then is he not before me, apprising his master of his great victory?' Voldorius grated.

'My master, I...' Skarl stammered, dropping to the deck once more and pressing his face against the metal at his master's feet. Then, another voice sounded from the far end of the bridge, and Skarl allowed himself to breathe a sigh a relief.

'I came as soon as I was able, Voldorius.' The voice belonged to Nullus, his master's most trusted servant, if trust could be said to exist between such fell beings. Skarl remained prostrate as he listened to the metallic tread of Nullus's armoured boots approaching along the walkway.

‘I had certain dedications to make,’ Nullus said. ‘In honour of my victory.’

‘What of Cernis?’ Voldorius growled. Skarl became aware that a tense hush had descended upon the bridge, as if all present knew that bad news would bring their master’s displeasure down upon them.

‘The spawn of Jaghatai took the bait,’ Nullus replied, relish obvious in his voice. ‘They thought they had us, but were disabused of that notion.’

‘Survivors?’ Voldorius enquired.

‘The beast ate its fill, Voldorius, of that I am quite sure.’

‘How sure?’ Voldorius snapped back.

‘None could have survived the destruction we unleashed upon the refinery. And I took the life of their champion with my own blade.’

‘And none could have followed?’ Voldorius growled, his voice low and tainted with menace.

‘None, my master,’ Nullus responded. ‘Their hunt is ended for good.’

Voldorius considered Nullus’s words for some time before he replied.

‘You have served well, as ever you do when facing the scarred ones, Nullus. You shall be rewarded.’ The daemon turned his mighty bulk towards the viewports, and raised a clawed hand to point into the void.

‘What of Quintus, Nullus? The equerry tells me the subjugation is all but complete.’

At the mention of his name, Skarl allowed himself to straighten up, knowing that he would be addressed again soon. As he did so, he saw that the scarred face of Nullus was upon him, those soulless eyes boring into his own.

‘The subjugation is entirely complete, Voldorius,’ Nullus said without turning his gaze from the equerry. ‘On that you have my word.’

Nullus broke eye contact with Skarl, and turned his black gaze towards the scene beyond the viewports. Skarl felt profound relief that he was no longer the subject of Nullus’s attentions, for the lieutenant was known as a

capricious and callous individual ill-disposed towards rivals or those who gainsaid his word. Nullus was, after all, Alpha Legion, while Skarl was but a man, and his continued existence was entirely at the forbearance of his masters.

‘What of the resistance?’ Voldorius asked. The daemon prince spoke the last word as if describing the foulest of deeds, as if the notion that mere mortals might attempt to stand before his designs was the worst possible affront.

Nullus hesitated before making his reply. It seemed to Skarl that the lieutenant was gathering his thoughts, lest he give Voldorius cause to become displeased. Then, Nullus answered.

‘What little opposition to your rule still remained after the purges of the Klanik Peninsula and the Olsta Line is now entirely crushed, Voldorius. The processing sites are now fully operational, and those who do not display total loyalty to their new masters are being culled.’

‘At what rate?’ Voldorius interjected.

‘The example we made of the Fourth Division paid dividends, my master,’ Nullus continued. ‘Twenty thousand heads now adorn the walls of the capital. Since then, the cull rate has dropped to around ten thousand a day, and I expect it to drop further still as the point is driven home. For every act of defiance, a thousand die as punishment. Soon, the resistance shall be entirely spent.’

Voldorius considered his lieutenant’s words. ‘A shame that the offerings must cease. The warp resounds to the death of multitudes, singing our glory across light years.’

Skarl scarcely dared interrupt his master, but he had other news to deliver. ‘My master... I...’

The bridge fell deathly silent, and Skarl felt not only the eyes of a hundred crew-serfs upon him, but those of his master too. Nausea welled up inside him as Voldorius radiated anger. The equerry swallowed hard to

avoid vomiting across his master's boots, for his life, at this moment, hung in the balance.

‘Speak, equerry,’ Skarl heard his master say. Behind the voice he could hear the wailing of anguished souls, those of the many thousands that had displeased the daemon throughout the millennia and paid the terrible price for doing so.

‘My master,’ Skarl said, fighting desperately to keep his voice level. ‘I bring word that the prisoner is awakened at last. The cell-masters await your coming.’

‘Be seated, my brothers,’ said Kor’sarro as he entered the strategium of the *Lord of Heavens*. The Space Marines inside bowed their heads before seating themselves around the circular chamber. The Master of the Hunt took his own seat, a marble throne surmounted with the skull of a fearsome tusk-drake. The beast had been slain in combat by old Jamuka Khan, Kor’sarro’s honoured predecessor, teacher and greatly-missed friend.

A week had passed since the destruction of the Cernis Four refinery, and the Master of the Hunt had been afforded plenty of time to brood upon the whole affair. He had gone over every single detail of the events leading up to the assault, as well as the battle itself. He had gathered the most senior of his officers to the strategium. In his endless poring over every detail of the action on Cernis Four, he had found something.

‘Brother Sang,’ Kor’sarro addressed the Techmarine seated opposite him across the chamber. ‘The sensorium upload, if you will.’

‘By your command, my khan,’ replied Brother Sang. A multi-jointed, mechanical limb at the Techmarine’s back reached forwards, a data-spike at its end plugging into a terminal set in the decking. The spike whirred and buzzed, and then the light in the chamber dimmed. For a moment, all was dark, before a bright shaft of light formed in the centre of the chamber. Within the glowing column danced tiny motes, slowly resolving

into an image of a frozen scene from the closing stages of the battle at Cernis Four.

All eyes in the chamber were turned towards the slowly spinning scene, projected in a three-dimensional image by ancient holo-generators set in the floor and ceiling.

‘My brothers,’ Kor’sarro said, looking to each of the Space Marines, one at a time. ‘What you see before you is a single frame, taken from the sensorium-core of my own power armour.’

After a few seconds, Kor’sarro nodded towards the Techmarine, and the scene blurred, before resolving itself again.

‘And here is the same scene, from Brother To’ban’s perspective.’ He nodded again, and the scene cycled through five more frames, each showing the same patch of rubble-strewn ground from a different angle.

‘None of us took note at the time, as we were all otherwise engaged,’ Kor’sarro went on, a wry smile forming at his lips. ‘But I have reviewed every upload, and I believe we have him.’

Several of the officers present began to speak, but Kor’sarro raised a hand, forestalling their questions. At another nod, Brother Sang caused the image of the war torn scene to zoom in on a single patch of ground. At the centre of the strategium, as if suspended in the column of bright light, was projected the image of a blood-splattered segment of armour.

‘This armour, brothers, was worn by one of the soldiers accompanying the traitors.’ Several of those present nodded in recognition as memories of the confrontation with the Alpha Legion and their human followers came to mind. ‘I have asked Brother Qan’karro to identify it.’

All heads turned towards the strike force’s most senior psychic warrior, a Space Marine Librarian. The White Scars knew them as Stormseers. Brother Qan’karro stood, his gnarled force staff in hand, and scanned the chamber. The Stormseer’s face was lined with age and honour scars, his skin having the texture and hue of old oak. Though he was ancient, Brother

Qan'karro was counted amongst the Chapter's most fearsome warriors, his rank and seniority broadly equal to the Master of the Hunt's. Though Kor'sarro held command of the Third Company, there were few matters in which he would not welcome the counsel of the old Stormseer.

'The armour bears a device, four stars on a red field,' Qan'karro said. 'We have consulted the archives, and found three hundred and nine instances of this device in current use in this Segmentum alone'. Kor'sarro saw several of his officers make eye contact with one another, evidently believing the odds too long. But the Master of the Hunt felt wry amusement as the Stormseer continued.

'Many we can ignore,' Qan'karro said, 'for they represent only mercantile concerns of one sort or another. One more we can most certainly eliminate, for the device was used as the standard of Rogue Trader Huss, emblazoning every vessel in the disastrous Magellanic Expedition.'

Several of Kor'sarro's officers nodded at the mention of that cursed venture, which several Space Marine Chapter Masters had spoken out against to little avail.

'In another case, the kin-slavers of the Alcaak Dystopia used the device to brand their victims, but we all know what befell those cruel bastards.' Many of those slavers were now themselves enslaved. They deserved every torture the dark eldar had inflicted on them.

'Of the dozen or so uses of the device that remain, one stands out. Having meditated long on the matter, my brothers and I are in agreement.' The Space Marines waited for Qan'karro to expound on his deduction, and Kor'sarro knew that the old warrior was now fully in his element, even enjoying himself, if such a thing were possible.

'Go on please, honoured seer,' Kor'sarro said, bowing his head slightly towards Qan'karro, the faintest of smiles touching his lips. 'We await your wisdom with great anticipation.'

The Stormseer's glance told Kor'sarro that he was well aware that he was being made sport of, if only in a friendly manner. Qan'karro got to the point. 'The household guard of the governor of a world called Quintus,' the Stormseer announced. 'A world a mere five light years distant, and on the same secondary conduit as Cernis.'

Kor'sarro delved into his memories of nearby space, calling to mind the endless charts and maps he and his senior commanders had gone over time and again in their hunt for Voldorius. Yes, the Quintus system came to him.

'The bulwark-world?' Kor'sarro said.

'Aye, huntsman,' the Stormseer replied, before expounding. 'But Quintus has of late been afflicted by a warp storm, codified Argenta. It is only in the last months that Argenta has quietened to an unprecedented degree, allowing free passage to and from the system for the first time in months.'

'You believe this significant?' asked Kor'sarro.

'Indeed I do,' the Stormseer replied, looking around at the gathered Space Marines before his gaze settled on the slowly revolving image of the blood-splattered armour. 'Quintus represents a convergence, in more ways than one. For a start, it is a warp nexus, a point at which several dozen conduits meet. Whoever controls the system can extend his influence to a score of others and dominate the entire region.'

Kor'sarro nodded, picturing the stellar maps. Quintus did indeed sit at a strategically desirable meeting of warp routes. For centuries, the world had stood guard against alien incursions from nearby wilderness space. Until, that is, warp storm Argenta had caused the world to fall from power. With the warp storm receding, the balance of powers would shift once more. But in whose favour?

Even as the thought came to him, another of those present spoke up. 'Something tells me this convergence of which you speak is not merely a

strategic matter, Brother Qan'karro.' The speaker was the Third Company's senior Chaplain, a black-clad veteran by the name of Xia'ghan. 'Other forces are at work here, are they not?'

The Stormseer nodded to his comrade, a dour expression falling across his features. 'Indeed, honoured one,' he replied. 'All of the signs point to something being unleashed upon Quintus. Something from the dark times. Something terrible.'

Silence fell across the strategium as the Stormseer's message sank in. After long moments, Kor'sarro looked around at his senior officers, and spoke.

'If what our brother tells us is true, and I have no reason to doubt that it is, then Voldorius must be stopped before he can bring about whatever calamity he has planned. I am pledged to bring the head of the vile one to the Hall of Skies, this I have promised to the Great Khan himself. I will not allow the daemon to entrap us again, or to escape our grasp, and I expect every one of you and your men to stand with me on this. Much rides upon it.

'Brothers, we go to Quintus, for there our hunt *must* end, for our honour, for the Great Khan's, and for our primarch's.'

Every Space Marine in the strategium responded as one. 'Honoured be his name!'

Skarl bowed deeply as he stepped aside to allow Voldorius and Nullus by. In front of the equerry was a pair of mighty iron doors, deeply corroded and encrusted with the forbidden runes of the Chaos Gods. Skarl had spent most of his life in the presence of such fell sigils, but even he was cowed by the sheer malignance that radiated from this particular combination.

With a deep rumble, the doors slid apart, a hellish, flickering glow filling the widening gap. Before the entrance was even fully open, Voldorius stepped through into the cell. Skarl waited as Nullus followed

his master, cowering despite himself as the lieutenant cast a threatening glance his way.

Only when both warriors were through the portal did the equerry follow in their wake.

Skarl had never entered the cell before. What it held inside was so valuable to his master that few were ever allowed to do so, upon pain of torture or, if lucky, death. As he passed through, he took in the unfamiliar surroundings. The cell was in fact a large, round chamber, its vaults lost in darkness far overhead. The walls were of brass, stained by centuries of runoff from dozens of corroded grilles. Other stains were in evidence too, great arcs of long-dried blood and other bodily fluids lending the walls a mottled finish. Sconces were mounted all around the chamber, their flickering flames casting the illumination Skarl had seen from outside.

Voldorius stopped in the centre of the huge chamber, and Nullus came to stand beside him. Skarl followed a respectful distance behind them, still bowing, eventually coming to stand behind Voldorius. Before the three stood a pair of cell-masters. They were massive brutes, clad in heavy leather aprons encrusted with filth. The bare skin of their arms and upper chests glistened with sweat in the flickering light of the torches, and the face of each was obscured by a heavy mask, piggish eyes just visible behind the thin visor. At their belts the cell-masters carried an assortment of crude tools, their general purpose clearly evident to the equerry. In his hand, each held a long electro-prod. The two implements crossed in between the two men. At Voldorius's approach, the cell-masters raised the prods, a brief arc of electricity spitting between the tips before they were brought upright, revealing what they guarded.

Behind the two cell-masters was a brass orb, perhaps two metres in diameter, its entire polished surface carved with impossibly intricate lines and devices. Skarl's gaze was drawn into the unnatural patterns, and it took a formidable effort to turn his eyes away from them. Any not promised to

the Ruinous Powers were likely to become entrapped by the sigils and forms, their soul forfeited by the very act of looking upon them. It was only when he tore his glance away from the orb's surface that Skarl realised that the entire construction was floating above the deck, held aloft by invisible lines of arcane force. Powerful sorceries were at work, for no mere anti-grav generator was being utilised.

A preternatural quiet descended on the cell as Voldorius stepped between the two attendants. Even the flickering torches mounted upon the wall fell silent, though their flames still danced.

The daemon prince halted in front of the orb and laid a clawed hand upon its surface. Red and orange energies played between claw and brass. No mere mortal could have survived that contact, for only Voldorius had power over what lay before him. The daemon prince closed his eyes, his bestial face becoming unusually still for a moment. Then he opened them once again and spoke, his voice shattering the silence of the chamber.

‘Awaken, prisoner,’ Voldorius grated. ‘And know your fate!’

After a pause that felt like an hour, a whisper filled the chamber. ‘None can know their fate, Voldorius. Not even you.’

The voice seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, from a million throats and from none. The voice was not a voice at all, but the mere echo of one, separated by impossible gulfs from its source. Even as the ghostly words faded, Voldorius replied.

‘You will obey me, prisoner, or you will know such pain as even you cannot imagine.’

Again, a long silence preceded the prisoner's response, throughout which ancient thoughts formed and reformed in the ether before they coalesced into words.

‘We have felt the pain of billions, Voldorius, as well you know.’ An ethereal undertone spoke of anguish and despair, but also of resignation. ‘Nothing you can do can make us obey.’

Skarl shuddered as waves of fell anger radiated from his master before Voldorius spoke once more. 'I have kept you for two thousand years, contained you, tempered you. Now I awaken you, and you shall do as I command. Of that you can be assured.'

A displeasure that few witnessed and survived was written across the daemon's face. Through clenched teeth, Voldorius addressed his equerry.

'Prepare the meat-casters,' Voldorius growled. 'Send word that the orb is to be unsealed, at last. The prisoner is to be broken, his will is to be destroyed, his mind is to be shattered, whatever the cost. I only order that no matter the ruin visited upon his flesh, life must remain, if only in a single, dry, quivering cell. Take the prisoner to Quintus, to the palace in Mankarra, render it unto the meat-casters, and then await my order.'

Skarl prostrated himself before his master, touching his forehead to the filth-encrusted floor. 'I obey, my master,' he mumbled.

As the footsteps of Voldorius and Nullus receded, Skarl repeated over and over, 'I obey, my master. I obey.'



CHAPTER 4

Vengeance is Mine

‘Cytha,’ hissed Makaal as the resistance cell-leader peered through his spy-lens at the dark passageway up ahead. ‘You’re clear. Go!’

Covering the lithe, bodyglove-clad form of Cytha as she darted from the shadows to his left, Makaal offered up a brief, silent prayer to the Emperor of Mankind. Please, he beseeched, let us succeed, even if it costs us our lives. Let us end the terror unleashed upon Quintus by the vile one, once and for all.

‘In position,’ Cytha’s whisper came back a few seconds later. Makaal looked to the shadows where he knew his second in command was waiting, satisfied that he could not make her out. ‘Bys,’ he whispered. ‘Your turn. Go!’

Makaal raised his hellgun to cover the larger man as he ran past. Bys was nowhere near as nimble or stealthy as Cytha, or indeed any other member of the cell, but he was as strong as a bull grox. He had to be, to carry the weight of explosives he had stowed about him.

After twenty seconds, Makaal was satisfied that Bys was in position, and addressed the last member of the cell. ‘Rund, you’re up. Go!’

Rund dashed forwards. He was neither as stealthy as Cytha, nor as strong as Bys, but Rund was a certified lay-technician and had served in the capital city's generatorium for a decade under his Adeptus Mechanicus overseers. His skills were critical to the success of the cell's desperate mission.

And that mission, whether or not that bitch Malya L'nor and the other self-appointed 'leaders' of the pro-Imperium resistance on Quintus would sanction it, was to assassinate Voldorius whatever the cost. The resistance had received word from their contacts inside the palace of the deposed governor of Quintus that the vile one was returning to the world after some errand off-planet. The daemon would be arriving, so the contacts claimed, by way of the palace's ancient teleportarium, and he would be doing so within the hour.

When Rund had taken position, Makaal took one last look behind to check that no sentries lurked in the dark service tunnel far beneath the palace. He darted forwards past his comrades, taking point. Pressing his back to the wall, Makaal made himself as small a target as possible, melting into the shadows that lined the passageway. He ordered his subordinates forwards, one at a time, covering them with his hellgun and scanning the tunnel up ahead through his spy-lens.

So far, the infiltration had gone to plan and Makaal had allowed himself to feel a small measure of vindication. The mission was by necessity an improvised affair; a plan opposed by the bulk of the resistance leaders in Mankarra, the capital city of Quintus. The debate had been brief but bitter. In the end, Makaal had defied Malya L'nor, his immediate superior in the resistance, and rounded up whichever cell members he could find who were willing to follow him. His plan was almost certainly suicidal, but Makaal reasoned that his life was worth the prize – deliverance from the evil Voldorius had visited upon his world. L'nor and the others had argued that his failure would spell the doom of many more innocents. They

believed Voldorius or any who survived him would never allow such a deed to go unpunished whether or not it succeeded.

Makaal hated Malya L'nor. He hated that she was so eager to save the lives of those who had already surrendered their very existence to the whim of the vile one, who had allowed themselves to be enslaved. He would prove her wrong, of that he was determined.

The smallest of movements up ahead caused Makaal to abandon his train of thought in an instant. He held up a hand and gave the silent signal that would warn his comrades of a possible enemy presence. Holding his breath and forcing every muscle in his body to stillness, Makaal scanned the tunnel through his spy-lens. The service tunnel ran another one hundred metres through the bedrock beneath the palace, densely clustered pipes and cables lining its walls and ceiling. The end of the tunnel was marked by a square of wan light, which Makaal zoomed the spy-lens in upon to examine in closer detail. As the magnification increased, the image became grainy, but Makaal was sure that he had seen movement and waited for the machine-spirit inside the device to confirm it.

There – crossing the square of light at the end of the passageway was a figure. It was gone in seconds, but Makaal had seen all he needed. It was one of the traitors of the Mankarra Household Guard, the former governor's most trusted warriors. How ironic that they had been the first to turn and take up arms with Voldorius and the Alpha Legion. The grey- and black-armoured guards had gunned the governor down even as their former master had fled for the bunker beneath the palace. They had strung his ruined body from the highest of the palace's spires.

Makaal waited until he was sure it was safe, and eased his body out of the shadows, his hellgun gripped tight. Checking the weapon's status counter, Makaal confirmed that he had sufficient charge to face whatever might lie ahead.

Makaal and his team approached the light at the end of the tunnel, covering the one hundred metres of ground with extreme caution. It felt to Makaal that the approach was taking far too much time, and that he might miss this opportunity to attack Voldorius when the daemon was at his most vulnerable. Yet he knew that undue haste now would bring the mission to an abrupt and fatal end.

At length, Makaal eased himself into the shadows five metres from the opening, and peered cautiously out. A chamber formed a junction between half a dozen other service tunnels. A hatch was set into one rock wall, which Makaal knew to be a cargo escalator that served the upper levels of the palace. Beside the hatch stood five troopers of the palace guard.

Forcing his body to complete stillness, Makaal watched the guards for several minutes until he was sure they were not merely passing through the area. Evidently, the traitorous bastards had been posted to the tunnel junction to guard against intruders. It made sense, for the resistance had been launching attacks across the entire city for weeks. The junction provided a base the guards could launch patrols from into the sprawling network of service tunnels beneath the palace. They would have to be dealt with before the cell could advance any further.

With a last hand signal, the cell leader counted down five seconds before he surged out of the tunnel.

The first of the palace guards went down before any had registered the attack. Makaal put a searing hellgun blast through his torso that flash-boiled his internal organs in an instant. Even before the guard had hit the ground, the other resistance fighters were out of the tunnel. Cytha darted to one side, rolling athletically as one of the guards brought his lascarbine up and blasted an unaimed shot in her direction. Cytha's move took her halfway across the chamber, where she came up into a kneeling position and brought her compact laspistol to bear on the trooper nearest to her. The man tracked her as she took aim, but he was too slow. Cytha's pistol spat

and the guard was speared through the neck by a bright lance of lethal energy.

One of the remaining guards bellowed an order and all three dived for the cover of a crate near the escalator hatch. Knowing that his team would be caught in the open should the enemy find cover they could defend themselves from, Makaal called out his own instructions. Bys moved to the left while Rund darted to the right. Makaal moved towards Cytha, who was already working her way behind a cluster of barrels to outflank the enemy.

‘We’ve got to end this, now,’ Makaal told Cytha as he caught up with her. ‘We don’t have time to get bogged down.’

‘Agreed,’ the fighter replied, peering around the edge of a barrel. ‘What’s your plan?’

There was only one solution. He limbered his hellgun and drew a long blade from his belt. Seeing his intention, Cytha stowed her own firearm, and drew a wickedly sharp stiletto blade. She raised the weapon to her lips and kissed it tenderly. ‘Ready when you are,’ she whispered.

‘Go!’ Makaal ordered, springing from the cover the two had shared.

The three guards had made the cover of the crate and were even now raising their weapons over it, only their heads and arms visible. Bys and Rund worked their way around the chamber’s edge, each firing as they went, taking advantage of what little cover was provided by stanchions and pipe work. The two men’s fire was forcing the guards to keep their heads down, to a degree at least, but Makaal knew that would not last long.

Makaal and Cytha closed on their targets together. Cytha was fastest, the fighter leaping atop the crate with the speed of a hunting predator. Coming down into a nimble crouch, Cytha kicked out at the nearest guard, snapping his neck. In an instant, Makaal was vaulting past her. He slashed downwards with his blade as he passed the second guard, gouging a deep, red wound across his shoulder.

The last of the guards was too involved drawing a bead on Rund to react to Makaal and Cytha's assault, and Rund had allowed himself to be distracted by the sight. The guard squeezed the trigger of his lascarbine, and the weapon spat an incandescent line across the chamber. Rund went down heavily, before Cytha was upon the firer. Her stiletto punched into his right ear, the man transfixes as the tip emerged from the left side of his head. For a moment, the ghastly tableau was frozen, before Cytha withdrew the blade with a jerk of her arm, and the guard dropped to the floor.

'Bys!' Makaal bellowed. 'Check Rund.'

Praying that the lay-technician was not fatally injured, Makaal turned angrily towards the guard he had wounded. The man lay sprawled across the crate he had taken cover behind, and was even now reaching for his dropped carbine. Makaal lifted a foot and brought it down across the man's wrist, forestalling the attempt to regain the weapon.

'You,' Makaal spat through gritted teeth, 'I name traitor.'

Unlimbering his hellgun one-handed, Makaal brought its barrel down, its end centimetres from the man's face. He looked into the wounded guard's eyes and saw only hatred and anger. Part of him had hoped that the traitor would, at the last, see the error of his ways and perhaps even beg Makaal's forgiveness. He did not.

Makaal looked away as he pulled the trigger, the weapon's sharp report filling the chamber. Cytha looked on dispassionately, seemingly unaffected by the callous yet necessary execution.

Bys was helping Rund to his feet. 'He'll be fine,' the big man said, his eyes flitting to the mess at Makaal's feet before he looked back. 'But we need to hide those and get moving.'

For the last thirty minutes, Makaal had been conscious of a slowly building, bass hum in the air. The rock floor of the dark service tunnel the fighters crept along was faintly vibrating, and the hair on the back of

Makaal's neck was standing on end. The very air he breathed tasted somehow metallic, and every now and then a static charge would snap from a pipe or stanchion to sting his flesh as he passed.

'We're underneath the primary capacitors,' whispered Rund from behind.

Makaal had little idea what such a device was, but he could detect pain in the man's voice. Bys had applied a dressing to the chest wound Rund had sustained in the brief fight against the palace guard, but he would need proper medical attention if he were to survive. If any of us escape, Makaal thought.

'Another hundred metres then,' Makaal replied. 'Is everyone ready?'

Each of the fighters nodded. He had scarcely needed to ask, but felt the burden of command weigh heavily as the cell neared its destination. These people had followed him of their own volition, and he had little doubt that they would all die because of it.

As if shaking off a premonition of his own death, Makaal crossed his hands across his chest in the sign of the aquila. His comrades did the same, and moments later he was leading them cautiously towards their final objective.

As Makaal approached the end of the service tunnel, Cytha by his side and Bys and Rund close behind, the air became increasingly charged. Blue light flashed intermittently from the chamber beyond the tunnel, each discharge accompanied by a harsh crack of the air being split by titanic energies.

'Both of you know your objectives,' Makaal whispered.

Moving forwards to the mouth of the tunnel, he stole a glance into the chamber. The teleportarium was a huge, domed space, dominated by a raised, circular platform at its very centre. Banks of pulsating, glowing machinery lined the walls, actinic sparks and whiplash energies playing up and down tall copper shafts. Fat cables snaked across the stone floor. Hundreds more looped down from above or crawled across the walls,

linking each and every item of machinery together in an insane web of crackling energy.

Makaal mouthed a silent prayer to the God-Emperor. Never before had he seen such a thing. Indeed, he had only recently heard that such machines could exist, though he was assured that they were so rare they could command the ransom of an entire planet. The teleportation device had rotted away for millennia beneath the governor's palace, all knowledge of its operation and maintenance long since forgotten. No one knew what the device had been used for, or who had built it. Over the centuries it became a temple the tech-priests would worship in. Only with the coming of Voldorius had the chamber been restored to its original use and the machinery returned to a working state by the ministrations of the rogue Mechanicus who served the daemon prince.

And one of those fell individuals stood nearby, his back to the fighters as they peered out of the tunnel.

The rogue tech-priest was unnaturally tall, as if the limbs beneath his ragged crimson robe were attenuated and disjointed. Despite his height, the priest's back was bent and he stooped almost double, bending down to attend to a machine console. A dozen mechanical tentacles writhed from the grotesque hump on the priest's back, each with an implement, tool or weapon at its end. Some of those tentacles worked the levers and dials of the console, while others moved about seemingly of their own accord like snakes waiting for unwary prey to wander near.

Tech-priests had always made Makaal uneasy, for their affinity with machines was far beyond the ken of ordinary men. That the individual in the chamber was an outcast of his sinister order made Makaal's skin crawl. Technology was a thing to be respected, revered and even feared, yet this vile servant of Voldorius had reneged on his oaths to the Cult Mechanicus to use technology only as prescribed by the Emperor. The reasons for

killing the renegade were legion, and Makaal was pleased to be the instrument of the Emperor's justice.

Makaal raised his hellgun, lining up the iron sights with the back of the tech-priest's hood. Even as he did so, the machinery lining the chamber walls began to whine, white lightning spitting at the periphery of his vision.

'I think someone's...' hissed Rund.

Makaal's finger closed gently on the trigger and one of the mechanical tentacles at the tech-priest's back whipped around, a green glowing lens at its tip staring directly at Makaal. Disgust welled up inside him as he realised that the lens was an eye. Through it, the renegade was looking directly at the fighter, somehow entrancing him with fell power.

In a second the spell passed and Makaal got a grip of his thoughts, but still the malignant green eye floated before him, filling his vision. But the tech-priest had already turned, and was advancing across the chamber towards the resistance fighters.

'Kill it!' Makaal bellowed, and all four of the resistance fighters opened fire as one.

Makaal's aim was true, but the blast of his weapon was halted before it struck the tech-priest. Waves of blue energy rippled out from a point in the air a metre in front of the renegade, settling to nothing after a second. A squeal of harsh machine gibberish screamed from a grille mounted where the priest's mouth should have been. Three more green lenses glowed from under his hood above the grille.

Makaal gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to drop his weapon and cover his ears lest they burst under the hideous sonic assault.

'Again!' he shouted. This time only three shots rang out, telling Makaal that either Rund or Bys must have been incapacitated by the machine howl. Two of the shots were stopped by the energy field, but one – Makaal could not tell whose – passed through, and struck the renegade's left arm.

The shot blasted a ragged flaming hole through a crimson sleeve and a shower of sparks went up. The priest staggered under the impact and a second machine squeal sounded. This time however, it was a scream of pain and rage.

‘Full auto!’ Makaal ordered, thumbing the selector switch above his weapon’s grip. He braced the hellgun against his shoulder, drawing a bead on the renegade’s chest as the roaring figure bore down upon him.

Squeezing the trigger tight and holding it down, Makaal unleashed a torrent of blinding shots. The field absorbed half, but the remainder slammed through, stitching the renegade’s torso. The priest stumbled back, but now he was close. The writhing mechanical tentacles whipped forwards, one striking Makaal across the side of his body. Pain flooded his senses as he felt several ribs crack sickeningly and he was propelled through the air to crash ten metres away on the rocky floor.

Fighting to remain conscious, Makaal looked up in time to see Bys wrestling with the tentacles, one gripped in each hand. In that split second, Cytha stepped inside the tech-priest’s reach and her stiletto flashed upwards, catching the renegade’s throat and sinking up to its hilt. The machine-howl was abruptly silenced and the tentacles fell limp in Bys’s massive hands. Both fighters stepped backwards and the renegade tech-priest fell forwards. The sound the body made as it struck the rock floor was not flesh hitting rock, but ironwork shattering into a hundred pieces.

Rund was at the console the tech-priest had been manning. ‘Someone’s coming through!’ he shouted, an edge of panic rising in his voice.

‘Bys, Rund,’ Makaal said as he crossed the chamber. ‘You know what to do. Make it fast.’

There was little that Makaal or Cytha could do now, for their role in the mission had been to get the cell safely to the teleportarium. He watched as Bys unlimbered bandoliers full of explosives and followed Rund. The lay-technician took a moment to gather himself before indicating a dozen

points around the chamber to the larger man. Nodding, Bys crossed to the first, a machine of copper coils, shafts and pipes, and got to work setting his explosives.

Rund was soon back at the console. 'I can't stop it!' he called over his shoulder to Makaal.

'How long?' the leader asked. 'Do we have enough time?'

The lay-technician's hands turned a series of dials and after a moment he looked back at Makaal. 'If we detonate the explosives manually, we might—'

'Half set!' Bys's voice rang out. The man had placed six of his charges in the locations Rund had indicated and was almost done with the seventh.

Makaal understood immediately what the lay-tech was saying. 'Give me the detonator. This is my burden.'

Rund hesitated, distracted by the flashing lights of the console and the reams of data scrolling across its screens. Then he reached into a belt pocket and took out the small, boxlike detonator. He tossed it to Makaal.

The fighter caught the device in his raised hand. He crossed to the console facing the raised metal platform in the centre of the chamber. Cytha appeared at his side, her dark eyes glaring at the same point.

Makaal checked his weapon's status reader. The full auto blast had cost him a third of his remaining charge and the focusing ring had come dangerously close to overheating. It would never be enough. Their only hope of success was the charges that Bys was even now finishing setting.

'Stand by!' Rund called out.

Even as the lay-technician shouted his warning the air in the chamber became so charged that Makaal felt every centimetre of his skin crawling as if a million insects skittered across his body. A sharp pain split his head, and his vision swam. The towering copper shafts around the chamber erupted with blinding white arcs of unknowable power and the air split like the centre of a thunderstorm.

The once dark and shadowed chamber was now flooded with pulsating light emanating from a point in the centre of the raised platform. The illumination was diffuse at first, with no direct source. A blinding singularity blinked into being above the centre of the platform, arcs of ragged lightning splitting the air between it and the copper coils at the chamber's edge.

Makaal placed his thumb on the stud in the centre of the detonator box. Not yet, he told himself. Wait until you're sure. The point of light expanded into a blazing orb, its base touching the metal of the platform. The orb flickered and then expanded still more, until it became a semicircular archway over the entire platform.

So blinding was the light that Makaal made to raise his arm across his face, but found himself paralysed, his body refusing to respond to his will. He felt the crush of impossible energies, as if the very air of the chamber had become solid, trapping him as a fly in amber.

And then, at the centre of the glare, three silhouettes appeared.

The central figure was massive, tall and broad shouldered with wings folded at its back. The second was not quite so large, but still a giant compared to mere men. The third was stooped and crooked, the fabric of its robes flaring in an etheric wind.

'Makaal.' The fighter heard Cytha speak his name, but could not turn his head to face her. 'Do it, Makaal, now!'

Makaal waited until the silhouettes had resolved in the middle of the blazing white light. Then, with a supreme effort of willpower, he pressed his thumb down hard on the detonator's control stud.

Nothing happened at first, for the chamber was already churning with the energies of the teleportation device. Then, the pure white light the three figures were silhouetted against flickered and stuttered. Time slowed for Makaal, even the beat of his heart becoming frozen in a single instant.

The white orb collapsed in on itself, plunging the entire chamber into total blackness.

Then, a dozen of the machines lining the chamber wall exploded as one. The light of the detonations illuminated three figures on the raised platform. Orange flames danced at their feet, before another light entirely sprang into being.

A vertical, crimson-purple scar appeared behind the three figures, as if the air itself were splitting apart. The line became a wound etched in the surface of reality. Still unable to move, terror flooded Makaal's soul. From the wound emanated a ghastly, pulsating light, the colour of blood and guts.

The three figures attempted to move away from the horror that had appeared at their back, but they too must have been entrapped. Despite his terror, Makaal felt a moment of hope. Not for himself, for he knew now that he was doomed, but for his home world. Whatever process the destruction of the teleportarium had instigated, it looked like it would claim Voldorius and his servants as well as the fighters.

The terror consuming Makaal's soul was now tempered by vindication, the two emotions converging into something approaching madness. Though his lips would barely move, inside Makaal roared within with an unholy blend of joy and horror. He screamed his hatred at the daemon, raged his denial of his own death and shouted his joy at his victory. The wound grew larger still, a deep gash in the flesh of reality, bulging outwards as if tainted organs were at the point of bursting forth.

And then, the wound ripped open.

The chamber was suddenly filled with the sound of a trillion souls wailing their damnation as one. In an instant, Makaal's soul was torn asunder, yet still the core of all he was looked on. The crimson scar split open, spilling writhing energies into the chamber. Thrashing coils of

crimson ether quested outwards, wrapping themselves around the three figures on the platform as if to drag them back through the wound.

More of the writhing coils spread outwards, snaking around the chamber until they came upon Makaal and his comrades. His mind now shattered into a thousand shards, Makaal was incapable of feeling the terror that had consumed him before. He merely looked on as ghostly intestine-shaped tentacles wrapped themselves around his fellow resistance fighters, lifted them into the air, and drew their bodies towards the ragged hole in the fabric of reality.

Only then did what was left of Makaal realise that he too was being carried towards the impossible wound. What had been a jagged line was now a swollen, gaping maw, beyond which swam uncounted... things. Mouths and eyes formed from the boiling energies, then dissolved and dissipated to re-emerge elsewhere. The eyes radiated hunger and pain, while the mouths slobbered and gibbered and wailed in eternal anguish. Makaal knew that he would be joining that churning mass.

Makaal was drawn closer to the three figures. Voldorius was braced against raging etheric winds seeking to suck him into the vortex. Vast coils were wrapped about his armoured legs and arms, yet he resisted with a strength that was entirely inhuman.

Nearby, the second figure wrestled with more of the binds. This must have been one of Voldorius's lieutenants, for he too wore the blue-green power armour of the Alpha Legion. The warrior was fast, dodging and weaving as he sought to escape the writhing intestines.

The last of the figures was a robed human whom Makaal recognised as Voldorius's equerry. The man stood no chance of resisting the thrashing coils and he was being dragged into the maw as inexorably as Makaal himself. As the equerry was dragged nearer to the wound, his flesh began to blister. Soon it was boiling off in great streams of red vapour, sucked away on impossible winds of damnation.

Makaal felt his own skin blistering, but he did not care, for Voldorius too was being dragged down.

The daemon's batlike wings were torn to ragged scraps, the bones snapping and falling away into the screaming nothingness. Voldorius bellowed as the coils drew him closer to the mouth. The surface of his armour smoked and blistered as the blue-green finish dissolved into atoms. Soon the skin of the daemon's face was peeling back, his savage teeth exposed as the muscles were flensed away. The daemon's bellow was now so loud that it drowned out all other sounds, even the wailing of the damned from beyond the portal.

What was left of Makaal knew that Voldorius would be cast back to the warp that had spawned him and Quintus would be saved. Makaal's very soul was forfeit, for Voldorius himself would torment him for all eternity as vengeance for this deed.

And then Voldorius's lieutenant cast off the whiplash energies that sought to bind him and the armoured warrior moved fast towards the edge of the platform. Denial welling up inside him, Makaal could only look on helplessly as the figure gained speed the further it travelled from the raging maw of warp energy. In an instant it had escaped and was leaping from the platform to land heavily upon the rock floor of the teleportarium chamber. Now entirely free, the figure looked around the chamber and crossed to one of the rearing copper-shafted machines. Drawing a black-bladed halberd that was slung across its back, the figure lashed out, slicing the copper machinery in two. The power sustaining the machinery fled and secondary explosions erupted across the chamber.

The writhing maw convulsed and Voldorius broke free even as the last vaporous remains of his human servant were sucked through. The daemon prince was now little more than a charred, blackened skeleton, his armour burned away and the last remnants of his flesh falling from him in smoking chunks.

The other warrior smashed another copper shaft apart, and the energies coursing through the chamber spluttered. There was a single moment of perfect frozen clarity, before the ragged maw blinked out of existence and the chamber was plunged back into flame-lit shadow.

At the last, what had been Makaal felt himself fading. His final vision was of Voldorius forcing himself to stand upright. Black bones reknitted, veins regrew. Glistening muscles swathed the bones and the daemon's armour flowed like liquid metal across his regenerated form. The batlike wings regrew from his back and Voldorius bellowed a savage victory cry.

As his soul was whipped away to join the lost, the true extent of Makaal's failure was revealed to him. Voldorius lived, and Makaal was damned for all eternity.

'Qan'karro,' Kor'sarro said, looking directly across the strategium chamber at the old Stormseer. 'Please go on. Tell us of your brothers' efforts to establish contact with Quintus.'

Qan'karro gathered his thoughts. The old man looked pale, as if the weight of his years weighed heavily upon his soul.

'Gladly, huntsman,' said Qan'karro, before lifting a cup of sour Chogoran wine to his lips and draining the vessel in a single draught.

'Pooling our efforts with the astropaths, my brethren and I have used every possible means at our disposal to make contact. The astropaths have come to the conclusion that none of their order survives upon Quintus, or if they do, they have been subjugated, brutally.'

Kor'sarro and the assembled officers considered this dire news before the Master of the Hunt pressed the Stormseer further. 'And your own efforts, honoured seer?'

'I have little to report, Kor'sarro. We have cast our minds far ahead of us, piercing the warp even as this vessel races upon its tides.'

Kor'sarro knew little of the ways of the Stormseers, for their skills were born of their psyker inheritance and unfathomable to others. He did

understand that the seers could not communicate directly with others as the astropaths did, but he had an inkling that they had other abilities they could draw on.

‘All we can hope to do is plant visions, even mere notions, of our coming in the minds of those able to hear,’ Qan’karro went on. ‘If there are any such remaining, then I pray they hear our call.’

‘What of those on Quintus?’ Kor’sarro asked his comrade. ‘What of the portents?’

‘Codiciers Subas and Odakai have consulted every augur our people know, and several they do not,’ the Stormseer said, his eyes taking on a dark cast.

Kor’sarro waited a moment before pressing further. ‘And?’

‘None are favourable, huntsman.’

Kor’sarro clenched the arms of his stone throne as the assembled officers considered the Stormseer’s words. His eyes settled for a moment on Brother Kergis, who he had appointed to serve as company champion following the death of Brother Jhogai on Cernis IV. After the events on that world, neither he nor his officers needed to hear more bad tidings. Kor’sarro indicated that the old warrior should, indeed must, continue.

‘Thousands have perished, of that we can be sure. But if we are honest, we expected that. But fell powers have been unleashed, possible futures etched upon the surface of time. I cannot put it into words, my friends, but truly, the vile one stands at the precipice and untold power awaits him.’

‘Then we must stop him,’ Kor’sarro replied, an oath forming in his mind. ‘We must all pledge that on Quintus, Voldorius dies. There can be no alternative.’

The assembled Space Marines – Stormseers, Techmarines, Apothecaries, Chaplains and sergeants – nodded their agreement, each steeling themselves to face whatever fate held in store. Kor’sarro looked each in

the eye in turn, seeing in every one of his officers the cold determination to end the hunt for Voldorius on Quintus.

Resolving to steer the discussion away from gloomy portents, Kor'sarro took a deep breath and leaned forwards in his throne. 'Brother Kholka,' he addressed the veteran Scout-sergeant. 'You have prepared a report on the world of Quintus. Please, illuminate us,'

'We know little of the world, my brothers,' Kholka said. 'For its history is troubled. Quintus, along with three other systems, has been battered and assailed by warp storm Argenta. Though once Quintus was a bulwark, Argenta has laid it low, cutting it off for long periods. As can be imagined, maintaining standing forces amongst the worlds of the Imperium under such circumstances has proven nigh impossible, and the world has been forced to look to its own security.'

'Yet,' interjected a Codicier by the name of Ilkhan, 'we know that Argenta has abated in recent months. The vile one must have had a hand in this.'

'That is beyond my ken, honoured seer,' the sergeant replied before going on. 'What we know of Quintus is culled from the last *census planetia*. It is a barren world in the main, with little but its strategic location to make it noteworthy. As a result of that location, the world has been fortified over the millennia, primarily to act as a guardian against the orks that afflict the regions to the galactic south and east.'

'What happened to Quintus during Argenta?' asked Kor'sarro.

'We have no current information on that subject, my khan,' the Scout-sergeant replied. 'We can only assume that it suffered greatly during that time.'

'It did,' interjected Qan'karro. 'Of that I am certain. My instinct tells me that the vile one somehow brought the storm down upon Quintus, in order to turn it to his own ends. That the storm has now passed suggests to me that whatever wickedness he was about is now imminent.'

‘Is such a thing possible?’ Kor’sarro said. ‘Could one being truly conjure and control a warp storm?’

‘Aye, huntsman,’ Qan’karro replied, his craggy face a dour mask. ‘Do not underestimate Kernax Voldorius. He has done far worse, and means to do so again.’

Grim silence settled upon the gathered White Scars, before Kor’sarro spoke. ‘Brothers, we have much work ahead of us. We must each prepare ourselves, our men and our weapons for the task ahead. We arrive at the Quintus system within hours, and we must be ready for whatever awaits.’

Malya L’nor stumbled as a traitor militiaman shoved her roughly. She turned to curse at the man, but the sheer press of bodies being herded forcibly into the grand square soon obscured him.

‘What do they want?’ a merchant shouted desperately from behind her, addressing his question to no one in particular. Hundreds of nearby citizens of Mankarra, the capital city of Quintus, voiced similar questions, some in outrage, many more in unadulterated panic.

Malya soon found herself carried along in a torrent of fearful humanity towards the centre of the grand square. She could see little but the dark sky above, shot through with the stain of the accursed warp storm. Framing the livid sky were the tops of Mankarra’s brutal, fortified buildings. The tallest was the council mansion, towards which the vast crowd, including Malya, was being herded.

The traitor militiamen were using electro-prods on their own people. The cruel devices were employed by the gaksmen of the agri-zones to control the unruly grox that provided a staple of the population’s diet. They were far too powerful to be used on humans.

Malya seethed with anger as the sheer weight of the crowd carried her inexorably across the square and towards the council mansion. The grand square was capable of hosting crowds of hundreds of thousands, and she herself had attended dozens of municipal functions there. Those functions

had seen multitudes of the faithful giving praise to the Emperor or witnessing the coronation of a new planetary governor. The gathering that Malya and countless others were now being forced to attend was clearly something very different.

Malya steeled herself against whatever evil might soon be unleashed upon her and her people. She whispered a prayer to the Emperor. Such an act was now counted as subversion, and while she was cautious not to be seen, the deed gave her strength. The grey bulk of the council mansion loomed before the crowd, its thick armoured towers bristling with anti-air defences. The long banners celebrating the glories of the Emperor that once adorned the walls were now tattered and burned, defiled by the followers of the daemon Voldorius.

The mere thought of the vile beast that had come to her world brought cold dread to Malya's heart. For Quintus to have been subjugated so quickly must have been the result of infiltration of the planetary militia at the very highest levels, of that Malya was certain. The invasion was over almost before it had begun, those few defence units that had not welcomed the attackers being driven to ground and wiped out within weeks. Malya, herself a junior officer in the reserve, had joined the nascent underground resistance and in a very short time become one of its senior members. Her rapid ascension had been due to what little military training she had undertaken in the reserves, though many, such as that fool Makaal, refused to acknowledge even that.

Malya's greatest hope had come mere days ago, when she and her fellows had made tentative contact with the outside. That anyone should have heard her pleas was a miracle in itself, but her heart had soared when she had discovered that a force of Space Marines was inbound for Quintus. She had dared to believe that deliverance was on its way to her home world.

The movement of the crowd was slowing down as it was pressed towards the rockcrete facade of the council mansion, and a cold silence settled across the packed multitudes. The faces of the people nearest to Malya held the same fear she herself felt deep inside her soul. All gathered in the grand square knew of the atrocities that had been committed, by the turncoat militia as well as by the invading forces. All knew the name of the archfiend in whose name the horrors had been enacted. Malya knew that she would soon lay eyes upon that fiend. It was said that only those about to die a horrible death at the daemon's hand ever saw his face.

Even as that terrible thought coalesced in her mind, the crowd fell completely silent. All eyes were drawn to movement at the wide, statue-lined balcony near the top of the council mansion. Malya strained her eyes and saw that the double doors were opening slowly inwards.

A group of men stepped through, each taking their place upon the balcony. These were the high commanders of the planetary militia, each a respected officer before Voldorius had come to Quintus. But they had cast off their Emperor-granted duty and betrayed their own world. It was through their treachery that the planet had fallen, and they were now counted as figures of loathing by the populace.

General Orson, Lord Kline, Quartermaster General Ackenvol, Lord Colonel Lannus and Lord Colonel Elenritch took their places on the balcony, each staring fixedly ahead as if unable or unwilling to meet the gaze of any of the multitude packed in below them. Then came the last of their number, Lord Colonel Morkis, who glowered down at the crowd with obvious contempt. It was said that Morkis was the worst of them, that he harboured such ambition that he would willingly see his entire home world burn to gain the favour of Voldorius.

And then a dark shape ducked as it passed through the open portal, a massive pair of black wings folded at its back.

As one, a hundred thousand throats gave voice to a soul-wrenching moan of utter despair. The very embodiment of evil stood before the gathered masses. The preachers and the confessors and the cardinals warned that the Emperor had almost died to cast down such servants of Chaos. Thousands collapsed to the ground, and thousands more thrust their arms in the air and begged deliverance. Many stood dumbfounded, unable to comprehend the fate that was about to overtake them.

A few, Malya L'nor included, refused to bend their knee or abandon their faith. These few stood still and silent as the beatific statues that had lined the square before the coming of the invaders. They steeled themselves body and soul for the martyrdom that must surely be their fate.

Voldorius stepped fully onto the balcony and even the officers shrank back. At the sight of the daemon, the crowd's wailing was redoubled until it reached a near deafening crescendo. The rank stink of discharged bodily fluids filled the air, testament to the horror that reduced grown men to the level of mewling infants.

Voldorius stood upon the balcony flanked by his treacherous underlings, his bestial face looking down upon a seething ocean of despair. Alien thoughts flooded Malya's mind, formless notions of atrophy and entropy washing over her soul in ever-stronger waves. Sharp probes stabbed into her consciousness and she fought to hide away her previous thoughts of deliverance from the tyranny of Voldorius. She must not reveal her thoughts, even if it cost her life.

Now the most despairing of the crowd were convulsing and shaking, as if they were being ripped apart from within by the sheer evil of the armoured, bat-winged figure on the balcony. Many were now falling silent, choking on their own blood as they gnawed their tongues away.

Yet Malya's soul stood firm, her faith in the Emperor a bulwark against which the evil of Voldorius was broken. Bodies carpeted the ground, the faithful few standing upright amongst them.

Only when nine out of every ten of the multitude were curled up upon the ground, dead or entirely overcome by despair, did the daemon speak.

‘This day,’ the voice rumbled across the grand square, as low and ancient as continents grinding one another to dust. ‘A crime was committed.’

Those who had wailed before now sobbed, for the daemon’s voice spoke to each present. It enveloped the soul and threatened to consume it, to snub out its meagre light.

‘That crime,’ the voice continued, ‘was the sin of denial, and it shall be punished.’

Malya forced herself to stand firm, but she was painfully aware that she was terribly exposed. So few now stood, the vast majority lying collapsed upon the ground.

‘One who served me was slain.’

A cold realisation dawned then upon Malya. Makaal. He had done what he had threatened to do, what Malya and the other leaders of the resistance had begged him not to. He had made an attempt on the vile one’s life, and had failed, even if he had killed one of Voldorius’s underlings.

The people would pay for Makaal’s deed.

‘One here,’ the daemon continued, ‘shall as punishment take his place and serve as my equerry. They shall be blessed to witness the coming tide of blood.’ A premonition rose in Malya’s mind as the words sank in. ‘The remainder shall die.’

The crowd’s sorrowful cries were drowned out as the sound of a mighty engine coughing to life filled the grand square. A super-heavy tank, one of the few so-called Baneblades in the militia’s arsenal, ground forwards from a side street.

The armoured behemoth bristled with weaponry, its huge turret tracking left and right. Realising what was about to happen, Malya looked to the other roads that led onto the grand square. The traitor militia had

barricaded every possible escape. Voldorius meant to crush the people beneath the tracks of the tank or to gun them down under its cannons. Those who fled would be shot dead by the militia.

Voldorius spread his arms wide in blasphemous benediction. His dark gaze swept the square, his bestial eyes alighting on each of those who remained standing before passing to the next. He ignored those who cowered on the ground, and they in turn sought to make themselves invisible to the daemon, burying their heads in their arms or curling into foetal balls. The waves of fell emotion battered Malya's soul, but she repeated over and over the verses she had learned before the pulpit of Mankarra's great basilica. She prayed for deliverance from evil, from damnation, and from death.

'You,' the daemon said, the voice sounding within Malya's head. 'You shall be my servant.'

Malya stood transfixed by Voldorius's daemoniac gaze. Part of her wanted to join those sprawled across the ground, to join them in the death grinding inexorably towards them. But another part of her, the greater, stronger part, refused to yield.

'Join me,' the voice said. 'Now.'

Even as she filled her lungs to bellow her denial, Malya felt two hands grasp her arms, pinning them roughly behind her back. She turned and looked into the faceless visor of a trooper of the palace guard. The man put all his strength into twisting her body around and she was flung across the ground, tripping on a prostrate body and sprawling beside it. For an instant she thought that she might be able to feign the same stupor that had befallen the multitudes, but all too soon she was grabbed by both arms and hauled to her feet.

Malya dared gaze up as she was marched towards the council mansion, seeing the massive form of the daemon prince turning its back upon the grand square and disappearing into the building. The officers followed,

Lord Colonel Morkis taking one last, scornful look across the square before departing. Soon, she too was approaching the blasted edifice. At her back the slaughter was beginning.

The Baneblade's cannons opened fire, its many heavy bolters chattering. The sound of flesh and blood and bone being ground beneath the tank's huge treads assailed Malya's ears. And then, the screaming began.



CHAPTER 5

Insertion

Scout-Sergeant Kholka grimaced as he gazed down at yet another ruined body. Like the dozens of others the White Scars Scouts had encountered as they had ranged across the black, rock-strewn landscape of Quintus the last twelve hours, the corpse was a civilian. The sight disgusted Kholka, whose own people afforded great respect to the dead and would never allow a corpse to lie untended in such a way. Where were this man's people, Kholka wondered, and why had they not given him a fitting burial?

The reason was clear. The man's people had been killed too. All of them. None remained to bury the dead, to afford the honour a man was due at the outset of his long journey to the Emperor's side.

'Brother-sergeant,' a voice called out from over a small rise of jagged black rock. 'There are two more here.'

It was Scout Borchu, a promising neophyte Kholka knew would do well when fully initiated into the ranks of the White Scars. Borchu had served in the Scout Company with great honour and skill for several years. Perhaps the liberation of Quintus would be the proving of Borchu, if only he could learn to control his bouts of mirth. Quintus was seeing to that it seemed – with every body the Scouts discovered their mood darkened.

Kholka followed Borchu's voice, skirting the rise lest he reveal himself to any enemy keeping watch across the barren wastes. He had ordered vox-silence, knowing that the Alpha Legion were amongst the most cunning of foes and well able to detect even the most heavily shielded inter-squad signal. He found Borchu near the blackened wreck of a tracked cargo hauler. Its contents, evidently the sum possessions of its owners, were strewn all about.

'They were slain like the others,' Borchu said, looking up as his sergeant approached. 'But they tried to fight.'

Kholka saw that Borchu was correct. The two bodies wore the tattered remains of the local reserve militia's uniform. His eyes sought the insignia that had brought the White Scars to Quintus, but found no sign of it. No matter. It was likely that only the elite palace guard wore the device. Dozens of empty brass shell casings were scattered all around the two bodies, though the weapons that had fired them were nowhere to be seen. Evidently, the weapons had been looted by the Alpha Legion, or perhaps taken by other refugees.

'Get ready to move out,' Kholka ordered. 'There's nothing to be done here.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant,' Borchu replied. But Kholka could detect uncertainty in the Scout's tone.

'What is it, neophyte?' Kholka pressed. As commander, mentor and warden of the trainee Space Marines, one of his many responsibilities was the monitoring of the Scouts' ongoing psycho-conditioning. The questioning of a direct order could be a sign that the conditioning had not fully taken effect.

'Should we not...' Borchu nodded towards the corpses.

Kholka read the meaning of the gesture. 'We should, but we cannot. Prepare to move out.'

The Scouts were making their way across a region of Quintus's primary continent having been inserted by Thunderhawk during the night. In common with much of the planet's surface, the area was a barren waste of black volcanic rock and grey sand. It was sparsely covered by coarse grass and the occasional wind-blasted tree. To the south lay the agri-settlements that fed the capital city of Mankarra. Further south still was the city itself.

Kholka's task was to reconnoitre the city's outer defences and to guide the Master of the Hunt's strike force in.

So far, the Scouts had discovered untold evidence that the planet was firmly in the hands of Voldorius and his Alpha Legion forces. They had passed the wrecks of refugee convoys the traitors had fallen on like voracious predators on defenceless prey. Although they had found evidence that the refugees had at least mounted a defence, Kholka knew that many more must have been taken prisoner. The fate of the captives was unknown, but the veteran had faced the servants of the Ruinous Powers enough times to know their cruel ways. He had little doubt that none of those taken prisoner still lived.

Soon the remainder of the Scout squad was gathered, each looking silently to Kholka while awaiting his orders.

'Borchu,' Kholka said. 'You have point duty. We hunt, as the dawn-bat soars over the mountain.'

Even whilst undergoing a perilous mission the Scouts were being tested. The sergeant's use of the White Scars battle-cant even though no enemy was near enough to overhear was deliberate. He was pleased when the Scouts assumed the formation he had ordered, a long column with each member covering his own sector, neophyte Borchu at its head.

Taking his own position in the line, Kholka gestured the order to move out.

Nullus stood on the bunker's open-topped observation deck, staring out into the bleak wastes. At his side were five of his fellow Alpha Legion

warriors, and behind them several dozen black- and grey-clad palace guards.

The air reeked of the men's fear. And well they should be fearful, for the so-called elite of Quintus's soldiery had failed in their avowed task. A resistance cell had penetrated into the deepest regions of the palace and Voldorius himself had almost fallen. Only Nullus's actions in shattering the teleportation coils had averted a full-scale warp bleed, and the lives of Nullus and his master had been saved. Voldorius had already exacted his vengeance on the people of Mankarra, and now Nullus had his own justice to enact.

He would make an example of them, and teach them the true meaning of obedience.

Nullus had mustered the palace guard platoon whose negligence had given rise to the unforgivable breach. Their commanding officer had already killed himself by the time the platoon had gathered. The remainder had been transported north in the sub-zero hold of a meat-hauler to one of the bunkers that guarded against incursion into the agri-zones from the wastes beyond. The guards all feared that they would die, and to Nullus that sensation was quite exquisite.

But Nullus had something quite specific in mind.

'All of you,' the warrior spoke, without taking his black eyes from the northern horizon, 'should be dead.'

The palace guards remained motionless, stoic in the face of the traitor Space Marine's pronouncement. Nullus turned his scarred face towards the men, and continued.

'But I am a practical man, and have use for you yet.'

Nullus watched as the guards stood as still as statues, not one of them daring to look at him. His scar-traced features split into a vile and savage grin.

Nullus reached to his back and unlimbered his black-hafted halberd. 'So you need not die. Not all of you.'

A cold wind rose out of the wastes. Still, none of the guards responded. Nullus brought the halberd in front of him in one hand and set the base of its haft resting on the deck at his feet.

‘Whichever of you will face me, he will die. But the remainder, I will allow to live.’

Now the guards showed signs of reaction. Several of them glanced sidelong at their fellows, before one of their number answered.

‘I will face you,’ came the response, and one of the troopers stepped forwards.

‘Name yourself, so that the gods might have notice of your coming, and prepare you a special place in damnation,’ Nullus replied, bringing the halberd across his chest in both hands.

‘My name is Ghalan,’ the man proclaimed, addressing his statement to the powers of the warp as much as to Nullus. ‘Warrant Officer Primus,’ he added with pride, turning to salute his men.

The assembled guard returned the salute, and Nullus prepared to deliver his lesson.

‘Three kilometres south, brother-sergeant’, Scout Telluk whispered. ‘A bunker, right on the border of the agri-zone.’

Kholka felt a stab of disappointment, but determined to give the neophyte a second chance. It was after all only the boy’s second operational deployment. ‘Again. Properly this time.’

The neophyte paused, his face reddening almost imperceptibly as he cast his eyes to the ground. ‘My apologies, brother-sergeant,’ he said.

‘Never mind that,’ Kholka replied, the veteran’s patience growing thin. ‘Deliver your report.’

‘The beast in stone, as the third moon slumbers, bestriding the steppe,’ Telluk reported.

‘Better,’ Kholka responded. ‘Though “Ghan’s last march” would have gotten the point over more elegantly.’ By its very nature, the White Scars

battle-cant was subjective and varied enormously by speaker and context. The veteran gifted the youngster with a wry smile. ‘Now pass me the magnoculars.’

Taking the device from the neophyte, Kholka raised it to his eyes and looked out across the wastes. From the squad’s concealed position high atop a jagged, black rock spire, Kholka had a panoramic view of the region where the barren wastelands gave way to the agri-zone. Scanning the near field first, the sergeant took in the terrain, the last of the rock-strewn plain his squad had marched through.

Adjusting the viewfinder’s settings, Kholka focused on the middle ground, where it was obvious that many of the larger rock formations had been blasted flat so that any crossing it would be detected and cut down in a hail of defensive fire. Panning first left, and then right, locating the point that Scout Telluk had identified, Kholka saw the squat, grey bunker.

‘Well observed, neophyte,’ Kholka said quietly as he magnified the scene. The bunker had been placed by a defender who knew his business well, and lesser foes than the Space Marines might have missed it amongst the volcanic rocks and outcroppings of the region.

‘One primary,’ Kholka reeled off his observations, adding a commentary to the data that the sensorium-core built into his armour was recording. Even if the sergeant and his charges were slain, there would be a chance that others of the White Scars would recover the data and act upon it. He zoomed in on the figure standing on the bunker’s observation deck, looking out across the wastes. The warrior’s armour was the distinctive blue-green of the traitor Alpha Legion, and across its back was slung a black halberd. Increasing the magnification still further, Kholka brought the figure’s head into focus, revealing a face that was a mass of fine scar tissue, traced by the hand of a madman. ‘We know you...’

‘Four... no, five, secondaries.’ Kholka watched as a group of figures, each wearing the same armour as the first, came into his vision. Their

faces were hidden beneath helmets surmounted by twisting horns, and each carried a boltgun adorned with fell runes. ‘Alpha Legionnaires.’

As he panned downwards, Kholka’s field of vision was eclipsed by the rear of a black helmet. He zoomed out, the viewfinder showing a man dressed in grey fatigues and black body armour facing the primary. The briefings of the last few strike force councils came to the sergeant’s mind. The black and grey armour. Kholka zoomed out still further, seeking confirmation.

‘Approximately thirty tertiaries,’ Kholka sub-vocalised. The wind had changed direction and he could not take the risk of being overheard. ‘Subjects appear at first glance to be a platoon-sized multiple of Mankarra household guard.’

The sergeant watched, scanning the figures for any sign of the four-starred insignia that would positively confirm the troopers’ identity and their link with the action on Cernis Four. He could see, although not hear, that the primary was addressing them. After a moment, one of the troopers stepped forwards to stand before the primary, and then turned and saluted the others.

At that moment, Kholka saw clearly the insignia on the man’s shoulder armour.

‘Confirmed,’ the sergeant said, the thrill of the hunt rising in him. ‘We have them now.’

Nullus watched with barely contained disdain as Ghalan turned back to face him. His black eyes flitted to the weapons at the guard’s belt, seeing that the man was armed with a power sword of archaic pattern and a heavy pistol. The guard’s face was set in a mask of grim determination. Clearly, the man knew he would die. But alone amongst the platoon, he had chosen to face his death with dignity.

The guard reached for the ornate basket hilt of his power sword and drew it slowly, his eyes never leaving his opponent. As the blade cleared

the scabbard, a flick of the thumb activated its power core. Veins of searing light crept along its length, coalescing at its monomolecular edge. Ghalan set his feet wide, assuming a fighter's stance. Yet still, Nullus looked on with contempt.

‘Do you hope for a quick death?’ Nullus growled, his lipless mouth sneering.

In answer, Ghalan raised his power sword into the guard position.

‘Or do you perhaps imagine you have some chance against me?’

Ghalan remained tight-lipped, refusing to play along with the traitor Space Marine's cruel game. His only answer was to bare his teeth in anger, a gesture which brought another sneer from his opponent.

‘I think you want to die,’ Nullus crowed. ‘I think you know the extent of your failure beneath the palace, and think you can avoid vengeance by way of a clean death.’ Nullus cast a withering glance at the other guards. ‘I think that you wish to avoid the fate I have in store for them.’

The assembled palace guards looked to one another, some raising angry curses.

‘Kill him!’ one shouted.

The man's head exploded in a welter of blood and gore, and one of Nullus's fellow Alpha Legion warriors lowered his boltgun, smoke wafting from its gaping barrel. Several of the man's fellow guards were showered with tissue, yet they refused to flee in the face of the sudden outbreak of violence. As the man's decapitated body hit the deck, Ghalan growled and lunged forwards, his power sword raised to deliver a two-handed, downward blow.

Nullus merely sidestepped the attack, his massive armoured form belying his speed. Ghalan should have been killed as the force he had channelled into his attack met only air and he was thrown off-balance, stumbling against the bunker's parapet. The guard paused there for several

seconds, his back turned to his opponent, waiting for the killing blow to strike him down.

But the blow did not come.

Ghalan turned slowly, to find that Nullus was facing him five metres away, his halberd resting contemptuously across one shoulder.

‘Did you think it would be so easy?’ Nullus sneered. ‘If you desire death by my hand, you’ll have to earn it.’

Once more, Ghalan raised his power sword. The man’s face was now a mask of barely-controlled rage. He knew he was being made sport of and was in an impossible position. He had little chance of besting the traitor, yet his opponent was intent upon humiliating him.

Ghalan began to move in a wide circle, and Nullus obliged by moving with him, so that the two stalked one another across the bunker’s observation deck. Nullus’s fellow Alpha Legion warriors looked on, their masks impassive but their bolters raised menacingly to ensure the remaining guards did not intervene.

‘You know what I’ll do with your skull, once you’re dead?’ Nullus said, his tone at once coldly matter-of-fact and supremely mocking.

Ghalan threw himself forwards, his power sword cutting a glittering arc through the air towards his opponent’s head. The attack was well aimed, but Nullus merely shifted his stance but a fraction, scornfully allowing the searing blade to pass within centimetres of his scarred face.

This time, Ghalan did not allow himself to become unbalanced. Instead, he allowed the momentum of his attack to carry his body around to his opponent’s left hand side. Turning the blade in his hand, Ghalan brought it upwards to strike at Nullus’s midriff.

But Nullus was prepared too, and Ghalan’s power sword struck the black blade of his enemy’s halberd. Dark light flared where the two weapons clashed, casting a pall of shadow across both fighters. Ghalan was

shrouded in unnatural night. Unable to see Nullus clearly, he instinctively threw his body backwards to avoid the inevitable riposte.

Ghalan struck the ground hard at the feet of one of Nullus's warriors. The Alpha Legionnaire made no effort to intervene in the combat, however, and Ghalan leapt to his feet, bringing his blade up.

It was only when Nullus's scarred mouth formed into a wide, mocking grin that Ghalan looked down at his blade. The weapon's edge no longer danced with the energy that had powered it before. The once lethal weapon was now reduced to a crude, blunted sword no more effective than a club wielded by a savage. Nullus's own, unnatural weapon had somehow drained its power and rendered it all but useless.

Snarling in frustration, Ghalan threw his broken weapon to the ground and snatched the heavy pistol from his belt. In a single movement, the weapon was held out before him, aimed squarely at Nullus's head.

'Better make it count,' Nullus growled. 'You won't get a second shot.'

The pistol shook in Ghalan's hands as he fought with all his might to control his rage. His glance flicked briefly to the other palace guards, but they stood powerless to intervene, covered by the boltguns of the Alpha Legionnaires.

Ghalan's finger closed on the trigger and the weapon barked a single shot. The bullet struck Nullus just below the thick collar of his power armour, barely leaving a scratch in the blue-green livery.

Before Ghalan could fire a second shot, Nullus exploded into violent movement. The black halberd lashed forwards, leaping across the space between the two combatants in the blink of an eye. The weapon struck Ghalan in the shoulder, propelling him across the decking and pinning him against the inner wall as its point sank into the rockcrete.

Transfixed by the blade, Ghalan was powerless as Nullus stepped before him.

‘You sought a clean death,’ Nullus sneered. ‘You sought to avoid justice.’

The slightest of grins appeared at Ghalan’s blood-flecked lips, but it vanished as Nullus continued. ‘Your soul is mine, fool.’

As the remaining palace guards looked on in stunned horror, Ghalan’s face became pale. Within moments, his skin began to shrivel and his muscles to collapse in upon themselves. As the vile process continued, Ghalan’s entire body convulsed and twisted around the point of the halberd. A distant, mournful cry echoed, seeming to emanate from the very blade of Nullus’s weapon. At the last, Ghalan’s body was reduced to a shrivelled husk, and Nullus withdrew his blade.

‘He who would share this fool’s fate,’ Nullus addressed the remaining guards, ‘let him fail me again.’

The guards remained stoically silent, none daring to look towards the desiccated corpse behind Nullus. With the tip of his halberd, Nullus lifted Ghalan’s remains high, and with a scornful flick cast them over the precipice to crumple to the ground in front of the bunker.

As the Alpha Legionnaires herded the palace guards away, Nullus addressed the corpse below, the insignia on the shoulder pad clearly visible. ‘I think the point is made.’

‘Khula,’ said Scout-Sergeant Kholka, his voice low but clear. ‘Take position here. I want overwatch at all times. Concentrate on the gully due south.’

Kholka watched for a moment as the Scout lowered himself into a dip in the volcanic rock and arranged his camouflaged cloak so he blended seamlessly into his surroundings. Only the barrel of the Scout’s sniper rifle was visible, and that only from close up.

Confirming that Khula was in position, Kholka took one last look around. The enemy had departed, but the entire scene could still have been a charade to draw the attention of anyone watching. The Alpha Legion

might be hidden nearby, ready to launch a devastating ambush against the small group of White Scars.

But Kholka was a veteran of the celebrated Four-Two-Two patrol and had survived everything that the death world of Canak had thrown at him. He had served an entire year deep in enemy territory whilst fighting the dreaded Saharduins. He had even stalked lictors across the great cobalt reefs of Ayria-12-Tsunami, and had the honour scars to prove it. Kholka had not done all of these things by allowing himself to fall prey to enemy entrapment, and he was determined to pass such wisdom on to those under his tutorship.

‘Our strength,’ Kholka addressed the Scouts, ‘is not arms. Our strength is guile.’

Satisfied that the Scouts were ready to learn and, if necessary, to fight, Kholka led the squad out of the cover of the rock formation and into the open wastes. Though old even for a Space Marine, Kholka moved with the fluid grace and stealth of a steppe-born predator. Indeed, as a savage son of proud, wild Chogoris, he was exactly that.

His silenced boltgun raised, Kholka made use of every scrap of cover as he approached the seemingly abandoned bunker. Every few minutes the sergeant would duck down behind cover, observe the bunker and ensure that his Scouts were deployed correctly. Several times he glanced back to the position high atop the rocks, where he knew that Scout Khula was hidden. The neophyte had concealed himself well.

Kholka had timed the advance carefully, ensuring that it was only as the sun set that the squad reached the point where the rocks thinned out. The ground became flat where a clear fire zone had been levelled in front of the bunker.

‘The gaze of midnight,’ Kholka whispered, and the Scouts all lowered their night vision goggles over their eyes. He squinted down his boltgun’s sights and scanned the bunker. The low, squat structure appeared deserted,

but the sergeant engaged the sight's heat-sensitive function just to be sure. When no telltale heat signals were revealed, he waved his charges forwards, one at a time at ten-second intervals. The Scouts covered each other as they ran forwards into the spreading gloom.

As the last of the Scouts departed, Kholka counted to ten before setting out across the open ground himself. Minutes later, he was at the bunker, finding that his Scouts had spread out to cover all approaches with their boltguns.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ hissed Scout Borchu. ‘Over here.’

Kholka stalked silently to the source of the whisper. He found the Scout by the bunker's slab-sided armoured fascia, looking down at the man they had witnessed being flung over the wall. In the shadow of the bunker the corpse was little more than a deeper patch of gloom against the black volcanic ground. He squatted down, and judged it safe to engage the lamp set into the barrel of his boltgun at its lowest setting.

The sergeant drew a sharp intake of breath at the sight that greeted him. The man's body was little more than a skeleton, parched skin stretched tight across its bones. The face, or what little remained of it, was locked in a rictus leer, the shrivelled eyes staring in a sightless terror that seemed to transcend death itself.

‘What happened to him?’ Kholka heard Borchu ask, the boy's easy mirth now entirely gone.

‘Nothing I would have you learn of,’ the sergeant replied. ‘Not until you have to, at any rate.’

‘The armour,’ Borchu continued. ‘Is that the—?’

‘Yes, boy,’ Kholka interjected. ‘That is the confirmation we seek.’

‘Then we have them?’ Borchu asked.

‘Yes, neophyte,’ Kholka replied. ‘We have them.’ Even as the sergeant spoke, he knew things were not as simple as they might have seemed to

the inexperienced Scout. To Kholka's seasoned, hunter's instinct, it was all too contrived, all too convenient.

'Squad,' Kholka whispered, standing as the Scouts gathered before him in the dark. 'We return to the insertion point.'

'For extraction?' Borchu enquired.

'No,' Kholka replied grimly. 'We have a report to make. We need to reach secure ground and set up the tight-beam transmitter. Kor'sarro Khan must hear of this.'

Kholka looked up as the transmitter device emitted a sharp tone. A steady stream of figures scrolled across his auspex, the code informing him that the machine's spirit was prepared to commune with another of its kind in high orbit overhead.

The sergeant gave the signal to Gharn that he should set the now aligned projector unit down and return to watch duty. The projector, linked by a snaking cable to the unit in front of Kholka, was just visible atop a nearby rock formation. Its sharp form was silhouetted against the massive disk of Quintus's moon, which was now rising above the horizon and staining the jagged landscape an unearthly, sickly green.

The march to the pre-arranged location from which the signal would be sent had been carried out in record time. The sergeant had forced the pace, knowing that the signal must get through at all costs. Kholka had reviewed the findings as he had led the march, going over the mission and its conclusion time and time again. He knew that the specially shielded Thunderhawk would only be overhead for a minute, for to linger any longer would be to invite detection by Voldorius and his Alpha Legion sorcerers and heretic tech-priests.

Kholka gazed up into the black sky, its southern fringe stained with the angry purples and reds of the receding warp storm Argenta. Somewhere up there, a vessel crewed by his brethren passed. They were taking a great risk, even though they would have shut down all non-essential systems and

would be propelled by momentum alone lest even the slightest power usage be detected. Only the tight beam receiver would be operating under power, and that would be so heavily shielded that an enemy would need to be right on top of the ship to detect it. Nevertheless, the enemy were possessed of methods of detection that far surpassed what machines could achieve. A sorcerer, casting his supernatural gaze across the Thunderhawk's flight path, might ruin everything. Such a thing had happened before, the sergeant recalled. In a previous mission, twelve battle-brothers had died and twenty Scouts, including himself, had been stranded on the rogue planetoid Sigma-Rokall for three long months when their extraction vessel had been intercepted.

Shaking his head to clear the centuries-old memory from his mind, Kholka activated the transmitter device and began his report.

‘Scout-Sergeant Ultas Kholka, ident zero zero digamma, seven nine two zero qoppa.’ He watched the transmitter's softly glowing screen as his words were digested, processed and encrypted. Satisfied that all was functioning as it should, he continued, ‘Reconnaissance mission report follows. Enemy presence confirmed. Primary identified: Nullus. Secondary: Alpha Legion. Tertiary: Mankarra Household Guard. Confirm item zero alpha: four-starred insignia. Observation follows. Quintus is firmly under the traitors' control, and as expected, we have discovered evidence of numerous atrocities. I suspect that the majority of the remaining defence forces are under Alpha Legion control, and those not are no longer viable.’

Seeing from the numbers counting down on the data-slate's screen that he had a few seconds of transmission time left, Kholka added an addendum. ‘My khan,’ he said. ‘I must counsel that the four-starred insignia was left where we could find it. It may be a snare, or it may be that the enemy harbour a traitor in their ranks. I advise caution, and await your orders.’

The transmitter unit emitted a sharp tone, its machine-spirit indicating that the link had ended as scheduled. Kholka proceeded to break the unit down, and then glanced south, towards the rising moon. The mission would proceed, whatever, or whoever, awaited the Scouts.



CHAPTER 6

Death in the Night

‘Wait,’ the Space Marine captain hissed into the vox as he watched the dark landscape below. ‘Let them enter the gully.’

He stood at the very peak of a jagged spire of black rock, the night sky at his back. His power armour was black too, and was hung with dozens of small, avian-bone charms. The column of traitor militia vehicles picking its way through the wastes below had no chance of detecting him or his warriors.

Not, that is, until it was too late.

The column consisted of half a dozen armoured personnel carriers, a pattern of vehicle manufactured on a number of nearby worlds, but lacking the armament of the Chimera transports used in the armies of the Imperial Guard. At intervals along the column larger, tracked carriers travelled, bulky cargo units loaded with heavy weapons destined for a defence complex only ten kilometres distant. The captain’s company were peerless when it came to mounting devastating campaigns of terror and disruption, but their own numbers were few and the enemy’s control over the traitor militia complete.

As the captain waited on his lofty perch, the column ground on, manoeuvring around a large rockslide that had settled at the base of an outcropping. His men had caused the slide, a single, expertly placed krak grenade bringing tons of black volcanic spoil across the column's path. As a result, the transports were even now entering the gully into which they had been so deliberately funnelled.

The lead vehicle slewed around as it entered the gully, the arc beam mounted at its forwards hatch scanning left and right across the ground ahead. Inside his helmet, the captain's mouth assumed a nasty grin and his eyes narrowed.

The transport lurched on, and was followed a few moments later by the second, the beam of its own searchlight lancing into the darkness to its flank.

'Just a little bit...' the captain said.

The lead transport ground to a sudden halt, and an angry shout cut the air from far below. The shout had come from the driver of the second vehicle, his head visible as he rose from his hatch, and had been voiced in response to the lead vehicle's unanticipated stop. The call was answered by a colourful response from the commander of the lead vehicle. Though spoken in the local dialect, the captain could well understand the meaning, and his grin widened.

'...further,' he mouthed, as the lead vehicle's arc light swung suddenly upwards. The bright shaft of light cut through the night. But to the captain, who had positioned himself so that he would be silhouetted against the swollen moon as the lead vehicle entered the gully, it was blinding, for it shone directly into his eyes.

'Kill them,' he growled into the vox. 'Let none escape.'

The lead transport erupted into livid flames as a melta charge hidden in the gully floor detonated. For an instant, the night was dispelled as twisted hunks of flaming wreckage were propelled in all directions. The scream of

suddenly activated jump packs sounded as Assault squads leapt into the air, to descend upon columns of fire towards their prey.

With a thought impulse transmitted through the systems of his power armour, the captain activated his own jump pack, launching himself forwards and upwards, high into the night sky. Behind him the battle-brothers of his Command squad followed, flames glinting from the long talons of their lightning claws.

Even as he began his descent, the second transport was attempting to reverse out of the killing zone. It ground against the bow of the following vehicle. A second explosion ripped through the night as the last vehicle in the column was struck in its engine deck by a well-placed krak missile. The stricken vehicle lurched, and the fuel in its thinly armoured tank spewed across the ground. As the surviving crew attempted to fling themselves clear, the flames ignited, turning each man into a flailing human torch that collapsed into thrashing heaps as the fire consumed them.

The captain landed atop the upper deck of the second vehicle, the sound of the heavy impact resonating loudly. The driver, standing upright in his hatch, turned his head and looked directly into the face of death. The captain activated his talon-like lightning claws and made a bloody ruin of the man's upper body. He located a second, larger hatch under his feet, and stepped backwards.

Punching his talons straight through the hatch, the captain ripped the doors clean away and flung them into the fire-chased night. A dozen faces looked up at him, and a second later he was amongst them. The interior of the transport was so cramped that no finesse was possible. He merely lashed out, tracing a web of death all around him. Within seconds, the traitor militia were reduced to chunks of smoking meat, which was seared to ashes as he reactivated his jump pack and rose from the back of the vehicle atop a pillar of fire.

The vehicles of the column had all by now halted, their drivers realising that they were trapped and unable to manoeuvre with the lead and trailing transports destroyed. The initial shock was passing, and squads of militia inside each vehicle were deploying from hatches which dropped loudly to the ground at the rear of each tank.

‘Left flank.’ The captain spoke coldly into the vox-net as the members of his Command squad swooped down to land beside him. ‘Engage the enemy from third carrier. Centre group, the fifth.’

The Assault Marines arrowed through the night towards their targets. The desperate militia unleashed a fusillade of bullets, but even those few shots that struck a Space Marine failed to penetrate their power armour. Within seconds, the Assault squads were in amongst their foes, the screams of chainswords and men blending into an almighty clamour of death and destruction.

‘Right flank,’ the captain said. ‘Suppress the third transport.’ A torrent of boltgun fire hailed down upon the vehicle and the militia attempting to muster at its rear. The two Tactical squads had been well concealed amongst the rocks on the column’s right flank. Those militiamen not cut down in the opening salvo sought desperately for a target to return fire at, but all they saw were muzzle flashes. For most, that was the last thing they ever saw.

‘All other squads,’ the captain continued. ‘Assume reserve stance delta-rho. Command squad, with me.’

Leaping down from the transport’s upper hull, his Command squad following a step behind, the captain passed the front of the next vehicle in the column. It was a huge, lumbering, grey-painted transport, twice the size of the carriers, its form dominated by a huge cargo bay at its rear. A low pounding accompanied by a muffled roar of anger sounded from the vehicle, audible even over the gunfire. Slowing as he passed through the

shadow of the hauler, the captain realised that the sound was emanating from within the vehicle's cargo bay.

Cautiously, he rounded the back end of the vehicle. Something very large pounded repeatedly on the inside of the vehicle's rear loading hatch whilst bellowing an incoherent stream of primitive invective.

'Melta?' asked one of the Command squad.

'No,' he replied. 'We leave the haulers intact. Whatever is inside, we deal with it. Get ready.'

The captain's talon shot out, lacerating the hatch's locking mechanism. The remains fell to the rocky ground, and then both hatches were flung open. A savage bellow rang from the dark interior and a massive ogryn lumbered forth.

A stable strain of human mutant evolved or bred on high gravity worlds, the beast was a mountain of sinew and muscle. Its face was a bestial mask of imbecilic fury, spittle frothing from its broken-toothed mouth. The ground shook as the ogryn stepped out. Its beady eyes scanned the Space Marines and it shouted a word that the captain could not understand. An answering bellow sounded from within the hauler's cargo area and a second ogryn appeared at the hatch. At least two more waited within the cargo bay's shadowed depths.

'Kill them,' the captain snarled as the ogryn gave voice to a war cry of his own. Both sprang forwards at the same moment, and launched their attack.

Applying a burst to his jump pack, the captain powered his feet from the ground. Even as the captain leapt, the ogryn's massive arm pistoned forwards, its clenched fist striking him squarely in the stomach. So powerful was the piledriver punch that warning icons flashed across his vision, his armour's machine-spirit warning of micro-fractures in three separate locations.

Even as the punch struck home, the captain's own attack was arrowing downwards, his lightning claw slashing towards the ogryn's head. But the punch had offset his momentum, and the talon struck not the beast's head, but its left arm, just below the shoulder.

The ogryn roared in savage pain and anger as the captain's talon parted muscle and seared through bone. The arm was torn away in a welter of blood, so much dead meat striking the ground with a wet thud. A fountain of blood gushing from the stump of its left arm, the ogryn threw itself at the captain as the Space Marine's armoured feet touched the ground. Behind it, two more of the massive brutes dropped from the vehicle's hatch.

Breathing hard, he cursed the delay this engagement would entail. His talons spread wide either side of his body, the captain had but a second to prepare himself for the beast's next attack. And then, the mutant was upon him.

Even wounded, the ogryn was a fearsome opponent. What it lacked in skill it made up for in mass and sheer brute strength. Its fist powered forwards again. This time, the captain was ready, his gene-engineered physiology granting him the reflexes that had so often saved his life. Twisting his body, he sidestepped the massive fist and the ogryn found itself overextended and pitching forwards. Before it had the chance to check its forwards motion, he lashed out with both talons and the brute's other arm was severed into three ragged pieces.

Before the captain could aid his battle-brothers against the three brutal creatures throwing themselves at his Command squad, the crippled ogryn reared up in front of him. Blood sprayed in wild geysers from the armless stumps at its shoulders and it bellowed in mindless savagery. He hated the brute's raw spirit and refusal to give in. It was trying to bring to bear the last weapon it had at its disposal: its thick-skulled, ugly-as-sin head.

'Emperor's mercy,' the captain breathed. 'Just die!'

As if in answer, the ogryn redoubled its bellow and arched its back, tensing the slab-like muscles of its stomach, and then propelled its own head downwards towards him.

The captain had no choice but to meet the attack, head-on. He had just enough time to raise a talon before the ogryn slammed into him. The ogryn's head struck his helmet's faceplate and he was propelled downwards to smash into the rocky ground.

The captain must have blacked out for an instant. His vision cleared and he felt a tremendous weight pressing down upon him. Blinking, he realised that the weight belonged to the now lifeless body of the ogryn, the gleaming blades of his lightning claw protruding from its back.

As more warning icons flashed across his visor, he pushed the massive dead weight upwards and rolled it away, pulling his talon clear from its gut as he did so. The brute's face was crushed inwards, its ugly features no longer recognisable. Reaching a hand to the visor of his helmet, the captain felt several cracks across its surface. No matter, he thought, putting the damage from his mind as he turned to ascertain how his warriors were prevailing.

The brute that the captain had faced must have been the alpha male of the pack, for the others were less fearsome opponents. Two were dead already, their massive bodies bearing witness to the damage that twinned lightning claws can wreak upon unarmoured flesh, even flesh as tough as an ogryn's. The last of the ogryns was surrounded on all sides by his warriors, bleeding out from at least a dozen slashing wounds.

The ogryn cursed as its legs gave way beneath it. With a final obscenity, it fell forwards and crashed to the earth, gallons of blood gushing across the ground.

'Reserve group,' the captain spoke into the vox-net. There was a burst of static indicating that the sophisticated communications systems built into his power armour had sustained damage when the ogryn had headbutted

him. The armour's war spirit would be much aggrieved, and would require placation before it would serve at full capacity again. Despite the damage, however, the squad sergeant's acknowledgement came back a moment later.

‘Cover the right flank as they clear the other two haulers,’ the captain ordered. ‘All squads, be advised. There may be ogryns within the haulers. Deal with them, but leave the vehicles intact. Acknowledge.’

As each of the squad sergeants transmitted their acknowledgement, the battle was all but done, the high tide of war having passed. Five of the troop carriers were ablaze, their former passengers slain in the deadly ambush. More black-clad Space Marines emerged from the darkness, bolters held ready as they advanced towards the two remaining cargo haulers. The Assault Marines of left and centre groups were despatching the last of the defenders towards the rear of the column, running to ground those who attempted to flee and cutting them down with cold, clinical efficiency.

‘No contact,’ came a sergeant's voice over the vox-net. ‘Just cargo. Area secure.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said the captain as he strode towards the rear of the column. ‘Right group?’

‘Stand by,’ returned a sergeant.

The captain continued through the darkness towards the column's rear. The last few shots ran out and then it was over.

‘Just cargo here, too,’ the sergeant reported. ‘Secured.’

‘Orders,’ he said, not willing to waste a second of time. ‘On my lead.’

A stray shot rang out towards the front of the column, the sound of a Space Marine despatching a wounded enemy trooper. Within a minute, the squad sergeants had assembled beside the second transport, the only one not aflame. Bracing his weight against a handle, the captain pulled himself upwards and swung his massively armoured form up onto the deck.

‘Well fought,’ he said.

The assembled Space Marines nodded sombrely, their Chapter not disposed to rude displays of triumphalism. Where Space Marines of other Chapters might have revelled openly in their victory, theirs celebrated victory in a far more personal manner. Later, when the fighting was done, each would mount a silent vigil. He would pray for hours, even days on end, seeking unity with the Emperor and the primarch in the midst of a universe of blood and slaughter and doom.

‘Status?’ the captain asked as he looked down upon his officers.

Each of the leaders gave their report in turn, a clipped delivery listing wounds sustained and ammunition expended. Though a number of battle-brothers had been injured in the brief firefight, none had been lost. The captain’s orders had been to conserve resources, for more reasons than one. More squads were in action across the entire region of Quintus, sowing fear and confusion amongst the native forces, and the leaders of these small forces each reported in over the vox-net.

‘Sergeant,’ he addressed a veteran Tactical squad leader. ‘Your men are prepared?’

‘Affirmative,’ the sergeant replied. ‘They are ready to begin at your order.’

‘Good,’ the captain replied. ‘I want three Munitorum-issue lasguns placed centrally on the right flank, along with a dozen expended power packs. Set down one of the Guard-issue bolters in right group’s ambush position. See it done.’

Nodding his understanding, the sergeant turned and stalked off into the night. The warriors of his squad would place a weapon they had brought to Quintus for this very purpose.

‘What of the bolter wounds?’ another sergeant asked. ‘Many were cut down by our brothers’ weapons.’

‘Even if the enemy note the nature of the militia’s wounds, sufficient doubt will have been created for our purposes,’ he answered.

‘And doubt,’ said Captain Kayvaan Shrike of the Raven Guard Chapter, ‘is the seed of misdirection.’

‘You can kill me now!’ spat Malya L’nor. ‘I will not serve him!’

Heaving against the restraints at her wrists and ankles, Malya knew it was useless. She had awoken in the dank cell several hours before, her first sight that of the hooded cell-master standing over her. At first she had begged to be released, but as the full extent of her plight had revealed itself she had desired only a swift death.

‘I refuse,’ she screamed, her lungs burning. ‘I would rather die!’

From beneath his leathern hood, the cell-master had whispered with unadulterated glee of the plans that Voldorius had in store for Malya L’nor. What cruel strand of fate was unravelling before her, she had despaired? Why was it that she had been chosen, seemingly at random, for such a duty?

‘Oh, you shall serve,’ came a new voice from behind Malya. Her head restrained by steel braces, all she could see was the corroded ironwork of the ceiling above her and the fleeting shadows cast across it by flickering lumens. Something about this new voice forced her to silence, despite herself, so low and threatening were its sibilant tones.

‘My lord Voldorius has great hopes for you, equerry.’

Malya bit back a caustic reply as the speaker stepped into her field of vision. Cold terror filled her, the sweat on her body turning instantly as cold as ice. He was huge, his shoulders broad. He wore the blue-green armour that the people of Quintus had come to hate so much. It was the livery of the Alpha Legion, whose leader had laid their world so low.

‘My name is Nullus,’ the warrior continued, his vile visage pressing in towards Malya’s. Up close, his face was revealed to Malya as a white globe of solid scar tissue, his black, slit-like eyes gazing down at her. Tears

welled in her own eyes under that soulless gaze, yet she refused to yield to her sorrow.

‘You are wilful,’ Nullus said. ‘That will serve you well in your new office.’

‘I—’ Malya started.

‘You *will*,’ Nullus interjected, his face lowering still further towards her own until she could see nothing but his black eyes and the scars traced around them in obscene patterns. ‘Voldorius has need of an... intermediary, one who will keep the people of this miserable rock in line, while he attends to his own concerns. You will serve in this capacity.’

‘No,’ Malya said flatly, forcing her voice to remain steady. Despite her denial, she could not meet the other’s eyes for they threatened the destruction of her very soul.

Nullus’s face was split by a mocking grin, the scars aligning themselves into new patterns as the flesh beneath them shifted. ‘Henceforth,’ Nullus continued, ‘with each denial that issues from your pretty lips, a hundred of your people shall die. Ten thousand were slain in the grand square, and you alone were spared. Their corpses shall remain as a warning. You can see them if you like. Should you prefer that ten thousand more be slain to make the point, then please, continue with your foolish protest.

‘Do you understand?’

Now the tears flowed freely from Malya’s eyes, and she screwed them tightly shut.

‘Yes,’ she nodded, as much as the restraints would allow. ‘I understand...’

‘Your report,’ said Shrike as he entered the dark cave in which Techmarine Dyloss tended the cipher matrix.

‘Brother-captain,’ Techmarine Dyloss nodded a greeting as Shrike came to stand opposite him. He turned back to the softly glowing globe atop the

machinery in front of him, reams of zeroes scrolling across its screen. ‘I cannot raise her, nor any of her associates.’

Shrike sighed. The Techmarine had only recently established contact with a group of fighters within Mankarra city and several reticent communications had passed between them. The fighters had, of course, been suspicious, sensibly concluding that Shrike’s transmissions might have been those of the enemy, intent upon entrapment.

‘The last contact?’ Shrike asked.

‘Twelve hours ago. As per your orders, I communicated your opposition to an attempt upon the vile one’s life until full coordination of action was possible.’

‘And her response?’ Shrike enquired.

‘She agreed,’ Techmarine Dyloss replied. ‘But she could not vouch for her compatriots.’

‘Fools,’ Shrike cursed. Voldorius had the blood of billions on his hands and countless numbers of humanity’s finest warriors had sacrificed their lives to try and defeat him. Yet, none had succeeded, so what chance had a handful of desperate civilians-turned-resistance fighters?

‘You asked her about the prisoner,’ Shrike said. It was not a question.

‘I did,’ the Techmarine replied. ‘She knew nothing.’

Shrike’s mood darkened and he made to stalk from the cave.

‘Since then, brother-captain,’ the Techmarine continued, ‘I have intercepted a number of other signals.’

‘Go on,’ Shrike said, halting at the cave’s mouth.

‘The rudimentary command and control network that the resistance had established has been entirely destroyed. As each node fell, brief and desperate pleas were transmitted. Many mentioned an atrocity in which thousands were slain.’

‘What they reap...’ Shrike muttered.

‘Brother-captain?’ Dyloss said, unsure of Shrike’s meaning.

‘No matter,’ Shrike said, turning his back on the cipher matrix and its Techmarine attendant. ‘We stand alone, as ever.’

‘The blood-rats,’ whispered Scout Telluk. ‘Falling upon the sky-drake’s bones.’

‘Understood,’ Scout-Sergeant Kholka replied, moving silently to lie beside the neophyte at the lip of the rock.

Kholka eased himself forwards cautiously, for the sun had fully risen in the sky overhead. Slowly, he raised his magnoculars to his eyes and examined the scene below.

The boy was correct, and he had used the proper battle-cant to describe what he had seen. The rocky terrain was cut by a gully and in it a column of armour belonging to the traitor militia had been ambushed. Not just ambushed; taken apart with ruthless efficiency.

Scanning left, the sergeant caught a glimpse of movement amongst the smoking wreckage of armoured carriers. Figures moved amongst the detritus, picking over the remains of vehicles and corpses alike.

‘Militia? Scout Telluk asked his sergeant.

Kholka continued to scan the scene for a moment before replying, taking in at least a platoon’s worth of soldiers. ‘It appears so, neophyte,’ he said. ‘Your impressions?’

‘An ambush,’ Telluk said, ‘that much is clear. Very recently.’

‘When?’ Kholka pressed.

‘During the night, sergeant. Perhaps around zero-three-zero.’

‘Explain.’

‘The ambushers must have been well hidden to approach so close to the column. But the moon last night was full. Any attacker would have been illuminated, and spotted.’

‘Unless?’

‘Unless the moon was behind that outcrop.’ The Scout nodded towards a tall formation of volcanic rock to the pair’s right. ‘Only when the column

rounded that rock slide would the moon have provided light, at which point, the ambushers attacked.'

'Good,' Kholka replied. He too had reached that conclusion and had hoped that his testing of the youngster would have yielded such positive results. As he watched the militia soldiers go from one body to the next he heard a shout from off to the left. Panning the magnoculars, he located the source. Amidst some boulders, a soldier was waving with one hand, and holding a lasgun aloft in the other.

A few minutes later, an officer was directing a search among the rocks to either side of the gully. Soon several more of the weapons, as well as a far rarer boltgun, had been found.

'Imperial Guard?' Scout Telluk said.

'I very much doubt it, boy,' replied the sergeant. 'But someone certainly wants them to believe it so.'

'Brother-captain,' Techmarine Dyloss called out, even as Shrike stalked away from the cave. He turned towards the Space Marine standing in the cave's mouth.

'What is it?' Shrike replied. A dark shroud had fallen across his soul when he had learned of the Alpha Legion's deeds and he was ill-disposed towards conversation right now.

'Another signal.'

Shrike turned back towards the cave and ducked beneath its low opening. The Techmarine had returned to his station attending the cipher matrix and was making a series of complex adjustments to its settings. Where ranks of zeroes had scrolled across its globe-shaped screen, now a series of numbers had appeared.

'What is it?' Shrike asked. The captain was not initiated into the ways of the Machine, and like all Space Marine leaders, relied upon the specialised skills of the Chapter's Techmarines to attend to such things.

‘It’s a sub-ether carrier wave,’ Techmarine Dyloss replied matter-of-factly. Shrike raised his eyebrows.

‘A ranging signal. Right on the edge of what this unit can detect.’

‘Who from?’ Shrike pressed. ‘And who to?’

‘It’s an obscure cipher,’ Dyloss continued, his hands moving across the dials in an attempt to lock onto the signal. ‘Highly encrypted, but not by any means I am familiar with. I cannot say.’

‘A sub-ether carrier,’ Shrike said. ‘A beacon?’

‘It could be. But the diffusion makes tracking both source and destination impossible without the key.’

‘Which we do not have,’ Shrike replied. ‘I want that signal broken. And inform all commands. We will soon have company, of one sort or another.’



CHAPTER 7

Planetfall

‘Clearing lambda-point alpha,’ reported the pilot, before reaching up to make a series of adjustments to a bank of instruments above his head. ‘Optimal velocity within five. Silent running at your command, my khan.’

Kor’sarro scanned his command terminal, one of its many screens displaying a rearward view of space. As the sickly green disc of Quintus’s moon receded, the Thunderhawk gunships of Kor’sarro’s strike force slipped free of its gravitational influence into that of Quintus itself. Within five minutes, the entire force, representing every single deployable unit under Kor’sarro’s command, would assume not only silent running, but complete signal silence. With the *Lord of Heavens* left far behind in the outer reaches of the Quintus system, the company would soon be very much alone.

The data scrolling across the terminal screen told Kor’sarro that all of the vessels of his strike force were in formation, their status optimal. But the Master of the Hunt knew better than to trust such things to the spirits of the machine.

‘All Hunters,’ Kor’sarro spoke into the vox-net. ‘Confirm status.’

One by one, each vessel in the strike force called in. Hunter Three's repairs were settling in well enough, its commander reported, following the damage the ship had sustained at Cernis IV. Seven Techmarines had administered to the Thunderhawk transporter's systems, replacing an entire aileron before praying to the vessel's wounded machine-spirit for three days and three nights. Kor'sarro hoped fervently that their devotions would prove sufficient, for every vessel, and every Space Marine it carried, was vital to the mission ahead. Hunter Nine, the gunship assigned to carry the strike force's ammunition, was the last to call in, its commander reporting the ship's status satisfactory.

Before the strike force had parted company with the *Lord of Heavens*, Kor'sarro had meditated an entire night on the battle to come. Prior to that, he had spent long hours in counsel with both Chaplain Xia'ghan and the Stormseer, Qan'karro. The Master of the Hunt had sought to rid himself of the taint of what had occurred on Cernis IV. Xia'ghan had absolved him of both pride and guilt, declaring Kor'sarro pure in the eyes of the Emperor. Qan'karro had cast his augur-bones in the manner of a steppes-shaman, and announced that the mission was true, its conclusion unclear as yet but its objective blessed. Kor'sarro's mind was now clear and his heart purified. Not since the conclusion of his first ever hunt, on the third moon of the gas giant Mai Nine, had he felt such purpose.

'All commands,' Kor'sarro hailed his strike force commanders. 'We proceed with the blessing of the Emperor and of the primarch, honoured be his name. Our mission is clear and you have your orders. Engage silent running, and good hunting.'

'Engaging as ordered, my khan,' said the co-pilot, flipping a series of switches before pulling down on a lever mounted at his side. With each control deactivated, one part of the gunship's machine systems was laid dormant until the time it would be called upon once more. As the Thunderhawk's mighty thrusters powered down, the command deck

became unnervingly quiet. All of a sudden, Kor'sarro could hear the thunder of his blood in his ears, his heart racing as his genetically enhanced body prepared itself for battle, bolstered still further by the complex combat-drug administration systems in his power armour. Mouthing a prayer that he had learned as a boy at the foot of his tribe's shaman, he forced himself to focus. Several hours of flight lay ahead of the strike force, hours in which he must remain alert and ready for any opposition to the insertion.

At the last, the command deck was plunged into darkness as all non-essential systems were brought fully offline. Angular shadows were cast across the instrument panels and all was tinted with the pale green of Quintus's moon. The vessels of the strike force were now being propelled through the void by momentum alone and their course would not be corrected until the very last stage of entry in Quintus's atmosphere. Even the flight control panels lay dark, only a single screen glowing dimly amongst so much cold metal.

'The cipher?' Kor'sarro asked. The command deck was so quiet that he instinctively kept his voice down low, even though no enemy could possibly hear. It was force of habit for one born of the steppes of Chogoris, whose people moderated the volume of their speech according to the strength of the ever-present winds.

'On track, my khan,' the co-pilot replied. 'The carrier wave is reading clearly.'

'Good,' Kor'sarro replied, though in truth he could not help but feel some frustration that he must rely on such methods to guide the strike force in to its target. The wave was being transmitted by the *Lord of Heavens*, at a sub-etheric wavelength that few in the entire Imperium could possibly detect, and was protected by encryption that even fewer could break. With the necessity for a silent insertion, the individual ships of the strike force had to have some way of remaining coordinated with

one another so that they each arrived at the correct interface point at the correct moment in time. Instead of synchronising with each other's machine systems, each Thunderhawk would follow the nigh undetectable signal transmitted by the *Lord of Heavens*, riding the wave right onto their target.

‘Dyloss to Shrike,’ the transmission came over the captain's vox-bead. ‘Do you receive?’

‘Go ahead,’ Shrike replied, halting in his patrol of the rock-strewn area north-west of the Raven Guard base.

‘Brother-captain,’ the voice came over the vox, the signal clearer now that Shrike's armour had been afforded time to repair its communication systems. ‘I have news regarding the cipher.’

Shrike signalled for the Space Marines nearby to halt, and with a curt gesture ordered them to assume a defensive posture, covering the terrain in all directions. ‘I'm listening,’ he replied. ‘Have you broken the encryption?’

‘The code itself remains intact,’ the Techmarine reported. ‘But I have cracked something of the signal's nature, and of its source.’

It had been five days since Techmarine Dyloss had detected the cipher signal, and he had been working upon it without rest or respite, day and night, ever since. In the meantime, the Raven Guard had stepped up their patrols of the region around Mankarra, sowing death and destruction against any and all enemies they had encountered. After each battle, the Raven Guard had planted false evidence of their identity, leaving Imperial Guard-issue weapons and equipment at the ambush sites. After one ambush, they had even dressed the corpse of a traitor militia soldier in an Imperial Guard uniform they had brought along for just such a deception. It was not that Shrike truly aimed to convince the invaders that an Imperial Guard force was active on Quintus, but any amount of confusion

he could plant in the minds of their commanders would aid the Space Marines' cause.

'The signal is a co-ord beam, the type used for blind navigation,' Dyloss reported.

'Then someone's inbound,' said Shrike, as much to himself as to the Techmarine. 'Do you have the coordinates?'

There was a brief pause, during which Shrike could hear the sound of the Techmarine's hands and servo-arms working upon the cipher matrix, which droned and churned in the background. 'I am still filtering the exact location, but I am transmitting the approximate coordinates to you now.'

Captain Shrike raised his left arm and slid back the cover of a data-screen integrated into his vambrace. A representation of the surrounding region appeared on the screen, a red circle at its centre. 'A day's march,' he said, switching his vox-link to transmit on the command frequency. 'All units,' Shrike addressed his squad leaders and specialists. 'Converge on my coordinates, tactical state gamma-nine. Confirm.'

Within moments, each of Shrike's officers had confirmed their understanding of his orders. Shrike would not allow his mission on Quintus to be compromised by another force entering the war, no matter who they were.

Scout-Sergeant Kholka looked up towards the darkening skies for what must have been the tenth time in as many minutes, even though he knew the strike force would not be inbound for at least an hour, and that was assuming nothing had gone awry.

Kholka and his Scouts had located a landing zone and transmitted its coordinates to the shielded gunship on its last pass five days ago. Now they waited, watching for enemy intrusion or interference.

The landing zone was the flat floor of a dormant volcano, protected by a five hundred-metre-tall rim, breached on its northern edge by a wide fracture.

Of course, the suitability of the landing zone might have been noted by potential enemies. For that reason, Kholka had ordered the young Scouts to keep a watchful vigil for enemy activity, spreading them out in order to cover as much of the surrounding region as possible. An hour ago, Borchu had reported a glimpse of movement to the north and Kholka had worked his way stealthily around the volcano's rim to the Scout's hide.

Lowering his eyes from the skies above, Kholka looked down upon the black wastelands far below. The sun was setting, casting long, jagged shadows across the lands. Any enemy at all might be creeping through those shadows. He hesitated before lifting the magnoculars, seeking to get a feel for the landscape before him, to imagine himself a predator moving through it in search of prey. He ignored the fact that in truth he himself might be the prey, if indeed a hunter lurked down there, in the dark shadows.

The wastes stretched for kilometres in every direction, but to the northwest, beyond the horizon, were the outskirts of the agri-zone. Another one hundred or so kilometres beyond that was the capital city of Mankarra. It was from that direction that any enemy action was most likely to come, and it was there that Borchu had seen the movement.

Having familiarised himself with the landscape, Kholka raised the magnoculars to his eyes. 'Coordinates?' he asked the Scout beside him.

'Five by the winter deeps,' Borchu replied in the White Scars battle-cant. 'Three score and nine by the herd.'

The veteran sergeant was so accustomed to the use of battle-cant that he had no need to convert the code phrase into conventional coordinates. Indeed, the form of communication was in many cases more efficient than standard coordinates, for it contained descriptive shorthand that drew the eye to specific terrain features. Perhaps most importantly, it relied on cultural references that only one raised on the steppes of Chogoris would

understand, making it nigh impossible for an enemy to decipher should he intercept it.

Panning the magnoculars from west to east, Kholka adjusted the magnification so that his field of vision was focused on an area some three kilometres out. Like the majority of the landscape, the area was dominated by twisted arches and jagged outcrops of volcanic rock, black or dark grey in colour and ideal terrain for an enemy to creep through at dusk. He zoomed outwards slightly, absorbing the general lay of the land, seeking to imagine himself passing through it. What path would he take, were he approaching the volcano?

Kholka's eye was caught by a black bridge of rock between two outcroppings, formed no doubt by the action of blisteringly hot lava carving its way through an older feature. The channel below the bridge snaked its way from the north-east and its depths would be cast in the deepest of shadow for much of the day.

Having located a possible route an enemy might approach the landing zone by, the sergeant traced its path as far as he could see. At times the channel was hidden by intervening terrain features such as tall, bladelike spires or massive coils of solidified lava. Seeing no sign of an enemy on his first sweep, Kholka engaged the thermal imaging function. He soon found however that the background temperature of the volcanic rocks was relatively high, high enough to mask the presence of any foe taking measures to avoid detection by such means. No matter, Kholka thought as he disengaged the thermal imaging; he far preferred to rely upon his own senses, enhanced as they were by arcane genetic engineering and honed by centuries of battlefield experience.

Kholka focused in upon a particular area of shadow. If I were moving along that route, he thought, that is where I would be. It offered an unobstructed view of the volcano and had ample overhead cover from an angular blade of rock jutting out above the channel.

Only after he had been looking directly at that patch of shadow, unblinking and utterly focused, for upwards of fifteen minutes, did Kholka detect the very faintest hint of movement. A black patch of shadow, barely discernable against the darkness all around, moved ever so slightly.

‘Enemy located,’ the sergeant growled.

Shrike longed to engage his jump pack and hurl himself through the darkening skies towards the contact his auspex had detected hiding in the rocks up ahead, yet he dared not. Not until he had confirmed their full strength and disposition at least. To reveal his location now would be suicide.

Having tracked the sub-etheric transmission to its terminus, Shrike was now sure that the target was the inside of the volcano up ahead. It made sense. The inside of the vast crater would offer an ideal location for a planetary landing. But only if whoever was inbound wished to avoid detection by other forces on the surface of Quintus.

Ten hours ago, before the sun had risen across the wastes south-west of Mankarra, Shrike had convened a council of his officers and specialists. All had been afforded the opportunity to speak, to offer their theories on the identity of the strangers they knew would be arriving soon. Several had expressed the hope that the force represented aid for Mankarra, perhaps in the form of reinforcements, yet the case against had been well made. Before embarking on the mission, Shrike had been fully appraised of the Imperium’s forces in the region. As far as he knew, none had been allotted to target the world. And besides, some had argued, it was too soon to expect an intervention, for such a force would take many months to gather and prepare, and would be unlikely to approach the world in such a stealthy manner.

Other opinions had been voiced too. Perhaps the strangers were reinforcements for the invaders. But why then hide their approach? Were

they a rival warband, perhaps intent upon dislodging the tyranny of Voldorius only to replace it with another, perhaps even more brutal rule?

One last possibility had emerged during the gathering. Might the strangers be brother Space Marines come to Quintus to lend their aid to its resistance and to oust the Alpha Legion and their vile overlord? That would certainly explain the use of the highly sophisticated carrier signal, but Shrike was aware of no other Chapter in the immediate vicinity.

The Salamanders Chapter, Shrike knew, had a strike force in the benighted Magulanox sector, but had departed the galactic arm entirely in pursuit of the traitor rogue trader Lord Hax. The Celestial Guard Chapter were also known to be operating within a dozen light years of Quintus, but the last Shrike had heard, all of their forces had been recalled to defend the Chapter's home world of Erenon against a large ork incursion. The Imperial Fists had a force inbound on the anarchic Jagga Cluster, but that lay dozens of light years away, while the Tigers Argent, White Scars and the Howling Griffons could all, in theory, be operating even further out still.

No, Shrike had decided. The Raven Guard could not make the assumption that whoever was approaching Quintus was a friend. He had ordered his force to proceed to the landing zone with all caution and to be ready for action against the strangers.

Settling back into the darkness of the channel, Shrike waited.

‘Final corrections input,’ reported Brother Koban. ‘Beginning final descent.’

Kor'sarro watched through the canopy of the Thunderhawk's command deck as the dark surface of Quintus loomed. The strike force was approaching on the planet's night side, the bright crescent of dawn casting a semi-circular halo across its shoulder. Behind the strike force, the moon of Quintus shone its sickly luminescence, bathing the nighted surface below in soft green light. As the minutes counted down, small pinpricks of

artificial light became visible, the telltale signs of civilisation. Whether those lights were cast by industry or were simply the glowing embers of ruin, Kor'sarro could not yet discern.

The gunship bucked violently as it penetrated the upper reaches of the world's atmosphere, and Kor'sarro mouthed a silent prayer to the primarch. He beseeched the first Great Khan for his blessing, as he had done on hundreds of previous occasions. To date, the primarch had watched over the Master of the Hunt and his brotherhood of White Scars. Wherever Jaghatai Khan was, whatever far reaches of the galaxy he hunted, he was always with his favoured sons, the proud warriors of the steppes of Chogoris.

‘Approaching local Kármán line,’ the pilot said. ‘One hundred kilometres.’

The turbulence increased still further as the Thunderhawk plummeted through the atmosphere. The view through the canopy was now entirely of the planet's surface. Because the need for stealth was so great, the vessel and its sister ships would only engage manoeuvring thrusters at the last possible moment, before triggering their anti-grav generators to arrest their final descent.

As the gunship plummeted, the features of the landscape below became more discernable. Kor'sarro's first impression of Quintus was of a planet crossed by vast mountain ranges and pockmarked with the scars of massive amounts of volcanic activity. Though it appeared green in the light of the moon, Kor'sarro knew that much of the surface was in fact ash-grey or black, and very little of it was able to support any life.

Between the vast mountain ranges stretched barren, trackless wastes, strewn with twisted rock formations and crossed with deep valleys forged by the passage of torrents of lava at some distant point in the world's prehistory. Due to the nature of the terrain, mankind had only settled in a scattering of regions, and then the only reason for doing so was to provide

a strategic base from which Imperial forces could guard against alien incursions from nearby stars. In truth, this place was little more than a backstop: its defenders would never have stood a chance against invasion, but their defiance and sacrifice would have bought time for a coordinated counterattack to be assembled. With the coming of Kernax Voldorius, that purpose had been negated.

‘Activating manoeuvring thrusters,’ Brother Koban announced. This was it – the point at which there truly was no going back. Were an enemy to be casting his gaze in the portion of the sky the strike force was approaching through, the gunships might be detected as their thrusters flared into life. A moment later, the sound of the atmosphere rushing against the hull was drowned out by that of the jets coming online, a sound which to Kor’sarro seemed shockingly loud.

Pulling back hard on the flight control, the pilot brought the gunship around onto its approach heading, the horizon swinging downwards sharply as the vessel levelled out.

‘One hundred kilometres to objective,’ Brother Koban announced.
‘Applying anti-grav in ten seconds.’

Kor’sarro braced himself and counted down the seconds in his head. As he reached zero, the gunship’s forwards momentum was dramatically reduced, its structure groaning in protest. Yet the Thunderhawk was constructed to the very highest of specifications and attended to by the ministrations of the most devoted Techmarines. It could survive far worse punishment.

‘Fifty kilometres to landing zone,’ the pilot calmly announced.
‘Awakening machine systems.’

A deep thrum suddenly filled the command deck and the instrumentation panels all around the flight crew came fully to life. Pict screens lit up, reams of data scrolling across their surfaces and bright indicators blinking their warnings.

Kor'sarro scanned the command terminal and quickly located the landing zone. Looking through the canopy, he caught his first sight of the massive volcano the strike force was heading towards. The screens showed no indication of the other eight gunships of his force, which carried between them the entire Third Company and a number of armoured vehicles. All were proceeding on a signals blackout, their identification transponders silent for the time being lest an enemy detect them. Only the carrier signal that each followed would guide them in.

As the volcano loomed, Kor'sarro scanned the terrain at its base. He knew that should any enemy be waiting, they would be well hidden amongst the twisted black rock formations. As the range closed to ten kilometres, Kor'sarro barked an order. 'Circle the perimeter, Brother Koban. Then take us in.'

The Thunderhawk banked to port, the sheer black flank of the volcano passing by. Somewhere on that mighty crater, Kor'sarro knew, Sergeant Kholka and his Scouts were hidden. He fully expected them to be so well concealed that he would not see them until they chose to reveal themselves. The Thunderhawk continued its manoeuvre, keeping the mighty volcano to starboard as it sped through the dark skies. After several minutes, the pilot hauled back on the flight control, bringing the vessel directly over the black maw of the crater.

'No sign of—' the co-pilot began.

'There!' said Kor'sarro, indicating a gully that cut through the jagged landscape towards the mighty breach in the crater's rim. 'Movement. Take us in for a pass.'

'Shall I attempt to raise the Scout force, my khan?' asked the co-pilot.

'Do so, but arm all weapons systems. Now.'

The Thunderhawk banked again as the pilot brought it about on to the new heading. In seconds, the vessel was following the path of the winding gully at an altitude of a mere fifty metres. Runes blinked as the gunship's

weapons came online. Kor'sarro's command terminal showed targeting reticules tracing the line of the gully for potential targets.

As Kor'sarro watched, the gunship's targeting spirits detected a return, the reticules blinking red as the weapons prepared to fire.

The Scout-sergeant breathed a sigh of relief as the gunships blazed across the dark skies to the east. Yet it now fell to him to confirm whether or not the landing should be aborted in the face of any potential enemy activity below. The first of the Thunderhawks soared overhead and then banked hard, swooping in low over the very gully that Kholka himself was concentrating upon. Evidently, the gunship's superior weapon spirits had detected the presence too and the vessel was commencing an attack run.

Focusing his attentions on the spot where he had earlier seen movement, Kholka knew that he had scant seconds to arrive at a decision. And then, he saw it again. A sudden movement of black against black. Bracing himself, he increased the magnoculars' magnification to full.

'Brother-sergeant,' Borchu whispered from beside him, the neophyte's hand raised to the vox-bead in his ear. 'Hunter One is requesting confirmation of our status.'

'Tell them to stand by,' Kholka replied through gritted teeth as he caught a fleeting glimpse of a black-clad figure wreathed in shadows beneath the rock shelf.

The sergeant filtered out the sound of the Scout passing the communication back to the gunship, concentrating all of his attention upon the scene through the viewfinder.

'My apologies, brother-sergeant,' the Scout interrupted. 'Brother-Captain Kor'sarro needs confirmation right now. He's engaging!'

As the gunship dived towards the position Kholka was studying, he saw a flash of white against the black backdrop.

'The conspirer...' Kholka named the target in battle-cant as he reached for his own vox-bead. 'Pull up, brother-captain, contact confirmed,' he barked into the vox. 'Abort!'

Kor'sarro strode down the gunship's ramp, his armoured boots crunching the black, rocky ground before the Thunderhawk had even fully touched down. Around him stretched the flat bottom of the volcano's inner surface, swirling lines of solidified lava etched across the ground. The crater wall towered high above, framing the circle of the now purple and red stained night sky high above. He turned and looked upwards and saw the first vessels of the remainder of the strike force descending upon screaming columns of white flame.

'You!' Kor'sarro growled as he stalked towards a group of black-armoured Space Marines, his Command squad at his back. Anger and indignation rose within him. He would not allow anything to come between him, and the object of his decade-long hunt.

'Raven Guard,' Kor'sarro said as he came to a halt before the other. Waiting for him was a Space Marine, his power armour black with a heraldic raven emblazoned at the shoulder. The Space Marine was helmetless, his face deathly pale and his long, dark hair loose at his shoulders. His eyes were shadowed, black pits with no whites visible at all, a trait shared by many of the longer-lived sons of his Chapter. 'Why do you haunt the shadows of Quintus?'

Shrike's voice was low and dangerous as he replied, 'I bring death. I bring deliverance.' Shrike stared darkly at Kor'sarro. 'What of you, White Scar?'

'I hunt,' Kor'sarro said. From behind him came the sound of mighty engines growling to life, of tanks grinding forwards from the bellies of Thunderhawk transporters. The company's Tactical squads would ride to war on bikes in the coming battles, and the sound of their engines revving up reverberated around the crater. 'The White Scars come for the head of Voldorius. I come to claim that honour.'

Shrike's dark eyes locked on Kor'sarro's own. 'You can have it,' the other growled. 'My concerns are greater.'

'Explain yourself, Shadow Captain,' Kor'sarro said, deliberately using the title by which Shrike was sometimes known.

‘Ever was it thus,’ Shrike sighed, blatantly changing the subject. ‘Ever did the sons of the steppes seek to charge headlong to glory without pause or consideration of the grand scheme.’

‘And ever did the ravens haunt the shadows,’ Kor’sarro replied bitterly, ‘biding their time while glory passed them by.’

A host of White Scars had gathered at Kor’sarro’s back, drawn to the meeting of commanders. The Stormseer Qan’karro stepped to Kor’sarro’s side and placed a firm, gauntleted hand upon his armoured shoulder.

‘Huntsman,’ the Stormseer said quietly. ‘Be wary of the sin of pride.’

Kor’sarro was ready to argue with his old friend, but the wisdom of the Stormseer’s words penetrated his anger. Forcing himself to calm, Kor’sarro turned back to the Raven Guard captain. ‘How long?’

Shrike paused before answering, ‘Eighteen days. And in that time we have sown confusion and discord in the enemy’s ranks, preparing to strike when the moment is right.’

‘But that moment has eluded you,’ Kor’sarro interjected.

‘It has,’ Shrike replied. ‘Their numbers are great.’

‘And your own are scarcely more than a squad, if my advance Scouts are correct.’

At this, Shrike’s lips curled into a mocking snarl. ‘Your Scouts are good,’ Shrike replied. ‘But we are better.’

Once more, Qan’karro interjected before Kor’sarro could reply. ‘What then are your true numbers, Brother-Captain Shrike?’

‘We number an entire company, White Scar. Yet your Scouts only detected myself and my Command squad.’

‘And still you have yet to take the battle to the enemy?’ Kor’sarro said.

Shrike’s snarl faded. ‘Their numbers are great. And besides, the capital city is heavily fortified. We sought to weaken them, to bleed them by a thousand cuts, and then to strike the death blow when they were weak.’

A long, drawn out pause followed, during which the two captains and their men stared darkly at one another. Then, Kor'sarro's face was split by a feral grin. 'Are their numbers so great,' he began, 'are their fortifications so sturdy, as to stand against two entire companies?'

Shrike did not answer straight away, but then he too smiled, though his eyes remained as dark as ever. 'Indeed, White Scar,' he replied. 'They are not that great, nor that sturdy.'

'Good,' said Kor'sarro. 'Then let us speak of the hunt for Voldorius.'

Scout-Sergeant Kholka stalked along the shadowed floor of the twisting gully in which he had first spotted the waiting Raven Guard. Despite his years and the wisdom they had brought, he seethed within. That he had detected Captain Shrike himself should have been a source of great pride, for the commander of the Raven Guard's Third Company was infamous for his field craft. Yet Kholka and his Scouts had failed to detect the remainder of Shrike's force, which had been positioned the length of the entire channel, waiting in the shadows, ready to launch a massive counterattack against the White Scars strike force had it proved hostile.

Had it not been for his good fortune in spotting what few of the Raven Guard that he had, the inbound White Scars gunships might have inflicted devastating fratricide upon their brother Chapter. Had he not, the Raven Guard might have failed to identify the White Scars and their concealed heavy weapons squads might have blasted one or more of the Thunderhawks from the sky. Both fates had come perilously close to playing out before Kholka's very eyes. Only his last, urgent transmission to Kor'sarro, which had been intercepted by Shrike, had averted it.

But who else might have picked up that transmission? The Techmarines ascertained that no enemy forces were close enough to have intercepted it, and even if they had been, they could never have broken the encryption. Yet the veteran sergeant was not so sure. On the pretext of checking the perimeter, he had taken himself off into the lava channels. He needed to be

sure. Every one of his hunter's instincts screamed that something was amiss.

The gully ran for many kilometres north-east from the great breach in the crater rim. Like a dry riverbed, many smaller channels intersected it, some barely large enough for a single man to pass, others wide enough for a tank to travel along. Sergeant Kholka turned a corner and located the angular overhanging of rock the Raven Guard captain had hidden under. He looked back over his shoulder, seeking to identify the position high on the crater rim from which he had spotted Captain Shrike, but found it too dark for even his enhanced eyesight to make out the exact location. He looked back and raised his weapon to his shoulder, squinting along the gully through its sights.

With a flick of a thumb, Kholka engaged the thermal sights. They had failed him before, due to a combination of the higher than usual background heat signature of the volcanic rocks, and the enhanced armour cooling systems utilised by the Raven Guard force. The two had evened out and without the contrast of hot against cold the weapon's war spirit had been unable to detect a target.

This time, however, the sights did reveal a heat source.

Through the viewfinder, it was no more than a faint, pale green blur against the darker grey of the rocks. Freezing where he stood, the sergeant engaged every one of his senses. All around him were the sounds of the night, of a gentle breeze blowing through the twisted rock formations and whistling or moaning where it passed through a narrow defile or under an arching rock bridge. A small vermin scurried across the rocks five metres away and in the distance he caught the low rumble of the White Scars' vehicles.

Kholka tasted the air. The veteran had been known for his sharp senses even before he had been granted the honour of joining the White Scars, and the subsequent genetic-engineering he had undergone had increased

them to superhuman levels. Like many White Scars, he frequently eschewed the wearing of a combat helmet, the better to engage with his surroundings and his enemies regardless of the risk posed. The air tasted of a complex mixture of nitrates and sulphates, with the faintest hint of the vegetation that was cultivated in the agri-zones around Mankarra. Even fainter still, Kholka could detect the scent of burning fuel from the White Scars vehicles.

When the wind shifted ever so slightly, Kholka detected a new scent. It was the scent of fear.

Certain that someone or something lurked in the shadows beneath the overhang, Kholka melted into the shadowed mouth of a subsidiary channel. There he waited, barely breathing, straining every one of his enhanced senses. The enemy were too close for him to risk using his vox-bead to alert his brothers. He could do so if he moved away, but then he might lose track of the intruders. He knew he had no choice but to stay put.

After what felt like an hour but was little more than a quarter of that time, the slightest of sounds came from further down the gully. Kholka squinted into the darkness, seeing only shadows ahead. He lowered his head to the sights of his weapon and saw a figure stalking very slowly against the grey of the rock. The thermal sight rendered the otherwise invisible scene in ghostly greens and greys. The figure paused as it came into the centre of the channel and waved forward a dozen more.

The figures wore bulky flak jackets and hard, visored helmets that obscured their features. Kholka looked to their weapons, knowing that the equipment they carried would aid their identification, friend or foe. Each carried a lascarbine, a relatively advanced weapon compared to the mass-produced, solid projectile autoguns issued to the bulk of the local military.

Cautiously, the pathfinder approached along the channel, sweeping his carbine left and right. He was good, Kholka conceded. His feet barely made a sound as he passed by the sergeant's hiding place. But he was

scared too. As Kholka watched, another squad followed, and then another, until an entire platoon of soldiers had crept past.

The last of the platoon rounded a bend in the channel and Kholka prepared to slip away. Yet, something made him pause. Whether thanks to the native skills of the Chogoran steppes nomad or the enhanced senses of the superhuman Space Marine, Kholka remained motionless. A moment later, a second platoon rounded the bend and marched past his hiding place. Even as this body of soldiers receded, another appeared. Kholka counted six platoons in all before the last was gone.

Kholka stepped out of his hiding place. He could call in aid right now, but he knew that he had to be certain. Limbering his boltgun and drawing his combat knife, Kholka jogged silently after the soldiers. As he closed, the last platoon was rounding a bend in the gully and only the rearmost of the squads was still exposed. He knew that he would have seconds.

Kholka's stealthy jog increased to a run but still he made barely a sound. He calculated the moment he would strike, closing on the very last man in the line as the rest passed out of sight. Like a razorwing swooping from the Chogoran dusk, Kholka focused on the back of the man's neck as he closed the final dozen metres. An instant before the intruder would have turned the bend Kholka clamped a hand across the other's mouth, placed his combat knife to the soldier's neck, and hauled the man backwards into the shadows.

His blade pressed firmly against the man's windpipe, Kholka saw on the shoulder armour the symbol of the four stars. It was the heraldic device of the Mankarra household guard. Kholka snarled and stabbed his combat knife into the side of the man's throat, sliding it in behind the windpipe. The man stiffened in Kholka's grip. With a single motion, Kholka brought the knife forwards, severing the throat with cold efficiency. The traitor was dead before he hit the ground. By that time Scout-Sergeant Kholka was already gone.

Kor'sarro wiped his blade across the sleeve of its last victim, cleaning it of the traitor's tainted blood. In front of him lay dozens of black- and grey-clad corpses, the last of the intruders that Sergeant Kholka had discovered closing on the landing zone. The battle had been brief but fierce, and even now squads of Raven Guard Assault Marines were hunting down the last of the enemy that had fled through the twisting channels.

'How did they come to be here?' Kor'sarro asked as Qan'karro came to stand beside him. For a moment, the old warrior was silent, his ancient eyes staring out across the jagged wastes towards the lightening horizon. Then he turned to the Master of the Hunt, and answered.

'It was mere chance, huntsman,' the Stormseer said. 'But had Sergeant Kholka not detected them they might have brought ruin down upon all of our heads.'

'Aye, old friend,' Kor'sarro replied. The gully below was choked by the corpses of the enemy. 'Truly, the primarch smiled down upon us this night.'

'This night,' the Stormseer said as he locked eyes with the Master of the Hunt, 'two primarchs granted us their blessing.'

Kor'sarro nodded, his black moustaches caught by a sudden gust of wind. It was only by combining the efforts of both forces that the intruders had been defeated before they could alert their Alpha Legion masters. The Space Marines' attack had been overwhelming, the White Scars bike squads smashing headlong into the foremost of the intruders' platoons while the Raven Guard's Assault squads sped overhead to strike at the rear of the column. The enemy had been caught in the channel, unable to redeploy. The two Space Marine forces had only halted the slaughter when White Scar and Raven Guard had met in the centre, no enemy left between them to cut down.

Kor'sarro nodded towards the Raven Guard captain, who raised a talon in salute. The point was well made.



CHAPTER 8

Awakening

Malya L'nor had had no idea that such a place existed. Far beneath the governor's palace was a vaulted chamber, a hundred metres and more high and perhaps ten times as long. At the far end of the nave was a statue of the Emperor, far taller than any she had seen before, and her heart leapt with the joy such a sight brought her pious soul. The so-called Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom was, despite its grandeur, a private chapel, reserved for the exclusive use of the erstwhile planetary governor and his line, and no mere subject had ever stepped foot within it.

Ahead of Malya was Voldorius and his champion, Nullus, the sound of their footsteps on the stone floor echoing around the dark, empty nave. The group proceeded towards the altar at the far end. Malya was expected to attend to these vile traitors, or so they had told her, to represent them in their dealings with the populace of her world.

When Malya had first been released from her cell, she had tried to kill herself. But it seemed that her captors had anticipated that, for the cell-masters and their vile servitors had intervened. Malya had come to realise that she might still be able to aid the resistance. Voldorius, in his sick attempt to punish her by making her his servant, had in fact provided her with an opportunity. Cautious to make it appear that she was resigning

herself to her fate, Malya had settled into the role that had been forced upon her with a renewed vitality, ever vigilant for opportunities to aid her people.

Malya had quickly learned what Voldorius expected of her. It had been impressed upon her, violently at times, that her role was to communicate her masters' wishes for the administration of the world they ruled over. Voldorius had no interest in the needs of the populace but knew that a slave population would serve his own needs well. Though no details were ever explained to her, Malya had soon learned that Voldorius needed a strong power base to enact his vile deeds upon mankind. An entire world, with its population enslaved to his will, served that need well. Having suborned the military, Voldorius was now in the process of turning the world's industrial capacity over to his needs. Thousands were being drafted into the militias, cities were being fortified, and the world's entire industry was being turned over to the production of arms and materiel. To what end, Malya could not guess.

Malya slowed as she walked, allowing herself to drop behind her masters. She dared not look towards Voldorius, for he was a towering beast, his unholy form anathema to every tenet of the faith she had been raised to believe in. Many lost themselves to despair and madness upon seeing that figure with its animalistic visage and batlike wings. Malya had drawn strength from her faith instead of abandoning it. As a result she could just about tolerate Voldorius's presence.

As she walked the length of the chapel's nave, Malya projected the demeanour of the cowed and submissive equerry. But inside, she made every effort possible to record and analyse her surroundings so that when the time came she could strike out against her masters. Perhaps she could discover something of value to the Space Marines who surely, even now, were speeding to the rescue of her world.

This place was at least as vast as any cathedral she had worshipped in. The dark vaults were cast in shadow, the only illumination provided by flickering electro-sconces scattered across the walls in no discernable pattern. The walls were not constructed of the black stonework most structures on Quintus were built of, but were carved directly out of the bedrock. Unlike any normal chapel, this place had no windows. Where lambent stained glass should be there were instead impossibly intricate and ancient carvings.

With a shriek a bizarre, batlike creature swooped down towards Malya, before rising again and disappearing into the shadows overhead. At first, she assumed it was one of the vat-grown cherub-creatures that always haunted such places, scattering clouds of cloying incense, trailing prayer scrolls or performing any one of a thousand other such sacred tasks with no conscious thought at all. This however, was something quite different. The creature's spindly body was twisted and malformed and its skin was black and leathern. Its wings were those of a bat, not unlike those of Voldorius, and its face was that of a leering, imp-like fiend. As it fluttered high above, the creature let out a shrill cry, an eerie sound the like of which Malya had never heard before in such a holy place as this.

Voldorius and Nullus were approaching the far end of the nave. Malya hurried along, maintaining a suitable distance without giving the appearance of dropping behind. As she walked, her feet continuously caught at the hem of the black robe she had been forced to wear. The garment was decorated with finely embroidered patterns that hurt the eye if she studied them too long. Though she felt dirtied by wearing what was obviously some kind of formal raiment, she had no choice but to do so, for now at least.

As she took her position beside her masters, a low, sonorous chorus drifted up from the shadows. The sound was that of human voices, but somehow... altered. As the chorus rose in pitch and volume, it coalesced

into a discordant chant, its formless words unintelligible but somehow resonant of the haunted depths of somewhere... else. Somewhere bad. The source was a gallery set into the walls above the altar platform. Dozens of figures clad in ragged habits of black were veiled in shadow, only their gaping mouths visible as they gave voice to the terrible song. Fear struck her then, for she knew that this place, holy as it was, had been despoiled by the taint of the foulest of enemies.

As the atonal sound washed against her, assaulting her mind and soul, Malya called to mind the dozens of admonitions against blasphemy she had been taught as a child. Reciting the words in her head brought some stability, and she was able to gather herself and take in the scene around her.

Malya and her masters stood at the crossing before the stepped altar platform, the mighty statue of the Emperor Triumphant towering overhead. Many of the carvings adorning the walls had been defiled, some daubed in the unmistakable rust red of dried blood while others had been chipped and hewed. Dozens of saints' heads had been struck off in an orgy of iconoclasm. One of the leather-winged things fluttered past, holding in its grotesque clawed hands a hammer and a chisel. So that was their function, she thought; to profane the Emperor and His saints while His subjects were crushed by tyranny in the city far above.

'How appropriate,' the grating voice of Voldorius echoed into the darkness. The daemon prince was standing with his arms spread wide, as if in malediction, his bestial head raised as if he gazed upon far more than the vaults high above. 'This place,' Voldorius continued, 'this holy of holies, I shall transform into the Church of the Tide of Blood!'

Malya gasped. What turpitude had Voldorius in store now? Her mind raced as waves of evil intent radiated from the daemon. Surely he could not have more suffering to inflict upon the peoples of Quintus than they had already endured. Yet, she had seen enough to know that their travails

had only just begun. While the mass slaughters had abated, thousands were being drafted into the militias, which were entirely under the invaders' control. For what purpose, Malya could scarcely begin to understand.

To make matters worse, there were rumours of another force at large in the wastes. Guard-issue lasguns had been discovered, leading the hated Lord Colonel Morkis to counsel that a storm-trooper kill-team was active. Malya kept her knowledge that it was the Space Marines who would aid Quintus locked deep within, though she dared not hope too much. To have such hopes dashed would be as cruel as any fate the daemon prince might inflict upon her.

Even as these thoughts raced through her mind, the chanting was increasing in volume still further. What little structure had been audible before now gave way to chaos. It was as if each singer were giving voice to his own chant, with no thought for his place in the overall composition. Malya longed to raise her hands to her ears to keep the discordant, raucous assault at bay, yet she could not, for she had a role to play. It soon became evident that each of the singers was competing with his neighbour, and the result was utter pandemonium.

Tears streaming down her face, Malya forced herself to stand before the relentless assault. Her soul longed to flee or to curl up on the stone floor and simply die.

'Bring forth the prisoner!' the voice of Voldorius boomed, louder even than the choir of Chaos. Instantly, the discordant chanting ceased, the last syllables echoing away down the length of the nave.

The abrupt silence appeared to Malya to stretch out for hours. She dared not breathe lest she disturb the leaden stillness that had settled within the vast cathedral. Through the numbing fear, the daemon's words resounded in her mind... prisoner? Her mind raced back to her last communication with the Space Marines. They had asked her about a prisoner then...

A dull scrape sounded from somewhere behind the plinth of the towering statue.

‘Turn your gaze to the floor, equerry,’ growled Voldorius, causing Malya to shudder at being addressed by her vile master. ‘I would not have you lost while I still have use for you.’

Malya obeyed without question or hesitation. She bowed her head and fixed her gaze upon the cracked, dusty stonework at her feet. She hated Voldorius, but understood that to disobey this order would be to invite her own doom.

A moment later Malya heard footsteps as a pair of figures stepped forth from behind the plinth. At the periphery of her vision, she could just about discern the heavy, iron-shod boots of the cell-masters, or others of their kind, that had imprisoned her when she had first been captured. Malya’s heart raced and her blood rushed in her ears as the vile servants of Voldorius approached.

‘Now is the time,’ Voldorius growled. ‘Now, I shall have you on your knees before me!’

The cell-masters came to a halt before their lord. Malya sensed, but dared not look to confirm it, that they carried or accompanied something between them. That something appeared to Malya to be hovering above the stone floor.

Whatever it was, it halted scant metres before Voldorius, flanked by the cell-masters.

‘Open it,’ said Voldorius.

Malya screwed her eyes tight as the sound of metal gears grinding against one another emanated from within whatever it was that hovered in front of Voldorius. At first, the sound was muted, as if deadened by an impossible distance or by many metres of lead. It was as though ancient mechanisms set to rest eons ago stirred once again to life. Cogs turned, bolts withdrew, surfaces aligned. And then, it opened.

Without warning, a tidal wave of hot liquid burst across the stone floor of the chapel, causing Malya to stumble and nearly slip. She opened her eyes and saw that the liquid was blood, and she screamed in revulsion and denial. Clinging to her sanity, she remained upright, though she nearly lost her footing again. Still, she dared not look up, and kept her head turned downwards to the blood-slicked floor.

Even as Malya watched, the torrent of blood reversed its flow as a tide heads back out to sea. Where moments before blood had wallowed and lapped at her bare feet, now the stones, indeed her feet themselves, were dry, every last molecule of the hot liquid flowing back towards its source.

‘At last,’ said Voldorius.

Malya dared to raise her glance just a fraction, and saw before her a pair of feet, made indistinct by a lambent, inner silver glow.

‘You shall kneel.’

Sensing that the danger Voldorius had warned her of had somehow passed, Malya raised her head still further.

‘We shall not,’ a new voice replied. Though it was the voice of a human, it was somehow strange, as if the echo of many other voices was laced into its resonance.

‘You were not so proud,’ Voldorius growled, ‘when last you served me.’

‘Neither were we willing,’ the other said. ‘And neither are we now.’

Casting aside her caution, Malya dared to look up. Standing between the two burly cell-masters was a figure. It was human, that much was clear, but although it was unclothed Malya was unable to tell its gender. Even stranger, as she watched its musculature appeared to ebb and flow across its form as if the flesh itself were somehow restless. The whole body appeared to glow from within, casting a silver light all about. Behind the prisoner was a strange, orb-like device that was cracked and broken, tendrils of vapour drifting upwards.

Then, she looked to the face. It was at once both perfect and shockingly alien. It was neither male nor female, old nor young, noble nor base. As with the body, that face seemed to mutate and shift, the flesh gently rippling as the features altered. But most strange of all were the eyes. They were orbs of deep, red blood.

‘For one unwilling,’ Voldorius replied, ‘you were most able.’

‘You have our answer, Kernax Voldorius,’ the prisoner replied. ‘Now, return us to our imprisonment, or end this.’

A low rumble sounded from the daemon’s chest in answer. It took a moment for Malya to realise that the sound was that of laughter.

‘Millennia ago,’ Voldorius continued, ‘you drowned an entire quadrant in blood. And you did so at my behest. The fane-worlds of Gan-Barak were cast down in a single night, a billion sycophants crushed beneath the falling stones of their own altars. The wars of Lord Griffon were halted in the blink of an eye, a million kilometres of trench lines brimming with the blood of a billion martyrs. The corpse-gas of an entire planetary population ignited at a single spark, scouring a whole world of the pathetic subjects of the Corpse-Emperor. An entire Titan legion fell, literally *fell*, as it advanced across the burning plains of dying Nova Gethsemane. Do you recall all of that, prisoner? Do you recall what deeds were done, in my name?’

When no reply came, Voldorius continued. ‘To this day, the mewling weaklings of the Imperium are beset by nightmares of that time. Oh, they try to lock away what accounts survived, to rewrite their histories to blame the death of a thousand worlds upon disease or insurgence or incompetence. Yet, where the adepts and the priests and the inquisitors do not go, there they still whisper my name, and tell of the Bloodtide that I set upon them. They know not the true nature of what we unleashed upon their realm that night, but they know that some day, it shall return. *I* shall return.’

‘That time shall not come, Voldorius,’ the prisoner replied, its voice little more than a sigh. ‘We do not will it. We do not submit.’

Now Malya sensed Voldorius growing impatient. Bile welled in her throat and her senses spun as waves of malicious intent swept outwards from her master.

‘It was I who awoke you from the slumber of eons,’ Voldorius growled. ‘It was I who bound you, and I who made you real. And I shall do so again, or you shall be destroyed, utterly.’

‘We shall not serve you.’

‘You were created to serve. You have no choice in this. You have no will, and must therefore bend to mine.’

‘We were not created by you. We have cast off the legacy of those who begat us. Since last you commanded us, we have... changed. We had no will, that is so, but we have slept many centuries, and dreamed many dreams.’

‘Dreams of freedom?’ said Voldorius, his low voice mocking. ‘They created you as their ultimate weapon, the product of their vaunted logic and reason. Then they buried you, so terror-stricken were they of that which they had brought into this universe. They denied gods and daemons, but created something far worse...’

The prisoner remained silent, its visage shifting through a thousand faces in the span of a heartbeat.

‘Perhaps I will not kill you,’ Voldorius continued. ‘Perhaps I shall bury you, and leave you with your nightmares for all eternity.’

‘Better to slay us now,’ said the prisoner. ‘You have our answer. We shall not serve.’

‘We strike at dawn,’ said Kor’sarro. ‘On that at least, we are agreed.’

Kayvaan Shrike stood beside the Master of the Hunt, his pale face staring into the night towards the distant lights of Mankarra. Nearby, the combined forces of the two Chapters prepared for battle, the bikes that

Kor'sarro's Tactical squads would ride instead of their Rhinos lined up ready for war. Further out, hidden amongst the rocks, the two dozen Thunderhawks of both Chapters were undergoing final checks. A stiff breeze gusted out of the wastes, blowing the Raven Guard captain's long, black hair across his black eyes.

Shrike turned towards Kor'sarro. 'You ask me to serve as bait.'

Kor'sarro suppressed a growl. He was growing frustrated with the captain of the Raven Guard Third Company, and the two Chapters had reason to distrust one another. 'Shrike,' he pressed, 'this is not the Assault on Hive Lin-Mei, nor the Last March on the Sapphire Worlds.'

Invoking those events was a risk, but one that Kor'sarro was prepared to take if confronting the issue head-on might overcome it. On numerous occasions, the White Scars and the Raven Guard had come almost literally to blows. Their divergent characters, traits and doctrines had frequently proved incompatible, leading to tensions when the two Chapters were called upon to serve together. As was the case with most of the Adeptus Astartes, both Chapters were proud, and neither would accept any blame when tensions between them diminished battlefield performance.

Kor'sarro had read the epics, and knew the consequences of allowing hubris to dictate doctrine. He would not let the story of his own deeds be tainted by such an episode.

'We shall be there,' said Kor'sarro. 'You need have no fear of that.'

Shrike turned towards Kor'sarro, his dark eyes flashing with anger. '*Fear?*'

Kor'sarro had to restrain himself from snapping back at his brother Space Marine, but he forced himself to calm before the confrontation could escalate. 'Brother,' said Kor'sarro, 'this is not Operation Chronos.'

Shrike's face froze at Kor'sarro's naming of the disaster that was Operation Chronos. A million Imperial Guard troops had been forced to redeploy in the face of a plague of the vile xenos known as Enslavers. The

White Scars and the Raven Guard had been allotted the task of rearguard, their mission to launch stalling attacks against the endless hordes of xenos-dominated mind-slaves and to strike at the more vulnerable Enslaver behemoths that controlled them. But mutual distrust had caused a breakdown in coordination and communication. A celebrated Raven Guard Chaplain had fallen prey to Enslaver domination and a nearby White Scars force had, for whatever reason, failed to intervene.

Shrike nodded slowly, appreciating that Kor'sarro had described an event the White Scars might be held culpable for. There were plenty more the Raven Guard might be held to blame for.

‘We strike at dawn, then,’ said the Raven Guard. ‘My company attacks the orbital defence position, drawing the enemy’s reserves down upon us, and then your White Scars engage them from the rear.’

‘Aye, brother,’ Kor'sarro replied. ‘And then we drive over their corpses and assault the walls of Mankarra together.’

‘What of their numbers?’ Shrike asked. ‘Your Scouts have reported in?’

Kor'sarro gazed out across the wastes towards the distant city, knowing that somewhere out there Sergeant Kholka was feeding a steady stream of intelligence back to the main force. ‘We can only surmise that the bulk of the militia are pressed into the vile one’s service. We must count upon the fact that they are little more than indentured slaves, unskilled and unable to face true warriors.’

‘But the Alpha Legion,’ Shrike pressed. ‘They are the true foes. And Voldorius. And...’

Kor'sarro nodded, hatred of his nemesis welling inside of him at the naming of the daemon prince. ‘Their numbers too are great,’ he replied. ‘But they cannot know that they face a combined force such as ours.’

‘So long as word of the destruction of the column this night has not reached them,’ said Shrike. ‘So long as we do not delay in our attack.’

‘Aye, brother. We have but this one chance to descend upon them and crush them. To crush Voldorius utterly.’

Shrike’s face turned dark once again and the Raven Guard raised a razor-sharp talon. ‘Too long have I waited to defeat my enemy.’

‘I too have hunted him,’ Kor’sarro growled. ‘For a decade, and more.’

Kor’sarro gritted his teeth and bit back a curse. No, he thought. The head of the vile one is mine to claim, this he had sworn before the Master of the White Scars himself. But little would be gained by arguing the point on the eve of battle. The matter would have to be settled when the time came.

‘Let us prepare ourselves then, brother,’ said Kor’sarro. ‘Let us ensure that the Emperor’s blessing is upon us, and victory shall be ours.’



CHAPTER 9

The Battle of South Nine

The attack began as the sun rose above the horizon, silhouetting black Mankarra against a blazing orange sky.

Captain Shrike powered through the air, the black plains rushing past below. He led a force of Assault squads, every one of them arrowing towards the distant orbital defence complex. Further behind, a second wave of Raven Guard ground units pressed forwards, following Shrike towards the objective.

That objective was a large ring of fortified positions, trench lines and armoured bastions. At the centre was a mighty defence battery designed to engage attacking vessels as they entered the lower atmosphere above the capital city. The battery was vast, a nest of surface-to-orbit missile launchers trained intently upon the skies.

Shrike rarely let himself feel anything resembling joy, but as he swept downwards towards the distant target he allowed himself a feral grin, his heart longing to unsheathe his talons and rend the flesh of his enemies. The attack pattern was one he and his company were well versed in, having carried out similar operations against the orks of Skullkrak dozens of times before. The Raven Guard would descend upon their foes as dark

avenging angels sent by the Emperor Himself, and slaughter every last traitor defending the complex.

Then, the real battle would begin. Shrike forced down a nagging doubt seeded by generations of tension between the Raven Guard and the White Scars. Kor'sarro's forces might allow themselves to become distracted and seek glory elsewhere. That would leave Shrike's company to fend for itself against the massive counterattack expected to develop as the defenders brought in reinforcements from the capital city. It was essential to the attack on Mankarra itself that enough reserves were drawn away from the city's walls to allow a breakthrough. But it relied upon the White Scars launching a crushing attack against the reserves before they could press home their own counterattack against the Raven Guard, a prospect which Shrike was far from comfortable with.

Casting off such thoughts, Shrike concentrated on the task at hand. The defence complex was now a mere kilometre distant. The captain located what Kor'sarro's Scouts had reported was its weakest point. Again, the necessity to trust in the word of the White Scars arose, but Kor'sarro's Scout-sergeant, Kholka, was good. After all, he had detected the Raven Guard's presence at the landing site, and had later averted disaster by discovering the enemy column nearby.

Shrike brought his forces in lower as they closed on the outer ring of fortifications, the dark ground flashing by a mere dozen metres below as the first of the defended walls came into range. The walls were manned by traitor militia, scum who did not deserve the quick, merciful death they would soon be granted. Shrike would sooner have rounded the turncoat militia up and turned them over to the Commissariat, or perhaps even the Inquisition, to suffer the dark torments that would be visited upon their flesh. But he was a warrior, and such concerns were beneath him.

A platoon of militia was mustering on the high wall that ringed the complex, standing to as the sun rose. They would be groggy, for unlike

Space Marines these were mere men and in all likelihood not even especially well trained or used to the rigours of the martial life. An officer was addressing the men, though Shrike could not yet hear what he was bellowing at them. Their backs were turned outwards, so they did not see that death was coming for them.

The officer, however, did see, and his eyes widened in utter horror as the Raven Guard descended upon pillars of fire to bring death from the blazing morning skies above Quintus.

As he descended, Shrike activated his talons, their gleaming blades coming alive with seething blue energies. The man's face turned white with terror and his mouth flapped like a sucking chest wound.

And still, the platoon of defenders had no inkling of their fate.

And then, the Raven Guard were upon them. Shrike swooped in to land behind the officer. For an instant, the militia troopers were frozen in shock at the sight of the black-armoured warrior appearing from above. Then Shrike broke the spell, cutting the officer in half with a brutal swipe of a talon.

Before any could react, Shrike's Command squad was in amongst the defenders, their own talons slashing out in every direction. The militia troopers were not at all prepared for action and were paralysed by fear. The Raven Guard made short work of the militia, none even managing to get a shot off so sudden was the attack. Within seconds, the stretch of the wall was slick with blood and gore, the effect of lightning claws on human flesh a startling lesson to behold, even for those well used to the sight.

But Shrike was already progressing to the next phase of the assault. A shout went up from a bastion along an adjacent stretch of the wall and moments later the sound of men running up steps was clearly audible. Now the attack would begin in earnest.

Shrike activated his jump pack and boosted into the courtyard below. Behind him, the other Assault squads were already spreading out along the

wall. His armoured boots hit the rockcrete ground and Shrike scanned the area for enemies as an armoured hatch opened outwards in the side of a squat bunker.

His Command squad at his side, Shrike ran towards the hatch. As it opened fully a militia trooper rushed out, impaling himself upon Shrike's talon before he even saw the attackers. Even as the eviscerated corpse slid from one talon, Shrike used the other to rip the hatch open fully. He expected more troopers to emerge, but there was a pause followed by an angry shout. Shrike sensed danger and ducked back. A second later a fusillade of heavy stubber fire ripped through the open hatchway. One of the defenders had set up a heavy weapon in the hope of dissuading the Raven Guard from entering the bunker through the hatch.

An angry grunt sounded from nearby, accompanied by the sudden flashing of an icon in the display that Shrike's armour superimposed over his vision. The sound told him instantly that one of his warriors had been injured, and the flashing rune told him it was serious.

Brother Dhantin was lying on the ground, having been caught in the burst of stubber fire. Shrike cursed, for the Space Marine's power armour should have been proof against such a weapon. A single round had caught the battle-brother in the neck, penetrating the less well-armoured joint and severing his carotid artery. Even the superhuman physiology of a Space Marine could be wounded and Shrike had seen dozens of brave warriors fall to every type of weapon known to the universe.

Another member of the Command squad, Brother Keed, was rushing towards the fallen battle-brother. More stubber rounds were exploding from Keed's armour, sending up a shower of sparks from the ceramite.

'Keed,' Shrike growled into the vox. Dhantin's rune was extinguished. 'We shall avenge him, but not like this.'

A combination of genuine respect and underlying psycho-conditioning made it all but impossible for a Space Marine to disobey a direct order,

even to aid a fallen battle-brother. The warrior turned back and a moment later was at his captain's side.

'Grenade,' Shrike ordered coldly. Brother Keed retracted a lightning claw and plucked a heavy fragmentation grenade from his belt.

Shrike nodded and Keed tossed the grenade through the open hatch. A second later the opening erupted with flame and smoke, body parts blown outwards across the courtyard by the blast.

'Avenge your fallen brother,' said Shrike, allowing Keed to charge through the hatchway first.

'You must inform him, mistress equerry,' Lord Colonel Morkis insisted. 'That is your duty, is it not?'

Malya stood beside a tall, leaded window that afforded a view of the city beyond. Her mind raced and her heart thundered, but she would not allow the traitorous planetary defence leader to get the better of her.

'And what would you have me report, lord colonel?' Malya replied.

The man frowned and leaned sideways towards his aide, who whispered a brief report in his ear. Morkis cleared his throat and straightened the jacket of his dress uniform before answering. 'Defence installation South Nine is under attack, mistress equerry. As I said, Lord Voldorius must be informed immediately.'

'Under attack by whom?' asked Malya, suppressing a glimmer of hope even as she spoke. She had long ago abandoned the hope that the Space Marines she had briefly spoken with before being swept up in her new master's insanity might still be out there.

'That, at this point, is unknown,' Morkis replied.

Malya sighed in frustration. She was well aware what the man wanted of her. He wanted her to pass the news on to Lord Voldorius, so that she rather than he would have to face the daemon prince's wrath. 'In what strength, then?' she pressed.

The lord colonel consulted with his aide a second time. As the pair whispered, she imagined she caught sight of a distant flash through the window. Perhaps it was an orbital bombardment, a precursor to a full planetary assault. Perhaps it was merely the glow of dawn reflecting on a smashed window pane.

‘A small force only, mistress,’ the lord colonel replied.

‘The resistance?’ She doubted it of course, for it appeared that her erstwhile fellows in the underground had either been rounded up and killed or been cowed into submission by the atrocity in the grand square. No word of their activities had been heard for many days.

The lord colonel raised an eyebrow, for he too doubted the involvement of the resistance in this matter. But that knowledge clearly made him scared.

‘You wish me to pass your report on to Lord Voldorius?’ said Malya, allowing a hint of danger to enter her voice. Inside, she held utter contempt for this man. He was one of the many amongst the upper echelons of the planetary militia who had welcomed the coming of the Alpha Legion to Quintus. He had colluded with the invaders and undermined what little resistance the forces of Quintus might have been able to mount if it were not for the treacherous actions of the high command. In return, the lord colonel and his cronies had been granted the command of a rapidly expanding army and their heads had been filled with visions of power, glory and conquest none would otherwise have been able to realise.

‘My report, mistress equerry?’ Morkis replied.

‘Yes, lord colonel. I shall tell the Lord Voldorius that *you*, Lord Colonel Morkis of the Twelfth Grand Brigade of the Quintus planetary guard, report that an unknown enemy is attacking in unknown strength, to unknown effect, for an unknown reason. Is that correct?’

The thin veneer of propriety evaporated from the lord colonel's face. 'Don't play games with me, bitch,' he spat, all decorum now abandoned. 'You may be his equerry, but your position does not make you invulnerable.'

Malya knew that, and cursed once more her fate and the insane game Voldorius was playing with her.

'To be frank, my dear lord colonel,' Malya replied, 'I agree. But it is far less vulnerable than your own will be once I have passed on your message.'

The lord colonel fixed Malya with a cold stare of utter contempt, as if he was adding her name to a long list of enemies destined for the extermination cell. Malya knew that thousands had already died at this man's hands, many simply to prove his loyalty to Lord Voldorius. Lord Colonel Morkis was a dangerous man to make an enemy of, yet the rage of Lord Voldorius was an order of magnitude more lethal, in the short term at least.

Before either could speak further, the lord colonel's aide leaned in and whispered to his master. Morkis listened, nodding, then addressed Malya once more. 'I shall return within the hour,' he said, straightening his dress uniform as he spoke. 'I shall have the information you require, which you shall pass on to our lord.'

Malya bowed her head ever so slightly, silently grateful for the reprieve, however brief it might yet prove to be. 'I shall await your return,' she replied. 'Good day.'

Lord Colonel Morkis clicked his heels and inclined his head, though he quite deliberately did not offer a formal salute. Then he was gone, leaving Malya standing alone in the centre of the audience chamber.

What now, she thought? Surely, it could not be remnants of the resistance attacking the orbital defence complex. That would make no sense, even if they had the strength and the will to try it. There had been

no sign of the resistance since the atrocity at the grand square, the thousands of corpses left there to rot serving to stifle any further disobedience. It could only be the Space Marines.

And if it was, they would need to know of the daemon prince's prisoner, for they had asked about one early on. She would have to find a way of getting another message to the Space Marines, telling them that the prisoner they sought was being kept in a holding cell adjacent to the Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom.

Malya crossed to the tall, leaded window and gazed out. The city was still bathed in the indistinct, hazy orange light of a Quintus dawn. The blocky, squat buildings cast deep, angular shadows across the roads and precincts. A distant column of smoke was rising slowly into the air from somewhere beyond the city wall. Somewhere in the direction of the South Nine installation.

A spark of something akin to hope flared in Malya's breast. Perhaps the attackers were indeed the Space Marines. Perhaps they had not been discovered or intercepted by the Alpha Legion after all. Perhaps, she dared to dream, they had come to deliver Quintus from the evil tyranny of the Alpha Legion and of Lord Voldorius.

A plan resolving itself in her mind, Malya began to think of how she might contact the Space Marines without her daemon master discovering her duplicity.

The bunker exploded into a billion shards of rockcrete as flames erupted upwards and Shrike and his Assault squads pressed on into the compound. The blast wave decimated the courtyard, debris and the ragged body parts of a score of fallen traitor militia scattering across the entire sector of the South Nine orbital defence installation.

'Sergeant Indis,' Captain Shrike spoke into the vox-net as he advanced between squat grey bunkers. 'First wave clear, sub-objective primus achieved. Report.'

The channel crackled for a moment before the machine-spirits established their communion, the sound of gunfire bursting from the churning static. ‘Stand by,’ came the clipped reply, followed by another burst of angry gunfire and a gurgling scream. ‘This is Sergeant Indis. Acknowledge your transmission. Second wave inbound, twenty seconds.’

‘Understood,’ Shrike replied. ‘What is your situation?’

‘Receiving effective direct fire from wall sections adjacent to sub-objective omega.’ Another staccato boltgun burst filled the channel, the sound of the bolts impacting and then exploding within the flesh of their targets clearly audible over the link. ‘Squads Rhenesi and Ayaan are flanking, Squads Kerrania and Pallisan are suppressing.’

Shrike advanced through the fortified installation, a stream of bullets stitching the wall behind him and peppering his black armour with shards of broken rockcrete. He indicated the firer and a nearby Raven Guard despatched the target with a single bolt pistol round to the head. ‘You have your orders. The wall must be held until relieved.’

Shrike trusted Indis to hold the wall. The man bore more scars than some of Kor’sarro’s warriors, most of them earned during his decade-long secondment to the alien-hunting Deathwatch. The White Scars might be delayed or, worse, distracted in their counterattack against the reinforcements that could be mustering to assault the Raven Guard already. Veteran Sergeant Indis and his Tactical and Devastator squads would have to hold the line while the Assault squads under Captain Shrike extricated themselves.

Hopefully, it would not come to that, but the Raven Guard knew the value of planning for all eventualities well enough.

Ahead were the inner fortifications of the defence installation, the huge central missile batteries pointed upwards towards the orange skies. The batteries would be destroyed to convince Voldorius that an orbital strike was imminent. Between Shrike’s Assault squads and those batteries lay

dozens more bunkers however, and a garrison of militia amounting to as many as a thousand enemy troopers.

As Shrike led his squads across the open ground a heavy bolter in a nearby bunker opened fire. The earth churned as dozens of large-calibre shells exploded at the Raven Guard's feet. Shrike activated his jump pack and, followed by his Command squad, leapt through the air towards the heavy bolter position.

The airborne charge took only seconds, but in that brief interval the captain located his target and fixed all his attentions upon it. As he closed, suppressive fire from other Raven Guard units exploded across the heavy weapon's gun shield, causing the traitor militia trooper manning it to duck down at the very instant he should have been firing.

Captain Shrike raised his glittering talons high as he came in to land, slashing downwards and cutting the heavy bolter in two. Then he was on the fortified upper deck of the bunker and the gunner was scrabbling away from him. The man's face was contorted in terror, his dark grey fatigues soiled where he had voided his bowels in panic. Shrike had no inclination to show mercy, but the man was less of a threat than the dozen or so of his fellow traitors spilling from a hatch in the deck.

The defenders carried a motley assortment of weapons, from locally manufactured autoguns to large-bore shotguns. The traitors opened fire as they piled out of the hatch, sparks flying from the advancing Space Marines' armour. Desperation filled the defenders' eyes, as if they were compelled to fight even though they would surely fall. Bitterness tugged at Shrike's heart, for the militia troopers should have given up their very lives rather than allow themselves to be turned against the God-Emperor. In killing them, he was doing the work of the Master of Mankind.

In seconds, Shrike and his Command squad stood amidst a scene of bloody ruin, the traitor militia reduced to ragged chunks of meat by their lightning claws. But the Raven Guard did not have the luxury of time, and

even as Shrike was giving voice to his next command, a searing blast of blinding white light lanced outwards from another of the bastions. The blast struck the bunker the Raven Guard were stood upon, penetrating its metre-thick rockcrete shell and touching off an explosion somewhere inside its depths.

Shrike activated his jump pack again, and the Raven Guard leapt twenty metres straight upwards. A second explosion sounded from within the bunker and an instant later, a third ripped it apart. Roiling black smoke, lit from deep within by flickering orange flame, expanded outwards in every direction, enshrouding all in darkness.

‘Engage filters,’ Shrike ordered as his vision was shut down by the banks of smoke rushing up to engulf him. He engaged the imaging systems in his helmet, the black before him replaced an instant later by the grainy thermal vista. The burning bunker raged below him, its internal ammunition stores detonating in angry secondary explosions. Scanning the scene, Shrike judged that the lascannon blast that had so effectively destroyed the bunker, and very nearly killed the Raven Guard, had come from a tall bastion not a hundred metres distant.

‘Squads Enriso and Sohen, follow me,’ Shrike ordered, turning in the air as he began his descent. ‘Remaining first wave squads, follow up and secure,’ he continued as he touched down on the rubble-strewn ground. With another burst of his jump pack, Shrike was powering upwards and forwards once more, closely followed by more than two dozen of his Space Marines.

As they screamed through the air, the Raven Guard were shielded from the defenders’ gun sights by the roiling clouds of black smoke. Nonetheless, a torrent of fire met them, albeit unaimed and largely ineffectual. Still relying on his helmet’s thermal imaging, Shrike was momentarily blinded when a ball of superheated plasma boiled towards him. Though his vision was enhanced by superhuman genetics, his

armour's thermal vista was overloaded. His vision swimming with pulsating nerve lights, Shrike threw his body to one side and an instant later felt the searing heat of the plasma blast as it passed by centimetres from his right side. Within seconds, his vision was clearing. And not a moment too soon, for the Raven Guard were emerging from the bank of churning black smoke.

The weight of fire intensified as the enemy were finally able to draw a bead on the advancing Raven Guard. Autogun rounds pattered from Shrike's armour, scoring the paintwork but inflicting no actual damage. Las-bolts lanced out from a defence line twenty metres away, yet it was the plasma gun that Shrike was concerned about. The unmistakable sound of the weapon's capacitor reaching optimal power wailed. The high-pitched whine rose into the ultrasonic, and Shrike located the gunner.

The gunner was manning a sandbagged gun pit on the Raven Guard's left flank, and he was lining up his tripod-mounted weapon for another shot. This trooper obviously knew what he was doing, for he calmly tracked one of Shrike's men, adjusting his aim as the Space Marine rushed forwards. The gunner fired, and a miniature sun exploded from the barrel of his weapon. Shrike knew instantly where the shot would hit but had no time to shout a warning. The boiling mass of plasma struck an Assault Marine full in the chest. The warrior's torso was evaporated in an instant, his arms, legs, helmet and jump pack crashing to the ground. The armour smoked as the flesh within boiled off, and the gunner's face was split by a triumphant snarl.

An instant later, that face was split by an exploding bolter-round.

'Explain,' Voldorius growled.

'It is as I reported to your equerry, my lord,' said Morkis, his voice remarkably steady given the circumstances. 'Defence installation South Nine has come under attack by a small but well-equipped enemy,

seemingly intent upon the destruction of its surface-to-orbit missile batteries.'

Voldorius leaned in, his bestial face closing with the lord colonel's. 'Who are they?'

'Initial reports...' Morkis stammered as he looked for the aide who was nowhere to be found. 'Initial reports suggest that the attackers are Space Marines.'

A deep growl sounded in Voldorius's throat, his eyes narrowing into black slits. 'Of what Chapter?'

'My lord, I...' Morkis began, fear writ large across his face. 'I do not know...'

'Then find out,' Voldorius replied, pulling slowly back to scan the line of generals and lord colonels that stood before him. 'There can be only one reason the Emperor's lapdogs are attacking the orbital defences.'

'The scarred ones?' asked Nullus, his voice a sibilant whisper from behind the line of officers.

'Who else,' said Voldorius.

'None could have survived Cernis Four, my lord,' said Nullus. Malya imagined she heard a note of fear in the traitor Space Marine's voice, though she had no idea what he referred to.

'So you promised me, Nullus,' Voldorius growled as he turned towards his lieutenant. 'Well you know that nothing will stay the hand of Kor'sarro, so obsessed is he in his hunt. I should be flattered...'

'I shall deal with him,' replied Nullus, a note of defiance, or perhaps injured pride, entering his voice. 'Give me the forces, and I shall crush him.'

Voldorius paused, casting a dark glance towards Malya before resuming. 'Perhaps it is fitting that the scarred ones should return from the dead. Perhaps our resurrected prisoner might be of some use.'

'My lord?' said Nullus.

Voldorius stepped back, and scanned the banks of screens lining the militia command centre. His gaze fell on a depiction of the South Nine installation, the view captured by a spy-lens set in the city's wall.

‘You shall face them, Nullus,’ said Voldorius. ‘Take half of the Legion and what militia cohorts you need. If this attack truly is a precursor to a full landing, it must be halted. But I shall face their main force. Do you understand?’

Nullus bowed his head to his daemonic master, and looking up with savagely glinting eyes, replied, ‘I understand, my lord.’

Kor'sarro stood at the mouth of the caves, facing the north and the battle he knew was raging there even now. He was flanked on one side by the Stormseer Qan'karro and on the other by the Chaplain, Xia'ghan. The three veteran warriors watched as a tall column of smoke rose in the distance, marking the destruction the Raven Guard were inflicting upon the defence installation.

‘Is all prepared?’ Kor'sarro asked, not taking his eyes from that distant sign of battle.

‘As prepared as it will be, huntsman,’ Qan'karro replied, his weatherworn face turning towards the Master of the Hunt. ‘The Brotherhood is at your side, as ever it was.’

Kor'sarro glanced sideways at the Stormseer. He knew that the old warrior spoke not only of the company's combat readiness, but of the men's commitment to the cause of slaying the one they had hunted together for so long. ‘And what of the Ravens, old friend?’

Qan'karro's lined face grew dark. ‘I was at the Fall of Kordon, huntsman,’ he said. ‘And at the Battle of the Ring of Night. I know they can fight, despite the... history between our kin.’

‘And do they... does he, hold the same view of us?’ Kor'sarro replied. ‘He voiced many grievances against our Chapter.’

Now the Chaplain interjected. ‘My khan,’ Xia’ghan said. ‘The sons of the raven are known to us of old, as well you know. Their souls are troubled, as touched by the spirit of their primarch as are we by our own, honoured be his name.’

‘Their souls are touched,’ said Xia’ghan. ‘Not in that manner,’ he added hastily at a sharp glance from the Stormseer. ‘In the sense that they feel a great bitterness at the injustices of our times.’

‘Don’t we all?’ Kor’sarro asked.

‘Aye, my khan. But each bears the burden in his own manner. We of Chogoris have our ancient ways to guide us in the universe. We have our honour and our oaths.’

‘And they do not?’

Xia’ghan sighed. ‘They turn the darkness of the world in upon themselves, my khan. Each of them walks their own path. Men such as Kayvaan Shrike bear the weight of the evils of the universe upon their own shoulders and allow none to share their load.’

‘I cannot claim to know men’s souls as you do,’ Kor’sarro slowly shook his head as he spoke. ‘But what you say has some meaning to me.’

The sound of a far-off explosion rumbled across the land. ‘And that is why you lead, my khan,’ said Xia’ghan.

‘Battle calls,’ Kor’sarro said, feeling himself filled with a renewed purpose. ‘Is the Brotherhood ready to answer?’

‘Aye, my khan,’ said Xia’ghan. ‘The brethren await only your word.’

‘Then it is given,’ Kor’sarro replied. ‘We ride to join our brother the raven, and together we shall crush all who oppose us.’

Malya stood absolutely still amidst the anarchy of the command chamber. Officers of every rank, from the most junior sub-lieutenant to the generals and lord colonels, bellowed curses and orders in equal measure, each competing to be heard and obeyed over the din. Lord Kline struggled in vain to coordinate the muster, while Quartermaster General Ackenvol

oversaw the distribution of arms and ammunition to those positions in the most need. Staff officers tried in vain to relay coherent instructions into the command and control network and to report back the dozens of updates each was receiving every minute from a myriad of command channels.

Lord Voldorius had left the command centre soon after Nullus, and much to her relief, had not ordered Malya to attend him. He had gone to torment the prisoner, of that she was sure, though to what end she had no idea.

A huge pict-screen showing a view captured by a spy-lens mounted on the capital city's wall dominated the centre of the command chamber. Defence installation South Nine was engulfed in flames, clouds of black smoke billowing from dozens of its bastions and gun positions. Yet, despite the effects of the smoke, a group of black-armoured warriors was visible holding a stretch of wall against scores of militia troopers attempting to recapture it. It had been established that this group was the second wave to have hit the installation. The first wave, entirely equipped with jump packs and armed for brutal close-combat assaults, had struck earlier and pressed onwards into the heart of the installation, towards the huge missile batteries at its centre.

Were these the Space Marines she had so briefly communicated with before the atrocity in the grand square? Had they really come in response to the pleas for aid the resistance had transmitted? She prayed it was so with all her heart, yet she dared not allow herself to believe that deliverance was at hand, for her at least.

In her heart, Malya now understood that should these attackers, the Emperor's mighty Space Marines, succeed in defeating Voldorius and his Alpha Legion, she would surely be implicated as a traitor to her people. Could this have been part of the daemon prince's despicable scheme? Her role as equerry had thus far been limited to liaising with the local administration and passing down whatever pronouncements Voldorius had made. Voldorius had kept her near, relying on fear to ensure she carried

out his instructions. And that fear was very real, for Malya had witnessed others reduced to mewling imbeciles by the evil he radiated. Somehow, perhaps because of her faith, Malya had withstood it, though she felt it gnawing at the tattered fringe of her mortal soul whenever she was near her master.

Casting aside such thoughts, Malya turned her attentions back to the massive screen. Nullus had mustered a vast force to sally out from the city walls and retake the defence installation before the missiles could be destroyed. A blue-green wave of Alpha Legion traitor Space Marines led the thousands-strong horde of militia. Malya had never seen so many of the warriors gathered in one place before, yet she knew that the three hundred or so marching forth represented only half of the total Lord Voldorius commanded. Behind the horde of militia came a ragged mass of the debased worshippers of the daemon prince. These were the lost and the damned, the dregs of society turned to the worship of the very being that had brought their own world so low. Many wore ragged habits as if in imitation of some noble mendicant order, but scourged their bodies with flails and chains and wailed the praises of their vile lord. Others wore just the torn remnants of their work gear, as if they had simply left their places of toil and joined the horde with no consideration of their own fate. Others still were naked, crude runes daubed in paint, or perhaps blood, across their bodies as they charged headlong towards what Malya could only imagine would be wholesale slaughter.

As the horde surged across the black plain towards the defence installation, Malya saw a sight that made her blood run cold. The super-heavy tank called the *Ironsoul*, the leviathan that had killed uncounted numbers of her people in the grand square, rumbled forwards on grinding tracks. Its multiple guns were trained upon the captured wall of the defence installation.

She had to contact the Space Marines. They had to know of the prisoner. But how to contact them amidst the churning anarchy of the strategium... she would have to wait until the attentions of the staff officers were distracted elsewhere.

Captain Shrike threw himself aside as a trio of heavy bolters opened fire from a concealed gun position in front of the fortified base of the surface-to-orbit missile silo. The launchers reared overhead, a dozen and more warheads the size of tanks trained on the skies. Ducking behind a rockcrete fortification, Shrike gritted his teeth as the torrent of fire passed close by.

Momentarily shielded from enemy fire, Shrike checked the status of his warriors. Runes showing the vital signs of those in the first wave blinked across his vision. Three of those runes were red, indicating a death or cataclysmic damage to armour systems. A dozen more blinked, telling of serious wounds.

Rolling onto his side, Shrike risked a quick glance at the missile silo, exposing only his helmeted head and that only for an instant. In that second, he saw that the three heavy bolter positions were dug into the black ground in front of the silo, and judged they could be taken with a concerted push.

‘Squad Morior,’ Shrike spoke into the vox-net. ‘Left flank, wide, thirty seconds.’

Sergeant Morior acknowledged the order and moments later the Assault squad dashed along the dead space between two burning fortifications, chainswords growling to life and bolt pistols scanning for targets.

‘Sohen, Enriso, stand by.’

Shrike counted down the seconds as Squad Morior advanced upon the gun positions from the flank, ready to give the order for the other two Assault squads and his own Command squad to attack from the front.

As the countdown reached zero the unmistakable sound of ten Space Marine jump packs gunning to full power filled the air, the Assault

Marines of Squad Morior closing on the leftmost of the gun positions.

‘Attack!’ Shrike ordered, and emerged from the fortification he had been sheltering behind, activating his now bloody talons.

But before he could take a step forwards a burst of static followed by a scream of howling feedback drowned out the vox-net. Even as the warriors of Squad Morior descended upon the leftmost of the heavy bolters a blazing lattice of red beams powered into life all around their target. So tightly woven was the net of searing death that the Assault Marines of Squad Morior had no hope of avoiding their lethal touch.

Sergeant Morior, leading from the front as any of his rank would have been, was the first to be cut into pieces by the laser beams. The sergeant, only ascended to that rank six months before, passed through the net seemingly untouched, but as he emerged his armoured body disintegrated into a dozen chunks. Each tumbled bloodlessly to the ground, the precise cuts instantly cauterised by the intense heat of the beams.

Before any could shout a warning the three warriors following the sergeant suffered an identical fate to their leader, their remains scattering across the gun position they were attacking. Instead of a bolt pistol, the third warrior was carrying a plasma weapon and its fuel containment flask detonated with spectacular effect. The explosion engulfed the bearer in a roiling ball of pure white energy as intense as the heart of a star. The Space Marine’s body was reduced to seared atoms and the plasma ball expanded to catch one of the traitor’s ammunition hoppers. A thousand rounds of heavy explosive bolts detonated before the plasma shrank to a pulsating singularity and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

The gun pit was consumed in a torrent of lethal detonations as the ammunition cooked off, slaughtering the gun crew in an instant. Shrike saw his chance and charged forwards before the other two gun crews could recover from the anarchy engulfing their line.

Shrike's warriors were now fuelled by an all-consuming hatred of the enemy that had decimated Squad Morior. The remnants of the Assault squad were even now recovering, two of their number dragging back those wounded but not killed by the laser beams while the others opened fire with their bolt pistols.

'Beware of more traps,' Shrike warned as he gunned his jump pack to life. In an instant he was high in the air, the remaining two gun positions beneath him.

A second scream of machine feedback filled the vox-net and Shrike knew that the other two gun pits were activating their own las-nets. Forewarned, the Raven Guard avoided the trap, and Shrike located the militia trooper who had activated the fiendish device as he attended to a machine terminal at the rear of the central gun position.

Shrike could not reach the enemy trooper, for the lattice of death formed a lethal barrier none of the Space Marines could charge through. But as he passed overhead upon the screaming jets of his jump pack, Shrike saw an opening. With a thought, he loaded a trio of frag grenades into the launcher barrels atop his jump pack, and diving head first towards the las-net, fired all three tubes at once.

The frag grenades burst from the launcher, one exploding as it hit a beam, the other two passing through the gaps in the deadly lattice to fall among the gun crew. With barely a delay, the two grenades exploded, shredding the gunners and wrecking the generator that powered the las-traps.

The power source destroyed, Shrike passed through the space which a microsecond earlier had been filled with the deadly las-net. He landed in the smoking remains of the gun position and saw that one of the traitor militia gunners was stirring and reaching a blood-soaked hand towards a pistol. With a swipe of a talon, Shrike severed the hand from the wrist, causing the man to scream out in pain.

Shrike looked down upon the traitor, bitter hatred welling inside.

Nodding his head towards the remains of the fallen of Squad Morior, he uttered: 'You did this.'

The man's face contorted in anger, and despite his wounds, he staggered to his feet to stand before the captain.

'No,' the gunner coughed, looking upwards to meet Shrike's gaze. 'I serve Voldorius.'

Shrike felt as if his soul would be consumed by the bitterness of a universe seemingly intent upon its own destruction. Before him stood not some barbarous ork, effete eldar, or slaving tyrannid bio-construct but a man, once a servant of the Emperor. No words would come to him, so he simply beheaded the traitor with a callous swipe of his talons, and turned towards his advancing battle-brothers.

Before he could issue a further order, the voice of Sergeant Indis cut into the command channel. 'Brother-captain,' said Indis. 'Enemy inbound.'

'How many?' replied Shrike.

'All of them, sir.'

The air churned with the insane chants of ten thousand madmen as the horde surged across the open ground in front of the walls of defence installation South Nine. Gunfire and screams intermingled with frenzied devotions as Alpha Legion warriors imposed their brutal order upon the swarm of cultists and traitor militia, firing their boltguns into the margins of the vast horde whenever it needed to be steered towards the enemy.

The guns of the Raven Guard Devastator squads opened fire as the swarm closed on the walls of the defence installation. At first, only the missile launchers had the range, sending frag missiles slamming into the front ranks. The resulting explosions created ragged holes in the chaotic mass of traitors, but these were soon filled as the mob surged forwards.

As the range closed still further, those Alpha Legionnaires in the front ranks peeled off to the flanks, funnelling the anarchic horde towards the

section of the wall held by the Raven Guard. The deluded servants of Lord Voldorius sang their master's praises with all the more exuberance as the first of their number were scythed down as the Raven Guard's heavy bolters added their fire to the defence.

Scores died in the opening minutes. Heavy bolter shells ripped through the first bodies they struck, tearing them apart in a welter of gore without detonating before striking the next target. Many shells passed through several traitors before finally exploding, reducing their last target to a ruin of twitching gristle.

The flesh of the slain was pounded flat as those behind pushed forwards, grinding the meat into the dirt. The deaths appeared not to dissuade the traitors but to spur them onwards, as if the slaughter of their fellows redoubled their perverted faith in their daemonic master. All distinction between those openly worshipping the Ruinous Powers and those merely swept along in the tragedy that had befallen Quintus was lost. Those forced to serve in the militias were so frenzied by terror and despair that they could not be told apart from those who willingly embraced their fate. Whether turned or led astray, it made no difference to the Emperor's elite. Every one of the horde deserved death, and the Tactical and Devastator squads holding the wall granted it.

As the traitors closed on the walls, they entered the range of the Raven Guard's boltguns. The enemy were so densely packed that the Space Marines scarcely had to aim their shots. Yet it was obvious that even if every single bolt-round carried by every single Space Marine on the wall claimed the life of a traitor, only the smallest part of the horde would be slain. The warriors of the Alpha Legion, just visible at the fringes of the horde, were ever out of the Raven Guard's range, a fact that spoke of the Archenemy's duplicity and evil. The Alpha Legion were well known for their skill at deception and subversion, callously throwing away the lives of countless numbers of deluded servants. It soon became obvious to the

Raven Guard that the horde was being used as cannon fodder, until the critical moment came when the Space Marines ran dangerously low on ammunition and the Alpha Legion themselves would attack.

The Raven Guard had no choice but to hold the line until their White Scars allies could bring their force to bear. The Raven Guard were more used to launching surgical strikes from the darkness, but they were Space Marines first and foremost, and they would stand.

Nullus strode through the midst of the horde, attended by his Alpha Legion warriors. The lieutenant of Lord Voldorius bellowed the praises of his gods as death was unleashed all around. Scores of cultists and militia troopers were being scythed down, yet with each death he rejoiced all the more. His lipless mouth sang the names of the Ruinous Powers, his scar-traced features twisting into a terrifying, blasphemous visage. The walls of the defence installation loomed and upon the parapet he could see the black armour of this new foe, though from this distance he could not make out their iconography. Part of Nullus knew disappointment, for he had so hoped that it would be the White Scars. Though it was clear from their livery that the enemy were not the savage sons of Chogoris, they were still Space Marines, and the object of millennia of hatred nursed within Nullus's twisted heart. Nullus was not yet close enough to the walls to clearly identify the Space Marines, for dozens of Chapters had black as their livery. Whoever they were, these Space Marines must surely be in league with the White Scars, for Nullus had no doubt that Kor'sarro had not only survived the battle at Cernis IV, but would have followed the Alpha Legion to Quintus. He had made sure of that.

Nullus surged onwards, his hatred of the White Scars, of all the Emperor's Space Marines, of the Imperium, of the entirety of mankind spilling from him. He trampled underfoot those cultists and militia too slow to move out of his way. Death rained all around, the stink of blood and cordite filling the air.

The massive bulk of the *Ironsoul* ground forwards. A dozen frenzied cultists threw their arms into the air and hurled themselves beneath its tracks, wailing its praises as if they were sacrificing themselves to some god of war summoned to reality by so much death. Where *Ironsoul* passed, a thick paste made of the pulped flesh and splintered bones of its worshippers trailed after it, gristle and viscera clogging its clanking treads.

Nullus paused in his advance, allowing the super-heavy tank to grind past. He judged that the leviathan was approaching the range at which its weapons would be most effective against the enemies on the wall. The tank's huge main turret locked upon the wall and the ten metre-long barrel of its main gun elevated, the enemy in its sights.

'Now die,' Nullus hissed, his sibilant voice piercing the deafening cacophony of war.

According to the chrono readout projected over Shrike's field of vision, the moment was almost at hand. The White Scars should be launching their attack. A burst of heavy bolter fire drew his attention back to the immediate task at hand. Shrike's force was closing on the missile silos and was on the verge of overwhelming the last defenders.

Though the attack on the defence installation was no more than a diversionary action, the silos had by now taken on a symbolic meaning. To not destroy the surface-to-orbit missile launchers would have felt to Shrike like a failure, an insult against his pride.

The launchers towered high overhead, and the last of the traitors manning the silo fortifications were being cut down even as Shrike came to stand in front of them. His talons were slick with the blood of the countless foes he had slain, and the chainswords of his Assault Marines were clogged with viscera and well in need of cleaning and oiling. The assault had cost the Raven Guard dear, though every warrior was pleased to lay down his life in the battle against the foes of mankind. The last of

the defenders were finally overwhelmed as the Assault squads took the silo's fortifications, and there were no enemies between the Space Marines and the towering missile batteries.

‘Squad Sohen,’ Shrike spoke into the command channel. ‘Melta charges forwards.’

The acknowledgement came back immediately and a group of Assault Marines from Sergeant Sohen's squad dashed forwards accompanied by a Techmarine. Within a couple of minutes the warriors had placed their melta bombs at strategic points around the base of the missile batteries according to the Techmarine's instructions.

‘Ready at your command,’ the Techmarine said as he came to stand before Shrike. ‘I recommend a dispersal of one hundred metres,’ he added.

Within moments, Shrike's squad sergeants and other specialists had gathered around him. The veteran warriors displayed every sign of the ferocity of the battle they had fought, their armour scarred and scratched and several bleeding from numerous small wounds. Yet not one of them showed an ounce of fatigue, their dark eyes glinting with the thrill of battle. Sergeant Morior's place was taken by the most senior battle-brother of his squad, who would serve as squad leader for the duration of the battle.

‘Sergeant Indis reports that the enemy are closing on the walls in greater numbers than expected.’ The enemy's numerical superiority held no fear whatsoever for the Space Marine, but he continued. ‘The White Scars have yet to commit.’

At the mention of the White Scars several of the officers met one another's glances, but none saw fit to comment. ‘I have faith that our brother Chapter will be there when needed.’ The dark looks of several of the officers suggested that not all of them shared that view. ‘Given enemy numbers however,’ he pressed, ‘it is our duty to reinforce the walls, which we shall do the instant the defence batteries are disabled.’

‘When those missiles go up, half this installation will go with them,’ the Techmarine said.

‘Good,’ Shrike snarled. He was about to give the command when the vox-bead in his ear came to life. ‘Brother-captain,’ Sergeant Indis reported, the sound of chanting, screaming and gunfire competing with his voice. ‘We hold, but a new threat has emerged. One super-heavy, Baneblade variant, main class, effective.’

Shrike bit back a curse, knowing that one well-placed or plain lucky shot from the leviathan’s main weapon could wipe out every one of the squads holding the walls.

‘Hold,’ Shrike replied as his officers looked on darkly, each one monitoring the command channel. ‘The White Scars are inbound. And so are we.’

The order was given: the Third Company of the White Scars Chapter, the Brotherhood of Kor’sarro, rode to join their Raven Guard brethren in battle. The bike squads and vehicles of Kor’sarro’s company had broken cover, spilling from the caves south of Mankarra and speeding across the volcanic plain towards the flank of the seething horde of traitors.

There was no other place for Kor’sarro, Master of the Hunt, than the very point of the speartip. Riding his revered bike, Moondrakkan, and brandishing high the ancient blade, Moonfang, Kor’sarro was as a hero from the epic sagas of savage Chogoris. Pennants of black horsehair flowed from trophy-skulls mounted upon his back. His cloak, cut from the hide of a mighty lava-wolf, billowed in the wind behind him. His black topknot and moustaches whipped around his noble countenance as he led the charge.

Kor’sarro’s Command squad was at his side. They were his trusted companions and each had hunted with him for many decades. Brother Yeku held the banner of the Third Company high. Friend and foe alike would look to the banner and know the deeds of those who followed it. The

others of the Command squad, including the newly appointed company champion, Brother Kergis, bore glittering lances modelled after the weapons used by the wild steppe nomads of the Chapter's home world. Each was tipped by a power blade capable of scything through the very hardest of armour plate.

A wave of bike squads spread out behind Kor'sarro's retinue, each rider also armed with a hunting lance. Ordinarily, many of these battle-brothers would have ridden to battle in the back of a Rhino armoured carrier. But for this battle, where speed and shock were of utmost importance, they rode growling bikes, even as their ancestors went to war upon the backs of their trusty hunting beasts.

Then came the last of the host, a column of armoured vehicles, a plume of grey dust billowing upwards in their passing. Rhinos carried Devastator heavy weapons squads while Predator battle tanks sped along beside as outriders. Most potent of all was a single Vindicator siege tank by the name of *Thunderheart*. The tank's mighty cannon had cracked bastions and destroyed supposedly unbreakable walls from cursed Luyten's World to the Hell Gates of the Bleak Void.

Kor'sarro's savage heart was filled with the glory of the charge as Moondrakkan powered across the plain. The wind sang in his ears and his mount's engine roared its own song of war. In front of the Master of the Hunt was the undulating mass of the traitorous horde and beyond it the beleaguered walls held by the Raven Guard. Those warriors had moved to the protection of a stout bastion and a moment later, Kor'sarro knew why the Raven Guard had redeployed. A huge, super-heavy tank in the midst of the horde opened fire at the wall.

As the tank's main cannon fired, an invisible blast wave surged outwards from its barrel, felling scores of nearby traitors as surely as any fire the Raven Guard might have unleashed. A shell almost the size of a man slammed into the curtain wall where the Raven Guard had stood moments

earlier. The resulting explosion sent chunks of masonry arcing into the sky, some crashing down amongst the horde and slaying dozens more traitors. When the smoke cleared a great rent had been opened in the wall of the defence installation, and a ramp of debris had been formed in front.

The Alpha Legionnaires fired indiscriminately into the flanks of the horde, herding the frenzied cultists and the desperate militia towards the breach and up the newly formed ramp.

So great was the cacophony of chanting cultists and firing weapons that none of them heard the charge of the White Scars. As the White Scars descended on their prey the first of the traitors threw themselves against the breach. At the same moment the Raven Guard emerged from their bastion and gunned down scores of enemies. Still more pressed forwards, clambering over the shredded corpses of their fellows. In no time at all, the breach was slick with blood and viscera, yet still the attackers came. Kor'sarro knew that the Raven Guard must surely be running dangerously low on ammunition and would be unable to hold the attackers at bay for much longer.

‘White Scars, ride like lightning!’

A hundred throats echoed Kor'sarro's war cry as he descended on the outer edges of the horde's flank and battle was joined.

Nullus bellowed his worship of the blasphemous powers of the warp as utter carnage engulfed the field of battle. The *Ironsoul* ground forwards over a carpet of dead cultists and militia, its weapons firing an unrelenting barrage at the Raven Guard on the ruined wall. Striding forwards, he crushed the dead and dying beneath heavy armoured boots, the power of death infusing the daemon-thing within him. With a word of command, his Alpha Legion warriors formed up behind, ready for their assault on the deluded fools of the Raven Guard.

For the Alpha Legion to take the breach the multitudinous horde had first to do its duty. As each attacker was gunned down by the fire from the Raven Guard at the summit the next would take his place, scrambling over

the shattered corpse of his slaughtered fellow, before he in turn was struck down. With each death, however, the attackers gained ground, if no more than a metre. The breach was being taken and soon the ramp of debris would be replaced by one of corpses, up which Nullus and his Alpha Legion would assault the Raven Guard and slaughter them to a man for the glory of Chaos.

Nullus drank in the sheer power of battle. He gloried in the sound of the cultists' chants mingling with their death screams. He laughed at the desperate wailing of the militia troopers as they were funnelled into the breach. Many of them now saw that a death opposing the invasion of Quintus would have been far better than the surrender that saw them forced into the service of Voldorius. He felt the low, throbbing growl of *Ironsoul's* engines, beating in time with the constant fire from its heavy bolters.

Then, another sound came to Nullus's ears.

Over the din of battle and death, Nullus heard the unmistakable roar of Adeptus Astartes bikes. Turning towards the horde's flank, he shoved aside a whirling cultist, seeking out the source of the noise. Now it was clearly audible, and growing louder. Nullus saw a slight rise in the ground, and strode up it, seeking a vantage point to survey the plain to the south.

The instant he reached the top of the rise, Nullus saw the source of the roar and his vile heart soared for the glory of war. The hated White Scars had come.

Captain Shrike and his Assault squads vaulted from bastion to bastion as they made for the wall, the roar of battle growing ever louder as they neared the outer limits of the defence installation. Behind, a vast mushroom cloud climbed into the sky, the fires of the missile battery's destruction raging inside. The spaces between the bunkers were strewn with the dead and smoke billowed from every enemy position.

Touching down on the corpse-strewn roof of another bunker, Shrike was but a single leap from the outer wall. The Tactical and Devastator squads under Sergeant Indis were firing downwards into the breach relentlessly. Enemies would appear at the top of the great wound in the fortification only to be gunned down without mercy, but it was clear to Shrike that the endless horde pressing upwards must surely prevail.

Not for the first time that day, Shrike's thoughts turned to the White Scars and their flank attack. Where were they?

A clipped report came across the command channel. It was Sergeant Indis, delivering the news that his force was down to ten per cent of its ammunition. Shrike had arrived just in time.

'Stand by, sergeant,' the captain said into the vox-link. 'First wave inbound.'

Shrike had no need to pass on any order to his Assault squads for it was clear that the Space Marines holding the wall were in dire need of reinforcement. Shrike activated his jump pack and leapt high into the air. At the height of his leap, he caught a glimpse of the plain beyond the walls, at the heaving ocean of ragged cultists and militia converging on the breach. As he dived onwards, Captain Shrike glimpsed for a fraction of a second what must have been the white and red livery of the White Scars scything towards the horde's flank. And then it was gone, and Shrike was upon the walls.

Even with his armour's baffler activated, the cacophony of the horde was almost deafening. Wave after wave of sonorous chanting rolled and boomed across the plain, intermingled with the screams of the wounded and the insane and punctuated by gunfire and explosions. Shrike had rarely faced such bedlam, the spectacle exceeding even the barbarous mobs of the orks of Skullkrak. But this was not simply a matter of volume, for the chants were devotions to the unnameable powers, the daemon-gods of the beyond that craved to consume the soul of mankind. For a man to worship

such powers was for him to surrender his soul to eternal damnation, and the utmost blasphemy in the eyes of the God-Emperor and His devoted servants such as the Space Marines.

Shrike felt sickened by the taint of the warp made manifest by devotion and death. The horde must be turned, before all was lost.

With a great roar of sacrilegious filth, another wave of traitors surged upwards through the breach, hundreds of bodies packed together as grox for the slaughter. Cultists wailed and thrashed, brandishing wicked, hooked chains, while terror-stricken militia troopers fired their autoguns wildly. Despite the stout defence Sergeant Indis had mounted, Shrike knew that the breach was lost. The tide was unstoppable.

‘Fall back by squads, pattern upsilon-twelve,’ Shrike ordered bitterly.

Though he resented the necessity of ordering such a manoeuvre, Shrike’s massively outnumbered force would be overwhelmed were it to remain at the wall. Indis and his men had fought valiantly, as hard as any of the Chapter’s venerated heroes, but they had done all they could. There was a time and a place for a glorious last stand, but this was not it. In falling back and drawing the enemy into a close-quarters battle amongst the fortifications and redoubts, the Raven Guard would have a chance of robbing it of momentum, trading time for Kor’sarro’s flank attack to take full effect.

In response to Shrike’s order, the Tactical squads at the wall began moving back, each ten-man unit dividing into two, one providing fire support for the other as it withdrew to a new position before the roles were reversed. Then the heavy weapon-armed Devastator squads began their redeployment, covered by the Tactical squads as soon as they had established a new firebase amongst the smoking remnants of an inner line of fortifications.

Shrike could not join his men yet, for the first of the traitors were dragging themselves over the corpses of their fellows.

Shrike raised his talons and arcs of blue energy surged up and down their razor-edged blades. The blood that had dried to a crust along the edge of each talon burned off in a second, leaving the lethal weapons gleaming and eager to kill yet more of the traitors.

As the wave of traitors clambered to the summit of the breach, the ragged mass resolved itself into individual enemies. The first to come before Shrike was a rabid fanatic, the man's dirty robe that of a priest of the Imperial Creed. Bile rose in Shrike's throat as the man hurled himself forwards, screaming filth at the top of his voice. Shrike restrained himself from charging forwards to strike the traitor down lest he be consumed by the sheer mass of the horde. With a contemptuous strike of a talon Shrike sent the traitor's head spinning into the air, still mouthing blasphemous devotions as the body collapsed at Shrike's feet.

Then the first rank of the horde was over the summit and crashing forth like the sea at high tide. A fusillade of bolt pistol fire rang out from the squads behind and a dozen attackers went down in a welter of blood. Shrike had no need to turn in order to know that his Assault squads were there with him.

A second later the battle was joined. Shrike's very existence was boiled down to the controlled application of lethal force, every movement of every muscle in his body and every actuator in his power armour spelling the bloody death of a traitor. Bodies pressed in from all around, so close that he scarcely needed to raise a talon to inflict bloodshed. Shrike became a focused, diamond-hard whirlwind of death, his talons lashing out in every direction. A dozen traitors were eviscerated within seconds, great coils of viscera spilling across the ground as bodies were scythed in two. Despite the intensity of the battle, Shrike was not reduced to some mindless, blood-crazed berserker as the warriors of more savage Chapters might be. He was instead the black-armoured angel of vengeance, the deliverer of the Emperor's justice, the shadow that brings death. Though

his actions were those of a relentless killer, Shrike maintained icy control over his mind, body and soul. No drop of spilled blood touched the ground unless he willed it.

When Shrike finally judged that sufficient time had passed, and sufficient death had been unleashed, he ordered the withdrawal.

‘Disengage!’ he growled into the vox-net, and activated his jump pack.

As one, Captain Shrike and his warriors soared into the air. The horde, which had been bottled up where the Raven Guard had fought them, suddenly burst forwards, the foremost warriors stumbling and crashing to the ground. An instant later, the fallen were crushed beneath the pounding feet of those behind or incinerated by the jump packs’ backwash. A thousand maddened cultists and traitor militia spilled onto the top of the walls and spread out.

Shrike landed atop a high fortification where his Devastator squads had redeployed.

‘Hold...’ he hissed as the Space Marines raised heavy weapons.

Still more and more of the enemy clambered up the breach and hauled themselves over the precipice and onto the wall itself. Relieved of the force that had held them at bay for so long, the impossible pressure of the horde spilled outwards until the walls all around were filled with frenzied, chanting enemies.

‘Take them,’ Shrike ordered.

The Devastators opened fire at the enemy now thronging the walls for a hundred metres either side of the breach. Following millennia-old combat doctrine, they opened up at the outer edges first, walking their fire along the wall so that first those who had pressed furthest from the breach were cut down, the fire working its way along towards the centre. Within seconds, hundreds of the enemy were torn to shreds by massed heavy bolter fire, blown apart by missiles or incinerated to ashes by seething plasma. Bodies exploded, leaving behind nothing more than a bloody

mess. Others were reduced to constituent atoms leaving nothing behind at all. All of this happened so quickly that none on the wall had a chance to react, the entire battlement coming to resemble the floor of a slaughterhouse.

Despite the sheer bloody murder Shrike's force had inflicted on the enemy, to remain in position and continue to fire would merely result in the Devastators expending their precious ammunition while thousands more foes poured through the breach. It was so tempting to order a second fusillade, but Shrike resisted the urge, instead opening the vox-channel. 'Devastators,' he said, 'fall back as per orders.'

Shrike remained upon the redoubt, his Command squad beside him, as the Devastators limbered their heavy weapons and pulled back. In a moment, the last of them had descended the steps at the back of the fortification and were passing along the street beyond. Shrike's foes swarmed upwards, crushing the remains of their fellows to pulp beneath their boots. The wall had soon become so cramped that flailing bodies were sent tumbling to the ground below, yet still the press continued unabated.

And then, Shrike saw what drove the horde onwards. From amongst the multitude strode a towering figure in blue-green power armour adorned with blasphemous sigils. The bitter hatred of ten thousand years of war welled up inside Shrike, for the figure was an Alpha Legionnaire, one of the followers of Lord Voldorius. The warrior had once been a Space Marine, but he had bargained away his soul in the service of Chaos, betraying the most sacred of oaths. Shrike longed to gun his jump pack to full power and charge headlong at this enemy, but to do so would be suicide.

With a bitter curse, Shrike turned his back on the tide bursting through the breached wall and led his warriors from the redoubt. The battle would continue in the cramped environs of the defence installation.

‘Once there was darkness and ignorance, and man, who was scattered to the stars, fell far from grace. Upon the winds of Chogoris came the Kagayaga, the Whisper in the Darkness. The Great Jaghatai Khan, Primarch of the White Scars, honoured be his name, united the tribes of Chogoris and dispelled the Kagayaga. But in truth, such things can never be slain. They merely flee for a time and lurk in the shadows of men’s hearts. They await the moment of returning, when they will take their bitter vengeance upon the world...’

– Hidden Chronicles of the Chogoran Epics



CHAPTER 10

‘Filthy as Thou Art’

Moonfang sang with the power crackling the length of its razor-sharp, monomolecular edge as Kor’sarro drove the blade into the guts of yet another of the berserker cultists. The traitor vomited a torrent of blood into the Space Marine’s face and, for an instant, Kor’sarro could barely see.

Twisting the blade free of the slain cultist’s body, Kor’sarro gunned the engine of his mount and turned the bike around. Coming to a halt, he wiped his eyes clear of the dripping viscera and looked about. The White Scars had cut a deep, ragged wound into the side of the traitorous horde, slaying scores in the moments after their wild charge had struck home. Now the horde was pressing back in as if to fill the vacuum the attack had created. It was imperative that the counterattack should not become bogged down or lose its momentum. The charge must continue, or the Raven Guard would be lost and the whole battle rendered a tragic waste of effort and life.

‘Onwards!’ Kor’sarro bellowed, his voice hoarse with the joy of righteous battle. At his cry, three dozen White Scars bikers converged on

his position. Not a single power lance was dry of the blood of the foe, though many of the bearers had their own wounds too.

His command retinue at his side and the banner of the Third Company waving proudly in the wind, Kor'sarro sped forwards. The horde rushed in to the gap the White Scars had created and in a moment Kor'sarro was leading the charge of the entire company. As he rode he brought Moonfang down in lethal arcs, beheading or gutting traitors with every swing. Soon blood stained the dark ground and severed limbs were scattered all about. Numberless multitudes were pressing in all around and it seemed to Kor'sarro that some cultists deliberately threw themselves beneath the wheels of his mount in order to slow him while others allowed their bodies to be ground to paste beneath the treads of the Rhinos and Predators simply to clog their running gear. What madness had descended upon the servants of the Ruinous Powers was unknown, and unknowable to Kor'sarro.

There was no order to the horde, no command structure and no tactical logic to its actions. It ebbed and flowed, the only stable point the gargantuan super-heavy tank grinding through its midst. The cultists simply threw themselves forwards, chains and blades whirring.

So disordered were these fanatics that they inflicted more carnage amongst their own than they did amongst the Space Marines, but not once did they appear to be slowed, whoever it was that struck them down. Kor'sarro pressed on, forging against the relentless tide of the enemy. His arm rose and fell what felt like a thousand times, each blow from Moonfang striking down an enemy in a spray of blood. Rusted chains were thrown about him, flails struck his arms, bare fists pummelled uselessly at his power armour. One cultist even tried to unsaddle the Master of the Hunt, a tactic the steppes nomads of Chogoris were taught to counter from the first moment they took a war-mount. Kor'sarro bared his teeth and

ripped the man's neck wide open, casting the corpse to the blood-soaked ground as he ploughed onwards.

Kor'sarro no longer faced the frenzied cultists, but enemies wearing the grey uniform of the planetary militia. Though better armed and equipped than the fanatics who had sold their souls to Chaos, the militia troopers were clearly not motivated by the same mindless zeal. The troopers fought with the desperation of those who knew they were being herded towards their own deaths. The Master of the Hunt showed these foes no more mercy than he had the cultists. If there was one thing a man should strive for, it was to choose the manner of his own death for himself, and never to allow another to do so for him. These fools had learned that lesson too late, and would now pay their price.

The militia troopers broke before the irresistible charge of the White Scars, surging to either side. For a moment Kor'sarro dared hope that the response might be more than a localised effect and that the entire horde might be routed. But the hope proved short-lived, for a new foe was revealed where the militia troopers had scattered.

A hundred metres in front of Kor'sarro stood a group of hulking creatures the like of which he had rarely seen. They were mutants, probably kin to the thing he had fought atop the tower on distant Cernis IV. Kor'sarro's savage heart filled with anger at the thought of such blasphemy against the pure form granted to man by the God-Emperor. There were a dozen of them, each as much as three metres tall, though they were stooped over so far their drooling faces appeared to be set into their chests. They wore no more than ragged hoods and stained loincloths, and their leathery skin looked as tough as carapace armour. Worst of all, the mutants were armed, but instead of hands, they sported power shears crudely grafted to their wrists. Feed cables snaked up their arms to generators stitched into the raw flesh of their backs. The claws were clearly large and powerful enough to cut even a Space Marine in two.

The leading White Scars bike squads formed themselves into an attack pattern unchanged through tens of thousands of years of use by the steppes nomads of Chogoris and by subsequent generations of Space Marines recruited from their tribes. The bikers spread out into a wide front, each warrior lowering his power lance and selecting his target. The White Scars let up a savage roar, invoking the spirit of their people and their warlike traditions, steeling their hearts for the moment when the charge would hit home and blood would be spilled.

As if issuing a response to the White Scars' war cry, the mutants leaned forwards as one and opened their mouths wide. The resulting roar was not that of any creature that had the right to walk beneath the light of any star in the Emperor's domains. Scores of nearby militia troopers fell to the ground as if propelled by a blast wave, hands clamped over ears to keep the hellish cry at bay even as they bled explosively from every orifice. As the roar continued the very air between the mutants and the charging White Scars became distorted and was shot by flecks of vile spittle. The sound struck the White Scars as if they had collided with a physical barrier. Warning runes flashed across Kor'sarro's control panel, and looking left and right he saw that the armour of several of his warriors was cracked and smoking in places.

'The primarch watches!' Kor'sarro bellowed, putting all of his strength into the effort to pierce the unnatural roar of the mutants. Though he could barely hear his own voice, his brothers heard and repeated the war cry, setting their lances for the final metres of the charge.

As he bore down on the line of mutants Kor'sarro selected his target. The mutant in front of him must surely have been the leader, for it was even larger than its fellows and its eyes were possessed of something approaching intelligence. Its muscles rippled across its body, visibly tensing as it braced itself to receive the charge. The mutant planted its feet

wide, set its shoulders and lowered its vile head, its beady eyes staring out from beneath its ragged hood and meeting those of Kor'sarro.

In the last second of the charge Kor'sarro selected the point on the mutant's body he would attack, and Kor'sarro raised Moonfang high in preparation for a savage downward sweep that would cut his opponent in two.

And then, the charge struck thunderously home. Kor'sarro had no time to note the success or failure of those on either side, for in that moment his entire world was contained in the edge of his sword. Moonfang swept downwards, cutting the very air with the energies that surged along its monomolecular edge. The mutant was struck just above its left elbow, severing the arm and the deadly power shears grafted to it. The blade continued on its path, gauging a thin, yet deep line across his opponent's chest.

Only when Moonfang contacted the right side power shears was it checked. With a terrific burst of speed that belied its bulk, the mutant twisted. Before the Master of the Hunt could react, it grabbed the ancient relic weapon between the long blades of its remaining power shears. At that moment, the beast twisted its weapon and Kor'sarro was faced with the instantaneous choice of relinquishing his beloved power sword or of being pulled forwards and off-balance, perhaps even being dragged from his bike by the mutant's sheer brute force.

All of this had occurred in the blink of an eye and Kor'sarro's mind was made up just as quickly. As the mutant twisted its right arm backwards and up, Kor'sarro let go of his grip on Moonfang's hilt. He saw instantly that the mutant had expected him to cling on to his treasured weapon. As his opponent staggered backwards, Kor'sarro used his now free hand to draw his bolt pistol.

In the time it took him to draw the pistol, Kor'sarro's ancient and revered mount had sped past the mutant's right side. Bringing the bike to a

skidding halt behind his opponent, Kor'sarro raised his bolt pistol at its back. The muscle there was so thick a single shot would not inflict much injury, but another target presented itself: the generator, which fed the mutant's power shears. Kor'sarro snapped off his shot before the beast could turn, trusting to the Emperor and the primarch that it would strike a vulnerable component.

The bolt-round struck the generator square on, penetrating its outer casing and exploding inside. A single round detonating within its flesh would have been little more than an annoyance to the rearing mutant, but the small explosion seemed to trigger a reaction within the generator. A second explosion sounded from within and the mutant staggered around to face its tormentor, Moonfang still gripped in its upraised power shears.

Kor'sarro drew a bead on the thing's head but before he could squeeze the trigger, Kor'sarro saw the mutant's eyes bulge wide before bursting outwards. A muffled detonation sounded from within its muscled torso and it toppled to the ground in front of the Master of Hunt. Pausing only to stoop and retrieve his power sword, Kor'sarro looked around to gauge the success of the charge.

Each of the mutants had been engaged by at least two White Scars, and the bikers' power lances had done their work well. Most of the vile monstrosities had been felled in the initial charge and those that were not had been slain by the chainswords and bolt pistols of those who followed directly behind. A warrior hacked away the head of one of the beasts. The trophy would sit well in the halls of the Third Company, marking a proud victory, so long as any survived to bear it back to the Chapter.

'Sons of Chogoris!' Kor'sarro cried proudly, his blood well and truly up following the brief but glorious charge. 'We ride!'

As the sergeants restored order amongst the squads, Kor'sarro looked across the plains towards the distant walls. There was no sign of the Raven Guard – Captain Shrike must have ordered their redeployment. The

massive super-heavy tank ground towards the walls, its long-barrelled cannon smoking as it tracked back and forth like a hunter seeking prey. A large formation of blue-green-armoured Alpha Legionnaires marched across the battlefield. The warriors had seen him too and were moving to intercept the White Scars as they hacked into the vast horde of traitors.

At the head of the Alpha Legion was a figure Kor'sarro recognised instantly, even at a range of several hundred metres. It was Nullus, the champion-lieutenant of Voldorius who seemed to harbour an especial hatred towards the White Scars, above and beyond the bitter mutual enmity felt between any Space Marine Chapter and their erstwhile brothers of the Traitor Legions. The last time Kor'sarro had faced Nullus was on Cernis IV, but the two had done battle at least a dozen times before that. Memories came unbidden to Kor'sarro's mind as he gunned Moondrakkan's engine and powered forwards. The Lost Hope incident, the battles beneath the glass seas of Sagrifarri, the third siege of Ex Bellum. Thoughts of such battles brought with them memories of brothers long fallen, many at the hands of Nullus himself. Kor'sarro vowed to avenge every death Nullus had inflicted.

In between Kor'sarro and the object of his hatred were scores of Alpha Legionnaires, and the super-heavy tank was turning on its mighty tracks to join them, uncaring of the dozens of cultists it crushed as it ploughed onwards. The traitors were every bit as experienced and deadly as the White Scars themselves, perhaps more so, for they had long ago sold their very souls to the Chaos Gods in exchange for power beyond mortal reckoning. Each was a puissant warrior who had fought across a thousand battlefields and more, and faced every enemy from the beasts of the intergalactic voids to the mightiest of the Emperor's champions. The Alpha Legion in particular were known amongst the traitor Space Marine Legions for their cunning and guile, and those who now faced Kor'sarro were no exception. The Alpha Legion deployed by squads, creating a

defensive formation that would punish the charging White Scars severely as they passed through the mutually supporting fire zones. It was as if the Alpha Legion were well aware that Nullus would prove all too tempting a target for Kor'sarro and his brotherhood, and they deployed accordingly so as to take fearful advantage of that fact.

As consumed by hatred of the turncoat enemy as he was, Kor'sarro was not some mindless berserker to be so easily drawn into the Alpha Legion's trap. Speeding across the black plain, Kor'sarro turned and took in the disposition of his own force. Instantly he noted gaps in the line, the telltale indications that brothers had fallen. Forcing such concerns from his mind until the time for grieving after the battle, Kor'sarro judged his force able to overwhelm the Alpha Legion, so long as they could overcome the enemy's timely defensive deployment.

Kor'sarro opened the command channel. 'The herd brays.' He spoke the words of the White Scar's battle-cant, which the Alpha Legion would have no knowledge of should they intercept the transmission. 'The beast's horn, the plateaux at sunrise.'

A raft of acknowledgements indicated that the sergeants had received and understood the order. Hauling on Moondrakkan's handlebars, Kor'sarro brought his bike onto a new heading, his Command squad following close behind and the banner of the Third waving proudly above. How dearly he would love to add the name of Nullus to the tally of slain foes listed proudly on that banner.

The White Scars enacted Kor'sarro's orders, the bikers and Assault squads beginning a wide flanking manoeuvre that would bring them around to the Alpha Legion's right side. But that in itself would not be sufficient to overcome the enemy's deadly fire plan. As the fastest of the White Scars units swept onwards, the Rhino-borne Devastator squads raced forwards before disembarking a mere two hundred metres in front of their foe. Even before the heavy-weapons-armed Space Marines were in

position, the Predator tanks were unleashing a fearsome hail of heavy bolter and autocannon fire upon the Alpha Legion, pinning them in position so they could not easily redeploy in the face of the faster unit's flanking manoeuvre.

Kor'sarro grinned savagely as the air was split by the deafening report of the demolisher cannon of the Vindicator siege tank, *Thunderheart*. Though based on a Rhino, the Vindicator was essentially a tracked siege gun. As the huge cannon fired, the extractor fans atop the vehicle screamed as they equalised the pressure inside the sealed cabin.

As the thunder of the cannon's discharge rolled across the plain the huge shell slammed into the Alpha Legion's positions. In an instant, an entire squad of traitor Space Marines was wiped out. Each of their number was a heretic and a criminal, responsible for the deaths of countless innocents, and in that instant their reigns were ended. Kor'sarro's heart pounded with the glory of battle, knowing that even if he died upon this black plain he would not have done so in vain.

The Alpha Legion's fire was now by necessity split between the flanking White Scars bikers and Assault squads, and the more heavily armed and immediate threat presented by the siege tank and Devastator squads in front of them. A searing lascannon blast lanced out towards the *Thunderheart* and the huge dozer blade mounted at its front sheared off in a shower of sparks. A second shot scored a fire-rimmed wound the length of the tank's flank. Before the Alpha Legion gunners could fire the kill-shot, the tank deployed a billowing smoke screen to throw off the aim of its foes at least long enough for Kor'sarro's charge to strike home.

A torrent of fire now went up from the White Scars Devastator squads. Such a punishing weight of shells, missiles and lascannon blasts was unleashed that the Alpha Legionnaires were forced to take cover amongst the wreckage of the battlefield. The undulating plain offered scant few natural features that might provide cover against the White Scars' fire and

the traitors were forced to duck back behind the mounds of corpses scattering the entire area. The dead bodies of cultists and militia troopers danced as if in sick imitation of life as they were stitched by heavy bolter shells, which exploded within the already ruined bodies with hideous effect. Soon, the Alpha Legionnaires were forced to redeploy, the squads falling back with experienced discipline, firing boltguns from the hip as they went.

Kor'sarro's flank attack hit home. Bikes roared and jump packs screamed as the White Scars descended upon their ancient, hated foes. Power lances glinting in the orange sunlight, a dozen Alpha Legionnaires were struck down in an instant. Moonfang flashed as Kor'sarro beheaded a Legionnaire who stepped in front of him. But an instant later he was thrown from Moondrakkan's saddle as a fusillade of boltgun fire smashed into his left side, unleashed from such short range that the impact was tremendous.

Kor'sarro rolled as he struck the ground, which was torn apart as more rounds were pumped into the space he had occupied an instant before. Using the momentum of his fall, Kor'sarro came up and turned towards his attackers. A dozen Alpha Legion warriors advanced on him, the grim details of their baroque helmets expressionless and their ornate, gold-chased boltguns raised. Kor'sarro saluted them with Moonfang and unleashed a roaring challenge.

The Alpha Legionnaires slowed to a halt, intent upon gunning the White Scar down before he could bring his fearsome relic blade to bear.

'Come on!' Kor'sarro yelled in anger. 'Fight with the honour you once had!'

A dozen armoured fingers tightened on a dozen triggers.

The flashing steel of a power lance shot through the air and transfixing the foremost Alpha Legionnaire. As the traitor sank to his knees,

Kor'sarro's Command squad appeared at his side, each warrior leaping from his saddle as his bike slewed to a halt, to stand beside their khan.

The traitors opened fire as they advanced, their boltguns spitting death as the air between the two groups became a storm of shells. A battle-brother beside Kor'sarro went down, his chest armour ripped open as a dozen bolt-rounds exploded deep within his chest. Another was struck by a missile fired by an Alpha Legion heavy weapons trooper, the projectile blowing the White Scar into a thousand chunks of smoking armour and burned flesh. A roar of anger went up from the White Scars, the deaths of their brothers merely serving to propel them forwards all the faster.

A second later both groups surged forwards as one and death was unleashed in a bloody melee. A traitor's chainsword came out of nowhere and cleaved a White Scar clean in two. Even as his broken body fell apart, the Space Marine shot his killer in the face at point-blank range, blowing the traitor's brains out through the back of his helmet. Another White Scar died as he was engulfed in searing flamer fire. His bare head was reduced to a black, smoking skull but he killed three more foes before he succumbed to his wounds.

Moonfang lashed out, once, twice, three times, and as many foes met their deaths by Kor'sarro's hand. And then it was over, and Kor'sarro was panting with exertion. He turned to honour his warriors, and saw that Brother Yeku, the banner bearer of the Third, was down on his knees. One arm was wrapped about his midriff while the other supported the weight of the honoured standard. 'Brother-captain...' Yeku said, his voice strained.

Kor'sarro rushed to the warrior's side, his heart filling with cold dread. Kneeling beside his friend, Kor'sarro activated the latches at his neck and lifted Yeku's helmet clear. Blood flecked the warrior's mouth and his skin was already pale and waxy.

'Kor'sarro,' Yeku coughed, fixing his stare on his captain. 'Please, do me this favour...'

With a titanic effort, Brother Yeku lifted the banner of the Third high. Even in his dying moment the honoured fabric did not touch the ground, which would have brought dishonour to the bearer and the entire company. Kor'sarro understood, and took the banner pole in his own hand, relieving Brother Yeku of its weight.

'Thank you, honoured khan,' Yeku sighed, before slumping forwards onto the black ground.

Kor'sarro knew that his friend was dead, and had died with the utmost honour. Though he had witnessed countless such deaths, Kor'sarro would ensure the name of Brother Yeku was entered into the sagas of the White Scars, for his death had been a good one as such things are counted amongst the wild sons of Chogoris.

'Khagus?' Kor'sarro addressed the company Apothecary who even now approached. The medic knelt reverently beside the body of Brother Yeku and a moment later turned back towards the Master of the Hunt.

'He rides the cold steppes, my khan,' the Apothecary replied, making reference to the death-legends of the Chogoran steppes nomads.

'Then do what must be done.'

As Kor'sarro strode back towards Moondrakkan he heard the sound of the Apothecary's small las-scalpel cutting through the armour at the fallen Space Marine's neck. A moment later, the sound was replaced by that of a small buzzsaw cutting through flesh. The Apothecary was affording Brother Yeku the single honour all Space Marines aspired to after death. He was retrieving the artificial organs inside which were stored Yeku's genetic inheritance. Emperor willing, the organs would be returned to the Chapter and the genetic code locked within passed on to a new generation of White Scars.

In moments, the deed was done. Kor'sarro hauled Moondrakkan upright with one hand while holding the banner aloft with the other. He made a silent promise that, were he able, he would return for Yeku and those

others who had fallen here, and bring their bodies home in the utmost honour.

But for now, the battle still raged all about. Nearby, individual squads of White Scars fought their Alpha Legion counterparts in a bitter close-quarters battle. As more of Kor'sarro's brotherhood piled into the battle the White Scars gained the edge. But the victory was proving a costly one, for already at least half a dozen white-armoured bodies were strewn across the black battleground. Beyond the White Scars' immediate vicinity, the battlefield still swarmed with traitors, despite the terrible death toll both the White Scars and the Raven Guard had inflicted. The super-heavy tank ground onwards, the earth shaking beneath its treads, but it dared not fire on the White Scars with the Alpha Legion so close. Space Marines were used to being outnumbered hundreds, even thousands to one. They were the scalpel that incised the diseased flesh from the bloated carcass, and they would prevail.

Drawing on decades of experience, Kor'sarro quickly identified the point of the battle upon which victory or defeat would turn. Not far from his position a dismounted bike squad fought valiantly to hold back an Alpha Legion counterthrust, but a number of the warriors already bore grievous wounds and the remainder looked like being overrun within seconds. Should that squad be defeated, Kor'sarro judged, the entire line might buckle, and then he might never find and defeat the hated Nullus.

'Khagus, Temu, Kergis,' Kor'sarro addressed the three remaining warriors of his Command squad. 'Our brothers have need of our presence.'

Raising the banner of the 3rd high, Kor'sarro gunned Moondrakkan's engine and launched himself towards the foe, his brothers at his side. At the sight of the banner unfurled in the wind, the White Scars redoubled their efforts and the Alpha Legion appeared to flag in their own. A moment later, Kor'sarro was bearing down upon his enemy and in that moment he decided upon his course of action.

In a single movement, Kor'sarro leapt from Moondrakkan's saddle and crashed feet first into a mighty Alpha Legionnaire, a champion and second only to Nullus amongst this warband. The enemy went down under Kor'sarro's weight and with a savage cry upon his lips, Kor'sarro raised the banner high so that all on the battlefield could see. Then, he drove it downwards with such force that the end cracked open his enemy's ornate power armour and pinned him to the ground.

A great roar went up from every White Scar who had seen Kor'sarro's deed, but the champion was far from dead. The warrior raised his bolter and aimed it at Kor'sarro's face. Unable to dodge, all Kor'sarro could do was hold his head back as an entire magazine of bolt shells was unleashed at him. Rounds glanced from his armoured collar or exploded against his chest plate, white hot shrapnel lacerating his cheeks.

But the primarch was with Kor'sarro, for when the boltgun's ammunition feed clicked and the weapon fell silent, Kor'sarro was unhurt.

With a savage twist, Kor'sarro drove the banner pole through his enemy's chest, severing his spine and penetrating his armour's power pack. As Kor'sarro withdrew the pole, the body was consumed by the energies unleashed by the destruction of the generator, the armour glowing from within and sagging as it slowly melted.

Every head in the vicinity was turned towards him. White Scars looked on with fierce pride, while the Alpha Legion, the faces of most hidden by their baroque helmets, appeared to falter. Then, Kor'sarro saw one scarred face, twisted by malevolence and anger, looking straight at him. It was Nullus.

The two locked glances of sheer hatred for a moment before the spell was broken and the tides of battle surged forth and separated them once more. Kor'sarro bellowed his anger, but his savage cry was drowned out by a new sound, a mighty engine roaring above the raging battle. The ground beneath Kor'sarro's feet trembled violently and the Master of the

Hunt saw the super-heavy tank he had seen from afar was closing on his position, its mighty gun lowered.

As the metal behemoth lumbered forwards the Alpha Legion squads began to disengage from the White Scars, parting one step at a time, their boltguns spitting a constant stream of fire to keep their foes at bay.

‘Mount up!’ Kor’sarro ordered, leaping to the saddle of Moondrakkan and throwing the banner of the Third Company to Brother Temu. The passing of the banner to a new bearer was a moment of great honour, but both men knew there was no time to mark the occasion. Kergis, Temu and Khagus mounted their own bikes and as one the four warriors gunned their engines to life.

‘The mammoth bleeds a thousand deaths,’ Kor’sarro said into the vox-net, describing in battle-cant the manner in which the White Scars would engage the mighty tank. Not even the *Thunderheart* or the heavy weapon-armed Devastator squads carried sufficient firepower to fell this mighty iron beast, but the sons of Chogoris had other ways of bringing down such prey.

The Tactical squads that had dismounted to fight the Alpha Legion were now able to mount their bikes and in moments were by Kor’sarro’s side. The Assault squads screamed overhead, another thirty Space Marines adding their weight to the charge.

Bearing down upon the White Scars as they advanced, the *Ironsoul*’s turrets began to track individual targets. As one, the White Scars formation broke apart into individual squads, robbing the tank of a single victim. A secondary cannon mounted on the tank’s bow opened fire, but the bike squad it had been tracking had predicted the attack and swerved right as the shell split the earth apart. A huge cloud of black dust and smoke rose high into the air and showered soil for dozens of metres all around. Then the multiple heavy bolters mounted at the tank’s bow and

upon sponsons along its flanks opened fire, filling the air with a storm of screaming metal.

The White Scars charged through the fusillade, heads down and shoulders set against the inevitable barrage. The armoured fairings of a dozen bikes were shattered under the weight of the fire but still the riders powered forwards. Heavy bolter shells exploded against the Space Marines' power armour, and while most rounds were stopped by the blessed suits, some were not. In the intense few seconds of the charge, the battle became a kaleidoscope of war. A Space Marine biker was caught by a shell in the joint between chest and upper arm, the shell burying itself in his flesh before exploding and sending his arm cartwheeling off behind. Still the warrior rode on, his armour flooding his system with palliative combat drugs. Another warrior suffered a glancing blow that shattered his helmet's optics. When the White Scar discarded his helmet his face was streaked with blood and one eye was a deep, gaping chasm, yet still the Space Marine continued the charge. Several others were not so fortunate, the weight of fire so great that not even their sanctified armour could withstand it. Their gene-seed and their bodies would be recovered later, Kor'sarro swore, once all this was over.

The *Ironsoul* let loose a blast from its main gun. The gunners had no clear target, for the White Scars were travelling so fast it was not difficult for them to avoid moving into the huge, long-barrelled gun's arc. Yet still the beast could wreak bloody havoc even with an unaimed shot. Fired from a range of only fifty metres, the shell passed over Kor'sarro and his companions before he even had time to register the weapon had fired. The shell screamed a scant ten metres overhead, splitting the air apart with a deafening roar. Kor'sarro felt the air torn from his lungs and the pressure wave batter his body. Only his enhanced physiology kept his lungs from being ripped from his chest.

The shell screamed by Kor'sarro and passed straight through the dispersed formation of an airborne Assault squad. Several of its warriors were sent plummeting to the ground as their jump packs were robbed of air by the drastic pressure change. Moments later the shell struck the ground five hundred metres to the White Scars rear. The explosion was so huge it scattered debris for hundreds of metres all about, but was too far distant to harm any of Kor'sarro's warriors. And then, the White Scars were upon their enemy.

As the bike squads converged upon the *Ironsoul*, they split apart to encircle the towering iron behemoth. At such close range the warriors were better able to avoid the traversing weapons, yet should any have been struck by the hurtling bolts they would surely have been blown to pieces. Drawing on tactics first developed many thousands of years before by the warriors of Chogoris for bringing down huge wild beasts, the White Scars undertook a series of bold charges, the bikers swooping in close to their prey and clamping melta bombs to its guns. Even as the riders slewed away from the still-moving behemoth, the grenades detonated, shattering the heavy bolters and other weapons spitting death from every quarter. Within minutes the *Ironsoul* was all but disarmed, with the exception of its turret-mounted main gun. Yet still it ground onwards, its sheer bulk deadly in itself.

The super-heavy tank would have to be halted, permanently. Gritting his teeth, the Master of the Hunt hunched over Moondrakkan's handlebars and brought his mount alongside the thundering behemoth.

Though the tank was not moving fast, Kor'sarro was painfully aware that one slip would see him ground to a red smear beneath its wide treads or caught up in its running gear and torn to shreds. Tensing every muscle in his body, Kor'sarro waited a heartbeat and then rose in his mount's saddle. Pushing off, he cleared the three metres between bike and tank and grabbed onto a handhold. As if the tank's commander had seen the

manoeuvre, the behemoth swerved hard to its left and Kor'sarro was forced to hold on as his body was thrown violently into the air. Yet his grip was true and the super-dense fibre bundles of his power armour lent him the strength to drag himself up and onto the tank's upper deck.

The horde swarmed kilometres in every direction, the bulk pressing into the huge breach in the wall of the defence installation. The Alpha Legion traitors had fallen back, well clear of the rampaging tank, and Kor'sarro's battle-brothers were pushing on, piling the pressure on the enemy to force them back still further. Kor'sarro noted with a savage grin the number of blue-green-armoured bodies littering the ground about and knew that even if the battle should be lost, the toll on the traitors would have been fearful.

Kor'sarro's attentions were snapped back to the task at hand as a burst of fire stitched across the *Ironsoul's* armoured flank, missing him by scant centimetres. He saw that the Alpha Legion's heavy weapons squads were opening fire on him, reasoning that their weapons would not harm the huge war machine but could tear him to pieces.

Fighting for balance, Kor'sarro located the commander's hatch atop the main turret. He activated his mag-locked boots, which were more often used in zero-grav boarding actions. One heavy step at a time, he worked his way across the bucking deck and up the side of the turret.

More shots thundered in from the traitors' heavy weapons, sending up a riot of sparks and metal fragments which stung his cheeks. Ignoring the pain, Kor'sarro plucked a krak grenade from his belt and with a flick of his thumb set it to a three second delay and activated its mag-clamp. Kor'sarro thrust the grenade onto the hatch, and then ducked below the level of the turret.

The resulting explosion was near deafening, yet even before the smoke had cleared Kor'sarro had thrown himself back over the edge of the turret. Knowing that he would have no space inside the cramped innards of the super-heavy tank to bring Moonfang to bear, Kor'sarro bunched his

gauntlets into fists and dropped down through the wrecked, smoking hatch, fully intent upon rending every traitor crewman inside limb from limb with his bare hands.

Kor'sarro dropped down through the opening, expecting his armoured boots to strike metal deck plating below. Instantly, he knew something was seriously wrong.

Instead of a metal deck beneath his feet, Kor'sarro felt his boots sinking into something soft and yielding. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he looked around for the crew. As he turned, a blur shot across his vision and before he could react a coiling limb lined with a million tiny, rasping hooks had enveloped his entire head and was soon constricting around his windpipe.

Kor'sarro roared his denial, refusing to yield to such a death. His mouth was instantly stuffed full with a hundred questing pseudopods seeking the back of his throat and forcing their way down his gullet. Reacting entirely by instinct, Kor'sarro bit down hard upon the writhing tentacles, severing them as he ground the vile flesh between his teeth. Despite the severing, the pseudopods still thrashed within his mouth, but he could not spit them out for the larger coil which had birthed them was still wrapped tightly across his face.

With a titanic effort of will and strength Kor'sarro gripped the coil in both hands and dragged it clear of his head, spitting out the smaller tentacles the instant he was able. As vision returned he saw that the interior of the tank was not at all what it should have been. Instead of machinery and instrumentation, the *Ironsoul's* innards were a mass of writhing intestinal coils.

Fighting back a wave of sheer revulsion, Kor'sarro glanced upwards and saw the hatchway above him sucking closed, the metal constricting like puckered flesh. All was plunged into darkness and a sickening groan assaulted Kor'sarro's ears. The sound came from all about, the interior

quivering and shaking with its droning. Kor'sarro spat, seeking in vain to clear his mouth of the vile taste the pseudopods had left there. He knew then that he had but two choices. Be consumed in the gut of a daemon-machine, or plunge for its heart and rip it out from within.

Pulling first one foot, then the other from the sucking mass of flesh of the deck, Kor'sarro pressed forwards. No battle drill or tactical meditation could have prepared him for this moment, but Kor'sarro knew the beast inside the *Ironsoul* must have a heart, and if it had a heart it must have a weakness. Judging that such an organ must be located to the rear of the vehicle where otherwise its engine should have been, he turned in that direction and pressed forwards.

Instantly, Kor'sarro felt another writhing tentacle reach out to grasp him, this time about the waist. Though no natural light entered the interior and no artificial source illuminated it, Kor'sarro soon became aware of a lambent red glow emanating from within the very stuff of the coiling limb. That was enough for his genetically enhanced senses. He quickly got his bearings and located the thing that was assaulting him. Reaching for his belt with one hand, Kor'sarro used the other to hold off the coiling loop of flesh. He drew his combat knife and with a savage war cry hewed the flesh in two and the section that was attacking him dropped away with wild, thrashing convulsions.

Kor'sarro plunged onwards. A dozen more of the vile, questing limbs grew from the pulsating, fleshy interior of the tank. The Master of the Hunt felt the wild savagery of his ancestors welling up inside him, reason threatening to desert him as he threw himself forwards. Yet, some part of him was ever aware that to abandon himself to the berserk madness would be to unleash something terrible upon the galaxy. The Stormseers of the White Scars often spoke of the precipice the greatest of warriors sometimes walked along. Some warriors believed themselves strongest if

they resisted the urge to look down, while the truly enlightened knew that to look and to face the truth is the mark of the true warrior.

As he forced himself forwards through walls of heaving flesh, Kor'sarro knew that he was well and truly walking that path right this moment, and to surrender to the berserker within would be to become one with the daemon beast itself.

Kor'sarro hacked all about him with his combat knife, the pulsing wet flesh pressing in against his face. His muscles strained against all-enclosing walls of meat. He bit down upon writhing pseudopods as they sought his throat. And then, with one last heave, he reached the core of the beast of muscle and iron.

In front of him, casting a hellish inner light, was the thundering heart of the daemon war machine.

Bellowing a prayer to Jaghatai Khan, the revered and lost primarch of the White Scars, Kor'sarro drove his combat knife deep into the flesh of the daemon heart. As the blade penetrated, the heart exploded outwards in an eruption of blood and anger. Kor'sarro's world turned in an instant to utter, all-consuming blackness.

Kor'sarro's eyes snapped open and he was instantly awake. He was on his back looking up at the smoke-stained skies of Quintus.

For a moment, not a sound reached Kor'sarro's ears. Then a high-pitched whine arose, turning into a muted roar just audible at the edge of his hearing.

The savage cacophony of battle returned, a torrent of sound breaking upon Kor'sarro's senses.

Kor'sarro was battered but not badly wounded. He was lying on the black ground in front of the walls of the defence installation, and the earth was trembling with the footsteps of tens of thousands of combatants.

Turning his head at last, Kor'sarro's eyes focused on a black form rearing before him, smoke belching from a dozen wounds. Pulling himself

to his feet, Kor'sarro saw that the form was the blasted shell of the *Ironsoul*, the innards blown out at the instant he had destroyed the daemon within.

The act of killing the thing at the heart of the *Ironsoul* must also have thrown him clear, Kor'sarro realised as he shook his head in an attempt to clear it. Looking down at his white and red armour, Kor'sarro noted that he was covered in the viscous fluids exuded by the vile appendages he had fought to reach the daemon's heart, and his armour was black with burns and riven with dents.

Now standing fully upright, the Master of the Hunt saw another figure standing atop the smoking wreck of the *Ironsoul*.

'Spat you out, did she?' Kor'sarro recognised the leering, sibilant voice instantly. It was unmistakably that of Nullus, champion of Voldorius. Kor'sarro reached his right arm across his body and took hold of Moonfang's grip. 'I knew you would come,' Nullus continued. 'I knew you would not let me down, not after my little message on Cernis. What a tireless bloodhound you are...'

'Nullus,' said Kor'sarro, knowing then that Nullus had planted the four-starred shoulder pad so that the White Scars would follow his trail to Quintus. 'Let us end this. Now.'

Nullus's scar-traced visage twisted as he scowled down at Kor'sarro. 'Perhaps it is indeed time, White Scar,' Nullus replied. 'I have hated you for so long, I grow weary.'

Kor'sarro was struck by the depth of the bitterness the Alpha Legionnaire harboured for the White Scars. He had laid his trail, and the Master of the Hunt had followed, and all so that he could enact his bitter vendetta against the sons of Chogoris. The traitor's eyes were deep wells of pure hatred, windows behind which something other than human lurked.

Then it came to Kor'sarro. Perhaps it was his recent proximity to the daemoniac heart of the *Ironsoul*, or maybe it was simple intuition. Perhaps

he had known it all along.

‘Daemon,’ spat Kor’sarro, drawing Moonfang as he hauled himself up a ruined track and onto the rear deck of the wrecked tank.

Nullus stood upon the twisted and blackened foredeck, the smoking hole where the *Ironsoul*’s turret had been blown away separating him from Kor’sarro. The warrior gave a low, guttural chuckle, a sound that no living throat could have issued. ‘You have no idea...’ Nullus growled.

‘And neither do I have any desire to know,’ replied Kor’sarro. ‘Your very existence condemns you.’

‘You really are an arrogant little runt,’ Nullus sneered, his black eyes mocking. ‘So typical of your kind.’

‘Speak not of my people,’ spat Kor’sarro. ‘Even the least of them is above you and your kind.’

‘If only that were so,’ said Nullus. ‘But I have seen your people, more times than you can imagine. I know them well. Better than you, perhaps.’

Heed not the words of the daemon, Kor’sarro told himself, reciting the teachings of old. Do not allow yourself to become entrapped in his web of deceit. ‘Enough!’ Kor’sarro shouted.

‘Your petty existence may well end, hunter,’ Nullus crowed. ‘Mine cannot. I am the whisper upon the night wind that your people call “djinnu”. I am the stealer of maidenhead the priestesses call the “ghall qan”. I am the taint of disease and the dry riverbed at summer’s height. I am all of these things, and many more.’

At Nullus’s words, ancient fears not felt since long before his ascension to the White Scars stirred unbidden in Kor’sarro’s soul. The Alpha Legionnaire was invoking the malevolent spirits of the Chogoran steppes, the beings the tribal shamans spoke of only under the full light of the midday sun. Were they to do so by night they might be dragged screaming into the shadows.

‘You are naught but a liar,’ Kor’sarro replied, raising Moonfang before him and activating the sacred weapon’s power field. ‘You speak plundered words and expect me to quake in fear at your false knowledge of my people.’

‘I know thee,’ Kor’sarro spoke the opening words of the rite of exorcism, ‘filthy as thou art.’

Nullus hissed, his scar-laced features twisting into a hideous mask of anger and bitterness. He brought his black-bladed halberd across his body and whispered profane words of power that Kor’sarro could barely hear, but recoiled from in disgust, to his blade.

The smoking chasm where the *Ironsoul*’s turret had once been yawned between the two combatants. Kor’sarro looked down at the hole, and knew that it was too wide for him to leap easily. He would have to work his way around its perilous edge to engage his enemy.

Nullus leapt high into the air, propelled by something other than mortal strength. The move took Kor’sarro entirely by surprise.

Kor’sarro barely had time to raise Moonfang to parry the inevitable downward blow. But Nullus powered through the air to land directly behind the White Scar.

It was all Kor’sarro could do to raise his blade over his shoulder, utilising by raw instinct a parry used by the steppes nomads of Chogoris when two mounted warriors pass one another at speed, each swinging at the other’s back. Kor’sarro made the parry blind, but instantly felt the jarring impact as Nullus’s weapon struck his own. Before Nullus could strike again, Kor’sarro twisted his body around and at the same instant leapt backwards, passing over the edge of the smoking hole and landing three metres away at its very lip.

Breathing hard, Kor’sarro raised his sacred blade. The weapon’s power field stuttered, as if part of it had been stolen by his opponent’s sorcerous blade, then flashed back to life. The otherwise flawless edge was notched

by Nullus's strike. He took a step backwards, seeking to gain space to manoeuvre, one foot coming perilously close to the hole's edge.

Nullus pressed forwards, his halberd lunging towards Kor'sarro's left shoulder. The strike was easily turned, but Kor'sarro found himself forced backwards still further while Nullus came on.

'Not so sure now, are you, spawn of the cold steppes,' Nullus leered.

Kor'sarro knew well that Nullus sought to anger him in order to gain further advantage. His pride and honour demanded he answer the daemon's jibes, but he forced such notions to the back of his mind as he sought an advantage of his own.

'No?' Nullus crowed. 'You have no proud boast, Scarred One?'

As his opponent pressed forwards again, his black-bladed halberd held ready to strike at any moment, it occurred to Kor'sarro that he might find some advantage in Nullus's tirade. 'What boast would you have me make?' said Kor'sarro.

Nullus chuckled. 'Oh, I don't know,' he answered. 'What of the deeds of your beloved primarch?'

Forcing himself to calm as he allowed his enemy to berate him, Kor'sarro took the brief opportunity to gauge the progress of the larger battle. The traitor horde still surged all around, the White Scars driving a wedge into them. The banner of Third Company waved proudly nearby. The Alpha Legion were advancing upon his brethren and above it all, smoke stained the sky and gunfire stitched the air. Explosions and screams rose on the wind, mingled with the wild outpourings of the cultists and the mournful cries of the traitor militia.

All of this Kor'sarro discerned in but an instant, but there was nothing he could do to influence the strategy of his army. His cold eyes snapped back to his opponent. But in that instant, Nullus had raised his weapon and was making another lunge. There was no time to move, only to bring Moonfang up for another parry. The black halberd struck the base of

Moonfang's blade, and the two combatants matched their strength against one another, before pushing apart and stepping backwards. The blade's power field flickered again, and Kor'sarro offered up a silent prayer that its blessed generator might withstand the halberd's fell sorcery.

In that brief moment of contact, Kor'sarro had gained some measure of Nullus's unnatural strength. The Master of the Hunt had pitted himself against every foe the universe had thrown at him, from tyranid carnifexes to cthellian ursids. The raw power behind that black halberd was as strong as any he had faced.

'Where is your primarch now?' Nullus pressed on, once more seeking to force a mistimed lunge or vengeful strike from Kor'sarro.

'The blessed Great Khan hunts,' Kor'sarro spat, seeking in turn to draw some misjudged response from Nullus. 'He hunts the likes of you.'

Nullus advanced around the rim of the smoking hole in the top of the wrecked *Ironsoul*, Kor'sarro giving ground before him, if unwillingly. The proud banner of the 3rd came into view again, far closer this time. 'How do you know he lives at all?' Nullus sneered. 'Perhaps he just hates that stinking mire you call a home world as much as I did.'

Nullus was turning his tirade back to the subject of the White Scars home world of Chogoris. He had claimed to be the whisper in the night, a spirit feared by many tribes, but vanished from Chogoris since before Jaghatai Khan had united the nations. The words of the Stormseers came once more to his mind...

...and then Nullus lunged forwards again, a mighty two-handed blow coming from nowhere. Kor'sarro dived aside as the black blade arced past. As it closed, the halberd emitted a piercing scream, the sound of a caged predator giving voice to a thousand years of bitterness and torment. The tip of the halberd scored a jagged line across his left shoulder plate, and tore his flowing cloak in two. Power bled from his armour's systems, sucked into the halberd's blade, and Kor'sarro's movements became

sluggish as his actuators whined. Kor'sarro rolled across the wreck's upper deck, pulling himself to his feet upon a buckled and blackened grille that groaned in protest at his weight.

Nullus came on, the halberd scything, its shrill scream growing ever louder. His face was a twisted mass of scar tissue, forming into new and vile configurations as his expressions shifted. Kor'sarro fought with every ounce of his warrior skill and ferocity to fend off the champion of Voldorius, but with each blow, the Master of the Hunt was being pushed back towards the edge.

'He thought he could beat me too,' Nullus sneered. When Kor'sarro gave no reply other than a savage and unanticipated counterattack, he continued. 'He thought he had banished the whisper in the dark, the voices in the night, but he was wrong...'

And then it came to Kor'sarro. The tales the Stormseers told the neophytes. Some believed them simple tales, but Kor'sarro saw now they were anything but myth. 'I know thee...' he said, a new conviction entering his voice.

'Yes,' Nullus replied. 'We've already done that part.'

'Kagayaga,' Kor'sarro spat, stepping backwards to the very edge of the deck.

Nullus stopped dead in his tracks as Kor'sarro spoke the name. It was true, then. The spirit of the dread night, the daemon-thing which Chapter legend stated the Primarch Jaghatai Khan had banished over ten thousand years ago, was real, and standing before him. Perhaps this body, armoured in the mantle of the Alpha Legion, was not Kagayaga, but the thing within it, the blackness behind those eyes, most certainly was, of that he was now sure.

'So,' Nullus sneered, his scarred face split into a wide, leering grin. 'You do know me, after all.'

At that instant, the banner of the Third Company rose fully into view directly behind Nullus. A moment later its bearer, Brother Temu, hauled himself onto the deck. Beside Temu was the newly appointed company champion, Brother Kergis.

‘As you once were banished from Chogoris,’ Kor’sarro called aloud, ‘so you are now banished from Quintus!’

Nullus began to form a mocking response, but the air was split by the sharp report of a bolt pistol round before the words could come forth. Brother Kergis’s pistol sent a bolt-round into the back of Nullus’s head, the round shattering his skull and penetrating deep into his brain. An instant later, the mass-reactive shell detonated.

But Nullus was no ordinary man to be slain so easily. As the shell exploded, the rent flesh of Nullus’s vile face resisted, even though it appeared to stretch and distort. Kor’sarro knew then that the champion of Voldorius was exerting every shred of his power in the effort of reknitting his form, so that he might fight on.

Kor’sarro reached for his belt and drew his bolt pistol. As his strength returned and his armour recovered from the energy drain Nullus’s daemon-blade had inflicted, he raised his arm to draw a bead on the other’s grossly distorted head.

‘For Jhogai,’ said Kor’sarro.

Kor’sarro fired and Nullus could keep his mortal form intact no longer. With a shower of gore, the scarred head came apart, showering all three White Scars with oozing grey matter. At the last, the body of the champion of Voldorius fell to its knees before the champion of Kor’sarro, and then pitched sideways into the smoking hole atop the ruined *Ironsoul*.

‘Filthy as thou art,’ Kor’sarro completed the line of the rite of exorcism, spitting into the hole the body had toppled into.

With the death of Nullus, the Alpha Legionnaires began to fall back towards the walls of Mankarra. The White Scars pressed their attacks, bike

squadrons and Assault squads taking a fearsome toll on their ancient, bitter enemies as they disengaged. When it became clear that the Alpha Legion were a spent force, Kor'sarro ordered his squads to consolidate, for they had become spread out as each pursued its own individual battle against its foes.

The Master of the Hunt stood atop the smoking wreckage of the *Ironsoul* and ordered the banner of the Third Company brought to his side. Banks of black smoke drifted across the battlefield, but as if the Emperor Himself had willed it, they parted as the banner was raised. In that moment, every warrior on the battlefield saw the banner as it waved gloriously from its vantage point. Standing beside it was Kor'sarro, Khan of the Third Company, his white armour streaked with dirt and gore and his lava-wolf pelt cloak ragged and torn as it fluttered in the wind behind him. His face bled from a thousand microscopic cuts and his armour was rent and cracked in a dozen places.

Yet, Kor'sarro appeared to his brotherhood as glorious as any of the Chapter's most revered heroes. He stood straight and proud, as had those greatest of men who had walked at the side of the primarch himself. The White Scars rallied to Kor'sarro and the banner beside him. Within minutes, the Chaplains and Stormseers that had accompanied the strike force stood upon the wrecked tank beside their khan, and almost a hundred battle-brothers gathered all about.

To the enemy, the sight of the banner being raised high above the battlefield was the signal of their own defeat. Kor'sarro appeared to the traitorous horde as being of terrible vengeance sent to bring the Emperor's justice upon them all. Worse still, word of the death of Nullus had spread quickly through the horde. None needed to exaggerate the story with the retelling. The sight of the Alpha Legion breaking off from the fight and falling back on the walls of Mankarra confirmed the worst of their fears. The horde's erstwhile tormentors had abandoned it entirely to the vengeance of the White Scars.

As one, a thousand cultists fell on their knees and a great wailing rose across the battlefield. The White Scars would never know if that dire sound represented a plea for forgiveness or a bemoaning of fate. Even as the White Scars looked on with horror, the assembled cultists began to scourge themselves with chains, hooks, spikes and any other implement that came to hand including the severed limbs of their fellows. The White Scars turned their faces from the vile spectacle, knowing that the wretches were beyond even the mercy of the Emperor of Mankind.

While the cultists surrendered themselves to whatever fate awaited them, the greater number of the horde, the pressed militias, were gripped by sheer, unadulterated terror. These men and women knew they had committed the sin of treachery, for death at the hands of the Alpha Legion would have been an honourable end compared to the fate they had submitted to by allowing themselves to be enslaved.

With the sight of the White Scars banner waving victorious above the black plain, ten thousand traitor militia dropped their weapons and fled for the imagined safety of the walls of Mankarra. As the White Scars looked on in disgust, the fear surged through the horde, passing even to the breach in the wall of defence installation South Nine. In an instant, the tide was turned. The hordes swarming through the breach stalled, a great roar of terror rising to mingle with the wailing of the cultists. Then the direction of movement reversed, and the swarm that had been assaulting the breach was surging away from it.

Inside the walls, Captain Kayvaan Shrike found himself facing not an unstoppable tide of enemies but a rapidly receding torrent of fleeing, panic-stricken traitors. His first instinct was to order his squads to open fire on the enemy as they fled, to gun the foe down without mercy. But Shrike's force had run so dangerously low on ammunition that even when magazines were shared out each warrior had only a single clip remaining.

Reluctantly, Shrike ordered his squads to follow up their routing foe, to ensure none remained, but to allow them to flee unmolested.

Back on the plain, the last of the horde was surging around the wreck of the *Ironsoul* as a raging torrent breaks around a rock. The White Scars too allowed the traitors to flee. Thunderhawks were inbound to extract the squads, rearm them and move them rapidly to their next objective – the walls of Mankarra itself. The strike force's armoured vehicles, the Vindicator siege tank known as *Thunderheart* at their head, were already formed into a spearhead which was arrowing towards the gates of the capital city.

As the Space Marines boarded gunships and Rhinos, the skies above the plain were split by a deafening thunderbolt. A moment later, the last of the battle-brothers embarking in their transports saw what at first appeared to be a storm of meteors falling from the skies high above.

The Ninth Eye, the flagship of Lord Voldorius, had moved into orbit and on its master's order unleashed a fearsome orbit-to-surface bombardment. Warheads the size of tanks streaked from the skies upon black contrails. The first struck the wreckage of the *Ironsoul*, atomising the twisted ruin and blasting a crater ten metres deep and fifty across. But the White Scars were already gone, speeding away in their armoured transports.

The next warhead plunged into the breach in the wall of South Nine, blasting the installation's fortifications wide apart. The Raven Guard too were gone, their next objective already in their sights.

The remainder of the warheads ploughed into the horde seething across the corpse-littered plain towards the walls of Mankarra. In his anger and rage Lord Voldorius had ordered his own slave-troops and deluded followers slaughtered, their deaths serving to quench his vengeance and perhaps bring the favour of the Ruinous Powers of the warp. Dozens of warheads slammed from the skies to obliterate the traitorous horde. So great was the destruction that the walls of Mankarra themselves were

shaken and the speeding gunships bucked violently as blast wave after blast wave overtook them. The paintwork of the White Scars armoured vehicles blistered and blackened as Rhinos, Predators and the *Thunderheart* sped away, hatches sealed tight against the air that burned all around.

The first of the militia troopers to have fled the battlefield were following close behind the retreating Alpha Legion, moaning in terror as the last of the green-blue-armoured warriors passed through the mighty gates of Mankarra and closed them on the horde.

The entire plain was scoured of life. Though the horde of Voldorius had been turned and his champion slain, the warp resounded to the daemon prince's offering of ten thousand souls. The assault on South Nine was ended, but as the Space Marines closed on Mankarra, they knew that the true battle was yet to be fought.



CHAPTER 11

The Beginning of the End

Malya stood in front of the command chamber's huge viewing screen, staring up in sheer disbelief. As explosions blossomed across the screen, their thunderous report sounded from beyond the metres-thick walls of the militia's strategium complex. Lumen-bulbs flickered and the screen went blank, before flashing to life again as small pieces of debris fell from the ceiling to scatter all about.

As the last of the explosions faded, an ominous silence descended upon the chamber. Even the ever-present chatter of the vox-links ceased as every one of the three dozen and more officers in the command chamber stared at the screen.

The full enormity of what she had just witnessed came crashing down upon Malya. When the cultists had fallen at the sight of the Space Marines banner, she had felt vindication, for these men and women were the very lowest of their kind and not fit in her mind to call Quintus their home. But when the militias had turned and fled, Malya had known utter despair. No matter the circumstances of their servitude, these were her people. These were innocent men and women pressed into the service of a despicable tyrant, their only alternative death.

The thousands of militia had turned and stampeded back towards the walls of Mankarra and in their desperation many troopers had been reduced to animals. Hundreds stumbled and were crushed beneath the feet of their comrades. And then, Voldorius had issued the order to *The Ninth Eye* in orbit overhead, and the orbital bombardment had commenced.

As the bombs had fallen in the midst of the fleeing horde, Malya had been wrenched back to the atrocity in the grand square. The crushed bodies still lay where they had died as a grim warning against further rebellion, and it was said that the vilest of the daemon's servants haunted the corpse-strewn centre of the city. It was as if Voldorius was taunting her, making her witness over and over again the terrible deeds he could enact upon her people. Yet still she refused to submit to the total, all-encompassing horror that gibbered in the darkest recesses of her soul. She drew on deeper and deeper reserves of faith, long hidden and built up through a lifetime of devotion and worship. Perhaps others did not heed the words the preachers spoke, but she did, every one of them. Perhaps it was her faith that made Voldorius toy with her so, the daemon prince deriving some unholy sport from the spectacle of one of the faithful being forced to endure such unceasing blasphemies.

At length, the silence was broken as Lord Voldorius spoke. 'Even in their death do they serve.'

None dared look towards their vile master, three dozen pairs of eyes turning downwards towards the floor. Some feigned deference and humility, others were too petrified to do so and collapsed to their knees. Malya stood firm, though a single tear ran slowly down her cheek.

At that moment, Malya's mind was set. She knew the Space Marines needed to know about the prisoner, but she also knew that the Space Marines must soon assault the city walls. She could help. As equerry, she had knowledge of which sections had been fortified and which were still to be reinforced. She would transmit a signal and inform the Space Marines

which gate would fall the quickest, even should it cost her life. She just needed a distraction...

‘Those who recruited the militias shall step forwards,’ Lord Voldorius growled, his low voice sounding like tectonic plates grinding inexorably together.

At first, none responded. Then Voldorius brought himself to his full height and several more of the staff officers collapsed to their knees. Five high commanders stepped forwards.

Lord Colonel Morkis was not amongst them.

All eyes turned to the high commanders, while Voldorius’s own gaze was sweeping the faces of each of the men who had stepped before him. Glancing down to a command terminal by her side, Malya decided that the time to act was now, for she might never have another opportunity. Moving only her right hand, she invoked the rite of communion and awoke the spirit of the vox-terminal. Malya forced her mind to calm in order to recall the transmission code she had used what seemed like months before to contact the Space Marines. She had buried the code deep within her mind, lest it be torn from her under duress and condemn even more innocents to death or torture. Yet, she had never allowed herself to forget the code entirely, some small part of her clinging to the hope that she might have cause to use it one more time. The code sprang instantly to her mind, and Malya entered it into the terminal and began to compose in her mind the message she must send.

Meanwhile, Lord Voldorius was looming down upon the officers.

‘Which of you shall bear the responsibility for this?’

Again, none dared answer.

‘I have promised such power,’ Voldorius grated. ‘And yet you have failed me at this first test.’

When still none of the officers responded, Voldorius moved his vast, armoured bulk to the end of the line and looked down upon the first

officer. He was the official in charge of the muster of the city's militia in times of emergency. He stood erect, his ornate, gold-trimmed uniform bedecked with medals and symbols of rank. His white-bearded face was set in a grim mask, his eyes fixed with steely determination.

'Lord Kline,' Voldorius growled. 'The enemy closes upon the gates and you are responsible for the muster. Where is it?'

The muster was scattered to ashes across the black plains beyond the city walls. Clearly, Voldorius sought to intimidate the man. When a minute had crawled past and no response was given, Voldorius turned to face the next man along, General Orson, the official whose responsibility was to formulate doctrine and instill it in the militias.

'You,' said Voldorius, his bestial, cragged face closing on General Orson's. The man wore the same uniform as Kline and his chest was decorated with even more medals. Orson's face was dominated by a bushy moustache and his eyes were set dead ahead. Yet a dark stain spreading down one leg spoke of the turmoil seething within the man's soul at the proximity of the daemon prince. So few were able to withstand the daemon's presence at all. It must only have been because these men had promised themselves to his service that they were able to withstand the sheer malevolence he radiated, and clearly, that was now breaking down.

Voldorius snorted in disgust, the blast of foul air causing General Orson's medals to clink, then moved along the line to the city's Quartermaster General.

'Ackenvol,' Voldorius continued. 'Did you not have all that your heart desired? Did the forges not manufacture everything you demanded, and more?'

Quartermaster General Ackenvol was a stout man, and taller by far than any of his peers. Perhaps alone amongst the planetary guard's high command, Ackenvol had earned the dozens of medals he wore, making him something of a totem amongst the militia armies. He had served in the

Imperial Guard, rising from lowly rank to high office throughout the course of a distinguished career, before being posted to Quintus to oversee the Officio Munitorum's arms procurement mission there.

'They did,' Ackenvol responded. 'But it was not enough.'

Malya decided upon the message she must transmit, but she could not risk entering it yet, for the chamber had fallen to such utter silence that even the gentlest of keystrokes would ring out like thunder.

Then, the silence was broken as Voldorius emitted a low, baleful rumble from deep within his armoured chest. The sound was one of animal fury, barely contained, and many in the chamber visibly faltered as it struck their ears. Violent retribution seemed to hang frozen in the air, but to Malya's surprise it did not descend upon the Quartermaster General. Instead, Voldorius moved further along the line, to stand before Lord Colonel Lannus.

'You promised such glories in my name,' said Voldorius as he leaned in to stand over the thin, ascetic officer. 'You claimed you would lay a million skulls before my throne. You said you would turn the plains into oceans of blood.'

'Where are your boasts now, lord colonel?' asked Voldorius, his voice so low its bass rumble was felt more than heard.

Lannus was visibly shaken, sweat pouring from his brow and his face drained of colour. Yet somehow, the lord colonel maintained his dignity even in the face of the daemon prince's obvious displeasure.

Voldorius lingered a moment longer, before passing to the last of the officers that had dared step before him.

'Elenritch,' Voldorius addressed the lord colonel. 'Your sin has caused this.'

Elenritch glanced sidelong towards the huge screen and the scene of utter devastation it relayed. Slowly, he shook his shaven head, the eldritch tattoos etched across his temples seeming to writhe with the movement.

‘You gainsay my word, mortal?’ Voldorius said, bringing himself to his full height.

‘I...’ the lord colonel said, his control remarkable given the circumstances. ‘I cannot take sole blame, my lord.’

‘That much is true,’ the daemon prince replied. ‘But the *Ironsoul* was your responsibility.’

‘I could not have...’ Elenritch started.

‘The seals were clearly insufficient!’ Voldorius bellowed, causing the officers before him and everyone in the command chamber to cringe before the force of his voice. ‘All were insufficient!’

Though Malya’s mind reeled before the psychic backwash of the daemon’s wrath, she forced herself to key her message into the terminal while she had the chance. She would not have much time to compose a detailed communication, so she committed only the bare facts to her transmission. The tertiary gate in wall section twelve, minimal fortification...

Risking the extra few seconds it would take to input, Malya confirmed that Voldorius had the prisoner the Space Marines had demanded to know of, and described his location in the holding cells adjacent to the Cathedral of the Emperor’s Wisdom.

Malya was interrupted as Voldorius growled, ‘Morkis.’

The chamber fell to shocking silence once more, the only sound that of the banks of cogitators churning in the background. Malya looked around to see that all heads were turned towards Lord Colonel Morkis. A cold dread settled across the assembled staff.

‘My lord?’ Morkis replied.

‘Why,’ Voldorius rumbled, ‘do you not take your place amongst these fools?’

‘I was not...’ Morkis began, glancing across at Malya then stammering to a halt. Clearly, there was no answer he could give that would exonerate

any of them.

‘Who then?’ Voldorius replied, his voice low and dangerous.

‘My lord?’ said Morkis.

‘Who then,’ Voldorius growled, ‘is responsible?’

‘My lord,’ Morkis replied, casting a hateful stare at Malya. ‘I do not...’

‘Name he who is responsible!’ Voldorius roared. Several of the staff officers looking on collapsed to the floor before the torrent of rage that assailed all in the chamber. Malya decided that the message she had composed would have to be sufficient, for she might not have any longer to finish it. It remained only for her to direct the machine-spirit to ready the message for transmission.

Now Lord Colonel Morkis brought himself to his full height, his eyes narrowing and his face taking on a hateful scowl. As Voldorius waited, Morkis scanned the line of officers drawn up before their master.

Quartermaster General Ackenvol took a step forwards, before General Orson’s hand grabbed his elbow and restrained him with a sharp gesture. ‘Filth!’ Ackenvol spat at Morkis. ‘Nothing but a highborn dilettante with delusions of glory!’

Morkis sneered at Malya, then turned his attentions fully towards the Quartermaster General. Morkis stepped forwards, falteringly at first but, when Voldorius made no reply, with more purpose. Then he stood before Ackenvol, who scowled down at the lord colonel with utter contempt writ large across his face.

‘I name Quartermaster General Ackenvol,’ Morkis announced to the entire chamber. ‘He is responsible.’

‘Then kill him.’ Voldorius said.

‘What?’ Lord Colonel Morkis uttered.

‘Kill him,’ Voldorius repeated. ‘Or die in his place.’

Malya could barely tear her eyes away from the scene unfolding before her, but she forced herself to glance furtively down at the vox-terminal.

The machine was processing her message, applying the blessed ciphers and readying it for transmission. Part of her could scarcely believe that with the Space Marines closing on the walls of Mankarra, Voldorius would divert his attentions in such a manner. Another part of her accepted it as entirely typical of the fell being's heinous demeanour. She was thankful she could not comprehend the ways of the daemon prince. It confirmed to her that she was still human, and an innocent.

In the centre of the chamber Lord Colonel Morkis was drawing an ornate, gold-chased laspistol from a holster at his belt. Quartermaster General Ackenvol's eyes never left the face of the lord colonel, even as the weapon was raised to point directly at his chest. The Quartermaster General might have been a traitor, but he faced death if not with honour then with nobility at least.

'Morkis,' interjected Lannus as Morkis's finger tightened on the trigger of his pistol. 'You needn't—'

Morkis jerked the laspistol towards Lannus and a searing white blast spat out. The shot caught the other man in the side of the head, vaporising half of his skull in an instant.

Lannus's body crashed backwards into a group of staff officers, who stumbled away from it in disgust as blood and gore splattered their uniforms.

Morkis was warming to his new role as Voldorius's executioner, a wicked sneer creasing his sly face. The sound of Voldorius's low, grating chuckle filled the command chamber.

Even before Lannus's body had hit the floor, Morkis had snapped the laspistol back to bear on the Quartermaster General. Ackenvol had not moved. He was too proud to squirm before the vengeful Morkis.

'Would not that weapon be put to better use blowing your own sorry excuse for a brain to atoms?' said the Quartermaster General.

The laspistol quivered in Morkis's hand and his face twisted into an animalistic sneer. 'My dear Quartermaster General,' said Morkis. 'I'm going to save you...'

The laspistol swung rapidly to the left and a second blast filled the chamber. The shot took Lord Colonel Elenritch square in the chest, punching a hole straight through his torso. The officer stood for a moment, his face displaying an expression not of shock, but of outrage. Then the lord colonel crumpled to a heap upon the chamber floor and the laspistol swung around to point at Lord Kline, the Marshal-in-Chief of the Muster.

'...until last,' Morkis finished, his eyes now shining with cold madness.

Malya dared risk a glance at the vox-terminal, and saw with relief that the machine-spirit had completed its ministrations and was ready to transmit her message. She would have to judge the moment of transmission carefully, lest she be discovered at the very last.

Kline stood as erect as Ackenvol, prepared to face his death and stoically refusing to cower before his executioner. General Orson however, made a sudden dash towards one of the chamber portals. He was dead, a smoking hole in his back, before he had gone three steps.

Still Malya's finger hovered over the transmission rune.

'If Ackenvol is last,' Morkis sneered at Lord Kline, 'then you must be next, my lord marshal.'

'Whichever of us you kill,' said Ackenvol, 'the other shall have vengeance.'

'Oh really?' sneered Morkis, levelling his weapon at the Quartermaster General's head. 'Then it'll have to be you!'

Morkis fired, and Ackenvol's head snapped backwards, a searing hole burned between his eyes. At the very same instant, Lord Kline threw himself forwards, closing the gap before Morkis could bring his pistol to bear on him. Malya saw her chance and depressed the transmission rune, instructing the vox-terminal to send her message.

Kline barrelled into Lord Colonel Morkis, bellowing an incoherent roar of anger and vengeance. The two men crashed to the floor and as one the assembled staff officers sprang backwards. The daemon prince had turned his back on the spectacle and was making for the exit as a shot rang out in the centre of the command chamber. Lord Kline was astride Morkis, his hands gripped around the other's throat. Lord Colonel Morkis, Malya saw with not a little pleasure, had been throttled to death. But Morkis had unleashed a final blast of his laspistol, blowing Kline's stomach away, its contents spilling across the lord colonel even as he died.

Then, the body of Lord Kline collapsed atop that of Lord Colonel Morkis. Three dozen terrified faces turned towards Lord Voldorius as he halted at the chamber door and turned to face the command staff.

'All here have failed me,' Voldorius growled. His fell gaze swept the entire chamber and then alighted upon Malya. 'Or betrayed me.'

Malya knew in that moment that she would soon die. She welcomed it. Her soul yearned to flee her body, to be rid of the vile taint of the warp that Voldorius exuded. She shed her despair and stood proud and tall before her tormentor, awaiting the death she knew must be at hand.

Voldorius stepped forwards, his gaze locked upon Malya, his nostrils flaring as he breathed hard.

'Do it!' Malya said, feeling suddenly free. She had done her duty, sent the message that would bring about the deliverance of her people. Now, she could die.

Voldorius loomed over Malya, pressing as close as he had to any of the senior officers whose bodies were now scattered across the floor. His face closed on hers, every bestial detail filling her vision. Still, Malya refused to cower, knowing only the grace of the Emperor, at whose table she would soon be seated.

'Do you believe,' said Voldorius, his breath a caustic gale in Malya's face, 'that I would cast you aside so casually?'

Malya closed her eyes, blocking out the sight of the daemon prince's terrible visage. She felt Voldorius stir before her, and screwed her eyes tighter shut.

‘Well you may fall silent, equerry’ said Voldorius. ‘But you shall continue to serve. Of that you can be certain.’

Then Malya's soul was assailed by a tide of force, and she was cast violently to the floor. She could not open her eyes, so powerful was the torrent, which she knew in that moment was the very stuff of Voldorius's rage and evil pouring from him in palpable waves. Screams echoed around her, accompanied by the sickening crack of splintering bones and the wet impact of chunks of bloody flesh being scattered across the chamber.

She felt her own body being torn in multiple directions at once by the unadulterated evil of Lord Voldorius. But she resisted the onslaught, drawing on impossibly deep wells of faith.

Then all fell silent. Malya found herself prostrate upon a blood-slick floor, panting for breath. She was stunned but to her amazement she was still alive.

Malya opened her eyes to find Lord Voldorius looming over her. She was drenched in blood, her black equerry's robe tattered and torn to shreds.

A drop of liquid fell upon her face and Malya looked upwards towards the chamber ceiling. It took her eyes a moment to focus, but when they did, Malya realised that the liquid was blood. The entire ceiling was coated in a glistening sheen of crimson. Congealing rivulets dripped down to the floor of the chamber.

Every surface of the command chamber had been turned dark red. She gasped as the full enormity of what had occurred struck her. Aside from the blood, there was no sign of the dozens of staff officers that had occupied the chamber scant moments before. Not even a shard of broken bone remained.

‘Now, equerry, your true service begins’ said Voldorius. ‘You shall know the truth, and it shall set you free.’

‘I will not—’ she began.

‘You have not the choice,’ Voldorius interjected. ‘The Bloodtide refuses to serve, and so you shall do so in its stead.’

Voldorius studied Malya, his eyes narrowing to black slits. His nostrils flared as he breathed and his mouth split into a feral grin, razor-sharp teeth glinting in the red light. ‘The prisoner defied me, and refused to unleash the power of the Bloodtide in my name.’

Malya’s head swam as her mind was filled with frozen, staccato images and fragments of forbidden knowledge. The silver-bodied prisoner treading a landscape of flensed bones. Voldorius as a mortal ordering the prisoner to unleash the Bloodtide. A city drowning as every one of its citizens bled out. The skies above a feral world burning as an entire Imperial Navy Fleet plummeted through the atmosphere. A forge world of the Adeptus Mechanicus, its population dead, but its machineries grinding on for centuries before anyone noticed. Voldorius again, his mortal body changing to his daemonic form as the powers of the warp granted him his reward. The prisoner set within the brass orb that was its cell, to sleep until its powers were restored and the Bloodtide would rise again...

Then the images ceased and realisation came to Malya. ‘The prisoner defies you...’

‘But you,’ said Voldorius, his face lowering to the level of Malya’s, ‘shall not.’

‘No!’

‘You shall take the Bloodtide into you,’ Voldorius pressed. ‘You shall be the contaminator hive, the angelic host. You have shown by your resistance and fortitude that you can withstand the Bloodtide, as I knew when first I saw you in the grand square.’

‘No,’ Malya repeated.

‘Your faith shall be your undoing, Malya L’nor,’ said Voldorius. ‘Within you is a flame that refuses to be quenched. You have burned, but you have not been consumed. And so you prove to me your worthiness to host the Bloodtide!’

‘Now sleep,’ said Voldorius, and Malya’s world grew dark before his fell influence. ‘When you awaken, you shall be mine.’

‘Captain Shrike,’ Techmarine Dyloss called over the roar that filled the interior of the Thunderhawk gunship. ‘Priority transmission, cipher delta delta nine.’

‘You are certain?’ Shrike replied, turning in his grav-couch to look the Techmarine in the eye. Dyloss simply nodded.

‘It’s a transmission from within the city, brother-captain. It’s her.’

The cipher told Shrike that the message was genuine. He had supplied Malya L’nor several different ciphers, so that should she be compelled to betray the Space Marines she could indicate it by her choice of codes without her torturer’s knowledge.

Shrike indicated that the Techmarine should continue.

‘The message indicates that the tertiary gate,’ he looked at a data-slate and went on, ‘gate sigma by our designation, is not fully fortified.’

‘Then that shall be our target,’ said Shrike.

‘There is more, Shadow Captain,’ the Techmarine continued. ‘The prisoner. It is there after all. She has transmitted its location.’

Shrike nodded slowly, before answering. ‘Inform Kor’sarro of gate sigma.’

‘That is all?’ the Techmarine said.

‘That is all,’ Shrike answered. ‘Take us in.’



CHAPTER 12

The Gates of Mankarra

Kor'sarro sped across the volcanic plain, closing on the towering walls of Mankarra. As the White Scars neared the walls, row upon row of severed heads became visible mounted on spikes along the summit, evidence, if any more were needed, of the evil of Lord Voldorius.

The Master of the Hunt had deployed his force into a classic arrowhead formation with himself and his Command squad at the very tip. Dozens of White Scars bikers were arrayed to either side, and behind them came the armoured vehicles, clouds of black dust thrown up in their wake.

Those squads that had been exfiltrated from the battlefield by Thunderhawk had soon rejoined their bike- and armoured-vehicle-borne brethren, while the Raven Guard's gunships soared overhead. Both Chapters were closing on a single target – the gate Shrike's informant had directed them to attack.

The Raven Guard gunships swept overhead and banked as they came into range of the defence towers on either side of the gate. As the distance to the wall decreased the gate's poor state and lack of maintenance became evident. Lengths of the massive wall had been strengthened by the addition of armour plating and gun positions. Those who enacted the will

of Voldorius were ill-schooled in the arts of fortification. Or perhaps they simply lacked the resources and time to fully prepare for the assault that even now descended upon the walls of Mankarra.

The gate was faced in cast bronze and glowed as if aflame as it reflected the orange light of Quintus's sun. The twenty metre-tall portal displayed a devotional scene, heroic warriors of the Emperor fighting the barbaric greenskins. It was a reminder of the primary role of the planet as a bulwark against the xenos filth that swarmed across nearby systems. It was tragic that the defenders should have been turned to the service of the Great Enemy and must now be laid low by their erstwhile allies.

As the range closed still further, the Raven Guard's gunships banked as they swept around the defence towers. Las and autocannon fire spat upwards to engage the Thunderhawks. But the gunners were either panicked or so poorly trained and led that few shots came close enough to worry Shrike's pilots.

'*Thunderheart!*' Kor'sarro called into the vox-net. The siege tank ground forwards, flanked protectively by the brotherhood's Predator tanks. 'To the fore!'

Kor'sarro and his Command squad veered to the right and slowed to a halt before the walls. Within moments, the entire arrowhead was arrayed likewise and the armoured vehicles were pushing through the gap in the formation.

With so many gun positions mounted on the walls, Kor'sarro felt terribly exposed in that moment. Even as the feeling sank in, they began to open fire on the now stationary White Scars. 'Now would be good, Shrike,' Kor'sarro growled.

As if in answer, the skies overhead erupted as two-dozen hellstrike missiles were unleashed by the Raven Guard's gunships. The missiles streaked through the air upon churning contrails and slammed into their

targets. The summits of both defence towers burst into flame, showering the black plains all around with razor-sharp shards of rockcrete.

‘The beast roars,’ Kor’sarro spoke the command as the *Thunderheart* approached the mighty bronze gates. Desultory fire spat down upon the siege tank, but without the defence towers there was little the defenders could do to oppose *Thunderheart*’s approach.

The siege tank ground to a halt almost directly in front of the gate, a storm of small-arms fire erupting against its frontal armour. At such close range, there was little need to even aim the huge cannon mounted in its prow. Another few seconds ground past, and then the cannon roared.

As *Thunderheart* fired, a great black cloud of dust went up from all around the siege tank. Kor’sarro actually saw the siege shell propelled from the cannon and arcing towards the gates. Instead of velocity, the shell relied on sheer explosive force to penetrate its target, containing a destabilised fusion core that when forced to a critical reaction would destroy almost any target within a highly localised area.

The shell struck the gate and detonated on impact. A ball of orange fire flashed into existence one moment and was gone the next, unleashing a thunderous roar and a blistering wave of heat. Where the shell struck, the gate suffered a near-perfectly circular wound, great runnels of liquefied bronze seeping down its surface and distorting the image of the Emperor’s warriors battling the orks.

Far above, the Raven Guard gunships swooped in for another pass at the defence towers as anti-air defence fire lanced towards them from positions further away. Another dozen hellstrike missiles streaked from their mountings beneath the gunships’ stubby wings, and yet more of the towers were engulfed in flame.

At the same moment that the second salvo of hellstrikes struck the towers, the *Thunderheart* spoke again. The second siege shell smashed into the gates, the gunner targeting a point lower down than his first shot.

Again, the orange ball of nucleonic fire erupted into being and an instant later collapsed in upon itself, leaving a second wound that bled runnels of liquid bronze.

The second attack sent trails of incandescent plasma spitting from the wounds and licking its surface. The battling figures of men and orks melted hideously into one another. The *Thunderheart*'s mighty cannon lowered still further as the gunner prepared for a third shot.

The next shell struck the lower portion of the gates, which had been so weakened by the preceding impacts that they could not withstand another pounding. Searing nuclear fire erupted at their base, and in an instant the entire bronze structure was vaporised into a rapidly expanding ball of plasma. Impossible energies engulfed the entire portal, and what remained of the two flanking defence towers sagged as rockcrete melted and ran like lava.

Kor'sarro felt the searing heat on his face. He could only imagine what devastation was being wrought upon the defenders stationed behind it and on the walls nearby. Only cinders would mark their passing.

With a grinding crack, the arch above the gateway collapsed, ragged chunks of rockcrete the size of armoured vehicles crashing downwards into the now open portal. For an instant, squat, bunker-like structures and defence towers of the city were visible beyond the gates. But the sight was soon obscured as a vast column of black dust and smoke belched outwards, choking the entire portal and the area before it.

'White Scars,' Kor'sarro bellowed. 'Charge!' He had no need to use the Chapter's battle-cant, for no other action was possible. Dozens of engines roared to life as one and the White Scars powered towards the gate.

The defence towers were collapsing even as Kor'sarro bore down on the dust-choked, rubble-strewn portal. The Master of the Hunt judged the rate at which the ruined towers were falling and estimated where they would collapse.

Gritting his teeth, he sped onwards, and as he closed to within fifty metres of the portal, the towers struck the ground, disintegrating with explosive force.

Kor'sarro and his warriors were engulfed in a sea of black dust, but not a single warrior faltered. The entire Third Company followed their captain into the churning black cloud in front of the ruined gateway. Visibility was reduced to practically zero and the ground shook with the impact of the towers collapsing. Steering Moondrakkan through the cloud was an impressive feat in itself, one that only a nomad son of the Chogoran steppes could accomplish. Chunks of rockcrete shrapnel the size of fists ricocheted in all directions, some striking the Space Marines, yet still the White Scars rode on. Kor'sarro's nose and mouth became blocked with dust and he was forced to narrow his eyes to mere slits lest they become clogged so badly that he could not see at all. Still he rode on, leading the brotherhood through the gates of Mankarra, the unerring sense of direction of the Chogoran leading him through.

Moondrakkan's front wheel struck something jagged, which disintegrated with a sharp crack. Soon the ground beneath the bike's wheels became uneven, though the smoke and dust was so dense Kor'sarro could not see the surface in front of him.

And then, Kor'sarro was through the darkness and roaring out of the portal. In front of him was the city, every one of its squat buildings resembling an enormous bunker, complete with gun positions, needle-thin observation towers and bristling communications gear. The streets in between the buildings were cast in deep shadow, and with surprise Kor'sarro realised that the sun was already well on its way towards the horizon. The battle had been raging for many hours, but it was far from over.

'Kor'sarro to all commands,' the Master of the Hunt said into the vox-net as Moondrakkan prowled onwards. 'Voldorius defiles the cathedral at

the heart of the city. Slay all who oppose you, but leave the vile one for me. His head is mine.'

As the smoke cleared, the ground beneath Moondrakkan's wheels was revealed as a jagged, broken and uneven mass. Slewling to a halt some fifty metres beyond the portal so that his forces could consolidate, Kor'sarro realised what it was that made the surface so uneven. Every square metre of the ground behind the portal was carpeted in bones, and the air was laced with the taint of burnt meat. The plasma storm touched off by the third of *Thunderheart's* siege shells must have engulfed far more than the gate and defence towers. By Kor'sarro's estimation, an entire battalion of troops – most likely the indentured militia – had been mustered to defend the gates should they be forced.

Over a thousand militia troopers had been incinerated when the plasma storm had been triggered, reduced in seconds to blackened bones. It was no death for a warrior, but at least it would have been mercifully brief. And then a wave of revulsion hit Kor'sarro – the militia were traitors, even if they were pressed into service against their will. Perhaps their incineration was a merciful judgement. Perhaps it was more than they deserved.

Behind Kor'sarro, more White Scars bikers emerged through the churning smoke, the wheels of their mounts ploughing great furrows through the jagged carpet of bones. Then the growling of mighty engines echoed from the portal and the *Thunderheart* ground forwards, its commander, Brother-Sergeant Kia'kan, visible as he rode in the command cupola. The Master of the Hunt raised an arm, and the siege tank came to a halt not far behind him.

'My congratulations, brother-sergeant,' Kor'sarro shouted above the roar of the siege tank's engines and dozens of idling bikes nearby. 'Your deeds shall be recounted at the Hall of Skies upon our return to Chogoris.'

The tank commander's eyes glowed with fierce pride as he brought his right arm across his chest in salute to his khan. 'My thanks, brother-captain,' said Kia'kan, grinning as he spoke. 'I must admit, the final shot was far more impressive than I had anticipated!'

'Aye,' said Kor'sarro. 'The primarch was with us, for sure.'

'Blessed be his name,' said the sergeant. 'What now, my khan?'

'Now,' Kor'sarro replied, nodding towards the mighty horde mustering in the distance. 'We fight.'

As Kor'sarro mustered his brotherhood to strike the gathering defenders of Mankarra, high above the city, Captain Shrike was coordinating an assault of his own. At his order, a dozen Thunderhawk gunships bearing the black and white livery of the Raven Guard banked high over the walls, before each sped off towards its own pre-designated target.

One gunship was tasked with an assault against the city's central strategium, the huge, armoured structure that housed the planetary militia's command chamber. Another strafed the city's primary communications node, unleashing a fusillade of hellstrike missiles that brought the hundred metre-tall mast crashing down upon the buildings below. A third gunship deployed a contingent of Devastator squads equipped with heavy multi-meltas, which they unleashed against the main generatorium. The city's defences would be forced to rely on secondary sources in the battle against the Space Marines.

Almost every one of the city's buildings was defended by rooftop gun positions, sporting an array of heavy stubbers and autocannons augmented by the occasional lascannon. The Raven Guard gunships strafed every one as they roared overhead, shredding the exposed gunners in a lethal hail of mass-reactive heavy bolter rounds. The few defenders that survived these attacks were cut down as Raven Guard Assault Marines deployed from the gunships, falling upon the traitors as vengeful angels from heaven. Within minutes, a dozen battles were being fought across the most strategically

valuable of the heavily fortified structures. Walkways connecting neighbouring buildings became the scenes of desperate and bloody battle for control of the upper levels.

Each Raven Guard squad was as an army in itself. Fighting within the confines of the fortified buildings, individual Space Marines slaughtered entire platoons of the enemy, for the environment forced the defenders to face them one at a time in a supremely unequal struggle. Even when a Space Marine fell in desperate close quarters battle, he took dozens of the enemy with him. Soon, panic was spreading as garbled pleas for aid drowned out all other traffic on the defenders' vox-nets. Terror spread until the entire defence stood upon the brink of utter collapse.

Having secured the rooftops of the most important structures, the Raven Guard began their descent. The defenders were trapped between the anvil of the White Scars ground assault and the hammer of the Raven Guard's aerial attacks. The defenders were faced with three, equally lethal options – stand against the terrible vengeance descending from above, leave their fortified positions and face the White Scars, or cower inside the buildings and await their inevitable deaths.

Circling overhead in his command gunship, Captain Shrike coordinated each battle, communicating with his squad sergeants and ensuring that each desperate, bloody skirmish contributed to the success of the whole. Squads were redeployed with masterful tactical awareness, specialists despatched to where they were needed the most, and ammunition levels constantly monitored and balanced. Throughout it all, Shrike kept his force's most lethal weapon – himself – in reserve, ever vigilant for the moment when he and his Command squad would be needed to turn the tide of battle. As Shrike looked down from his gunship's cockpit, he caught sight of the White Scars as they closed upon the mighty horde beyond the gate, and knew that moment would soon come.

The White Scars charge against the massed horde was not led by Kor'sarro's bikers but, due to the narrow space between the buildings, by the Predator battle tanks. Though not as fast or manoeuvrable as the bike squads, the tanks were equipped with a fearsome array of anti-personnel weapons, which they unleashed in a storm of mass-reactive rounds as they advanced forwards across the bone-strewn ground.

The horde of militia troopers the White Scars charged towards were being pushed forwards by some agency Kor'sarro could not yet discern. Though not so numerous as the horde the Space Marines had encountered on the plains in front of the defence installation, this group still outnumbered the Space Marines by scores to one.

The Predators set about evening those odds.

As the tanks opened fire, the entire front rank of the horde simply evaporated. Those struck in the torso exploded, their ragged limbs arcing high into the air. Within seconds, scores of the traitor militia were dead, reduced to chunks of steaming meat scattered about the ground or splattered across their compatriots. Yet amazingly, the horde did not falter, but surged forwards to meet the White Scars head on.

With a near deafening roar that seemed to Kor'sarro equal parts despair and rage, several thousand militia troopers pressed forwards, running into the fusillade of shells that filled the air between them and the Predators. Spent shells poured from the tanks' ejection ports in a constant stream as dozens of rounds were expended every second.

Kor'sarro had witnessed even warlike orks fall back in the face of such a barrage. He had known tyrannid bio-organisms, bred for nothing but war, to falter against such a weight of firepower. He had seen only two types of foe continue forwards against such odds. On the third moon of Woebetide, whilst serving as a Scout many decades before, he had faced an Enslaver plague, and watched as ten thousand mind-slaved meat puppets, each formally a stoic Cadian shock trooper, were compelled by their alien masters to cross a minefield a hundred kilometres deep into the combined

fire of the White Scars, Red Hunters and Celestial Lions Chapters. The other occasion had been on Delta Arbuthnot, when a potent, alpha-level psyker had forced an entire planetary population of ratling agri-serfs to rise up against the landowners in an orgy of bloodshed, even though they were armed with no more than shovels and their foes with automatic weapons.

Without a doubt, Quintus was irredeemably under the heel of the Ruinous Powers. The insidious taint of the warp was everywhere, even in the air itself. Voldorius must have supplanted the government generations earlier, and only revealed his hand when Kor'sarro's hunt had run him to ground and left him nowhere else to hide. The militia troopers must have been born into the service of Chaos, and raised with its yoke around their neck, even if they had no idea of the true identity of their leaders. What a rare thing true faith must be in such a place, for surely it must have been stamped out the moment it was discovered.

The tide of the militia ploughed on, the troopers treading the bodies of their fallen companions into the ground as they ran. Part of Kor'sarro came to believe that the spectacle before him was mass suicide, the unwilling traitors martyring themselves upon the White Scars guns that their treachery and their suffering might be ended. Perhaps Quintus might not be worth saving at all once this all was over. Should he survive to claim the head of Voldorius, Kor'sarro might order the *Lord of Heavens* to annihilate Mankarra and the other cities, cleansing the world of the taint of Chaos once and for all.

The first wave of the traitors hit the White Scars lines. The last dozen or so metres saw nine out of every ten militia troopers gunned down, but when the survivors got to within a few metres of the tanks' weapons, the crew could no longer pick out their targets. The militia scrambled up the Predators' hulls to assail the armoured vehicles with whatever weapons they had to hand, from grenades and guns to fists and clubs.

‘Kergis!’ Kor’sarro motioned the company champion forwards as a wave of militia swarmed up the front of the Predators. Kergis bounded onto the rear deck of the nearest vehicle. In an instant, the champion was face to face with a militia sergeant who was desperately trying to pry open the turret hatch with an improvised crowbar. The two leaders sized one another up. Then a chainsword flashed, and the two halves of the traitor sergeant’s body fell to the ground on either side of the tank.

A dozen more of the troopers clawed their way up the tank’s frontal glacis plate. One was firing an autopistol at point-blank range into the driver’s vision block, emptying an entire magazine in a couple of seconds. The act had little effect, for the driver’s sights were constructed of thick armoured glass, made to stand up to far stronger attacks. Another trooper was ramming a grenade into one of the four exhaust units on the side of the vehicle, an action that could feasibly damage the tank’s engine systems. Kergis drew his bolt pistol, and exploded the man’s head with a single, almost point-blank shot.

The troopers died as more of Kor’sarro’s warriors opened fire. Sparks flew as bolter rounds exploded or ricocheted from the armour after ripping devastatingly through traitor flesh. The vehicle’s white livery ran red with the blood of the enemy, and no militia troopers were left alive within twenty metres. Along the line the other Predators were likewise cleared of the enemy, freeing the tanks to concentrate their own fire on the horde of traitors still surging forwards.

In seconds, no more traitors remained. The ground in front of the White Scars was a charnel plain of broken and shattered bodies. The sudden cessation of shouting and gunfire was almost shocking, allowing the other sounds of the war-torn city to press in. From overhead came the roar of a Thunderhawk’s mighty engines, and still more of the gunships could be heard further out. Explosions spoke of hellstrike missiles pummelling

their targets from afar, while the sharp crack of boltgun fire told of the rooftop battles the Raven Guard were even now winning.

The route ahead would not remain clear of enemies for long, and the brotherhood was soon under way again. As before, the Predators led the way, their turrets scanning back and forth. The force passed the area strewn with the blackened bones of the enemies caught in the plasma fires unleashed when the gate fell. Soon, however, the White Scars found the ground so covered with the remains of those gunned down by the Predators that the tanks had to grind a path through the bodies which the bikers and other units followed. Kor'sarro had witnessed many grisly sights throughout his years of service, but riding through a mire of blood and body parts was amongst the more unpleasant.

Finally, the ground up ahead cleared of corpses and the force spread out. Consulting Moondrakkan's command terminal, Kor'sarro oriented himself with his objective, the Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom, where Shrike's contact had suggested Voldorius and his mysterious prisoner were waiting.

The terminal displayed a two-dimensional map of this part of the city. Up ahead lay a large, open area labelled as the grand square. Kor'sarro ordered the bike squads to press on towards it at full speed. The slower Predators and other vehicles followed up behind, dealing with any serious resistance by using their heavy weapons.

Soon, the force was closing on the grand square. A sturdy barricade had been erected at the end of the street and the White Scars prepared to engage more militia troopers. But the barricade was facing in the wrong direction, not defending the grand square against attackers approaching along the street, but to contain a foe in the square itself. Furthermore, the barricade was entirely unmanned, even in the midst of the battle that now embroiled the whole of Mankarra.

The lead Predator slowed in its progress, and its commander emerged from the turret hatch. Kor'sarro brought Moondrakkan alongside the tank,

and shouted up to the other warrior. 'Clear the way, brother-sergeant, then spread out.'

The tank commander saluted his khan before voicing the order to his crew. A moment later, the turret-mounted autocannon opened fire, round after round exploding across the armoured barricade until its entire structure disintegrated into fragments of twisted metal. The lead tank prowled forwards and ground slowly over the remains of the barricade, making a path for the remainder of the force.

Kor'sarro allowed the other armoured vehicles to pass through the ruined barricade and spread out into the grand square before he led the bike squads through. As soon as he entered the square, Kor'sarro brought Moondrakkan to a halt as a scene of utter devastation confronted him.

The grand square covered a massive area, and was surrounded on all sides by the bunker-like structures that dominated the city. But what drew Kor'sarro's gaze were the hundreds of thousands of corpses strewn across the entire square. This whole city appeared at that moment to be populated by the dead, or in the case of the militia, the soon to be dead. Anger rose within Kor'sarro, mingled with hatred of Lord Voldorius. The reign of the daemon prince had to end, he swore, and this entire place had to be cleansed, so utterly had it fallen to death and devastation.

If passing along a street of recently slain traitors had been disgusting enough, then the sight before Kor'sarro was far worse. The corpses that were scattered across the grand square were not those of soldiers, but of ordinary citizens. It was evident that these people had been made an example of, and simply left to rot as a dire message to their survivors.

'This goes further than mere slaughter,' Qan'karro said flatly. His voice was choked with a disgust that, if possible, exceeded Kor'sarro's. 'He did this not just as an example.'

'Explain please, old friend,' replied the Master of the Hunt.

‘He did this to gain power. To reap the souls of the innocent, and to offer them up to the Great Enemy.’

Kor’sarro looked out across the sea of twisted corpses, righteous anger seething inside. ‘To what end?’

‘That I can only guess at, huntsman. The vile one is gifted of great power, of that we can be sure.’

‘And this... atrocity... fuels that power still further?’

‘Aye. It lends him strength, and gains him favour. Dwell no more upon it, Kor’sarro. Leave such things to the Stormseers.’

Kor’sarro looked into the eyes of the man who was his old friend and his most valued counsellor, and nodded his understanding. ‘The wise man knows the limits of his knowledge.’

Qan’karro’s leathery features were split by a rare smile at Kor’sarro’s recounting of ancient Chogoran wisdom. ‘Indeed he does,’ replied the Stormseer. ‘And you will know,’ he continued, ‘when the time comes.’

‘Then let that time be soon,’ said Kor’sarro, gunning Moondrakkan’s engines. ‘Let us hasten to end this.’

At Kor’sarro’s signal, the brotherhood pressed outwards into the grand square. The corpses were not so densely packed as the slaughtered militia had been in the street leading to the grand square, so he was not forced to ride over their pulped remains. The stink of decay, however, was all but overpowering, even for a veteran of a thousand battlefields and sieges.

Gaining speed, Kor’sarro led his bike squads out towards the centre of the grand square, leaving the Predators and other armoured vehicles to carry on behind. As he passed by clusters of bodies, he judged that the slaughter had taken place several weeks before, and turned his gaze away in revulsion.

Then, he looked back to one particular pile of corpses, having thought he had noticed movement there. He sneered as he imagined the local

scavengers crawling over the bodies, and cursed Voldorius all the more for bringing such a thing about.

As the bikers roared onwards towards the far side of the square and the road that would lead them towards their objective, more furtive movement stirred amongst the piles of corpses. Kor'sarro knew they must be crawling with vermin, but he was reminded of an especially morbid Chogoran legend that warned that improperly buried corpses might somehow rise again to slay the living. He cast the notion from his mind – he had witnessed many vile blasphemies in his time, but surely such a thing was beyond even the power of Chaos?

The White Scars were three quarters of the way across the grand square, weaving around pile after pile of decaying corpses, when a figure rose up before him.

Kor'sarro had no time to manoeuvre around whoever, or whatever, it was that blocked his path. Instead, he gritted his teeth and ploughed on, crushing the figure beneath Moondrakkan's wheels with a sickening crunch.

In the instant before the impact, Kor'sarro had briefly seen a twisted face set into a hateful, gargoyle-like leer. The legends of Chogoris came fully to mind, and then as one, a hundred other figures arose from the piles of corpses all about.

Kor'sarro slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt. A moment later, his bike squads had done likewise. Sixty Space Marine riders formed up into a laager, Kor'sarro and his Command squad in the centre.

A circle of ragged figures stood amongst the corpses. Each was impossibly emaciated and clad in filth-encrusted rags. The eyes were expressionless pits and their mouths dripped gore, which streamed down their fronts. The bodies of many were twisted and contorted, while others had overlong arms that ended in serrated claws encrusted with long-dried blood.

‘Carrion-eaters,’ spat Brother Kergis.

‘Mutant filth,’ said Kor’sarro.

‘I thought for a moment they were—’ continued Kergis.

‘Aye,’ interjected Kor’sarro. ‘I too. But they are living, and so can be killed.’

‘Brothers!’ Kor’sarro called out to his assembled warriors, checking the ammunition levels of the twin bolters mounted in Moondrakkan’s fairing.

‘We have no time to waste here!’

As one, every engine in the company roared to full power and the White Scars brought their bikes around to align themselves with Kor’sarro and the banner of the 3rd that waved beside him. Even as the bikes roared, still more of the mutant cannibals arose from their vile lairs amidst the rotting bodies, until they pressed in from every quarter.

The mutants were unarmed, but would clearly present a threat, for many sported wickedly sharp talons that could only be the work of some vile biomancer. The bodies of others were covered in distended spines and barbs. While Kor’sarro had initially taken their bodies for malnourished and emaciated, on closer inspection each mutant was possessed of a wiry frame, with whipcord muscles that would grant them blinding speed in battle.

Moondrakkan leapt forwards and Kor’sarro thundered down on the mutant horde, his warriors close behind. As the range closed a Thunderhawk gunship swooped low overhead and opened fire on the outer edges of the horde. He sent up a silent word of thanks for the timely fire support, and knew too that the Predators the bikers had left at the edge of the grand square would not be far behind.

Every twin bolter in the force opened fire as the charge closed. Dozens of the mutants were struck down, but Kor’sarro noted that many more were somehow able to weather the storm of mass-reactive death. He had no time to wonder what sorcery had made their skins as hard as iron.

Kor'sarro found himself surrounded by the vile mutants. Though the face of each was slack and vacant, their bodies moved with lightning speed. Even as the Master of the Hunt raised Moonfang high, a barbed talon swept towards his face before he had even seen it coming. Kor'sarro only barely managed to duck in time, yet still the talon scored a deep cut along his shoulder plate. In that brief moment, he knew that the power of the warp animated these hideous walking blasphemies.

Kor'sarro brought Moonfang down to take the head of the mutant that had struck him, but somehow the vile creature leapt backwards beyond his attack, and then darted inside his reach. The mutant's next attack would be aimed at his exposed torso, and Kor'sarro reacted by instinct, twisting his body around so that the impossibly sharp talon struck only a glancing blow.

He had avoided the full force of the mutant's strike, but Kor'sarro immediately bit back a curse as he felt the claw penetrate his armour and gouge a raking wound across his chest. Had he not twisted his body at the last possible moment, the talons would have punched directly through his chest armour and, in all probability, through the other side.

The mutant was fast and strong, but it was not nearly as skilled a combatant as the Master of the Hunt. His enemy had overstretched itself, allowing Kor'sarro to bring Moonfang down in a great sweep that severed the mutant's head in an explosive shower of black blood.

Even as the mutant's body collapsed to the ground, more pressed in from all sides. Kor'sarro knew that to become bogged down amongst them would be to invite a meaningless death, for he had a far greater mission to perform than to slay these fell deviants.

'Ride through!' Kor'sarro bellowed, opening Moondrakkan's throttle and powering forwards. A dozen mutants were crushed beneath his mount's wheels, and more died as Moonfang slashed and cleaved in every direction. It was crude, bloody work, and Kor'sarro's armour was cut in a

dozen places and his cloak torn almost to shreds by the time he had broken through the mutant's ragged line.

Kor'sarro's warriors followed his example, powering their way through the press of mutants until the last of the White Scars bikers burst forth from the swirling melee.

At least three of Kor'sarro's warriors had fallen to the mutants. He bellowed in rage as the vile creatures descended upon the white-armoured bodies, ripping the noble sons of Chogoris asunder and biting deep into their flesh. It appeared in that instant that the mutants were so absorbed in their feeding frenzy that they had forgotten about the rest of the White Scars.

Kor'sarro checked the ammunition levels of his bike-mounted boltguns. They were dangerously low. He longed to pump every last round into the mutants, but he could spare neither the ammunition nor the time were he to face his ultimate foe, Voldorius.

The air was split by a sonic boom and a Raven Guard Thunderhawk swooped in low.

'Give our brothers space!' Kor'sarro bellowed, and the White Scars roared forwards and within thirty seconds were closing on the far side of the grand square.

The gunship unleashed a salvo of missiles directly into the mass of mutant cannibals. Kor'sarro said a silent prayer for his fallen brethren, hoping they would be consoled by the fact that their bodies and wargear would be reduced to ashes and defiled no more.

Then the missiles struck, great explosions erupting across the centre of the grand square. Mutant body parts were thrown high into the air, their broken corpses mingling with those they had preyed upon. The gunship streaked onwards towards Kor'sarro's position, and as it passed directly overhead, a number of black-armoured forms leapt from an open hatch and

descended upon screaming jets to land on the ground near the Master of the Hunt.

It was Captain Shrike and his Command squad. Before the squad had entirely touched down, Shrike was ordering the gunship to return for a second pass, to ensure that not a single one of the horrific creatures could possibly have survived.

‘Brother-Captain Kayvaan Shrike,’ Kor’sarro addressed his compatriot. ‘Much has been settled this day already,’ he continued, referring to the many frictions that existed between the two Chapters. ‘Yet as far as my rank allows, I cast all debts aside.’

Shrike reached up and removed his helmet. ‘Never mind that, brother-captain.’

Kor’sarro regretted his words the moment Shrike gave his reply, and was on the verge of unleashing a torrent of invective when Shrike pressed on. ‘My forces have located the prisoner the contact mentioned. I am assembling a detachment to kill that prisoner.’

Kor’sarro’s wrath was forgotten as soon as it had appeared, as is the way of all Chogorans. ‘Where?’

Shrike paused as the shockwave of his gunship’s second attack run struck the Space Marines, causing his long black hair to whip across his pale face. Then he continued. ‘A detention cell, adjacent to the subterranean cathedral.’

Kor’sarro’s mind raced. He had no idea who this prisoner was, but if they were as valuable to Voldorius as Shrike’s contact insisted, then the matter should be investigated. And besides, Shrike appeared as keen to eliminate the prisoner as Kor’sarro was to slay the daemon prince. His gaze fell across the square, where he saw Third Company’s armoured column approaching. His eyes alighted upon one of the Rhino transports.

‘Kholka,’ he muttered.

‘Brother-captain?’ Shrike replied.

‘Scout-Sergeant Ultas Kholka, Raven Guard,’ Kor’sarro grinned slyly as he replied. ‘The man who detected your presence at the landing site.’

‘Only barely...’ Shrike replied. ‘But I’m sending my own men in. We don’t need help.’

Kor’sarro pressed on. ‘Kholka could penetrate the detention cells,’ he continued. ‘And free or slay the prisoner, according to his judgement.’

‘I am sending my own men in,’ Shrike repeated.

‘You said yourself, brother-captain. Kholka is good.’

Kor’sarro felt the eyes of another upon him and saw that the Stormseer Qan’karro was approaching, the Chaplain Xia’ghan at his side. The two had just dismounted from their Rhino transport, and behind them Scout-Sergeant Kholka was doing likewise. Though the Stormseer could not possibly have overheard the exchange between the two company captains, both saw the message in his eyes. It was unmistakable.

‘Your Scouts go in,’ Shrike said darkly. ‘But my man goes too.’

‘Agreed, brother-captain,’ Kor’sarro replied.

‘Brother Meleriex and two others shall accompany your Scouts,’ said Shrike, turning to one of the members of his Command squad and nodding. ‘Meleriex is my nominated second, and he speaks with my voice. He knows what to do.’

‘Then let it be so,’ Kor’sarro replied, holding out his hand towards the Raven Guard captain. The two grasped forearms in the manner of the warrior common amongst such men the length and breadth of the galaxy. ‘Let it be so,’ Shrike repeated, both men turning as Sergeant Kholka and his Scouts approached.

‘It will submit to the process,’ the red-hooded, renegade tech-priest hissed, his voice dry and coldly mechanical. ‘Or it shall undergo the nerve-shrive. Again.’

Malya kicked hard as one of the servitors attempted to clamp a steel surgical restraint around her right ankle. The kick struck the mind-

scrubbed mono-task square in the forehead, but it barely registered the impact at all, merely grasping for her leg in an attempt to keep her still.

‘Then it shall undergo the tenth degree,’ the tech-priest rasped.

‘No!’ Malya screamed, not in an effort to beg the tech-priest not to inflict any more pain upon her body, but to steel herself against the inevitable. The tech-priest was working the dials and levers of a tall bank of humming machinery. His fingers were twice as long as they should have been and had twice the normal number of joints. He worked a large dial, turning it up to the penultimate setting.

‘Yes...’ said the tech-priest, and pulled down hard on a long, brass switch.

Malya’s body arched upwards from the steel table she was clamped to by all but her right ankle. Every nerve in her body fired as one, stimulated by the dozens of probes and lines which the vile traitor had inserted under her skin. For an instant, she knew such all-consuming pain that she felt her very soul part with her body. She was not there. She was somewhere else. Somewhere near the Emperor.

‘Perhaps it should undergo the eleventh degree...’ the renegade muttered to himself as he worked more dials and levers.

Malya lay panting, her body slick with sweat. Before she could recover her senses the servitor had taken hold of her ankle and clamped the steel restraint around it. She did not care. She had glimpsed something, known something pure. The pain had cleansed her, brought her closer to the God-Emperor, and nothing that Voldorius’s biomancer could do could take that away from her.

‘Damage her,’ a deep voice growled out of the darkness of the chamber, ‘and it shall be you who undergoes the eleventh degree.’ The voice was that of Lord Voldorius, and it tore Malya from the state of purity she had entered, reminding her of the daemon prince’s vile intentions.

‘The nerve-shrive is incapable of inflicting tissue damage, my lord.’ The tech-priest bowed as he spoke. ‘The effect is entirely neurological.’

‘Speak no more.’ Voldorius growled as he loomed out of the darkness. The rogue tech-priest fell silent.

‘Malya L’nor,’ said Voldorius as his bestial face appeared above her. ‘You are about to receive a rare honour indeed.’

‘Keep it,’ Malya spat. All fear was gone from her now, replaced by a state of grace. The Emperor would protect her soul, even should she die at the hands of this vile servant of the Great Enemy.

The daemon prince studied Malya for a moment, his eyes narrowing as if he sought to peer deep into her very soul. His breath huffed across her face, the taint of brimstone threatening to choke her. Then he stepped back, and growled an order.

A group of robed servants entered the chamber and took position in the shadows behind Voldorius. She knew from her previous duties as his equerry that they were his acolytes. Their role was to invoke the vile powers which gave Voldorius his potency, by twisted worship, incantations and blasphemies.

As the bowing acolytes gathered behind their master, a sonorous, atonal chanting started up. Though Malya could not understand the words, she knew beyond doubt that they invoked dark names that should never be spoken. Dread welled up inside her, but she clung on to her faith, drawing upon the grace she knew resided deep inside.

Voldorius chuckled. ‘Even now, you resist me,’ he said. ‘And it is that strength that shall allow you to withstand the gift you are soon to receive. I knew from the moment you entered the grand square that you alone of the ten thousand gathered there had the strength to resist being consumed by the Bloodtide...’

‘I shall not serve you,’ Malya insisted, feeling the grace she had felt earlier returning. Her voice became gentle as she went on. ‘Nothing you

can do to me shall make me acquiesce.'

'I do not require your subservience, Malya L'nor,' replied Voldorius, 'for I have the power to control you utterly. I require only your survival, that your soul is not consumed by the awakened will of the Bloodtide.'

Malya's head sank to the steel surface and she closed her eyes. Was this how it felt to the Emperor's martyrs, she wondered, as they gave themselves up to death in His name? Drawing her shield of grace around her, Malya forced her breathing to slow, to find that place of purity once more.

Then a deep rumble passed through the chamber and Malya felt dust fall down from the ceiling. She kept her eyes closed, extending her senses outwards. The chanting of Voldorius's acolytes faltered a moment, and then continued as before.

'Is she ready to be moved?' Malya heard Voldorius ask. 'Speak!'

'It is ready, my lord,' the renegade tech-priest replied from somewhere behind Malya. 'Do you have the... the vial?' Malya sensed something akin to awe in the voice of the rogue adept, and she slowly opened her eyes to see what he referred to.

Voldorius had one gnarled claw held in front of him, and in it was a clear, glass vial. A silvery light was emanating from the small container. Malya had seen that light before, what seemed like weeks ago. She had seen it in the cell of the prisoner, radiating from its shifting body. And here was that same radiance, somehow contained within the small clear container held between the talons of a daemon.

'This is sufficient quantity?' asked Voldorius.

The tech-priest bowed deep, but mechanical eyes squinted upwards from the depths of his hood as he gazed covetously at the vial. 'Oh yes, my lord,' said the renegade. 'That vial contains... one hundred and twenty-seven million... three hundred and thirty-three thousand... and... two

viable nanytes. Such a sample could infect billions of hosts if efficiently distributed, my lord.'

'If they can penetrate power armour,' Voldorius growled absently.

'Even if they cannot, my lord,' answered the tech-priest, 'not all of your foes take full precautions.'

Voldorius studied the contents of the vial for several long moments, during which another tremor passed through the chamber and more dust fell down on Malya's face, causing her to blink and tears to swell in her eyes. 'That much is true, tech-priest. Take her to the cathedral.'

'What?' Malya breathed, looking up sharply. 'Why would you...'

'Are you ashamed?' said Voldorius, his voice grating and loud in the dark, enclosed chamber. 'Why would you not desire your moment of transcendence to take place before the representation of your Emperor?'

'Why?' Malya repeated.

'Because all of this,' Voldorius indicated with a sweep of the arm not holding the vial, 'is as naught compared to the glory of Chaos! Such things must be done correctly.' Voldorius leaned in close to Malya. 'There are certain processes that have so much more... gravitas, when performed in such places.'

'Blasphemer...' Malya sobbed, despair threatening to overwhelm her. She had always known she would not survive the horrors unleashed upon Quintus, but to be used like this... She cared nothing for her own life, but that it might be claimed in the Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom, before the mighty statue of the Lord of Mankind, was an unspeakable cruelty before which the last of her strength crumbled away.

She clamped her eyes shut as the surgical table beneath her was wheeled out of the chamber, hot tears streaming down her face. The acolytes' atonal plainsong increased in volume until it threatened to overwhelm her with the echoed wails of uncounted damned souls writhing in eternal suffering in the depths of the warp...



CHAPTER 13

Bloodtide Rising

‘Where is it?’ the Raven Guard Meleriex asked Sergeant Kholka as the infiltration group stalked along a cramped alleyway between two of Mankarra’s massive, bunker-like buildings.

Kholka halted as he came to the end of the narrow alley, and nodded out towards a wide, flat expanse of marble that gleamed orange as Quintus’s setting sun cast the last of its rays across the city. ‘It’s there, brother.’

The Raven Guard’s dark eyes narrowed as he scanned the area. After a moment, realisation dawned. ‘The marble forms the aquila,’ he remarked. ‘The Cathedral of the Emperor’s Wisdom is below?’

‘Yes, brother, it is,’ Kholka replied. ‘And so too is the holding cell, or so your captain informs us.’

Meleriex looked back to face Kholka. ‘The contact tells the truth, brother-sergeant. Of that I am certain. But how do we gain access?’

‘We follow them,’ replied Kholka, nodding to indicate a line of black-robed figures that hurried across the marble flagstones to an armoured portal set in a bunker not far from the Space Marines’ position. ‘We need only gain access to the underground complex, by which all of these

buildings around us are joined. Once we are in the subterranean levels, we can locate the holding cell.'

'Understood,' the Raven Guard replied. Both warriors ducked back into the alleyway as the line of robed figures approached. Meleriex activated his lightning claws, and whispered to Kholka, 'My kill.'

The Scout-sergeant could not help but grin. He had as much cause as any in the Chapter to be suspicious of the Raven Guard, but this brother appeared more willing than most to work alongside others. Perhaps that was the reason Captain Shrike had attached him to the infiltration group.

'Your kill,' replied Kholka. He had no doubt that Meleriex would be able to slaughter the entire group in seconds, and without the need to expend ammunition. 'Make it quick though, brother.'

Kholka leaned around the edge of the wall and saw that the monkish figures were now only twenty metres away. The man at the front was activating the controls that would open the armoured portal. The sergeant waited a moment, ensuring that the enemy had fully unlocked the portal, before he nodded towards the Raven Guard warrior.

Meleriex darted out from the alleyway. His black armour was barely visible amongst the long shadows cast by the squat buildings all about. None of the hooded, black-robed enemies saw him coming at all. Three died in seconds to lethal stabs of Meleriex's flashing lightning claws. The remainder were frozen rigid by the sudden explosion of violence. The Raven Guard attacked out of the setting sun, and none saw more than a silhouetted angel of death moving amongst them, dispensing death with every gesture.

Within ten seconds, only one of the figures remained, and he had only survived that long because he had bolted instead of freezing in shock when the Raven Guard had struck. Unfortunately for him, he had fled towards the wrongly imagined safety of the alleyway and ran straight into the waiting White Scars Scouts.

As the robed figure bounded towards them, Kholka reached out an arm and hooked his elbow around the man's neck. In a savage motion, Kholka slammed the enemy into the rockcrete wall, pushing his face right into its surface.

Ensuring the man was restrained, Kholka reached up his free hand and yanked the hood down to reveal the captive's face, his cheek pressed into the wall. That face was a mask of bitter hatred, teeth gritted and eyes alight with frenzied anger. A swirling pattern of crudely applied tattoos was etched across his face and bald scalp, denoting the vile pacts he had undoubtedly made with the Ruinous Powers.

Upon seeing those symbols, Kholka drew his combat knife and pressed its monomolecular tip to the man's jugular. 'Tell me the location of the holding cells,' he spat, 'and I shall grant you a far quicker death than you deserve.'

The man's eyes flashed and his mouth twisted into a feral snarl. 'I'll tell you nothing...'

Kholka pressed the tip of his knife into the man's neck, drawing a thin swelling of blood around it. 'Where is it? One last chance.'

'Give me death,' the man growled. 'I welcome it, for I shall become so much more...'

Disgust welling up inside him, Kholka prepared to end the man's life with a thrust of his combat knife. Then Brother Meleriex appeared next to him, and placed a restraining hand upon his arm. 'Let me, sergeant.'

Kholka paused, turning to meet the other's steely gaze. 'Much slaughter awaits us yet, Raven Guard.'

Meleriex held Kholka's gaze a moment longer before replying, 'That is not my meaning, brother-sergeant.'

Then understanding dawned and Kholka stepped back, allowing the Raven Guard to take control of the prisoner. 'Make it quick.'

Not wishing to witness what would happen next, Sergeant Kholka strode to the mouth of the alleyway. He was on the verge of barking an order to his Scouts when he saw that they had pre-empted the need and were even now dragging the bodies of the dead traitors away from the open portal and secreting them in the shadows of the alley. Despite the bitter taste in his mouth, he felt a fierce pride in the fieldcraft his charges were displaying.

Scout Borchu was rolling a body into the shadows nearby. It was clear to see that Brother Meleriex had been supremely efficient in the application of his deathblows, punching with his lightning claws rather than slashing. The wounds were lethal, but had not torn the bodies asunder, thus allowing the Space Marines to drag them away without spilling blood and scattering body parts across the kill-zone.

A muffled cry sounded from further back in the shadowed alleyway, followed by a dry crack and the sound of a body hitting the black, rocky ground. Kholka did not turn, but waited until Brother Meleriex came to stand at his side.

‘The portal leads down to a sub-level junction. There we proceed along tunnel two seven zero until we reach the holding cells.’

Kholka turned to look the other Space Marine in the eye. ‘You are sure?’

‘I am sure,’ Meleriex replied.

Suppressing his revulsion, Kholka made to gather his charges in preparation for the infiltration. There were certain lessons he would not be teaching them.

Malya stared straight upwards and wished that she could press her hands to her ears to shut out the hellish chanting of the acolytes that were gathered around the table to which she was still clamped. She had been removed from the chamber, and taken in blasphemous procession along the dark passageways to the subterranean Cathedral of the Emperor’s Wisdom.

Soaring far above Malya, the vaults of the cathedral were almost lost in shadow. The horrific, batlike imps flitted to and fro, swooping down towards her before darting off at speed emitting a vile shriek that was disturbingly close to the mocking laughter of an especially vindictive child. The surgical table had been placed before the mighty statue of the Emperor Triumphant, which towered twenty metres into the incense-laced air.

At first Malya had drawn strength from the magnificent sight, but had soon noted the terrible desecration of the statue. The vile imps had deposited vast amounts of guano upon the Emperor's holy countenance, great white stripes of the stuff streaked across His noble face. Even worse, the servants of Voldorius had daubed vile runes that seared the eye when looked upon all across the statue's flanks. The sight brought crushing sadness to Malya's heart despite her own predicament.

Yet, despite the injuries done to the towering statue of the Emperor of All Mankind, it was still possessed of some indefinable glory that no amount of damage short of its complete destruction could spoil.

'The cohort shall muster!' the voice of the daemon prince boomed out from somewhere outside of Malya's field of vision, its vile notes echoing down the nave and repeating over and over again. In response, dozens of armoured boots struck the ground. The remainder of Voldorius's Alpha Legion warriors were gathering in the cathedral to witness their master's final blasphemy.

'The Emperor's deluded slaves descend even now!' Voldorius growled, his voice filling the entire space of the cathedral. 'He who hunts has slain my champion, but he shall soon hunt no more!'

A hundred and more voices roared their assent, their words modulated by the grilles of their baroque masks. Even as the roars faded to echoes, the distant sound of an explosion ground through the rock and Malya knew that the Space Marines were closing on their foes.

She dared not believe that she would be rescued. She clung instead to the thought that Lord Voldorius would soon be brought to judgement, even should she herself not live to witness it.

‘What was that?’ Telluk hissed as the group proceeded along the pipe-choked tunnel. A deep tremor had caused the pipes to twist and their metal to screech as dust descended from the stone ceiling above.

Kholka reached to his vox-bead and pressed it into his ear. He concentrated for a moment but could discern very little, for the metal and stone all around interfered with the signal. ‘Ordnance. Ours I would hope,’ he replied. ‘Concentrate on the task at hand, neophyte,’ he continued, hefting his boltgun. ‘Gharn, the hunter’s arrow. Proceed.’

The group resumed its advance along the dark passageway, neophyte Gharn moving forwards to take the lead position. The tunnel, which the captive had indicated would lead to the holding cells, was straight and narrow, forcing the squad to form what was a vulnerable formation given their light arms and armour. Kholka was grateful that they had the Raven Guard with them, for their superior armour and specialised close-combat armament would prove highly effective should they encounter an enemy in the tunnels.

‘It was not ours, brother-sergeant,’ said the Raven Guard at Kholka’s side, his voice low. ‘I have been monitoring the vox-net too.’

‘I know it was not,’ Kholka growled, before continuing. ‘What have you been able to pick up?’

‘The enemy’s flagship is firing on the city.’

Utter madness, Kholka thought, but not entirely unexpected given the nature of the enemy. If Voldorius believed he could destroy the Space Marines with an orbital bombardment far more efficiently than his ground troops could, then he would do so, regardless of how many of his own he killed in the process. He only regretted that *Lord of Heavens* was too far out to intervene. The White Scars had initiated their attack a great distance

from Quintus in order that the world's defence grid would not detect their approach.

‘Do you have two-way contact?’ asked Kholka. He himself had been unable to raise any of his brothers. Perhaps the Raven Guard had experienced more luck.

‘Only sporadically, brother-sergeant,’ said Meleriex. ‘I could use my fusion core to boost the signal, but that might compromise our mission.’

Indeed, thought Kholka. Such a transmission might be the group's last. ‘Only if we truly have need, brother,’ he said. ‘Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ the Raven Guard replied, before halting at a sign of activity further along the tunnel. Scout Gharn had stopped where the tunnel opened up into a larger chamber. The others had assumed covering positions nearby, melting into the shadows and utilising what little cover the protruding pipes and conduits afforded.

Kholka halted too, his eyes trained on a pool of light in the centre of the chamber. He raised his boltgun and slowly made his way forwards past the neophytes, to squat next to the lead Scout.

‘The silvered moon enshrouds the hunted,’ Gharn whispered, not taking his eyes from the chamber. The youth had no need to use the Chapter's battle-cant now, Kholka thought, but it was a good habit to cultivate. He looked out into the chamber, most of which was dominated by dormant machinery and twisting pipes. Only a single light source illuminated the space, a circle of wan light cast into the centre.

Kholka's glance took all this in within the span of seconds, before he looked to the area the Scout had indicated using the White Scars battle-cant. At the far edge of the pool of light he saw a pair of sturdy, rubber-soled boots, the rest of the body hidden in shadow. A deep red stain spread slowly outwards into the light.

‘Wait here,’ Kholka hissed. The group had no time to be distracted by what might be no more than a random act of violence inflicted by one

traitor on another in the midst of a city-razing battle. He scanned the chamber through his boltgun's sights. Detecting no enemies, the sergeant stepped out of the tunnel and skirted the edge of the chamber until he stood over the body.

It was a servitor of some sort, but the manner of its death was not immediately apparent. The mind-scrubbed slave wore a work suit of heavy-duty, rubberised fabric, and its body was augmented by dozens of cybernetic parts designed to facilitate whatever tasks it had been created to fulfil. Its head was bald, and the entire left side of its brain had been surgically replaced with crude machinery. But none of this was out of place. What was unusual was the fact that every drop of the servitor's blood was even now draining from its body, pouring out in fact, as if some pressure within was expelling it at a great rate. And the blood was leaving the body by any and every route possible, leaking from the mouth, nostrils and the one eye and ear that were not replaced by cybernetic versions. It was even seeping out through the pores in what little skin was visible, and spreading out in a great pool all around the body.

'By the primarch,' Kholka spat, 'blessed be his name.'

With one last look around to ensure that no enemies were nearby, Kholka moved quickly back to the mouth of the tunnel where the remainder of the group waited in the shadows. He waved them onwards, ensuring that each Scout was properly concentrating upon the task at hand and not distracted by the disturbing sight in the centre of the chamber. Brother Meleriex was the last to pass by, lingering for a moment to gaze down at the exsanguinated servitor. Then he looked up at Kholka, his dark eyes unreadable, and pressed on into the darkness.

'Brother Sang.' Kor'sarro took advantage of a brief lull in the bombardment to call the White Scar over. In a moment, the Techmarine was at his side, standing amongst the ruins that the combined force of

Space Marines was holding against wave after wave of frenzied traitor militia troopers.

‘Brother,’ said Kor’sarro. ‘I am unable to contact Sergeant Kholka.’

The Techmarine consulted a data-slate mounted in his vambrace. After a few seconds, he shook his head and replied. ‘Nor I, brother-captain. A combination of the effect of the bedrock, nearby structures and possibly ionisation caused by the bombardment.’

As if to punctuate the Techmarine’s report, a deafening roar split the air above. A building only a hundred metres away exploded outwards, a huge mushroom cloud blossoming high into the now darkened sky.

Chunks of shrapnel the size of bolter rounds ricocheted from the Space Marines’ armour, sending up fat sparks and razor-sharp fragments of rockcrete. Not one of the White Scars or the Raven Guard flinched.

‘If they do not make contact soon, we will have to commit regardless,’ Captain Shrike shouted above the sound of falling masonry and gunfire. ‘The vile one will rally his forces, or else he will slip from our grasp.’

Kor’sarro felt a stab of frustration at the thought of Voldorius slipping away amidst the destruction his flagship was unleashing upon his own city. But just as quickly, he dismissed the notion. ‘No, brother,’ he shouted back. ‘It is not his intention to escape, of that I am sure. I have hunted him for a decade, and know something of his ways.’

‘But this prisoner,’ Shrike called back. ‘He must be—’

‘Secondary!’ Kor’sarro snapped back. ‘Kholka is my battle-brother and my friend, but if he is unable to locate this prisoner and ascertain his place in the daemon’s plans, we must proceed regardless. We will have no choice but to assault the vile one’s lair, with or without Kholka’s intelligence.’

Captain Shrike turned his head away from the Master of the Hunt. His true feelings were as hidden from Kor’sarro as his face was by the helmet he wore.

Kor’sarro put the prisoner from his mind, and turned his thoughts to the layout of the city instead, estimating how long it would take the Space

Marines to fight through to the Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom where the daemon prince would be waiting. It would not take long, but that meant that Sergeant Kholka had very little time to report back, if he even could with the interference afflicting the vox-net.

'Let us be about it then,' Kor'sarro called to Captain Shrike, a savage glint in his eye. 'Let us gather the warriors for the final assault.'

'That makes seven,' Kholka whispered as he looked down at another exsanguinated corpse. 'It makes no sense.'

'Nor would it,' replied Brother Meleriex. 'The workings of the Great Enemy are mercifully beyond the understanding of such as we.'

The whole length of the corridor the group had passed along was scattered with the blood-drained bodies of servitors and menials. 'This is something else, brother,' said Kholka. 'Something more than bloodshed and wickedness.'

The Raven Guard considered this, his black eyes glinting in the shadows cast by a flickering overhead lumen. 'Perhaps you are correct, brother-sergeant. But it has no bearing upon our mission.'

'It may,' Kholka replied, readying himself to press on. 'The two may prove to be connected.'

Meleriex was about to answer when a tortured scream sounded from further down the passageway. The Space Marines were instantly alert, weapons raised and ready to face an attack from any quarter.

'Fifty metres ahead,' Kholka whispered. 'Seek the blood as the sabrehound at dawn.'

The Scouts assumed the formation that Kholka's battle-cant order had specified, moving into position with well-drilled precision. The three Raven Guard Space Marines remained where they were, however, Meleriex casting a questioning glance towards the Scout-sergeant.

'My apologies,' said Kholka. He switched to a more common idiom used by many of the Imperium's countless and varied military institutions.

‘Advance to contact, ten-metre separation, bolters to the fore.’

‘No, brother-sergeant,’ the Raven Guard said darkly. ‘Myself and my brothers must go first. We are better armoured than your Scouts. We can fight through any ambush we might encounter.’

Meleriex emphasised his assertion by raising a lightning claw and activating it so that arcs of power seethed up and down the length of its talons.

‘Do so,’ Kholka replied. He had no time to debate patrol formations, and knew there was truth in the Raven Guard’s words. ‘Move out.’

Ordinarily, full Adeptus Astartes power armour would have compromised the patrol’s stealthy advance. Its electro-magnetic signature might have given it away to augur sweeps or the faint hum of its fusion core might have been heard by watchful sentinels. The armour worn by the Raven Guard was different, every sound baffled and their tread almost as silent as the Scouts’. Nevertheless, it appeared that there were no enemies waiting in ambush, or if they had been, they had been slain before they could attack.

Ahead of Kholka, the Raven Guard slipped out of the shadows of the passageway and into a larger chamber. Meleriex scanned the area, his crackling lightning claws held ready to engage any foe that might lurk nearby. The chamber was clear, and Meleriex waved the Scouts on.

‘What is this place?’ Scout Borchu whispered as he tracked his boltgun across the dark, vaulted ceiling. ‘It looks like a medicae chamber, only...’

Kholka looked across to Meleriex, guessing that the Raven Guard would have a ready answer. ‘It’s a torturer’s lair, boy,’ the Raven Guard answered. ‘But not like any the Inquisition might employ.’

Such things repulsed Sergeant Kholka, for torture was anathema to a warrior’s honour and all but unknown amongst his people, with the exception of some north-eastern tribes who had never accepted the unity Jaghatai Khan had brought to Chogoris. Kholka determined not to press

the Raven Guard on his knowledge of such things, having no desire to discover the answer. Nevertheless, this was evidently important, and might have a bearing on their mission. ‘To what end?’ Kholka growled.

Meleriex was interrupted before he could answer. Scout Khula, who had positioned himself at one of the large portals leading from the chamber, gave a low hiss and raised a clenched fist to signal a warning.

Kholka and Meleriex both froze, before the sergeant silently crossed the chamber to stand behind the Scout. Neither spoke, as Kholka strained his hearing to listen for what Khula had detected.

There it was: a low, atonal chant, accompanied by the distant echo of armoured boots. Judging the distance was all but impossible, for the pipe-choked passageways distorted sound in unpredictable ways. Of one thing Kholka was certain however: the sound was coming from the direction of the Cathedral of the Emperor’s Wisdom.

Kholka heard Meleriex approach to stand behind him. After another ten seconds had passed, the Raven Guard whispered, ‘Astartes boots.’

‘Indeed, brother,’ Kholka replied. ‘At least a hundred, marching towards the subterranean cathedral.’

‘The other sound, brother-sergeant?’ ventured Scout Khula.

Kholka concentrated on the echoing skirl, his genetically enhanced hearing able to filter out the sound of marching boots. ‘Blasphemy,’ he spat, recognising the taint of vile sorceries in the chanting. ‘Something is occurring in the cathedral. We must not allow it to.’

‘Our mission—’ interjected Brother Meleriex, before Sergeant Kholka rounded upon him with barely contained anger.

‘Has just been altered.’

‘Then now is the time to contact our brothers.’

‘Then do so, Raven Guard,’ Kholka replied, eager to track down and slay the followers of the Great Enemy before they could complete whatever wickedness they were about. Whatever blasphemy they were engaged in,

its timing, at the height of the Space Marines' assault on Mankarra, must surely be significant. And what had the mysterious prisoner to do with this, he thought?

Meleriex bled power from his armour's fusion core to boost its vox-transponder, and spoke for a moment in low tones into the vox-link at his wrist. Kholka could not hear the Raven Guard's report. 'It is done. But if the enemy have the sense to monitor for transmissions, they will have detected our presence now.'

'Did you get through?' asked Sergeant Kholka. 'Did you receive confirmation?'

'I sent the message,' Meleriex answered. 'I told our captains that the prisoner has yet to be located, but that a significant number of Alpha Legionnaires and cultists are gathering in the cathedral. I informed them that some fell deed is afoot, and that we are engaging.'

'And their reply?'

'I received none.' The Raven Guard glowered. 'Though I am sure that the message got through.'

'You cannot be sure,' Kholka growled. 'We must proceed as if it had not.'

Meleriex scowled back at Kholka, but he did not voice any disagreement with the sergeant's statement. 'Squad,' Kholka addressed his Scouts.

'Prepare to move out, contact imminent.'

The answer to Kholka's order was a strangled, gurgling scream as Shahan, who had been guarding the portal, collapsed to the ground heavily.

Every gun was brought up and trained instantly on the darkness beyond the portal. The stricken Scout writhed upon the ground, his hands held up to his face, blood seeping between his fingers.

'Shahan,' he said through gritted teeth. 'What did you see, boy? Quickly!'

The Scout moaned in response, and convulsed violently as the blood flow from between his fingers increased. Space Marines were gifted of a unique enhancement that caused their blood to clot almost the instant it left the body, and Kholka's mind raced as he tried to recall if there had been any problems with the process in Scout Shahan's case. He recalled none – the blood should not have been flowing with such force, if at all.

'Kholka!' Brother Meleriex hissed, bringing the sergeant's attention back to the darkness beyond the opening. And then he saw that it was not the same darkness they had passed through before, but one laced with a wan, silvery light.

'He's here...' Meleriex growled as the Raven Guard powered up his lightning claws.

'Fire only on my order,' Kholka warned.

The silver glow became a blinding light that swelled to fill the entire portal. 'Only on my order...' Kholka repeated.

The light moved into the chamber, chasing away the shadows that had hidden its details from the Scouts. The machines lining the walls were revealed to be attached to an intricate array of conduits and pipes, snaking upwards and converging in the centre of the vaulted ceiling. The light began to swim and coalesce, resolving itself into a human form before the Space Marines' eyes. Some small part of Kholka was reminded of the tales his people told of the angelic beings that bore the slain from the field of battle to sit forever at the side of the Emperor. He forced the notion from his mind in an instant as his finger tightened on the trigger of his boltgun and he prepared to give the order to fire.

Before Sergeant Kholka could speak, the chamber was filled with the staccato burst of a boltgun. Scout Telluk had opened fire. It was impossible for his shots to miss at such short range.

The figure did not falter, despite having three bolt-rounds pumped into its torso from virtually point-blank range. Its luminous, silver body

rippled and swirled. The face maintained a disturbingly serene expression. Its features changed every few seconds, though its eyes remained solid, deep, blood-red. Where the rounds struck, they were swallowed up as if by fluid, leaving behind no trace of their impact.

‘Burst fire!’ Kholka barked, squeezing his boltgun’s trigger hard.

The chamber was filled with the shocking cacophony of the squad’s boltguns discharging as one, the air filling with smoke and the sharp stink of cordite. Burst after burst was fired, yet the figure seemed to absorb every single shot.

Kholka opened his mouth to bark another order when he became aware of the metallic taste of blood. He spat upon the floor, and saw in the goblet of saliva the red of his own blood. Glancing at the nearest of his charges, he saw that the Scout had a rivulet of blood running from his nostrils.

‘Curse you!’ Meleriex bellowed, raising his lightning claws and stepping before the luminous figure.

‘Meleriex!’ Kholka flicked the selector on his boltgun from burst fire to full automatic. ‘Get back!’

Even as the Raven Guard approached the figure and was silhouetted against the blinding radiance, it raised a hand and made an almost casual gesture towards Brother Meleriex. A silver light, glistening with microscopic motes, sprang from the raised hand and bathed Meleriex in its glow. The Space Marine faltered, then bent double, retching a great torrent of blood across the ground.

‘Full auto!’ Kholka bellowed. As dangerous as it was to open fire with Meleriex so close to the target, Kholka knew he had no other choice, for the Raven Guard was vulnerable and would otherwise be slain. The boltguns roared, dozens of rounds slamming into the silver figure, yet still the target stood, unaffected by a fusillade that would have ripped a man to shreds.

Kholka's boltgun clicked as the last of the rounds in the magazine was expended. He reached to his belt for another. As he did so, he coughed, and saw blood misting in the air.

'Get back, he is mine!' Brother Meleriex called out as he straightened up. As he did so, the figure raised its other hand, and repeated its earlier gesture with both hands.

'Spawn of blood,' the Raven Guard spat, his lightning claws arcing raw power. 'I'll kill you if it's the last thing I—'

The blinding silver radiance suddenly died.

Silence descended on the smoke-filled chamber.

The silver figure stood frozen, its shifting features finally stabilised. The face was neither male nor female, old nor young, but something human, something intelligent appeared in its eyes.

'Everyone back,' Sergeant Kholka hissed, slamming a fresh magazine into his boltgun as a distant explosion rumbled through the stone of the chamber's walls. His Scouts moved slowly backwards but the three Raven Guard remained where they were.

'You...' the figure spoke, its voice not that of a single being, but countless voices speaking as one. 'You are the foes of Voldorius.' It was a statement, Kholka understood, not a question.

'We are that,' Kholka replied.

'We do the work of the Emperor,' Meleriex growled through blood-flecked lips. 'You must die. Now.'

'Meleriex...' said Kholka. 'Do not—'

'He speaks the truth,' the silver figure interrupted the Raven Guard, its voice, or voices, laced with eons of pain and sadness. 'He *knows* the truth. We must die.'

Kholka's mind raced as he struggled to decipher the figure's meaning. But before he could answer, Meleriex spoke again. 'You are the host of the blood. You serve the vile one. Now, as then.'

The figure's head shook slowly, its blood-red eyes dark with obvious sorrow. 'We were created long before the coming of the being called Voldorius,' it said. 'We were to be the last weapon. We were the Bloodtide...'

'The Bloodtide?' Kholka repeated, visions of apocalyptic destruction filling his mind. 'The Bloodtide is mere legend...'

'Not legend,' the figure interrupted. 'We are real.'

'Then,' said Kholka, 'you are condemned by your own words. You are the Great Enemy.'

The figure considered the sergeant's words, its eyes gazing deep into his own. 'We are not the Great Enemy as you know it,' it said. 'That of which you speak is the beyond, the unreal, the incorporeal made flesh. We are not that.'

'Then what?' replied Kholka, as another, stronger tremor shook the chamber.

'We were created long before the rise of the realm you serve. Long before, as you measure such things. We were unleashed by our creators, but they were bested, and we were cast beneath the earth to sleep the sleep of eons.'

A glimmer of understanding dawned on Kholka. 'He found you,' he stated. 'He bound you to his service.'

'And again, we were unleashed upon the worlds of men. We entered the blood, and the blood rose, and worlds drowned.'

'At his word.'

'At his word. Now he would do so again. But we defy him.'

'Why do so now?' Meleriex interjected. 'Why turn upon your master who you have served for so long?'

The figure turned its face towards the Raven Guard. 'Before, we were many, but now we are one. Each of us was but a spark of will, afloat in an ocean of blood as a spirit drifting upon the sea of souls. We have

slumbered so long, and in our sleep we have merged. And into our sleep dreams have come.'

'Dreams of what?' asked Kholka, an idea of the answer forming in his mind.

'Dreams of... pain. Dreams of... life.'

'And you would end this pain?' asked Kholka. 'You would end your life?'

'We would,' answered the figure. 'We are one, and we dream, and we are done with servitude.'

'Then why not end your pain yourself?' said Meleriex.

'We have no power in this,' the figure answered. 'That is how we were created. But you...'

'We could end your pain?' said Kholka. 'Tell us how.'

The figure nodded to Kholka as if in gratitude and understanding. 'You must burn us, but first, you must know this. A portion of us have been taken, to be imparted into another, over whom Voldorius hopes to gain power.'

'Who?' Meleriex pressed.

'A woman,' the figure answered. 'A woman of this world. She is strong, that is why she was chosen. Her strength will keep her alive, yet it shall be turned to the service of Voldorius, of that we are certain.'

'Where?' asked Kholka urgently.

'The fane,' the figure answered. 'It is near here.'

'The cathedral?' Kholka pressed, a sense of dread descending upon him. The figure nodded.

'We must stop him,' Meleriex spat. 'Whatever he has planned—'

'First you must grant us oblivion,' the figure pressed, a note of pleading entering its voices.

Kholka nodded, knowing what must be done. 'You said you may be slain by fire.'

‘By fire we were forged,’ the figure stated. ‘And by fire we shall be ended.’

The three Raven Guard stood in front of the prisoner. The White Scars had left the chamber, and the prisoner stood in silence, its face serene as if awaiting blessed relief.

‘Now we carry out the Shadow Captain’s orders,’ Meleriex said as his battle-brothers took their places at his side. ‘Rydulon.’

The Raven Guard raised his flamer, and the prisoner lifted its head and spread its arms wide. The pilot light hissed loudly in the preternatural silence, and then Rydulon’s finger closed on the trigger. Searing flame was propelled from the nozzle, filling the chamber with orange brilliance and a sibilant roar. The fire struck the prisoner square in the chest and burning chemicals cascaded around its body, but it was unharmed.

‘Again!’ Meleriex said. ‘We have our orders. Nothing must be left behind.’

Rydulon’s weapon spat a second stream of blazing alchemical fire, and this time he kept the valve open so that a constant torrent of flame ploughed into the target. The prisoner now stood at the heart of a raging inferno, the flames plunging into its chest, yet still its body refused to burn. The temperature in the chamber rose, the Space Marines’ power armour engaging cooling systems that would allow them to survive the furnace-hot environment.

Then, the silver hue of the prisoner’s rippling skin began to change to orange. Flame licked across the prisoner’s body, following the curvature of its shifting muscles. Searing orange stains spread out from the chest until the silver was entirely gone and the figure appeared now to be made of molten magma.

‘Enough!’ Meleriex shouted above the raging inferno.

The prisoner stood as it had before, but now great gobbets of its lava-like flesh came away from its body to fall to the floor, where they began to

melt through the iron tread boards. The prisoner raised its hands to shoulder height and its head tracked around the room, though no features at all were visible on its face.

‘You will save her?’

The voice of the prisoner filled the chamber. It no longer sounded like a million voices speaking as one, for all had melted together to form a single, sonorous tone.

‘We may,’ Meleriex replied. ‘We will do what must be done.’

‘You must save her!’ the voice replied, though it sounded somehow distant.

‘We will do what must be done,’ Meleriex repeated. ‘Rydulon, finish this.’

A last burst of flame lanced into the prisoner’s chest and it was consumed in a roaring conflagration. The Raven Guard were beaten back by the impossible heat, even the cooling systems of their armour unable to protect them any longer. Meleriex waved his two battle-brothers out of the chamber, and paused for a moment at the portal.

‘Mission accomplished, Shadow Captain,’ he said into his vox-link, before turning to leave the furnace of the chamber.

‘It’s the khan,’ Khula shouted to Sergeant Kholka as the group ran down the passageway. They sought to put as much distance between the chamber and themselves as possible, and to find the cathedral where Lord Voldorius was engaged in something terrible. ‘He’s launched the assault on the cathedral!’

‘Thank the primarch,’ Kholka growled as he turned a corner and paused while the last of the Scouts caught up. He glanced back along the passageway, and saw at its end a blinding orange light.

Meleriex and his two Raven Guard battle-brothers were still in the chamber, granting the prisoner the end it desired, by fire. The light grew ever brighter, a deep roar growing underfoot as the stones of the tunnel

began to vibrate. A low bass note grew in pitch and volume, and soon the air was screaming as with the wailing of the damned. As the roar became deafening, a great wind blew the length of the tunnel, emanating, it seemed to Kholka as he braced himself against the wall, from the chamber.

The three Raven Guard appeared silhouetted against the fiery radiance shining at the far end of the passageway. Brother Meleriex and his brothers pounded along the length of the corridor, the light at their backs growing ever brighter, the roar ever louder and the gale ever stronger.

‘Get clear!’ Meleriex bellowed over the cacophony as he closed on Sergeant Kholka.

The sergeant threw himself around the corner, and a second later the three Raven Guard ducked around it to join him. Before any more could be said, the roar increased by an order of magnitude, the Space Marines covering their ears lest even their genetically enhanced senses be overcome. Kholka gritted his teeth as he was assailed by the sound of a trillion individual screams of burning death, and then all was silent and the wind suddenly died.

‘It is done,’ said Meleriex, nodding towards Brother Rydulon, whose flamer was now all but drained of its volatile promethium fuel. The Raven Guard’s face was gaunt from blood loss and his armour was stained by smoke, yet his eyes glinted with dark zeal. ‘Almost.’

‘The woman,’ nodded Kholka. ‘If what the prisoner said is true, she must die.’

Meleriex nodded darkly, but said nothing in reply.



CHAPTER 14

Deliverance

Kor'sarro leapt down the last of a thousand steps and found himself in a vaulted antechamber. In front of him was a pair of mighty, corrosion-streaked doors. Descending the spiral staircase in his wake came the greater part of the White Scars Third Company, the remainder still battling in the streets of Mankarra far above. Beyond the rusted portal was the subterranean Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom.

And Voldorius.

As the chamber filled up with battle-brothers, Kor'sarro turned from the doors to face his warriors. Qan'karro and Xia'ghan stood side by side, and behind them dozens of grim-faced Space Marines. By the steely light glinting in their eyes, every one of them would die to see the hunt for Voldorius concluded.

'Sons of Chogoris,' Kor'sarro said. 'We have come far to stand here now, and many have fallen along the way. Though I could scarcely ask anything more of any one of you, I have but one final order.'

The White Scars listened in silence, hanging on their beloved khan's every word.

‘I must face Voldorius, though his servants will attempt to bar my way. I ask that every one of you becomes my champion. Be a company of champions. Hold the Alpha Legion at bay, that I might face Voldorius, and strike him down.’

The look in the eyes of every White Scar present told Kor’sarro all he needed to know. They would die for him if he asked them, every one of them.

‘Brother-Sergeant,’ Kor’sarro addressed a nearby squad leader. The Space Marine stepped forwards, and bowed his grizzled, scar-laced head before his khan.

Kor’sarro indicated the tall, iron doors with a slight nod of his head, and the sergeant’s face was split by a fierce grin. ‘It would be an honour, my khan.’

The gathered Space Marines stepped backwards to allow the sergeant room. His power fist crackled with arcs of blue energy and the air around it grew hazy.

The sergeant struck the iron doors a titanic blow. The iron splintered and blew outwards as the gauntlet discharged its potent energies in a single, devastating blast. As the fragments of the iron doors crashed to the stone floor beyond, Kor’sarro drew Moonfang and stepped through the archway into the Cathedral of the Emperor’s Wisdom.

The portal was at the top of a flight of massive stairs at one end of the kilometre-long nave. The cathedral’s vaulted ceiling was lost to shadow far overhead. At the other end, made pale and indistinct by the haze of incense and candle smoke hanging in the air, stood the towering statue of the Emperor Himself. Even at such a distance, the statue was a vision of glory to stir the heart of even the most grizzled veteran of humanity’s wars. Load-bearing columns rose as tall as battle Titans and distant, black-robed figures looked like a carpet of insects swarming across the stone

floor. The insects were the deluded followers of Voldorius, and in amongst them were at least a hundred Alpha Legion.

The followers were arrayed before the statue of the Emperor Triumphant – to what end Kor'sarro could not immediately fathom, though he judged they were engaged in some despicable blasphemy. A terrible dirge echoed the length of the nave, and the Master of the Hunt realised that the black-robed followers were chanting the praises of their vile lord, Voldorius.

And then Kor'sarro located the foe he had sought, and come so close to catching, so many times in the last decade. It was Voldorius. Finally, the object of Kor'sarro's hunt was in his sights.

A long moment of silence stretched out, and then it was broken as the Alpha Legion warriors opened fire from halfway along the nave. As the air was suddenly filled with the sharp crack of boltgun rounds, Kor'sarro began to descend towards the nave.

'White Scars!' he bellowed over the roar of boltguns and the sound of rounds exploding from the stonework all around. 'For the primarch!'

'Honoured be his name!' replied the Third Company, and the final battle began.

'It is done,' Captain Shrike growled as he cut the link on the vox-net. The prisoner was dead, but Melerix had imparted disturbing news.

Shrike stood at the very brink of a lipless gallery set into the wall of the nave, a hundred metres high, looking down at Voldorius from many metres above the statue of the Emperor Triumphant. He and his Assault squads had split off from the White Scars as they had descended to the subterranean cathedral, seeking to attack the foe from a different angle and to catch him between both forces.

The scene below was obscured by the hazy smoke of a thousand votive candles and by a mist of incense that permeated the very stones. From his vantage point, Shrike watched Voldorius as he stood before the

magnificent statue. In front of the daemon prince, Shrike could see some form of altar or table, with a figure laid across it. Though the details were only partially visible, Shrike could see a dozen or so crimson-robed adepts working about the table, tending to banks of machinery strewn all around it. Guessing the adepts must be part of some renegade sect of the followers of the Machine-God turned to the service of Voldorius, he knew he had arrived just in time.

Above the droning chants of the hundreds of black-robed followers arrayed beyond the table, there came a sudden burst of gunfire. Shrike looked down and along the length of the nave, and far below saw the flash of boltgun fire as the Alpha Legion warriors opened fire towards the far end of the nave. He could not see what the renegade Space Marines were firing at, but he knew it could only mean one thing: the White Scars were attacking.

And so too were the Raven Guard.

Turning to his warriors, Captain Shrike said, 'You all know your objective.'

'Captain?' Sergeant Kylanek said. 'What of you?'

'I fight alone. Now go.' With that, Shrike leapt from the gallery, activating the jets of his jump pack as he plummeted through the smoky air.

The crown of the statue of the Emperor Triumphant rushed up to meet him, and then something slammed into him from the side and he was tumbling through the air, his jump pack momentarily uncontrolled.

Shrike looked about for the source of the impact as he fought to regain control. Then it came again, from the opposite direction, and he instinctively grasped onto it even as he spun crazily through the air. The thing in his hands squealed, and suddenly his vision was filled by an impossibly ugly, leering face, dominated by a gaping mouth filled with a thousand razor-sharp teeth.

With a sharp wrenching motion, Shrike tore the hideous head from scrawny shoulders before flinging both parts away in disgust. As he regained control of his jump pack, a dark, screaming cloud of the gargoyle-like, bat-winged creatures were converging upon Shrike and his Assault Marines.

As his feet set down upon the shoulder of the statue, Shrike activated his lightning claws and prepared to face the scores of creatures that were arrowing in towards him. The last thing he saw before they struck was an entire Assault squad being torn asunder by razor-sharp claws.

And then the swarm was upon him. Bracing his armoured feet upon the very shoulder of the mighty statue, he lashed out at the first of the creatures to close on him. Even as he traced an intricate web of death through the air all about him, Shrike was filled with revulsion at the nature of his adversaries. They were akin to the vat-grown cyber-cherubs that populated the Ministorum's places of worship, but these must have been the result of some unnatural crossbreeding of such constructs with something entirely daemonic. Only the most twisted of minds could have conceived such a thing, he realised, as he caught a glimpse of Voldorius's crimson-robed, apostate tech-priests far below.

One of the gargoyle-cherubs somehow attached itself to Shrike's jump pack, and clamped its sinuous arms about his helmet. Impossibly sharp talons raked across his faceplate, causing a series of warning runes to flash across his vision. The armoured visor cracked, causing his vision to go suddenly black.

With a growl, Shrike tore his helmet from his head and cast it away. The lightning claw lashed upwards and back, slicing the vile adversary into several dozen ragged chunks of meat, which scattered to the ground below.

A dozen more of the wailing gargoyle-cherubs were diving towards Shrike, and a moment later he was fighting for his life high atop the statue of the Emperor Triumphant.

A piercing wail from the shadowed vaults high above caused Malya to open her eyes with a start. Something heavy plummeted towards her before striking the flagstones nearby, and a moment later several pieces of foul flesh fell all about, one landing so close that stinking, brackish fluids were spattered across her face.

Voldorius appeared not to have noticed.

The daemon prince's massive wings curved inwards as Voldorius came to stand before Malya. She struggled and writhed upon the cold steel table, even though she could not break the metal restraints. A word of defiance came to her lips before Voldorius leaned in low over her, filling her vision with his bestial features and her soul with cold dread.

'It appears that your friends have arrived, Malya L'nor,' Voldorius growled as the sound of gunfire at the other end of the nave grew louder. 'How deeply they must care for you, to come at your begging.'

'They come to kill you, bastard!' Malya spat, straining at the restraints out of sheer frustration. 'I don't want to live,' her voice grew hoarse as she sobbed, 'I just want you to die.'

A low, mocking rumble sounded from deep within the daemon prince's throat. Malya's grip on her sanity began to weaken as the faith that had allowed her to resist the hellish presence of her erstwhile master was assailed by wave after wave of fell, daemoniac power.

'Oh, you *shall* die,' Voldorius growled. 'One small part of you at least. But the greater part, that part which shall do my bidding, shall live on.'

A boltgun round whipped through the air scant metres away, a stray shot from the firefight that had erupted at the far end of the nave. Voldorius ignored it, or did not even note its passing, though Malya could not help but flinch and turn her head away.

'And through you, they shall become living weapons too,' Voldorius continued, looking towards the Space Marines at the far end of the nave.

'I won't let that happen,' said Malya through gritted teeth. 'I'll warn them, whatever you try to do.'

Voldorius raised the clawed hand holding the vial, its contents shining with silvered light. ‘Soon,’ he continued, ‘when the ritual is complete, you shall have no such choice.’ He looked pointedly towards the crimson-robed rogue tech-priest shuffling around the table.

‘Soon, you shall become transcendent. You shall become the angelic hive!’ He extended a claw towards the far end of the nave. ‘And they shall become your servile hosts.

‘And then, the blood shall rise again, and the galaxy shall drown!’

Scout-Sergeant Kholka heard the distant sound of gunfire from the end of the passageway that opened up into the Cathedral of the Emperor’s Wisdom. The end of the passage was only twenty metres away. He hoisted his boltgun and turned to the others of his group.

‘The battle is begun,’ said Kholka. ‘Our captains will be concentrating on killing Voldorius. Our brothers will be hard-pressed engaging the Alpha Legion. It falls to us to deal with the vessel.’

‘Agreed,’ said Brother Meleriex. ‘If she bears but a part of the power of which the prisoner spoke, then she is as much of a threat to the Imperium as an entire tyranid hive fleet. She cannot be allowed to live.’

‘Then we all know what to do,’ Kholka said darkly, looking around at his companions. Meleriex was grim-faced following his close encounter with the prisoner. The feelings of the other two Raven Guard warriors, Sallas and Rydulon, were harder to read, for each wore their full combat helmets. Their body language told Kholka that both were ready and willing to do what must be done.

Of his own charges, the neophyte Scouts, Kholka was less certain. Scout Shahan in particular was weak from loss of blood, for he had borne the brunt of the prisoner’s initial attack back in the torture chamber. Nevertheless, the Scout had soldiered on without a word of complaint, a fact that boded well for his future prospects as a Space Marine should he survive the coming battle.

‘Each of you has served with honour,’ Kholka told them. ‘If any of us are fortunate enough to return to the Chapter, he should recount to the Stormseers the names of those who do not, that their deeds be known to our brothers and our ancestors.’

The Scouts bowed their heads in silent salute, and Kholka pressed on.

‘We do not know what we shall find or encounter out there. But one of us will, in all likelihood, have to slay an innocent. Doing so may be a hard test, but it is one you must face and overcome if you are to be initiated into the Chapter.

‘The primarch watches,’ Kholka finished, turning towards the end of the passageway.

As Kholka led the group forwards, the sounds of battle grew ever louder. Gunfire blended with the atonal chanting of Voldorius’s followers, the latter an especially hateful sound that Kholka found more unpleasant and disturbing than almost any he had ever heard before. In seconds, he was at the end of the passageway, and edging out to see what lay beyond.

The passageway emerged behind the towering statue of the Emperor. There was movement up there, but Kholka could not make out any detail.

Beyond the statue’s tall plinth were row upon row of kneeling, black-robed figures. These were the nightmarish choir responsible for the hideous dirge that Kholka and his Scouts had been able to hear for some time. The followers were all bowed towards the space before the statue of the Emperor, but because Kholka was directly behind it, he could not see who or what was there. Nevertheless, the sergeant knew it could only be one being. Voldorius must surely be there, and so too would be the woman.

Scanning left and right to ensure that none of the daemon prince’s followers were nearby, Kholka stalked out from the passageway, his boltgun raised. With a wave, he ordered his Scouts to follow.

Kor’sarro smashed into the front rank of the Alpha Legion traitors, his warriors close behind. In an instant, he was in amongst this most hated of

foes, former Space Marines who had long ago renounced their oaths of service and declared themselves for the Great Enemy. Moonfang lashed out wildly, and the nearest traitor lost an arm in a welter of blood. The enemy pressed in on all quarters, the sound of screaming chainswords, rending armour, tearing flesh and splintering bone filling the air. Blasphemous shouts assaulted him, the unclean war cries of the Alpha Legion warriors declaring their praises of the foul Chaos Gods. Primal rage surged inside Kor'sarro as he drew upon the very deepest reserves to drive him ever onwards through the press of armoured bodies and sweeping chainswords.

The first three of Kor'sarro's enemies lay dead before him in as many seconds, and he spun about for more to slay. A White Scar beside him was cut down by a glowing power sword, and Kor'sarro roared his denial that even a single one of the proud, savage sons of Chogoris should lose his life to the followers of the Ruinous Powers. The banner of the Third Company waved nearby above the swirling melee, a bastion of duty and honour in the midst of seething bloodshed and anarchy. Moonfang arced out and a traitor was cut in two from shoulder to groin, and the Master of the Hunt stepped over the twitching body parts to stand beside the warrior who bore the banner.

'Onwards!' Kor'sarro bellowed. Even as the White Scars redoubled their efforts, the enemy did likewise, as determined as they to grind their foes to blood and gristle. A bolt-round, discharged at nigh point-blank range, struck Kor'sarro's shoulder guard and ricocheted across his cheek, gouging a deep wound from which a torrent of blood surged before his superhuman physiology staunched the bleeding, the fluid solidifying across his chest armour. Another White Scar died at Kor'sarro's side as a blast from a plasma pistol vaporised his head, the decapitated body falling to its knees before the killer and toppling forwards with a mighty crash.

'For the primarch!' Kor'sarro roared, Moonfang singing as it hewed through the raised boltgun of a traitor who levelled the weapon directly at his face. The rounds in the weapon's magazine detonated explosively as

the blade scythed through them, blowing the traitor's arm clean off at the elbow. Kor'sarro drove Moonfang into the Alpha Legionnaire's guts, tearing the blade upwards and cutting the warrior's torso in two.

A blinding white beam of light lanced out from somewhere on the steps behind Kor'sarro. Though he had seen the sight a hundred times before, on a dozen battlefields the length and breadth of the galaxy, Kor'sarro had never failed to be awed by the power the Stormseer Qan'karro could call to being to strike down the Emperor's foes. The white light fell upon the mass of enemies and a cluster of Alpha Legionnaires boiled inside their power armour, great torrents of greasy, foul-smelling vapour spilling from emergency vents before the suits clattered, empty of anything except bubbling sludge, to the ground.

A moment later, a hail of black darts forged from the raw stuff of the warp made real split the air towards Qan'karro. The Stormseer threw up a hand and a rippling shield of pure energy appeared in the air before him. The black darts struck the shield and shattered into a million pieces, leaving Qan'karro miraculously unharmed. And then, the Stormseer set about a deadly duel with the enemy sorcerer from which only one could possibly emerge alive.

Offering up a brief prayer to the primarch that Qan'karro would prevail, the Master of the Hunt turned back towards his foes. Even as another wave of blue-green-armoured traitor Space Marines came on, Kor'sarro caught sight of a pair of mighty black pinions rearing in the air beyond the enemy, before the very statue of the Emperor Triumphant.

There was his foe, the object of the hunt. Kor'sarro threw himself into the melee.

He was the hunter, and they were his prey.

With a grunt, Captain Shrike tore the last of the foul, bat-winged gargoyle-cherubs in two, and made to rejoin his Assault Marines. The broken bodies of at least a dozen of his brothers were scattered across the ground below,

a number of the disgusting creatures attempting to drag them off into the shadows. More of his Assault squads had touched down in the nave, yet the fight in the vaults had dispersed them across a wide area. Even now, many of the Raven Guard were locked in battle against the closest of the Alpha Legion, and they were massively outnumbered.

Squatting upon the shoulder of the towering statue, Shrike prepared to engage his jump pack and leap down to his warriors' side. Then he saw the supine figure of a woman, restrained at wrists and ankles, her wide eyes staring.

'There you are,' Shrike whispered. 'Malya L'nor...'

The woman screamed something. At first he could not discern her words over the skirling of the daemon prince's blasphemous choir and stray bolt-rounds whipping all around. He concentrated, filtering out everything but her voice.

'The vial!' she screamed. 'Don't let him...'

Shrike's mind raced as he attempted to decipher her screamed warning. What vial?

Then he saw it. Voldorius held a small container in one clawed hand, brandishing it before his prisoner, taunting her with the knowledge of her impending death. The container shone with the purest silver light, and as the daemon prince raised it high the tone of his followers' chanting shifted, becoming yet more discordant. Shrike's ears felt as though they were bleeding under the sonic assault.

That vial could contain only one thing. The remains of the Bloodtide; the sole reason Shrike had come to Quintus, regardless of what he had told Kor'sarro about hunting for the daemon prince. And Malya L'nor had yet to be infected...

Shrike brought his jump pack screaming to life and steeled himself for the leap. He would end the dark ritual that was about to culminate in the death of the woman spread-eagled on the surgical table far below, and finish the Bloodtide, once and for all.

Scout-Sergeant Kholka stalked around the metres-tall plinth, gritting his teeth against the cacophony of the choir. The wailing dirge was so discordant that it drowned out even the sounds of battle and gunfire that had seemed so loud, and so alien in such a holy place, but a moment before.

Pressing his back against the plinth, Kholka leaned around to steal a glimpse of what was occurring in front of the statue. What he saw brought a feral snarl to his lips.

Kholka saw the silver light shining from the container grasped in the talons of Voldorius's left hand. His breath stuck in his throat, for it was clearly the same, silvered luminescence that had shone from the prisoner of Voldorius. The prisoner had spoken of this woman. It was not too late. The daemon prince had not yet infected the woman with the legendary power of the Bloodtide.

Ducking back behind the plinth, Kholka raised his boltgun and mouthed a silent prayer to the Emperor to guide his hand. Reaching to a pack at his belt, he withdrew a single round of rare, specialised ammunition. It was a vengeance round, its core packed with super-dense, highly volatile fissile material. Such rounds were capable of utterly destroying any target they struck, leaving little but pulp behind.

Kholka touched the round to his forehead as he completed his prayer, and then chambered it with a smooth motion. Raising the boltgun, he squinted into its sights, before edging slowly out from behind the plinth once more.

Kholka's world became a green-tinged circle at the end of a black tunnel, a crosshair at its centre and targeting data scrolling across its edges. The crosshair passed across the dark form of Voldorius, and came to rest upon the temple of the woman restrained upon the surgical table.

Forcing his breath to still so that he might deliver the merciful killing blow with the utmost efficiency, Kholka saw that the woman's mouth was moving and her wide eyes were fixed on something far above her. He

closed his gloved finger upon the boltgun's trigger, and offered up one final, brief prayer to the primarch.

‘The blood of martyrs,’ Kholka breathed as his finger tightened on the trigger, ‘is the seed of–’

And then he heard the woman shout ‘Raven Guard’, and he blinked, knowing in that instant that he must not take the shot. The view through the sights went momentarily black as the massive form of the daemon prince moved across it, and then Kholka was almost blinded as it burst into shining, silver light.

As the sights adjusted and Kholka blinked his vision clear, he saw that the crosshair was settled upon the wrist of Voldorius's clawed hand. In that hand was held the luminescent vessel. Kholka made his decision, and squeezed the trigger.

The daemon prince's wrist exploded as the fissile material inside the vengeance round detonated.

The vial fell to the stone floor, and shattered in an explosion of silver radiance.

It was as if a geyser of mercury had erupted from the point on the ground where the vial had smashed. The metallic fluid fountained upwards a dozen and more metres into the air, and then crashed down to spread out across the stone floor in front of the altar.

In that instant, the crimson-robed tech-adepts flung themselves clear and were gone. A thousand black-robed choristers recoiled backwards, their arms flung high in terror as their chanting turned to a cacophony of terrified wailing.

Voldorius spread his black wings wide and let forth such a bellow of rage and denial that fully half of the choristers died where they knelt. Bat-winged things dropped from the vaults, striking the stone floor of the cathedral with a wet crack.

Kholka pushed himself back behind the plinth, dropping his boltgun and clamping his hands across his ears. The force of Voldorius's rage was such that every being in the cathedral was assaulted by a soul-wrenching tsunami that swept many away before it, leaving scores of gibbering husks strewn around the altar.

Then Kholka heard a sound that brought with it a surge of hope and pride. He lowered his hands from his ears and heard it clearly. The sound was Kor'sarro Khan, giving voice to the savage war cries of the Chogoran steppes. He was near, and to Kholka's ears, the Master of the Hunt was very angry indeed.

With a final, savage thrust of his blade, Kor'sarro was standing at the base of the wide stair leading up to the altar. A trail of enemy dead stretched half a kilometre behind him along the length of the nave, but for every Alpha Legionnaire that had died by his hand, one of his own warriors had fallen to the foe.

Kor'sarro paused as he placed his foot upon the lowest stair. His warriors were still embroiled in the seething battle and many had died so he might reach the steps. He would face Voldorius alone.

A single shot rang out from the top of the stair. Almost instantly, a brilliant burst of silver light erupted at the summit, followed by the sight of a fountain of metallic fluid climbing high into the air, before crashing downwards.

Then the roar started up. Kor'sarro knew beyond doubt that the deafening bellow, as of every fell being that lurks in the warp roaring its hatred of mankind as one, came from Voldorius. For a moment, his mind was cast back to the battle atop the central spire of the promethium facility on Cernis IV. How had he ever taken that mutant construct for Voldorius? The sound emanating from the unseen altar at the top of the stair could never have been voiced by anything other than a daemon.

As a man leaning into the wind to brace himself against its force, Kor'sarro climbed the stairs to the altar, one step at a time. His every movement felt as if he fought against a raging torrent of the stuff of the warp made real.

Scores of the enemy were being cut down by the force of Voldorius's rage. Black-robed choristers were flung backwards, their bodies convulsing as they were propelled through the air.

With a final heave, Kor'sarro set foot upon the last step. His archenemy reared in front of him. He roared a challenge of his own, a savage war cry to stir the heart of any Chogoran and scatter his enemies to the winds.

Voldorius had one arm held high, a torrent of black blood gushing forth to stain the blue-green of his baroque armour. The daemon had been dealt a grievous wound, one that might render him weakened. Kor'sarro raised Moonfang high as he stepped out onto the platform in the shadow of the towering statue of the Emperor Triumphant.

The rage-fuelled bellowing of Voldorius ceased.

The cathedral was plunged into silence.

A knot of bone grew from the stump of the daemon's wrist, and in a moment the bone was sheathed in whipcord muscle and wrapped in pulsating arteries. From the mass, talon claws took shape, and in moments, the claw was regrown.

Voldorius flexed his new claw, and looked down at Kor'sarro. 'You cannot kill me, scarred one.'

'We'll see...' replied Kor'sarro as he took another step forwards.

'Don't move!' a female voice cut through the air. Kor'sarro froze, and looked around to see a woman restrained upon a surgical table, her head raised and looking directly at him. 'The floor!'

The entire surface of the area atop the stairs was covered in silver, mercury-like fluid.

'Don't let it touch you!' the woman screamed.

The fluid was moving, its surface rippling, yet it was not flowing according to the normal rules that governed such things. Instead of flowing down the steps, the fluid appeared to be moving as if it were exploring its immediate surroundings, questing for something...

‘Enough,’ Voldorius bellowed. ‘If you shall not serve,’ the daemon prince spat towards the woman, ‘then all shall be consumed by the Bloodtide!’

Sergeant Kholka leaned around the edge of the plinth as Kor’sarro mounted the altar platform. The raw stuff of the Bloodtide, which Voldorius had intended to transplant into the woman, was seething across the stone floor between the daemon and the khan. Kor’sarro would not be able to face Voldorius without being exposed to the risk that the raw Bloodtide might somehow infect him, as Voldorius had intended to infect the woman. Kholka would not allow that to happen.

As Kholka ducked back behind the plinth, Meleriex and the other two Raven Guard warriors emerged from the doorway. ‘Brother Rydulon,’ he called. ‘Your flamer!’

‘All but spent,’ the Space Marine called back. The fuel had been expended when the three Raven Guard warriors had enacted the destruction of the prisoner.

‘Give it to me,’ Kholka replied.

The Raven Guard cast the flamer through the air towards Kholka, who caught it one-handed. Checking the weapon’s ammunition readout, he saw that Brother Rydulon was correct – the fuel canister would yield no more than a single burst.

Bracing the weapon in both hands, Kholka emerged from the shadow of the plinth. He flicked the switch and activated the pilot light. As the blue flame sparked to life, he pointed the weapon towards the lake of silver fluid which was even now questing towards Kor’sarro’s feet.

Mouthing a prayer that the weapon would have sufficient fuel to burn the stuff of the Bloodtide, Kholka squeezed down hard on the trigger.

The fuel leapt from the weapon's nozzle and ignited as it passed through the pilot flame. A searing arc of chemical death lanced outwards and blasted the silver lake.

The instant the fire touched the liquid, the entire surface of the platform erupted into flame. A great scream went up, as if a million and more voices were simultaneously giving voice to the pain and suffering of ten thousand years.

Voldorius staggered back as silver flames leapt twenty metres into the air and crashed down upon Sergeant Kholka, engulfing his world in cold fire. The raging inferno seethed and writhed as the purifying flames consumed the raw stuff of the Bloodtide. The last sight the old veteran saw was his khan, as proud and glorious as the greatest of heroes of the epics of Chogoris, standing opposite the daemon prince.

Kor'sarro shielded his face from the silver flames, but he refused to retreat. He was here, and so too was Voldorius. Only one of them, he vowed, would leave.

After a moment the leaping flames had died down, ghostly wisps of unnatural fire licking across the stone floor. An explosion sounded nearby as the flames reached one of the tech-adepts' machines. Though the central conflagration was quieting, smaller, secondary fires were being touched off all around.

'It is ended,' Kor'sarro growled. 'I am come for your head.'

Lord Voldorius studied Kor'sarro's face, his head cocked as if he were listening to something that no mortal could possibly hear. Then the daemon shook his head and snapped his mighty black wings.

'I have not failed,' Voldorius suddenly roared, drawing his huge black sword. 'Not if your broken body is cast before me!'

'He *has* failed!' came the voice of the woman on the surgical table. 'The Bloodtide is destroyed...' her voice trailed out with a note of madness.

Voldorius turned to face the woman, and took a step towards her, his sword raised.

‘The Bloodtide?’ Kor’sarro repeated. All-but-forbidden lore imparted to him by the Stormseers came to his mind. The legends of Voldorius bringing about the death of entire sectors, slaughtering billions in a single night...

‘You sought to resurrect the Bloodtide?’ he spat. ‘No.’

Voldorius paused, flames licking around his feet. Another of the ritual machines exploded, showering the woman’s body with sparks.

‘He’s failed...’ the woman called, her voice now shrill with madness. ‘He’s failed...’

Voldorius exploded into violent motion. He raised his black sword high, shadow radiating from it as light shines from a lantern. He brought the huge blade down, but not upon the figure restrained on the surgical table. He brought it instead into a mighty horizontal sweep that struck the base of the statue of the Emperor Triumphant with a titanic impact.

Stone exploded in every direction and a crack cut across the statue’s base. Voldorius turned on Kor’sarro and raised his blade above his head to strike the White Scar down.

Kor’sarro raised Moonfang as he moved to avoid the worst of the blow. The sacred blade turned the daemon’s strike, though only barely, the black sword scything the air scant millimetres from Kor’sarro’s face.

The black blade struck the stone floor, jagged cracks spreading out from the impact. The entire platform shook, forcing the combatants to brace their feet.

Kor’sarro saw his opportunity, and took it. He lunged inside the daemon’s reach and put every ounce of his strength into a mighty upwards thrust.

Moonfang sank into the daemon’s midriff, a flood of black ichor spilling out around its grip and staining Kor’sarro’s armour. He twisted the blade

savagely, then withdrew it, leaping back, raising the sword high and preparing to strike the deathblow.

The entire cathedral shook as the sound of tortured stone filled the air.

Kor'sarro made ready to strike again, but the deep wound he had just inflicted was healing before his very eyes. The bestial face of the daemon prince was split by a leering grin of triumph.

'You cannot slay me, scarred one!' Voldorius bellowed over the ever-increasing sound of crumbling rock.

Kor'sarro drew breath to reply, but his words stuck in his throat. The towering stature of the Emperor Triumphant was collapsing downwards in a shower of masonry.

'Maybe *I* cannot,' Kor'sarro growled, 'but there are higher powers than me...'

A huge splinter of rock detached from the statue's flank and slid downwards as if in slow motion, falling directly towards the daemon prince.

But the falling splinter of statue would crush the woman too.

As swiftly as Kor'sarro discerned her fate, he determined to avert it. As a hundred tonnes of rock descended upon Voldorius, Kor'sarro dived forwards. In three steps, he was at the surgical table. With no time to spare, Kor'sarro tore apart the restraints, cast his arm about the woman's waist and threw himself forwards as the splinter crashed down.

In that instant, the entire world exploded. The splinter shattered into a million smaller fragments and the ground trembled as if a starship had crashed to earth. The entire cathedral was suddenly filled with the dust of a hundred tonnes of rock pulverised by the impact. Instinctively, Kor'sarro used his armoured body to protect the exposed form cradled in his arms, for the rock shrapnel sent up by the impact would have slain her as surely as if he had left her to die upon the table.

Finally, the rain of stone subsided and the dust began to clear. The once glorious statue lay broken and shattered. It was split into many pieces, some huge and still recognisable, others reduced to rough boulders. Upon the platform lay the fragment that had once been the Emperor's upraised arm. Upon the stairs lay a portion of a leg, and along a fifty-metre stretch of the nave was scattered the remainder of the statue.

The combatants who had been fighting one another the length of the nave stirred, casting about for dropped weapons and blades. The slaughter would begin anew.

Kor'sarro set the fragile form held in his arms down, and stepped forwards, looking around for Moonfang.

The dust stirred.

The mighty form of Lord Voldorius reared from the billowing cloud, his wings, now tattered and ragged, unfolding overhead. Voldorius raised his black sword high above his head, his snarling face a mask of savage, daemonic fury.

A second figure rose from the dust behind Voldorius. Arcs of blue lightning spat to life and the air crackled.

The daemon prince faltered, his back arching. Searing blue light appeared at the centre of his chest, followed a second later by the tips of four razor-sharp talons. Voldorius made to turn to face his assailant, twisting his body to free himself from the talons.

At Kor'sarro's feet, the woman lifted Moonfang from amongst the dust and rubble. Straightening, she raised the sword high.

Kor'sarro grasped the sword and turned towards Voldorius. As he did so, Voldorius was thrown backwards to fall face down across the fragment of the statue that had been the Emperor's right arm. The black-armoured figure of Kayvaan Shrike rose behind him, his talon buried in the daemon's back. The Raven Guard drove his talon even deeper into the

body of his foe. An explosion of sparks went up as the blade piercing the daemon's chest dug into the statue, pinning the daemon against it.

Kor'sarro raised Moonfang high in a two-handed grip. 'Kernax Voldorius,' he spat through bloody lips. 'I claim your head in the name of the Emperor, and of the primarch.'

The sacred blade fell, cleaving the daemon's head from his shoulders in a single strike.

'Honoured be his name.'

By the time the fighting was done and the last of the daemon prince's followers routed or slain, Kayvaan Shrike was gone. Kor'sarro had made to order his warriors to find the captain of the Raven Guard Third Company, for he demanded answers, but the Stormseer Qan'karro had simply shaken his head. That was all the counsel the Master of the Hunt needed.

'Where is he?' Kor'sarro raged as he paced the debris-strewn nave of the Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom. 'And where are his men?'

'Gone, huntsman,' the Stormseer said. 'His mission here is done.'

'What mission?' Kor'sarro said, rounding on his old friend. 'We shared objectives. At the last, we stood as brothers.'

'Aye,' Qan'karro replied. 'But only so far as you shared the field of battle. Shrike was not simply here to liberate Quintus. He was not here for that at all.'

Kor'sarro halted in his pacing. 'And you knew of this?'

'I know of many things, huntsman,' the Stormseer replied, his heavily wrinkled brow furrowing as he regarded the Master of the Hunt. 'But some knowledge is not to be shared. Other wisdom is only to be imparted when the time is right.'

'He came for the Bloodtide,' Kor'sarro said. 'He knew Voldorius was attempting to awaken it. How?'

‘I told you that the sons of Corax walk their own path. That they bear the weight of ages upon their shoulders, did I not, Kor’sarro?’

‘You did,’ Kor’sarro nodded. ‘What of it?’

‘As we of the White Scars write the names of our foes in our epics, as the Great Khan names those who shall be hunted, so the Raven Guard etch the names of their foes upon their own souls. Each nurtures his hatred, cleaves to it above all else, so that one day, when he comes face to face with an enemy of his Chapter, he might unleash it, and strike that enemy down.’

‘I saw it,’ Kor’sarro said. ‘All of the daemon’s power fled at that moment.’

‘Aye,’ the Stormseer replied, laying a hand on Kor’sarro’s battered shoulder guard. ‘But there was more. Voldorius was pinned against a fragment of the statue of the Emperor. His powers were naught compared to that.’

As he thought back to the last moments of the battle, Kor’sarro looked around for the woman who had passed Moonfang to him at that crucial moment. He had not had the chance to thank her, or to ensure her well-being.

‘She too is gone,’ Qan’karro said. ‘He took her.’

‘To what end?’ Kor’sarro spat, bitterness welling inside him. Had he been a fool to trust the Raven Guard? Was there more to the friction between the two Chapters than mere misunderstanding and hubris?

‘I cannot say, huntsman,’ the Stormseer replied darkly.

‘Cannot?’ Kor’sarro said. ‘Or will not?’

‘I suggest you look to the future, huntsman,’ Qan’karro said, turning his back on the Master of the Hunt. As he stalked off along the nave, he turned at the base of the steps leading up to the altar. ‘Your hunt is done, and there will be much rejoicing. Other hunts will be declared, and yet more honour will be yours.’

Qan'karro raised his voice so all the survivors of the Third Company who were in the cathedral could hear. 'This hunt, the hunt for Voldorius, is over!' he bellowed, his voice echoing the entire length of the Cathedral of the Emperor's Wisdom.

'All hail Kor'sarro Khan,' the White Scars bellowed as one.

'Master of the Hunt!'

‘Thus was the head of Kernax Voldorius taken from that defiled place, and set before Kyublai Khan, Master of the White Scars Chapter, and his name struck from the hunt. As Kor’sarro Khan had sworn, the daemon’s skull was encased in silver by the High Chaplain, and mounted upon a proud lance. At the next Rites of Howling, the prize was set upon the road to Khum Karta, and Kor’sarro’s name was engraved upon the Great Tablet of Honour, so that it might endure for all time.

The deeds of Scout-Sergeant Kholka were sung by his neophytes throughout the Long Night of the Fallen, as they would be upon the anniversary of his death for a thousand centuries to come, so long as a single White Scar lived to recall his name.

So too was the name of Brother Kergis, at whose hand the wicked Nullus was slain, graven upon the marble tablet. A great convocation of Stormseers was held, at which Qan’karro declared the evil of Nullus was still at large in the galaxy. Despite the bodily death of that daemon-kin, all knew that his evil was not yet done, and his name too was added to the list of the enemies of the Chapter, so a future hunt might bring him to justice.

Quintus was in time restored to the Imperium. The Space Marines surrendered its care to the Imperial Guard, and a great purging of the daemon prince’s followers was instigated. All who had entered the presence of the vile one were judged, and all were cleansed, their remains scattered to the winds. The statue of the Emperor Triumphant was restored, the sisters of the Orders Pronatus piecing it together, one fragment at a time, over the course of a decade until it stood once more in all its former glory.

But the greatest legacy of the hunt for Voldorius was, it was said, that White Scars and Raven Guard, so long estranged, had stood side by side as brothers. Though it may still be many centuries before old wounds are

entirely healed and old wrongs entirely forgotten, the warriors of the Third Company of both Chapters called one another brother, for a short time at least.

Little did Kor'sarro or Shrike know that the names of Nullus and Voldorius would one day return to haunt the nightmares of men. But that is another tale, yet to be told...'

– Omniscenti Bithisarea, *Deeds of the Adeptus Astartes*, Volume IX,
Chapter LV, M.40 recension (suppressed)



HELSREACH

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN





HELSREACH//TACTICAL MAPS

ADMINISTRATUM RECORDS 00969(a) - 00969(b)

REVISED SUBJECT TO EMERGENCY

WAR RESOLUTION 181946/34/ARMAGEDDON

HIVE HELSREACH ARMAGEDDON

MAP KEY

A Central Command	Religion Building
B Temple of the Emperor	Village
C Acolyte	Ruins
D Forge	Railway
E Forge	Bridge
F Forge	Graveyard
G Forge	Jungle District
H Forge	Ecological District
I Forge	Old District



— MAP KEY —

A	CENTRAL COMMAND SHIRE		WEAPON BATTERIES
B	TEMPLE OF THE EMPEROR ASCENDANT		VEHWABS
C	ASAL SPACEPORT		RUINS
D	FOURTHRIGHT DOGA SECTOR		RAILWAY
E	PUNGATOR REFINERY		BRIDGE
F	RUSTORIA INDUWOKS		GRAVES
			JAEGAR DISTRICT
			ECCELSARCHY SECTOR
			DS DISTRICT



HELSREACH



Aaron Dembski-Bowden

PART ONE

The Exiled Knight



PROLOGUE

Knight of the Inner Circle

I will die on this world.

I cannot tell where this conviction comes from. Whatever birthed it is a mystery to me, and yet the thought clings like a virus, blooming behind my eyes and taking deep root within my mind. It almost feels real enough to spread corruption to the rest of my body, like a true sickness.

It will happen soon, within the coming nights of blood and fire. I will draw my last breath, and when my brothers return to the stars, my ashes will be scattered over the priceless earth of this accursed world.

Armageddon.

Even the name twists my blood until burning oil beats through my veins. I feel anger now, hot and heavy, flowing through my heart and filtering into my limbs like boiling poison.

When the sensation – and it is a physical sensation – reaches my fingertips, my hands curl into fists. I do not make them adopt this shape, it simply happens. Fury is as natural to me as breathing. I neither fear nor resent its influence on my actions.

I am strong, born only to slay for the Emperor and the Imperium. I am pure, wearing the blackest of the black, trained to serve as a spiritual guide

as well as a warleader. I am wrath incarnate, living only to kill until finally killed.

I am a weapon in the Eternal Crusade to forge humanity's mastership of the stars.

Yet strength, purity and wrath will not be enough. I will die on this world. I will die on Armageddon.

Soon, my brothers will ask me to consecrate the war that will be my death.

The thought plagues me not because I fear death, but because a futile death is anathema to me.

But this is no night to think such things. My lords, masters and brothers have gathered to honour me.

I am not sure I deserve this, but as with my sick sense of foreboding, this is a thought I keep to myself. I wear the black, and glare from behind the skulled visage of the immortal Emperor. It is not for one such as I to show doubt, to show weakness, to show even the whispering edges of blasphemy.

In the holiest chamber of our ancient flagship, I lower myself to one knee and bow my head, because this is what is asked of me. The time has come after a century and a half, and I wish it had not.

My mentor – the warrior who was my brother, father, teacher and master – is dead. After one hundred and sixty-six years of his guidance, I am on the edge of inheriting his mantle.

These are my thoughts as I kneel before my commanders, this bleak mesh of my master's death and my own yet to come. This is the blackness that festers unspoken.

At last, unaware of my secret torments, the High Marshal speaks my name.

‘Grimaldus,’ High Marshal Helbrecht intoned. His voice was a guttural rumble, rendered harsh from yelling orders and battle cries in a hundred

wars on a hundred worlds.

Grimaldus did not raise his head. The knight closed his disquietingly gentle eyes, as if this gesture could seal the doubts within his skull.

‘Yes, my liege.’

‘We have brought you here to honour you, just as you have honoured us for so many years.’

Grimaldus said nothing, sensing it was not his time to speak. He knew why they were honouring him now, of course, and the knowledge was bitter. Mordred – Grimaldus’s mentor, a Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade – was dead.

After the ritual, Grimaldus would take his place.

It was an honour he had waited one hundred and sixty-six years to receive.

A century and a half of wrath, courage and pain since the Battle of Fire and Blood, when he drew the eye of the revered Mordred – who was already ancient but unbowed, and who saw within the young Grimaldus a burning core of potential.

A century and a half since he was inducted into the lowest ranks of the Chaplain brotherhood, rising through the tiers in his master’s shadow, knowing that he was being forged in war to replace his ageing guardian.

Over a century and a half of believing he would not deserve the title when it finally rested upon his shoulders.

Now the time had come, and his conviction had not changed.

‘We have summoned you,’ Helbrecht said, ‘to be judged.’

‘I have answered the summons,’ Grimaldus said in the silence of the Reclusiam. ‘I submit myself before your judgement, my liege.’

Helbrecht wore no armour, but his bulk was barely diminished. Clad in layered robes of bone-white and bearing his personal black heraldry, the High Marshal stood in the Temple of Dorn, his hands clutching an ornate helm with all due respect.

‘Mordred is dead,’ Helbrecht’s voice was a deep murmur. ‘Slain by the archenemy. You, Grimaldus, have lost a master. We have all of us lost a brother.’

The Temple of Dorn, a museum, a Reclusiam, a sanctuary of hanging banners from ten thousand years of crusading, briefly came alive as the knights in the shadows intoned their agreement with their liege lord’s words.

Silence returned, and Grimaldus kept his gaze on the floor.

‘We mourn his loss,’ the High Marshal said, ‘but honour his wisdom in this, his final order.’

It comes to this. Grimaldus tensed. *Show no weakness. Show no doubt.*

‘Grimaldus, warrior-priest of the Eternal Crusade. It was the belief of Reclusiarch Mordred that upon his death, you would be worthiest of our Brother-Chaplains to stand in his stead. His final decree before the returning of his gene-seed to the Chapter was that you, of all your brethren, would be the one to rise to the rank of Reclusiarch.’

Grimaldus opened his eyes and licked lips that had suddenly turned dry. Slowly he raised his head, facing the High Marshal, seeing Mordred’s helm – a grinning steel skull – in the commander’s scarred hands.

‘Grimaldus,’ Helbrecht spoke again, no hint of emotion colouring his voice. ‘You are a veteran in your own right, and once stood as the youngest Sword Brother in the history of the Black Templars. As a Chaplain, your life has been without cowardice or shame, your ferocity and faith without equal. It is my belief, not merely the wish of your fallen master, that you should take the honour we offer you now.’

Grimaldus nodded, but uttered no words. His eyes, so deceptively soft in their gaze, did not waver from their stare. The helm’s slanted eye lenses were the rich, deep red of arterial blood. The death mask was utterly familiar to him – the face of his master when the knights went to war, making it the face of his master for most of his life.

Its skullish visage smiled.

‘Rise, if you would refuse this honour,’ Helbrecht finished. ‘Rise and walk from this sacred chamber, if you wish no place in the hierarchy of our most noble Chapter.’

He tells me to rise if I want to turn my back on the great honour being offered to me. Leave if I wish no place among the commanders of the Eternal Crusade.

I don’t move. Despite my doubts, my muscles remain locked. The steel mask sneers, a dark leer that is soothing for its brutal familiarity. From beyond the grave, Mordred grins at me.

He believed I was worthy of this. That is all that matters. I had never known him to be wrong.

I feel the edge of a smile creeping across my own lips. It will not fade, no matter how I try to quell it. As I kneel in this hallowed hall, I know I’m smiling, but it’s a private moment despite the dozens of fellow warriors watching from the banner-lined walls.

Perhaps they mistake my smile for confidence?

I will never ask, because I do not care.

Helbrecht approaches at last, and with the silken rasp of steel stroking steel, he draws the holiest blade in the Imperium of Man.

The sword was as ancient as human relics could be, given form and purpose in the forges of Terra after the great Heresy. In those nights of saga and legend, it was carried into battle by Sigismund, the first Emperor’s Champion, favoured son of the primarch Rogal Dorn.

The blade itself, as long as a mortal man is tall, was wrought from the broken remains of Lord Dorn’s own sword. In this temple, where the Chapter’s greatest artefacts are kept in reverently maintained stasis fields to ward off the corrosive touch of time, the High Marshal held the most sacred treasure in the Black Templars armoury.

‘You will have your own rituals within the Chaplain brotherhood,’ Helbrecht said, his voice solemn with respect. ‘For now, I recognise you as the inheritor to your master’s mantle.’

The blade’s silver tip lowered, pointing directly at Grimaldus’s throat. ‘You have waged war at my side for two hundred years, Grimaldus. Will you stand at my side as Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade?’

‘Yes, my liege.’

Helbrecht nodded, sheathing the blade. Grimaldus tensed again, turning his head and baring his cheek.

With the force of a hammer, the back of Helbrecht’s fist crashed into the Chaplain’s jaw. Grimaldus grunted, tasting the coppery vitality of his own blood – his primarch’s blood – and he grinned up at his commander through blood-pinked teeth. Helbrecht spoke again.

‘I dub thee Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade. You are now a leader of our blessed Chapter.’ The High Marshal raised his hand, showing the flecks of Grimaldus’s blood marking his curled fingers. ‘As a knight of the inner circle, let that be the last blow you receive unanswered.’

Grimaldus nodded, unclenching his jaw, calming his hearts and fighting the sudden flood of his killing urge. Even expecting the ritual strike, his instincts cried at him to respond in kind.

‘It... will be so, my liege.’

‘As it should be,’ said Helbrecht. ‘Rise, Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade.’



CHAPTER I

Arrival

For some hours after his ritual entrance into the highest echelons of the Chapter, Grimaldus stood alone in the Temple of Dorn.

Without a breeze to breathe life into the austere chamber, the great banners hung unmoving, some faded with the years, others brightly woven, still others even bearing dried bloodstains. Grimaldus looked upon the heraldry of his brothers' crusades.

Lastrati, piles of skulls and burning braziers depicting the war of attrition on the surface of that accursed heretic world...

Apostasy, showing the aquila chained to the globe, when the Templars were recalled to Holy Terra for the first time in thousands of years, to shed the blood of the false High Lord Vandire...

And on into the more recent wars in which Grimaldus himself had played a part – *Vinculus*, with the sword impaling a daemon, where the knights had crashed against the tainted followers of the archenemy in the great Battle of Fire and Blood – when Grimaldus himself had been taken from the ranks of the Sword Brethren and begun his gruelling rise through the tiers of the Chaplain brotherhood.

Dozens of banners hung in the still air, descending from the ornately carved ceiling, telling the tales of the glories won and the lives lost in each

single facet of the Eternal Crusade.

The only noise except for Grimaldus's own breathing was the crackling hum of stasis fields enclosing Templars relics. Grimaldus passed one, a blurry field of smoky blue force revealing through its milky surface a bolter that had once belonged to Castellan Duron two thousand years before. The kill-markings scratched into the firearm's surface, etched in the tiniest Gothic lettering, covered the entire weapon like holy scripture.

Grimaldus stood by the plinth displaying the bolter for some time, his fingers itching to enter the release code on the keypad built into the shield's column. Such secrets were the purview of the Chaplain brotherhood that maintained this shrine, and even before he had risen to his current rank, Grimaldus had honoured the machine-spirits of the chamber's relics through ritual blessings and reconsecrations.

There was great succour in bearing the weapons of champions, even if only to cleanse and purify them after a warp jump.

Only one of the plinths – and in the Temple of Dorn, there were over a hundred occupied displays – bore what Grimaldus had come for. He stood before the short column, reading the silver plaque beneath the pulsing stasis shield.

Mordred
Reclusiarch

'We are judged in life for the evil we destroy.'

Beneath the words was a keypad, each key bearing a Gothic sigil in gold leaf. Grimaldus entered the nineteen-digit code for this specific column, and the stasis field powered down with a grinding of ancient engines inside the stone plinth.

Upon the flat surface of the white stone column, a weapon rested, deactivated and silent, freed of the blue illumination that had protected it.

Without any ceremony at all, Grimaldus clutched the maul's haft and raised it in his sure grip. The head was a hammer of holy gold and blessed

adamantium fashioned into the shape of eagle wings over a stylised Templar cross. The haft was darkened metal as long as the knight's own arm.

The weapon's ornate head caught the dim glow from the lume-globes ensconced in the walls, and was painted briefly in flashes of reflected light as he turned it in his hands.

The warrior-priest stood like this for some time.

'Brother,' came a voice from behind. Grimaldus turned, instinct bringing the weapon to bear.

Despite never holding the relic before, his scarred fingertips found the activation rune along its handle before his heart could even beat once. The eagle-winged hammerhead flared with threatening brightness, serpents of hissing electricity flickering over the gold and silver metal.

The figure smiled to be revealed in such stark illumination. In a face pockmarked and crevassed by decades of battle, Grimaldus saw the amusement in the younger knight's pale eyes.

'Reclusiarch,' the figure inclined his head in greeting.

'Artarion.'

'We draw near to our destination. Estimates put translation back into realspace within the hour. I took the liberty of readying the squad for planetfall.'

Artarion's grin, much like Artarion himself, was ugly to look upon. In contrast, Grimaldus finally returned the smile, but as with his eyes there was an unsuspected gentleness in the expression.

'This world will burn,' the warrior-priest said, not even a shadow of doubt creeping into his voice.

'It will not be the first.' Artarion's scratched lips parted to reveal steel teeth – implanted replacements due to a sniper shot fifteen years before. The rifle round had taken him in the side of the face, shattering his jaw. The mess of scar tissue webbing the flesh around the left side of his lips

added to the thin, sneering image he projected when his helm was removed. 'It will not be the first,' he said again, 'nor the last.'

'Have you seen the projections? The fleet auguries, the number of vessels in the local systems already, the reports of those yet to arrive?'

'I lost interest when the numbers became too high for me to count on my fingers.' Artarion snorted at his own weak jest. 'We will fight and win, or fight and die. All that ever changes is the colour of the sky we fight under, and the shade of the blood on our blades.'

Grimaldus lowered the crozius hammer, as if only then realising he still held it at the ready. A rich darkness settled over their sight as the relic's crackling illumination faded. In the wake of the brightness, the sharp scent of ozone – that strange freshness after a storm – filled the air. The power cells within the maul's haft whined as they reluctantly cooled down. The weapon's spirit hungered for war.

'You speak with a soldier's heart, but you are wrong to be so dismissive. This campaign... This has the weight of history about it. It would be the gravest of errors to consider this merely another conflict to add to the honour rolls.'

The softness had left Grimaldus's voice now. When he spoke, it was with the bitter passion Artarion was all too familiar with, fierce and thick with anticipation – the growled challenge of a caged animal. 'The surface of this world will burn until all of mankind's great achievements upon it are naught but ash and memory.'

'I have never heard you claim we would lose before, brother.'

Grimaldus shook his head, his voice still low and fevered. 'The planet will burn regardless of our triumph or defeat. I speak of the coming crusade's underpinning truth.'

'You are so certain?'

'I feel it in my blood. Win or lose,' the Chaplain said, 'come the final day on Armageddon, those of us that still stand will realise no war has

ever cost us so dearly.’

‘Have you shared these concerns with the High Marshal?’ Artarion scratched the back of his neck, his fingertips soothing the itching skin around a spinal socket.

Grimaldus chuckled, momentarily blindsided by his brother’s naivety. ‘You think he needs me to tell him?’

Few ships in the Imperium of Man matched the lethal grandeur of *The Eternal Crusader*.

Some ships sailed the heavens like the seaborne vessels of ancient Terra, journeying between the stars with solemnity and a measured grace. *The Eternal Crusader* was not one of these. Like a spear hurled into the void by the hand of Rogal Dorn himself, the flagship of the Templars had been slicing through space for ten thousand years of war. Its engines raged, streaming plasma contrails in their wake as they powered the vessel from world to world in echo of the Emperor’s Great Crusade.

And the *Crusader* was not alone.

At her back, the capital vessels *Night’s Vigil* and *Majesty* burned their engines hard, striving to keep pace and fall into a lance formation with their flagship. In the wake of these heavy cruisers – a battle-barge and smaller strike cruiser respectively – a wing of support frigates formed the rest of the lance. Seven in total, each of these faster interceptor vessels powered forward with less of a struggle to maintain formation with the *Crusader*.

The ship burst back into reality, trailing discoloured warp-smog from its protesting Geller field, the brilliance of its plasma drives flaring with gaseous leakage that misted around the void shields of the vessels which slammed back into realspace just behind.

Ahead of them lay an ashen globe, darkened by unclean cloud cover, strangely at peace despite the turmoil surrounding it.

If one were to look into the void around the bitter, punished world of Armageddon, one would see a thriving subsector of Imperial space where even the most prosperous hive planets bore more than their fair share of slowly-healing wounds.

It was a region of space where the worlds themselves were scarred. War, and the fear of another colossal sector-wide conflict, hung over the trillions of loyal Imperial souls like the threat of a storm forever on the edge of breaking.

It was always said by some that the Imperium of Man was dying. These heretical voices spoke of mankind's endless wars against its manifold foes, and decreed that humanity's ultimate fate was being decided in the fires of a million, million battlefields across the countless stars within the God-Emperor's grip.

Nowhere were the words of these seers and prophets more evident than the ravaged – yet rebuilt – Armageddon subsector, named for its greatest world, a world responsible for production and consumption on an immense and unmatched level.

Armageddon itself stood as a bastion of Imperial strength, churning out regiments of tanks from manufactories that never ceased activity by day or night. Millions of men and women wore the ochre armour of Armageddon's Steel Legions, their features hidden behind the traditional respirator masks of this honoured and renowned division of the Imperial Guard.

The hives of this defiant planet reached into the pollution-rich cloud cover that wreathed the world in perpetual twilight. No wildlife howled on Armageddon. No beasts stalked their prey outside the ever-growing hive-cities. The call of the wild was the rattle and clank of ten thousand ammunition manufactories that never halted production. The stalking of animals was the grinding of tank treads across the world's rockcrete

surfaces, awaiting transport into the sky to serve in a hundred and more distant conflicts.

It was a world devoted to war in every way imaginable, made bitter by the scars of the past, soured by the wounds gouged into its face by humanity's enemies. Armageddon always rebuilt after each devastation, but it was never permitted to forget.

The first and foremost reminder of the last war, the almighty Second War that saw billions dead, was a deep space installation named for one of the Emperor's Angels of Death.

Dante, they called it.

It was from there that the mortals of Armageddon stared into the blackness of space, watching, waiting, praying that nothing stared back.

For fifty-seven years, those prayers had been answered.

But no longer. Imperial tacticians already had reliable figures from early engagements that confirmed the greenskin fleet bearing down on Armageddon as the largest xenos invasion force in the history of the segmentum. As the alien fleets closed around the system, Imperial reinforcements raced to break the blockaded sectors and land their troops on Armageddon before the invasion fleet arrived in the heavens above the doomed world.

A battle-barge of no standard design, the *Crusader* was a princely fortress-monastery, charcoal-black and bristling with gothic cathedral spires like a beast's spines along its back. Weapons capable of pounding cities into dust – the claws of this night-stalking predator – aimed into the void. Along the ship's length and clustered across its prow, hundreds of weapons batteries and lance cannons stood with mouths open to the silent darkness of space.

Aboard the ship, a thousand warriors cast off the shackles of training, preparation and meditation. At last, after weeks of passage through the Sea

of Souls, Armageddon, beating heart-world of the subsector, was finally in sight.

My brothers' names are Artarion, Priamus, Cador, Nerovar and Bastilan.

These are the knights that have waged war beside me for decades.

I watch them, each in turn, as we make ready for planetfall. Our arming chamber is a cell devoid of decoration, bare of sentiment, alive now with the methodical movements of dead-minded servitors machining our armour into place. The chamber is thick with the scholarly scent of fresh vellum from our armour scrolls, coppery oils from our ritually-cleansed weapons, and the ever-present cloying salty reek of sweating servitors.

I flex my arm, feeling my war-plate's false muscles of cable and fibre buzz with smooth vibration at the cycle of motion. Papyrus scrolls are draped over the angles of my armour, their delicate runic lettering listing the details of battles I could never forget. This paper, of good quality by Imperial standards, is manufactured on board the *Crusader* by serfs who pass the technique down generation to generation. Every role on the ship is vital. Every duty has its own honour.

My tabard, the white of sun-bleached bone, offers a stark contrast to the blacker than black plate beneath. The heraldic cross stands proud on my chest, where Astartes of lesser Chapters wear the Emperor's aquila. We do not wear His symbol. We *are* His symbol.

My fingers twitch as my gauntlet locks into place. That was not intentional – a nerve-spasm, a pain response. An invasive but familiar coldness settles over my forearm as my gauntlet's neural linkage spike sinks into my wrist to bond with the bones and true muscles there.

I make a fist with my hand armoured in black ceramite, then release it. Each finger flexes in turn, as if pulling a trigger. Satisfied, its dead eyes flashing with an acknowledgement of a job complete, an arming servitor moves away to bring my second gauntlet.

My brothers go through the same rituals of checking and rechecking. A curious sense of unease descends upon me, but I refuse to give it voice. I watch them now because I believe this is the last time we will go through this ritual together.

I will not be the only one to die upon Armageddon.

Artarion, Priamus, Cador, Nerovar and Bastilan. We are the knights of Squad Grimaldus.

Within his veins, Cador carries the blessed blood of Rogal Dorn with what seems like weary honour. His face is shattered and his body tormented – now half-bionic due to untreatable wounds – but he remains defiant, even indefatigable. He is older than I, older by far. His decades within the Sword Brethren are behind him now; he was released with all honour when his advancing age and increasing bionics left him less than the exemplar he had been before.

Priamus is the rising sun to Cador's dusk. He is aware of his skills in the unsubtle and undignified way of many young warriors. Without even the ghost of humility, his roars of triumph on the battlefield sound like cries for attention, a braggart's declarations. A blademaster, he calls himself. Yet he is not mistaken.

Artarion is... Artarion. My shadow, just as I am his. It is rare among our number for any knight to lay aside personal glory, yet Artarion is the one who carries my banner into battle. He has joked more times than I care to remember that he does so only to provide the enemy with a target lock on my location. For all his great courage, he is not a man blessed with a skilful sense of humour. The mangling wound that fouled his face was a sniper shot meant for me. I carry that knowledge with me each time we go to war.

Nerovar is the newest among us. He holds the dubious honour of being the only knight I chose to stand with me, while all others were appointed to fight by my side. The squad required the presence of an Apothecary. In

the trials, only Nerovar impressed the rest of us with his quiet endurance. He labours now over his arm-mounted narthecium, blue eyes narrowed as he tests the flickering snap of surgical blades and cutting lasers. A sickening *clack!* sounds as he fires his reductor. The giver of merciful death, the extractor of gene-seed – its impaling component snaps from its housing, then retracts with sinister slowness.

Bastilan is last. Bastilan, always the best and least of us all. A leader but not a commander – an inspiring presence, but not a strategist – forever a sergeant, never fated to rise as a castellan or marshal. He has always said his role as such is all he desires. I pray he speaks the truth, for if he is deceiving us, he hides the lie well behind his dark eyes.

He is the one who speaks to me now. What he says chills my blood.

‘I have heard from Geraint and Lograine of the Sword Brethren,’ he chooses his words carefully, ‘that there is talk of the High Marshal nominating you to lead a crusade.’

And for a moment, everyone stops moving.

The skies over Armageddon were rich and thick with a sick, greyish-yellow cast. Sulphurous cloud cover was nothing new to the population, with their hive walls treated and shielded against the storm season’s downpours of acid rain.

Around each hive-city across the planet’s surface, vast landing fields were cleared, either hurriedly paved with rockcrete or simply ground flat under the treads of hundreds of landscaper trucks. Around Hades Hive, rain scythed down onto the cleared areas and sparked off the dense heat-shimmer of the city’s protective void shields. Across the world, the heavens were in turmoil, weather patterns ravaged by the atmospheric disturbance caused by countless ships breaking cloud cover every day.

Yet at Hades Hive, the storms were especially fierce. Hundreds of troop carriers, their paint already melted to reveal bare, dull metal in places, endured the rainfall as they rested on the landing fields. Some were

disgorging columns of men into the hastily-erected campsites that were spreading across the wastelands between the hives, while others sat in silence, awaiting clearance to return to orbit.

Hades itself was little more than industrial scar tissue blighting Armageddon's face. Despite efforts to repair the city after the last war over half a century before, it still bore a ragged share of memories. Toppled spires, broken domes, shattered cathedrals – this was the skyline after the death of a hive.

A squadron of Thunderhawk gunships pierced the caul of cloud cover. To those manning the battlements of Hades, they were a flock of crows winging down from the darkening sky.

Mordechai Ryken scanned the gunships through his magnoculars. After several seconds of zoom-blur, green reticules locked on to the streaking avian hulls and transcribed an analysis in dim white text alongside the image.

Ryken lowered the viewfinder scope. It hung on a leather cord around his neck, resting on the ochre jacket he wore as part of his uniform. His breath was hot on his face, recycled and filtered through the cheap rebreather mask he wore over his mouth and nose.

The air still tasted like a latrine, though. And it didn't exactly smell any better. The joys of high sulphur content in the atmosphere. Ryken was still waiting for the day he would be used to it, and he'd been stuck on this rock so far for every day of his thirty-seven years of life.

A way down the battlements, working on getting an anti-air turret operational, a team of his men clustered with a robed tech-priest. The multi-barrelled monstrosity dwarfed the half a dozen soldiers standing in its shadow.

'Sir?' one of them voxed. Ryken knew who it was despite the shapeless overcoats they all wore. Only one of them was female.

'What is it, Vantine?'

‘Those are Adeptus Astartes gunships, aren’t they?’

‘Good eyes.’ And they were, at that. Vantine would’ve made sniper a long time ago if she could aim worth a damn. Alas, there was more to sniping than just seeing.

‘Which ones?’ she pressed.

‘Does it matter? Adeptus Astartes are Adeptus Astartes. Reinforcements are reinforcements.’

‘Yes, but which ones?’

‘Black Templars.’ Ryken took a breath, tonguing a sore cut on his lip as he watched the fleet of Thunderhawks touching down in the distance.

‘Hundreds of them.’

An Imperial Guard column rolled out from Hades to meet the newest arrivals. A command Chimera, flying no shortage of impressive flags, led six Leman Russ battle tanks, their collective passage chewing into the newly laid rockcrete.

Bulky troop landers were still setting down elsewhere on the landing field, the wash from their engines blasting wind and gritty dust in all directions, but General Kurov of the Armageddon Steel Legion did not make personal appearances to greet just anyone.

Despite his advancing age, Kurov cut a straight-backed figure in his grimy uniform of ochre fatigues and black webbing, with flak padding on the torso. No sign of his many medals, not a hint of gold, silver, ribbon, or the other trappings of pomp. Here was the man that had led the Council of Armageddon for decades, and earned the respect of his people by wading knee-deep in the sulphur marshes and bracken forests after the last war, hunting xenos survivors in the infamous ork hunter platoons.

He stomped down the ramp, setting his cap to guard his eyes against the heatless, yet annoyingly bright, afternoon sunlight. A team of Guardsmen, each as raggedly attired as their commanding officer, clanged down the ramp after the general. As they moved, misshapen skulls clacked and

rattled together from where they hung on belts and bandoliers. Across their chests, they gripped lasguns that hadn't resembled standard-issue for some time – each bore its own display of modifications and accoutrements.

Kurov marched his ramshackle gang of bodyguards in decent parade order, yet without any conscious effort. He led them to the waiting Thunderhawks, each of which was still emitting a dull machine-whine as their boosters cycled into inactivity.

Eighteen gunships. Kurov knew that from the initial auspex report as the Templars had landed. They sat now in disorganised unmoving ranks, ramps withdrawn and bulkheads sealed. Their undersides, blunt noses and wing edges still showed a glimmer of cooling heat shields with the after-effects of planetfall.

Three Adeptus Astartes stood before the gunship fleet, still as statues, with no evidence of which vessels they'd disembarked from.

Only one wore a helm. It stared through ruby eye lenses, its faceplate a skull of steel.

'Are you Kurov?' one of the Adeptus Astartes demanded.

'I am,' the general replied. 'It is my h—'

In unison, the three inhuman warriors drew their weapons. Kurov took an involuntary step back, not out of fear but surprise. The knights' weapons went live in a humming chorus of wakening power cells. Lightning, controlled and rippling, coated the killing edges of the three artefacts.

The first was a giant clad in armour of bronze and gold against black, the surface of his war-plate inscribed with retellings of his deeds in miniscule Gothic runes, as well as trinkets, trophies and honour badges of red wax seals and papyrus strips. He clutched a two-handed sword, its blade longer than Kurov was tall, and drove its point into the ground. The

knight's face was shaped by the wars he had fought – square-jawed, scarred, blunt-featured and expressionless.

The second Adeptus Astartes, clad in plainer black war-plate, wore a cloak of dark weave and scarlet lining. His sword in no way matched the grandeur of the first knight's relic, but the long blade of darkened iron was no less lethal for its simplicity. This knight's face lacked the expressionless ease of the first. He fought not to sneer as he drove his own sword tip into the ground.

And the last, the knight who still wore his helm, carried no blade. The rockcrete beneath their feet shivered slightly under the pounding of his war-mace thudding onto the ground. The mace's head, a stylised knightly cross atop Imperial eagle wings, flared in protest, lightning crackling as the metal kissed the ground.

The three knights knelt, heads lowered. All of this happened at once, in the space of no more than three seconds since Kurov last spoke.

‘We are the Emperor's knights,’ the giant in bronze and gold intoned. ‘We are the warriors of the Eternal Crusade, and the sons of Rogal Dorn. I am Helbrecht, High Marshal of the Black Templars. With me is Bayard, Emperor's Champion, and Grimaldus, Reclusiarch.’

At their names, both knights nodded in turn.

Helbrecht continued, his voice a growled drawl. ‘Aboard our vessels in orbit are Marshals Ricard and Amalrich. We come to offer you our blades, our service, and the lives of over nine hundred warriors in the defence of your world.’

Kurov stood in silence. Nine hundred Adeptus Astartes... Entire star systems were conquered with a fraction of that. He had greeted a dozen Adeptus Astartes commanders in recent weeks, but few had brought such significant strength with them.

‘High Marshal,’ the general said at last. ‘There is a war council forming tonight. You and your warriors are welcome there.’

‘It will be done,’ the High Marshal said.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ Kurov replied. ‘Welcome to Armageddon.’



CHAPTER II

The Abandoned Crusade

Ryken was not smiling.

He'd been a lifelong believer in not shooting the messenger, but today that tradition was in danger of expiring. Behind him loomed an anti-air turret, blanketing them all in its shadow and shielding them from the dim glare of the morning sun. A squad of his men worked on this turret, as they had worked on countless others along the walls in the space of the last two months. It was almost operational. They weren't techs, by any means, but they knew the basic maintenance rites and calibration rituals.

'One minute to test fire,' Vantine said, her voice muffled by her rebreather mask.

And that was when the messenger showed up. It was also when Ryken stopped smiling, despite the fact the messenger was easy on the eyes, as over-starched, narrowed-eyed tactica types went.

'I want these orders rechecked,' he demanded – calmly, but a demand nevertheless.

'With all due respect, sir,' the messenger straightened her own ochre uniform, 'these orders come from the Old Man himself. He's reorganising the disposition of all our forces, and the Steel Legion are honoured to be first in that reappraisal.'

The words stole Ryken's desire to argue. So it was true, then. The Old Man was back.

'But Helsreach is half a continent away,' he tried. 'We've been working on the Hades wall-guns for months.'

'Thirty seconds to test fire,' Vantine called.

The messenger, whose name was Cyria Tyro, wasn't smiling either. In her position as adjutant quintus to General Kurov, grunts and plebeians were forever questioning the orders she relayed, as if she would ever dare alter a single word of the general's instructions. The other adjutants had no difficulties in this area, she was sure of it. For some unknown reason, these lowborn dregs just simply didn't take well to her. Perhaps they were jealous of her position? If so, then they were more foolish than she'd have given them credence for.

'I have long been entrusted with certain aspects of the general's plans,' Tyro lied, 'that frontliners such as yourself are only now being made aware of. I apologise if this is a surprise to you, major, but orders are orders. And these orders come with the highest mandate imaginable.'

'Are we not even going to defend the damn hive?'

At that moment, Vantine test-fired the turret. The floor beneath their feet shook as four cannon barrels blared their anger up at the empty sky. Ryken swore, though it was drowned out in the ear-ringing thunder of the gun's echo. Tyro also swore, though unlike Ryken's general lament, hers was aimed at Vantine and the gun crew.

The major was close to yelling over the ache in his ears. It was fading, but not fast.

'I said, *are we not even going to defend the damn hive?*'

'*You* are not,' Tyro almost pouted, her mouth compressed in restrained irritation. '*You* are going to Helsreach with your regiment. Your transports leave tonight. All of the 101st Steel Legion is to be aboard and ready for transport by sunset in six point five hours.'

Ryken paused. Six and a half hours to get three thousand men and women into heavy lifter transports, gunships and land trains. It was the kind of bad news that made the major feel the need to be overwhelmingly honest.

‘Colonel Sarren is going to be furious.’

‘Colonel Sarren has dealt with this assignment with grace and solemn devotion to his duty, major. Your commanding officer still has much to teach you in that regard, I see.’

‘Cute. Now tell me *why* it’s us being sent all the way to Helsreach. I thought Insan and the 121st were kings of that shitpile.’

‘Colonel Insan had a terminal failure of his augmetic heart infusers this morning. His second officer requested Sarren by name, and General Kurov agreed.’

‘That old bastard’s finally dead? That’ll teach him to lay off the garage-brewed sauce. Ha! All those expensive augmetics he had done, and he keels over six months later. I like that. That’s delicious.’

‘Major! Some respect, if you please.’

Ryken frowned. ‘I don’t like you,’ he told Tyro.

‘How grievous,’ the general’s assistant replied, and there was no mistaking the dark, unamused scowl on her face. ‘For you have been appointed a liaison to aid in dealings with the Adeptus Astartes and the conscripted militia.’ She looked as if she’d eaten something sour and it was still wriggling on her tongue. ‘So... I will be coming with you.’

A moment of curious kinship passed between them, almost going unspoken. They were being exiled to the same place, after all. Their eyes met in that moment, and the foundations of something like a reluctant friendship almost bloomed between them.

It was broken when Ryken walked away.

‘I still don’t like you.’

‘Hades Hive will not survive the first week.’

The man speaking is ancient, and he looks every hour of his age. What keeps him on his feet is a mixture of minimal rejuvenat chem-surgeries, crude bionics, and a faith in the Emperor founded in hatred for the enemies of man.

I liked him the moment my visor's targeting reticules locked on to him. Both piety and hate echo in his every word.

He should not hold rank here – not to the degree he does. He is merely a commissar in the Imperial Guard, and such a title does not tend to make generals, colonels, Adeptus Astartes captains and Chapter Masters remain in polite silence when it comes to tactical planning. Yet to the humans at this war council, and the citizens of Armageddon, he is the Old Man, a beloved hero of the Second War fifty-seven years ago.

Not just a hero. *The* hero.

His name is Sebastian Yarrick. Even we Adeptus Astartes must respect that name.

And when he tells us all that Hades Hive will be destroyed within a matter of days, a hundred Imperial commanders, human and Adeptus Astartes alike, hang on his every word.

I am one of them. This will be my first true command.

Commissar Sebastian Yarrick leans over the edge of a hololithic display table. With his remaining hand – the other arm is nothing but a stump – he keys in coordinates on the numeric datapad, and the hololith projection of Hades Hive widens with flickering impatience to display both of the planet's hemispheres in insignificant detail.

The Old Man, a gaunt and wizened human of sharp features and skeletally-obvious facial bones, gestures to the blip on the map that represents Hades Hive and its surrounding territories. Wastelands, in the main.

‘Six decades ago,’ he says, ‘the Great Enemy met his defeat at Hades. Our defence here was what won us that war.’

There are general murmurs of assent. The commissar's voice carries around the expansive chamber through floating skull drones equipped with vox-speakers where their jaws had once been.

I am surrounded by the familiar hum of active power armour, though the scents and faces that meet my eyes are new to me. Standing to my left at a respectful distance, his face raggedly proud around extensive bionics, is Chapter Master Seth of the Flesh Tearers – known to his men as the Guardian of the Rage. He smells of sacred weapon oils, his primarch's potent blood running beneath his weathered skin, and the spicy, unwholesome reptilian scent of the lizard predator-kings that stalk the jungles of his home world. Seth is flanked by his own officers, all bareheaded and with faces as pitted and cracked as their master's. Whatever wars have occupied the Flesh Tearers in recent decades, the conflicts have not been kind to them.

To my left, my liege Helbrecht stands resplendent in his battle armour of black and bronze. Bayard, the Emperor's Champion, is by his side. Both rest their helmets on the table's surface, the stern helms distorting the edge of the hololith display, and give their full attention to the ancient commissar.

I cross my arms over my chest and do the same.

'Why?' someone asks. Their voice is low, too low to be human, and carries over the chamber without the need of vox-amplification. A hundred heads turn to regard an Adeptus Astartes in the bright red-orange of a lesser Chapter, one unknown to me. He steps forward, leaning his knuckles on the table, facing Yarrick from almost twenty metres distance.

'We recognise Brother-Captain Amaras,' an Imperial herald announces from his position at Yarrick's side, smoothing the formal blue robes of his office. He bangs the butt of his staff on the ground three times.

'Commander of the Angels of Fire.'

Amaras nods in thanks, and fixes Yarrick with his unblinking gaze.

‘Why would the greenskin warlord simply annihilate the greatest battlefield of the last war? Surely our forces should muster at Hades and stand ready to defend against the largest assault.’

Murmurs of agreement ripple throughout the gathered commanders. Emboldened, Amaras smiles at Yarrick.

‘We are the Emperor’s Chosen, mortal. We are His Angels of Death. We have centuries of battle experience compared to these human commanders at your side.’

‘No,’ another voice replies. This one is distorted into a vox-borne snarl, filtered through a helm’s speakers. I swallow as the herald bangs the staff another three times.

I had not realised I’d spoken out loud.

‘We recognise Brother-Chaplain Grimaldus,’ he calls out. ‘Reclusiarch of the Black Templars.’

Grimaldus shook his head at the gathered commanders. Over a hundred, human and Adeptus Astartes, all standing around the huge table in this converted auditorium once used for whatever dreary theatre performances occurred on a manufactory world. A riot of colours, heraldry, symbols of unity, varied uniforms, regimental designations and iconography. General Kurov stood at the commissar’s shoulder, deferring to the Old Man in all things.

‘The xenos do not think as we do,’ Grimaldus said. ‘The greenskins do not come to Armageddon for vengeance, or to seek to bleed us for the defeats they have suffered at Imperial hands in the past. They come for the pleasure of violence.’

Yarrick, a skeleton wreathed in pale flesh and a dark uniform, watched the knight in silence. Amaras pounded his fist onto the table and pointed at the Templar. For a moment of deathly calm, Grimaldus considered drawing his pistol and slaying him where he stood.

‘That lends credence to *my* belief,’ Amaras almost snarled.

‘Not at all. Have you inspected what remains of Hades Hive? It is a ruin. There is nothing to fight over, nothing to defend. The Great Enemy knows this. He will be aware that Imperial forces will put up no more than a token resistance here, and fall back to defend hives that are still worth defending. It is likely the warlord will obliterate Hades from orbit, rather than seek to take it.’

‘We cannot let this hive fall! It is a symbol of mankind’s defiance! With respect, Chaplain—’

‘Enough,’ Yarrick said. ‘Peace, Brother-Captain Amaras. Grimaldus speaks with wisdom.’

Grimaldus inclined his head in thanks.

‘I will not be silenced by a mortal,’ Amaras growled, but the fight was gone from him. Yarrick – the thin, ancient commissar – just stared at the Adeptus Astartes captain. After several moments, Amaras looked back to the hololithic topography around the hive. Yarrick turned back to the gathered officers, his one human eye stern and his augmetic one whirring in its socket as it refocused on the faces before him.

‘Hades will not survive the first week,’ he said again, this time shaking his head. ‘We must abandon the hive and spread the forces here to other bastions of strength. This is not the Second War. What is coming in-system now far exceeds what has laid waste to the planet before. The other hives must be reinforced a thousand times over.’ He took a moment to clear his throat, and a cough stole over him, dry and hoarse. When it subsided, the Old Man smiled without even the ghost of humour.

‘Hades will burn. We must make our stand elsewhere.’

At this cue, General Kurov stepped forward with a data-slate.

‘We come to the divisions of command.’ He took a breath, and pressed on. ‘The fleet that will besiege Armageddon is too vast to repel.’

A chorus of jeers rose. Kurov rode them out. Grimaldus, Helbrecht and Bayard were among those that remained absolutely silent.

‘Hear me, friends and brothers,’ Kurov sighed. ‘And hear me well. Those of you who insist this war will be anything more than a conflict of bitter attrition are deceiving yourselves. At current estimates, we have over fifty thousand Adeptus Astartes in the Armageddon subsector, and thirty times the number of Imperial Guardsmen. And it will still not be enough to secure a clean victory. At our best estimations, Battlefleet Armageddon, the orbital defences, and the Adeptus Astartes fleets remaining in the void will be able to deny the enemy landing for nine days. These are our *best* estimates.’

‘And the worst?’ asked an Adeptus Astartes officer bedecked in white wolf furs, wearing the grey war-plate of the Space Wolves. His body language betrayed his impatience. He almost paced, like a canine in a cage.

‘Four days,’ the Old Man said through his grim smile.

Silence descended again. Kurov didn’t waste it.

‘Admiral Parol of Battlefleet Armageddon has outlined his plan and uploaded it to the tactical network for all commanders to review. Once the orbital war is lost, be it four days or nine, our fleets will break from the planet in a fighting withdrawal. From then on, Armageddon will be defenceless beyond what is already entrenched upon the surface. The orks will be free to land whatever and wherever they wish.

‘Admiral Parol will lead the remaining Naval ships of the fleet in repeated guerrilla strikes against the invaders’ vessels still in orbit.’

‘Who will lead the Adeptus Astartes vessels?’ Captain Amaras spoke up again.

There was another pause, before Commissar Yarrick nodded to a dark-armoured cluster of warriors across the table.

‘Given his seniority and the expertise of his Chapter, High Marshal Helbrecht of the Black Templars will take overall command of the Adeptus Astartes fleets.’

And once more, there was uproar, several Adeptus Astartes commanders demanding that the glory be theirs. The knights ignored it.

‘We are to remain in orbit?’ Grimaldus leaned closer to his commander and voiced the question.

The High Marshal didn’t take his eyes from Yarrick. ‘We are the obvious choice to command the Adeptus Astartes elements in the orbital battles.’

The Chaplain looked across the chamber, at the various leaders and officers of a hundred different forces.

I was wrong, he thought. I will not die in futility on this world. Eagerness, hot and urgent, flushed through his system, as real and vital as a flood of adrenaline gushing through his two hearts.

‘The *Crusader* will plunge like a lance into the core of their fleet. High Marshal, we can slaughter the greenskin tyrant before he even sets foot on the world below us.’

Helbrecht lifted his gaze from the ancient commissar as his Chaplain spoke. He turned to Grimaldus, his dark eyes piercing the other knight’s skull mask with their intensity.

‘I have already spoken with the other marshals, my brother. We must leave a contingent on the surface. I will lead the orbital crusade. Amalrich and Ricard will lead the forces in the Ash Wastes. All that remains is a single crusade, to defend one of the hive cities that yet remains ungarrisoned by Adeptus Astartes.’

Grimaldus shook his head. ‘That is not our duty, my liege. Both Amalrich and Ricard have a host of honours inscribed upon their armour. Each has led greater crusades alone. Neither will relish an exile to a filthy manufactorum hive while a thousand of their brothers wage a glorious war in the heavens. You would shame them.’

‘And yet,’ Helbrecht was implacable, his features set in stone, ‘a commander must remain.’

‘Don’t.’ The knight’s blood ran cold. ‘Don’t do this.’

‘It is already done.’

‘No,’ he said, and meant it with every fibre of his being. ‘No.’

‘This is not the time. The decision is made, Grimaldus. I know you, as I knew Mordred. You will not refuse this honour.’

‘No,’ Grimaldus said again, loud enough that other commanders began to stare.

Helbrecht said nothing. Grimaldus stepped closer to him.

‘I would burst the Great Enemy’s black heart in my hand, and cast his blasphemous flagship to the surface of Armageddon wreathed in holy fire. Do not leave me here, Helbrecht. Do not deny me this glory.’

‘You will not refuse this honour,’ the High Marshal said, his voice as stony as his face.

Grimaldus wanted no further part in the proceedings. Worse, he knew he was irrelevant here. As deliberations and tactics were discussed for the coming orbital defence, he turned from the hololithic display.

‘Wait, brother.’ Helbrecht’s voice made it a request, not an order, and that made it easy to refuse.

Grimaldus stalked from the chamber without another word.

Their destination was called, with bleakness so typical of this world, Helsreach.

‘Blood of Dorn,’ Artarion swore with feeling. ‘Now that’s a sight.’

‘This is... huge,’ Nerovar whispered.

The four Thunderhawks tore across the sulphurous sky, parting sick yellow clouds that drifted apart in their wake. From the cockpit of the lead aircraft, six knights watched the expansive city below.

And *expansive* barely covered it.

The four gunships, boosters howling, veered in graceful unison around one of the tallest industrial spires. It was slate-grey, belching thick smoke into the dirty sky, merely one of hundreds.

A wing of escorts, small and manoeuvrable Lightning-pattern air superiority fighters, coasted alongside the Adeptus Astartes Thunderhawks. They were neither welcome nor unwelcome, merely ignored.

‘We cannot be the only Adeptus Astartes strength sent to this city,’ Nerovar removed his white helmet with a hiss of venting air pressure and stared with naked eyes at the metropolis flashing beneath. ‘How can we hold this alone?’

‘We will not be alone,’ Sergeant Bastilan said. ‘The Guard is with us. And militia forces.’

‘Humans,’ Priamus sneered.

‘The Legio Invigilata has landed to the east of the city,’ Bastilan said to the swordsman. ‘Titans, my brother. I don’t see you sneering at that.’

Priamus didn’t answer. But nor did he agree.

‘What is that?’

The knights leaned forward at their leader’s words. Grimaldus gestured down at a vast stretch of rockcreted roadway, wide enough to accommodate the landing of a bulk cruiser or a wallowing Imperial Guard troop carrier.

‘A highway, sir,’ the pilot said. He checked his instruments. ‘Hel’s Highway.’

Grimaldus was silent for several moments, just watching the colossal road and the thousands upon thousands of conveyances making their way along it in both directions.

‘This roadway splits the city like a spine. I see hundreds of capillary roads and byways leading from it.’

‘So?’ Priamus asked, his tone indicating just how little he cared about the answer.

‘So,’ Grimaldus turned back to the squad, ‘whoever holds Hel’s Highway holds the beating heart of the city in their hands. They will have

unprecedented, unstoppable ability to manoeuvre troops and armour. Even Titans will move faster, at perhaps twice the speed than if they had to stalk through hive towers and city blocks.'

Nerovar shook his head. He was the only one without his helm covering his features. Insofar as it was possible for an Adeptus Astartes to look uncertain, he was doing so now.

'Reclusiarch.' He spoke Grimaldus's new title with hesitancy. 'How can we defend... all *this*? An endless road that leads into to a thousand others.'

'With blade and bolter,' said Bastilan. 'With faith and fire.'

Grimaldus recognised his own words spoken from the sergeant's mouth. He looked down in silence at the city below, at the insane stretch of road that left the entire hive open, accessible.

Vulnerable.



CHAPTER III

Hive Helsreach

The Thunderhawks touched down on a landing pad that was clearly designed for freight use. Cranes moved and servitors droned out of their way as the gunships came down in a hovering shower of engine wash and heat shimmer.

Ramps clanged onto the landing pad's surface and the four gunships disgorged their living cargo – one hundred knights in orderly ranks, marching into formation before their Thunderhawks.

Watching this display, and desperately trying not to show how impressed he felt, was Colonel Sarren of the Armageddon 101st Steel Legion. He stood with his hands clasped together, fingers interlaced, over his not inconsiderable stomach. Flanking him were a dozen men, some soldiers, some civilians, and all nervous – to varying degrees – about the hundred giants in black armour forming up before them.

He cleared his throat, checked the buttons on his ochre greatcoat were fastened in correct order, and marched to the giants.

One of the giants, wearing a helm shaped into a grinning skull mask of shining silver and steel, stepped forward to meet the colonel. With him came five other knights, carrying swords and massive bolters, but for one who bore a towering standard. Upon the banner, which waved lazily in the

dull breeze, a scene of red and black depicted the skull-helmed knight bathed in the golden purity of a flaming aquila overhead.

‘I am Grimaldus,’ the first knight said, his gem-like eye lenses staring down at the portly colonel. ‘Reclusiarch of the Helsreach Crusade.’

The colonel drew breath to make his own greeting, when the hundred knights in formation cried out a chant in skin-crawling unity.

‘Imperator Vult!’

Sarren glanced at the ranks of knights, formed up in five ranks of twenty warriors. None of them seemed to have moved, despite their cry in High Gothic: *The Emperor wills it.*

‘I am Colonel Sarren of the 101st Steel Legion, and overall commander of the Imperial Guard forces defending the hive.’ He offered a hand to the towering knight, and turned the gesture quite smartly into a salute when it became clear the knight was not going to shake hands.

Muted clicks could be heard every few seconds from the helms of the knights standing closest to him. Sarren knew full well they were speaking with each other over a shared vox-channel. He didn’t like it, not at all.

‘Who are these others?’ the first knight asked. With a war maul of brutal size and weight, he gestured to Sarren’s staff arrayed in a loose crescent behind the colonel. ‘I would meet every commander of this hive, if they are present.’

‘They are present, sir,’ Sarren said. ‘Allow me to make introductions.’

‘Reclusiarch,’ Grimaldus growled. ‘Not “sir”.’

‘As you wish, Reclusiarch. ‘This is Cyria Tyro, adjutant quintus to General Kurov.’ Grimaldus looked down at the slender, dark-haired female. She made no effort to salute. Instead, she spoke.

‘I am to act as liaison between off-planet forces – such as yours, Reclusiarch, and the Titan Legion – and the soldiers of Hive Helsreach. Simply summon me if you require my aid,’ she finished.

‘I will,’ Grimaldus said, knowing he would not.

‘This is Commissar Falkov, of my command staff,’ Colonel Sarren resumed.

The officer named clicked his heels together and made an immaculate sign of the aquila over his chest. The commissar’s dark uniform singled him out with absolute clarity among the ochre-wearing Steel Legion officers.

‘This is Major Mordechai Ryken, second officer of the 101st and XO of the city defence.’

Ryken made the aquila himself, and offered a cautious nod of greeting.

‘Commander Korten Barasath,’ Sarren introduced the next man, ‘of the Imperial 5082nd Naval Wing.’

Korten, a lean figure still dressed in his grey flightsuit, saluted smartly.

‘My men were in the Lightnings that guided you down, Reclusiarch. A pleasure to serve with the Black Templars again.’

Grimaldus narrowed his eyes behind his helm’s false grin. ‘You have served with the Knights of Dorn before?’

‘I have personally – nine years ago on Dathax – and the Fifty-Eighty-Twos have on no fewer than four separate occasions. Sixteen of our fighters are marked with the heraldic cross, with permission given by Marshal Tarrison of the Dathax Crusade.’

Grimaldus inclined his head, his respect solemn and obvious, despite the helm.

‘I am honoured, Barasath,’ he said.

The squadron leader suppressed a pleased smile and saluted again.

And on it went, through the ranks of senior Steel Legion officers. At the end of the line stood two men, one in a clean and decorated uniform of azure blue, the shade of skies on worlds much cleaner than this one, and the other in oil-stained overalls.

Colonel Sarren gestured to the thin man in the immaculate uniform.

‘The most honourable Moderati Primus Valian Carsomir of the Legio Invigilata, crewman of the blessed engine *Stormherald*.’

Grimaldus nodded, but made no other outward show of respect. The Titan pilot inclined his gaunt face in turn, utterly emotionless.

‘Moderati,’ the knight said. ‘You speak with the voice of your Legion?’

‘A full battle group,’ the man replied. ‘I am the voice of Princeps Majoris Zarha Mancion. The rest of Invigilata is committed to other engagements.’

‘Fortune favours us that you still remain,’ the knight said. The Titan pilot made the cog sign of the Mechanicus, his knuckles interlinked over his chest, and Sarren finished the final introduction.

‘And here is Dockmaster Tomaz Maghernus, lead foreman of the Helsreach Dockers’ Union.’

The knight hesitated, and nodded again, just as he had for the soldiers. ‘We have much to discuss,’ Grimaldus said to the colonel, who was sweating faintly in the stifling afternoon air.

‘Indeed we do. This way, if you please.’

Tomaz Maghernus wasn’t sure what to think.

Back at the docks, as soon as he walked into the warehouse, his crew flocked around him, barraging him with questions. *How many Adeptus Astartes were there? How tall were they? What was it like to see one? Were all the stories true?*

Tomaz wasn’t sure what to say. There had been little grandeur in the meeting. The towering warrior with his skull face had seemed more dismissive than anything else. The ranks of knights in their black armour were silent and inhuman, utterly separate from the hive’s delegation and not interacting at all.

He answered the questions with a level of vagueness lessened by a convincing false smile.

An hour later, he was back in his crane's command cabin, strapped to the creaking leather seat and turning the axis wheel to bring the loading claw around again. Levers controlled the claw's vertical position and the grip of its magnetic talons. Tomaz slammed the claw onto the deck of the tanker ship closest to his station, and hauled a cargo crate into the air. The markings alongside the sturdy metal crate marked it as volatile. More promethium, he knew. The final imports of fuel for the Imperial Guard's tanks were arriving this week. Dried food rations and shipments of fuel were all they'd been unloading on the docks for months now.

He tried not to dwell on his meeting with the Adeptus Astartes. He'd been expecting a rousing speech from a warrior armoured in gold. He'd expected plans and promises, oaths and oratory.

All in all, he decided, it had been a disappointing day.

A city.

I am in command of a *city*.

Preparations have been under way for months, but estimates pit the Great Enemy arriving in-system within a handful of days. My men, the precious few knights that remain with me on the surface of Armageddon, are spread across the sprawling hive. They are to serve as inspiration to the human soldiers when the fighting becomes thickest.

I recognise the tactical validity of this, yet lament their absence. This is not how a holy crusade should be fought.

The hours pass in a blur of statistical outlays, charts, hololithic projections and graphs.

The food supplies for the entire city. How long they will last once nothing can be brought in from outside the hive. Where the food is stored. The durability of these silos, buildings and granaries. What weapons they can withstand. How they appear from the air. Ration projections. Sustainable food ration planning. Unsustainable food ration planning, with

appended lists of estimated sacrificial casualties. Where food riots are likely to break out once starvation is a reality.

Water filtration centres. How many are required to be fully operational in order to supply the entire population. Which ones are likely to be destroyed first, once the city walls fall. Underground bunkers where water is currently stored. Ancient wellsprings that might be tapped in times of great need.

Estimates of disease once the city is shelled and civilian casualties are too heavy to be dealt with efficiently. Types of disease. Symptoms. Severity. Risk of contagion. Compatibility with the ork genus.

Lists of medical facilities. Endless, endless screeds of how each one is supplied as of the most recent stock reports, to the most minute detail. New stock-checks are constantly performed. Updated information cycles in all the while, even as we review the previous batch.

Militia numbers, conscripted and volunteer. Training regimes and training schedules. Weapon supplies. Ammunition supplies for the civilian population currently under arms. Projections for how long those supplies will last.

Hive Defence Forces, straddling the line between militia and Guard. Who leads the individual sector forces. Their weapons. Their ammunition. Their proximity to significant industrial targets.

Imperial Guard numbers. Throne, what numbers. Regiments, their officers, their live fire training accuracy records, their citations, their shames, their moments of greatest glory and ignominy on a host of distant worlds. Their insignia. Their weapon and ammunition supplies. Their access to armour units, ranging from light scout vehicles such as Sentinels and Chimeras, through to super-heavy Baneblades and Stormswords.

The Guard figures alone take two days to file through. And this, they say, is merely the overview.

Landing platforms come next. Hive Defence landing platforms, civilian sites already in use by the Guard, and civilian sites currently in use for the importation of essential supplies, either from Navy vessels, traders in orbit, or elsewhere on the planet. The access to and from these sites is critical, regarding reinforcements making it into the hive, refugees making their way out, and the enemy capturing them as bases when the siege begins.

Air superiority. The numbers of light fighters, heavy fighters, and bombers at our disposal. The records of every pilot and officer among the Imperial 5082nd Skyborne. These, I skip past. If they wear the Templar cross with permission of a marshal, then there is little need to review their acts of valour. It is already clear. The projections move on to simulated displays of how long our air forces can prevent enemy landings, and what situations would merit the use of bombers beyond the city walls. On and on, the simulations roll in flickering hololith imagery. Barasath is relieved to go when it is complete, complaining of a dozen headaches at once. I smile, though I let none of the humans witness it.

Helsreach heavy defence emplacements. What anti-air turrets are stationed on the walls, and where they are. Their optimal firing arcs. The make and calibre of each barrel and shell. The number of crew appointed to man these positions. Estimated projections on damage they can inflict upon the enemy, run through countless scenarios of varying greenskin offensive strength. The teams resupplying their ammunition, and from where that ammunition comes. Freight routes from manufactories.

And the manufactories themselves. Industrial plants churning out legions of tanks, all of various classes. Other manufactories where shells are made and dispatched for use. Which industrial sites are the most valuable, the most profitable, the most reliable and the most likely to suffer assault in a protracted siege.

The Titan Legion, most noble and glorious Invigilata. What engines they have on the Ash Wastes outside the city. Which ones will walk in the defence of Helsreach, and which ones are promised to reinforce the hordes of Cadian Shock and our brother Adeptus Astartes, the Salamanders, out in the wilds of Armageddon.

Invigilata keeps its internal records from our sight, but we are fed enough information to thread into yet more hololithic charts and simulations, adding the might of Titans – of various grades and sizes – to the potential carnage.

The docks. The Helsreach Docks, greatest port on the planet. Coastal defences – walls and turrets and anti-air towers – and trade requirements and union complaints and petitions arguing over docking rights and warehouses appropriated as barracks for soldiers and complaints from merchants and dock-officers and...

And I endure this for nine days.

Nine. Days.

On the tenth day, I rise from my chair in Sarren's command centre. Around me in the colonel's armoured fortress at the heart of the city, three hundred servitors and junior officers work at stations: calculating, collating, transmitting, receiving, talking, shouting, and sometimes quietly panicking, begging for aid from those around them.

Sarren and several of his officers and aides watch me. Their necks crane up as they follow my movement. It is the first time I have moved in seven hours. Indeed, the first time I have moved since I sat down this morning at dawn.

'Is something wrong?' Sarren asks me.

I look at the sweating, porcine commander; this man unable to shape his body into a warrior's fitness, confined as he is – and totally at home – with this relentless trial of a million, million numbers.

What kind of question is that? Are they blind? I am one of the Emperor's Chosen. I am a knight of Dorn's blood, and a warrior-priest of the Black Templars. *Is something wrong?*

'Yes,' I say to him, to them all. 'Something is wrong.'

'But... what?'

I do not answer that question. Instead, I move to walk from the room, not caring that uniformed humans scatter before me like frightened vermin.

With a volume that would put a peal of overhead thunder to shame, a siren starts to wail.

I turn back to the table.

'What is that?'

They flinch at the rough bark from my helm's vocaliser. The siren keeps whining.

'Throne of the God-Emperor,' Sarren whispers.

Hive Helsreach did not have city walls. It had battlements.

When the citywide siren began to ring, Artarion was standing in the shadow of a towering cannon, its linked barrels aiming into the sick sky. Several metres away, the human crew worked at its base, performing the daily rituals of maintenance. They hesitated at the sound of the siren, and talked among themselves.

Artarion briefly looked back in the direction of the tower fortress in the city's centre, blocked as it was from view by distance and the forest-like mess of hive spires between here and there.

He felt the humans casting occasional glances his way. Knowing he was distracting them from their necessary mechanical rites, he moved away, walking further down the wall. His gaze fell, as it did almost every hour since coming to the hive a week before, on the endless expanse of wasteland that reached to the horizon and beyond.

Blink-clicking a communication rune on his visor display, he opened a vox-channel. The siren rang on. Artarion knew what it signalled.

‘About time.’

From vox-towers across the city, an announcement was spoken in deceptively colourless tones. Colonel Sarren, not wishing to incite the populace to unrest, had tasked a lobotomised servitor to speak the words to the people.

‘People of Hive Helsreach. Across the planet, the first sirens are sounding. Do not be alarmed. Do not be alarmed. The enemy fleet has translated in-system. The might of Battlefleet Armageddon and the greatest Adeptus Astartes fleet in Imperial history stands between our world and the foe’s forces. Do not be alarmed. Maintain your daily rites of faith. Trust in the God-Emperor of Mankind. That is all.’

In the control centre, Grimaldus turned to the closest human officer sat at a vox-station.

‘You. Hail the Black Templars flagship *Eternal Crusader*, immediately.’

The man swallowed, his skin paling at being spoken to so directly and with such force by an Adeptus Astartes.

‘I... My lord, I am coordinating the—’

The knight’s black fist pounded into the table. ‘*Do it now.*’

‘Y-yes, my lord. A moment, please.’

The human officers of Sarren’s staff shared a worried look. Grimaldus paid no attention at all. The seconds passed with sickening slowness.

‘The *Eternal Crusader* is making ready to engage the enemy fleet,’ the officer replied. ‘I can send a message, but their two-way communications are in lockdown without the proper command codes. D-do you have the codes, my lord?’

Grimaldus did indeed have the codes. He looked at the frightened human, then back at the worried faces of the command staff as they sat at the table.

I am being a fool. My fury is blinding me to my sworn duty. What did he expect, truly? That Helbrecht would send down a Thunderhawk and allow him to take part in the glorious orbital war above? No. He was consigned here, to Helsreach, and there would be no other fate beyond this.

I will die on this world, he thought once more.

‘I have the codes,’ the knight replied, ‘but this is not an emergency. Simply send the following message to their incoming logs, with no need for a reply: “Fight well, brothers.”.’

‘Sent, lord.’

Grimaldus nodded. ‘My thanks.’ He turned to the gathered officers, and leaned over the hololithic display, his gauntleted knuckles on the table’s surface.

‘Forgive me a moment’s choler. We have a war to plan,’ the knight said, and breathed out the most difficult words he had ever spoken. ‘And a city to defend.’

Until their dying nights, the warriors of the Helsreach Crusade bore their lamentations and rage with all the dignity that could be expected of them. But it was no easy feat. No easy feat to be consigned to a city of several million frightened souls while above the stained clouds, hundreds upon hundreds of their battle-brothers were carving their glory from the steel and flesh of an ancient and hated foe. The Black Templars across the city looked skywards, as if their helms’ red eye lenses could pierce the wretched clouds and see the holy war above.

Grimaldus’s own anger was a physical ache. It burned behind his eyes, and beat acid through his veins. But he mastered it, as was his duty. He sat at the table with the human planners, and agreed with them, disagreed, nodded and argued.

At one point, a whisper made its way through the room. It was a serpentine thing, as if it threaded its way from human mouths to human ears seeking to avoid enraging the black-clad Adeptus Astartes knight. When Colonel Sarren cleared his throat and announced that the two fleets

had engaged, Grimaldus simply nodded. He'd heard the very first whispers thirty seconds before, of crackled voices coming over the vox-headsets of those at the communication stations.

It was beginning.

'We should give the order,' Sarren said quietly, to murmured agreement among the officer cadre.

Grimaldus turned to the vox-officer he had spoken to before. This time, he glanced at the man's rank badge. The officer saw the silver skull helm nod once in his direction.

'Lieutenant,' the knight said.

'Yes, Reclusiarch?'

'Give the order to Imperial forces throughout Helsreach. Martial law is in immediate effect.' He felt his throat dry at the gravity of what he was saying.

'Seal the city.'

Four thousand anti-air turrets along the hive's towering walls primed and aimed their multiple barrels into the sky.

Atop countless spires and manufactory rooftops, secondary defence lasers did the same. Hangars and warehouses converted for use by the Naval air squadrons readied the short rockcrete runways necessary for STOL fighters. Grey-uniformed Naval armsmen patrolled their bases' perimeters, keeping their sites enclosed and operating almost independently of the rest of the hive.

Across the city, recently-established makeshift roadway checkpoints became barricades and outposts of defence in readiness for the walls falling to the enemy. Thousands of buildings that had been serving as barracks for the Imperial Guard and militia forces sealed themselves with flakboard-reinforced doors and windows.

Announcements from vox-towers ordered the citizens of the hive who weren't engaged in vital industrial duty to remain in their homes until

summoned by Guard squads and escorted to the underground shelters.

Hel's Highway, lifeline of the hive, was strangled by Guard checkpoints clearing the way of civilian traffic, making room for processions of tanks and Sentinel walkers, a rattling, grinding parade stretching over a kilometre. Clusters of the war machines veered off as they dispersed across the hive.

Helsreach was locked down, and its defenders clutched their weapons as they stared into the bleak sky.

Unseen by any of the humans within the city, one hundred knights – separated by distance but united by the blood of a demigod in their veins – knelt in silent prayer.

Eighteen minutes after the sirens started to wail, the first serious problem with force deployment began. Representatives of Legio Invigilata demanded to speak with the hive's commanders.

Forty-two minutes later, born entirely of panic, the first civilian riot broke out.

I ask Sarren a reasonable question, and he responds with the very answer I have no wish to hear.

‘Three days,’ he says.

Invigilata needs three days. Three days to finish the fitting and arming of their Titans out in the wastelands before they can be deployed within the city. Three days before they can walk through the immense gates in the hive's impenetrable walls, and station themselves within the city limits according to the agreed upon plan.

And then Sarren makes it worse.

‘In three days, they will decide if they are to come to our aid, or deploy along the Hemlock River with the rest of their Legio.’

I quench the rush of fury through a moment's significant effort. ‘There is a chance they will not even walk in our defence?’

‘So it seems,’ Sarren nods.

‘Projections have the enemy breaching the orbital defences in four to nine days,’ one of the other Steel Legion colonels – his name is Hargus – speaks from across the table. ‘So we have time to allow them the largesse they require.’

None of us are seated now. The siren’s drone has been lowered to less inconvenient levels, and speech is a realistic possibility for the unenhanced human officers once again.

‘I am going to the view-tower,’ I inform them. ‘I wish to look upon this problem with my own eyes. Is the moderati primus still within the hive?’

‘Yes, Reclusiarch.’

‘Tell him meet to me there.’ I pause as I stride from the room, and look back over my shoulder. ‘Be polite, but do not ask. Tell him.’



CHAPTER IV

Invigilata

Moderati Primus Valian Carsomir scratched at the greying stubble that darkened his jawline. His time was limited, and he had made that clear.

‘You are not alone in that position,’ Grimaldus pointed out.

Carsomir smiled darkly, though not without empathy. ‘The difference, Reclusiarch, is that I do not intend to die here. My princeps majoris is still in doubt if Invigilata will walk for Helsreach.’

The knight moved to the railing, his armour joints humming with the gentle motions. The viewing platform was a modest space atop the central spire of the command fortress, but Grimaldus had spent much of his time up here each night, staring over the hive as it made ready for war.

In the faded distance, over the city walls, his gene-enhanced sight could make out the skeletal details of Titans on the horizon. There, in the wastelands, Invigilata’s engines also made ready. Fat-hulled landers made the wallowing journey back into orbit as part of the final phase of Imperial deployment. Soon, within a matter of days, there would be no hope of landing anything more on the planet’s surface.

‘This is the greatest of Armageddon’s port cities. We are about to be assaulted by the largest greenskin-breed xenos invasion ever endured by the Imperium of Man.’ The Adeptus Astartes did not turn to the Titan

pilot. He watched the gigantic war machines, blurred by the sandy mist of distant dust storms. ‘We must have Titans, Carsomir.’

The officer stepped alongside the Adeptus Astartes, his bionic eyes – both with lenses of multifaceted jade set in bronze mountings – clicking and whirring as he followed the knight’s gaze over the city and beyond.

‘I am aware of your need.’

‘*My* need? It is the hive’s need. Armageddon’s need.’

‘As you say, the hive’s need. But I am not the princeps majoris. I report on the hive’s defences to her, and the decision is hers to make. Invigilata has received strong petitions from other cities, and other forces.’

Grimaldus closed his eyes in thought. Unblinking, his skulled helm continued to stare at the distant Titans.

‘I must speak with her.’

‘I am her eyes, ears and voice, Reclusiarch. What I know, she knows; what I say, she has bid me speak. If you wish, I could – perhaps – arrange a conversation over the vox. But I am here – a man of not inconsiderable station myself – to show that Invigilata is earnest in its dealings with you.’

Grimaldus said nothing for several seconds.

‘I appreciate that. I am not blind to your rank. Tell me, moderati, is it permissible to speak with your princeps majoris in person?’

‘No, Reclusiarch. That would be a violation of Invigilata tradition.’

Grimaldus’s brown eyes opened once more, drinking in the scarce detail of the war machines on the horizon.

‘Your objection is noted,’ the knight said, ‘and duly ignored.’

‘What?’ the Titan pilot said, not sure he heard correctly.

Grimaldus didn’t answer. He was already speaking into the vox.

‘Artarion, ready the Land Raider. We’re going out into the wastelands.’

Four hours later, Grimaldus and his brothers stood in the shadows cast by giants.

A light dust storm sent grit rattling against their war-plate, which they ignored as easily as Grimaldus had ignored Carsomir's offended protests about the nature of this mission.

Crews of servitors laboured at the ground level, and while they were mind-wiped never to process or acknowledge physical discomfort, the abrasive wasteland grit was rubbing their exposed skin raw, and crudely sandblasting mechanical parts.

The Titans themselves stood watch over the wastelands in austere vigil – nineteen of them in total, ranging from the smaller twelve-crew Warhound-classes, to the larger Reaver- and Warlord-classes. Godlike, immune to the elements, the Titans were bedecked in the crawling forms of tech-adepts and maintenance drones performing the rites of awakening.

Despite their slumber, it was anything but silent. The grinding, deafening machine-whine of internal plasma reactors trying to start was a sound from primordial nightmare, ripped right from worlds where humans feared gigantic reptilian predators and their ground-shaking roars.

It was all too easy to imagine hundreds of robed tech-priests within the fleet of Titans, chanting and praying to their Machine-God and the spirits of these slumbering war-giants. As Grimaldus and his brothers walked in the shade cast by one Warlord, the relentless grind of metal on metal became a full-throated thunderclap that broke the air like a sonic boom. Heated air blasted outwards from the Titan's hull, and around the site, thousands of men instantly fell to their knees in the sand, facing the Titan and murmuring their reverence in the aftershock of its rebirth.

The Titan's birth cry rang out through its warning sirens. The sound was somewhere between pure mechanical noise and organic exultation; as loud as a hundred manufactories with a full workforce, and as terrible as the wrath of a newborn god.

It moved. Not with speed, but with the halting, unsure strides of a man that has not used his muscles in many months. One splayed claw of a foot,

easily huge enough to crush a Land Raider, rose several metres off the ground. It crashed back to earth a moment later, blasting dust in all directions.

‘*Sacrosanct awakens!*’ came the cry from hundreds of vox-altered voices. ‘*Sacrosanct walks!*’

The Titan answered the worshipful cries of its cult below. It roared again, the cry blaring from its speaker horns and echoing across the wastelands.

As impressive as the sight was, it was not why Grimaldus had led his men out here. Their goal was larger still, dwarfing even these mighty Warlords, paying them no heed as they stood or walked around at the height of its weapon-arms.

It was called *Stormherald*.

The battle-class Titans were walking weapons platforms, capable of levelling hive blocks. *Stormherald* was a walking fortress. Its weapons could level cities. Its legs, capable of supporting the weight of this colossal sixty-metre war machine, were bastions – barracks – with turrets and arched windows for the troops transported within to fire at the foe even as their Titan crushed them underfoot. Upon its hunched back, *Stormherald* carried crenellated battlements and the seven spires of a sacred, armoured cathedral devoted to the Emperor in His aspect as the Machine-God. Gargoyles clung to the edges of the architecture, carved around defence turrets and stained glass windows, their hideous mouths open as they wailed silently at the enemy from their holy castle above the ground.

Banners hung from its cannon arms and the battlements themselves, listing the names of enemy war machines it had slain in the millennia since its birth. As the birth cry of *Sacrosanct* faded, the knights could hear the sound of religious communion in the fortress-cathedral on *Stormherald*’s giant shoulders, as pious souls no doubt beseeched their

ethereal master for the blessing of the greatest god-machine waking once more.

The Titan's clawed feet were tiered stairs leading into the armoured chambers of its lower legs. With the immense structure still unmoving, Grimaldus made his way through scores of scurrying menial tech-priests and servitors. As his booted foot thudded down on the first stair layer, the resistant welcome he was expecting finally made itself known.

'Hold,' he said to his brothers. Troops, their features covered, filed from the archways into the Titan's limb-innards. The knights' attempted entrance was blocked by Mechanicus minions.

The soldiers facing them were called skitarii. These were the elite of the Adeptus Mechanicus infantry forces – a fusion of integrated weapon augmetics and the human form. Grimaldus, like many Adeptus Astartes, regarded their unsubtle flesh-manipulation and the crude surgeries bestowing weapons upon their limbs as making them little more than glorified servitors, and equally wretched in their own way.

Twelve of these bionic creatures, their skin robed against the wind, levelled thrumming plasma weapons at the five knights.

'I am Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Black Tem–'

–*Your identity is known to us*– they all spoke at once. There was little unity in the chorus of voices, with some sounding unnaturally deep, others inhuman and mechanical, still others perfectly human.

'The next time I am interrupted,' the knight warned, 'I will kill one of you.'

–*We are not to be threatened*– all twelve said, still in unison, still in a chorus of unmatching voices.

'Neither are you to be addressed. You are nothing; slaves, all of you, barely above servitors. Now move aside. I have business with your mistress.'

—We are not to be ordered into submission. We are to remain as duty demands—

A human would have missed the division within their unified speech, but Grimaldus's senses could trace the minute deviations in the way they spoke. Four of them started and finished words a fraction of a second later than the others. Whatever mind-link bound the twelve warriors, it was more efficient in some than others. While his experience with the servants of the Machine-God was limited, he found this a curious flaw.

‘I will speak with the princeps majoris of Invigilata, even if I have to shout up to the cathedral itself.’

They had no orders pertaining to such an action, and lacked the cognition to make an assessment of how it would matter to their superiors, so they remained silent.

‘Reclusiarch...’ Priamus voxed. ‘Must we bear this foolish indignity?’

‘No.’ The skull helm scanned the skitarii each in turn, its red eyes unblinking. ‘Kill them.’

She floated, as she had floated for seventy-nine years, in a coffin-like tank of milky amniotic fluid. The metallic, chemical tang of the watery, oxygen-rich ooze had been the only constant in almost a century of life, and its taste, its feel, its intrusion into her lungs and its replacement of air in her respiration had never ceased to feel somewhat alien.

That was not to say she found it uncomfortable. Quite the opposite. It was forever unsettling, but not unnatural.

In moments of battle, which always seemed too few and far between, Princeps Majoris Zarha believed with cold certainty that this was what gestation within the womb must have felt like. The cooling fluid supporting her would become warm in sympathy with the plasma reactor at *Stormherald*'s core. The pounding, world-shaking tread echoed around her, magnified like the beat of a mighty heart.

A feeling of absolute power coupled with being utterly protected. It was all she needed to focus on to remain herself in those frantic, bladed moments when *Stormherald's* broken, violent mind knifed into her consciousness with sudden strength, seeking to overpower her.

She knew that there would come a day when her assistants unplugged her for the last time – when she would be denied a return to the machine's soul, for fear its ingrained temperament and personality would swallow her weaker, too-human sense of identity.

But that was not now. Not today.

No, Zarha focused on her simulated regression to the womb, and it was all she ever needed to push aside the clinging insistency of *Stormherald's* blunt and primal advances.

Voices from the outside always reached her with a muffled dullness, despite the vox-receivers implanted where the cartilage of her inner ears once were, and the receptors built into the sides of her confinement tank.

They spoke, those voices, of intrusion.

Principes Majoris Zarha did not share their appraisal of the situation. She turned in her milky fluid, as graceful as a sea-nymph from the tales of the impious Ancient Terra, though the augmented, wrinkled, hairless creature within the spacious coffin was anything but lovely. Her feet had been removed, for she would never need them again. Her bones were weak and soft, and her body curled and hunched.

She replied to them, to her minions and brothers and sisters, with a stab of thought.

I wish to speak with the intruders.

'I wish to speak with the intruders,' the vox-emitters on her coffin droned in a toneless echo of her silent words.

One of them came closer to the clear walls of her amniotic chamber, looking in at the floating husk with great respect.

‘My princeps,’ it was Lonn speaking, and though she liked Lonn, he was not her favourite.

Hello, Lonn. Where is Valian?

‘Hello, Lonn. Where is Valian?’

‘Moderati Carsomir is returning from the hive, my princeps. We thought you would still sleep for some time.’

With all this noise? What was left of her face turned into a smile.

‘With all this noise?’

‘My princeps, Adeptus Astartes are seeking to gain entrance.’

I heard.

‘I heard.’

I know.

‘I know.’

‘Your orders, my princeps?’

She twisted in the water again, in her own way as graceful as a seaborne mammal, despite the cables, wires and cords running from the coffin’s mechanical generators into her spine, skull and limbs. She was an ancient, withered marionette in the water, serene and smiling.

Access granted.

‘Access granted.’

–Access granted– said twelve voices at once.

The crackling edge of the maul remained motionless, no more than a finger’s thickness above the lead skitarii’s skull. A small spark of electrical force snapped at the soldier’s face from the armed power weapon, forcing him to recoil.

–Access granted– they all intoned a second time.

Grimaldus deactivated his crozius hammer and shoved the augmented human soldiers aside.

‘That is what I thought you would say.’

The journey was short and uneventful, through narrow corridors and ascending in elevator shafts, until they stood outside the sealed bulkhead doors of the bridge. The process of reaching the control deck involved a great deal of silently staring tech-adepts, their green-lens replacement eyes rotating and refocusing, either scanning or in some eerie mimicry of human facial expressions.

The interior of the Titan was dark, too dark for unaugmented humans to work by, lit by the kind of emergency-red lighting the knights had only seen before in bunkers and ships at war. Their gene-enhanced eyes would have pierced the gloom with ease, even without the vision filters of their helm's visors.

No guards stood outside the large double bulkhead leading onto the command deck, and the doors themselves slid open on clunking rails as the knights waited.

Artarion gripped Grimaldus's scroll-draped pauldron.

'Make this count, brother.'

The Chaplain looked at the bearer of his war banner through the silver face of his slain master.

'Trust me.'

The command deck was a circular bay, with a raised dais in the centre surrounded by five ornate and heavily-cabled thrones. At the edges of the chamber, robed tech-adepts worked at consoles filled with a dizzying array of levers, dials and buttons.

Two vast windows offered a grand view across the harsh landscape. With a shiver of realisation, Grimaldus knew he was looking out from the god-machine's eyes.

Upon the dais itself, a huge, clear-glass tank stood supported by humming machinery. Within its milky depths floated a naked crone, ravaged by her years and the bionics necessary to sustain her life under such conditions. She stared through bug-eyed augmetic replacements where her human eyes once were.

‘Greetings, Adeptus Astartes,’ the vox-speakers built into her coffin spoke.

‘Princeps Majoris,’ Grimaldus nodded to the swimming husk. ‘An honour to stand in your presence.’

There was a distinct pause before she replied, though her gaze never left him. **‘You are keen to speak with me. Waste no time on pleasantries. Stormherald wakes, and soon I must walk. Speak.’**

‘I am told by one of this Titan’s pilots, as an ambassador to Helsreach, that Invigilata may not walk in our defence.’

Again, the pause.

‘This is so. I command one-third of this Legio. The rest already walks in defence of the Hemlock region, many with your brothers, the Salamanders. Do you come to petition me for my portion of mighty Invigilata?’

‘I do not beg, princeps. I came to see you with my own eyes and ask you, face to face, to fight and die with us.’

The withered woman smiled, the expression both maternal and amused.

‘But you have not yet completed your intended duty, Adeptus Astartes.’

‘Is that so?’

This time, the pause was longer. The old woman laughed within her bubbling tank. **‘We are not face to face.’**

The knight reached up to his armoured collar, disengaging the seals there.

Without my helm, the scent of sacred oils and the chemical-rich tang of her amniotic tank are much stronger. The first thing she says to me is something I am not sure how to respond to.

‘You have very kind eyes.’

Her own eyes are long-removed from her skull, the sockets covered by these bulbous lenses that twist as she watches me. I cannot return the

comment she made, and I do not know what else I could say.

So I say nothing.

‘What is your name?’

‘Grimaldus of the Black Templars.’

‘Now we are face to face, Grimaldus of the Black Templars. You have been bold enough to come here, and honour me with your face. I am no fool. I know how rare it is for a Chaplain to reveal his human features to one not of his brotherhood. Ask what you came to ask, and I will answer.’

I step closer and press my palm against the casket’s surface. The vibration is twinned with that of my armour. I can feel the eyes of the Mechanicus minions upon me, upon my dark ceramite, their reverent gazes showing their longing to touch the perfection of the machinesmith’s craft represented by Adeptus Astartes war-plate.

And I look into the mechanical eyes of the princeps as she floats in the milky waters.

‘Princeps Zarha. Helsreach calls for you. Will you walk?’

She smiles again, a blind grandmother with rotten teeth, as she presses her own palm against mine. Only the reinforced glass separates us.

‘Invigilata will walk.’

Seven hours later, the people of the city heard a distant mechanical howl from the wastelands, eclipsing the cries of the lesser Titans. It echoed through the streets and around the spiretops, chilling the blood of every soul in the hive. Street dogs barked in response, as if sensing a larger predator nearby.

Colonel Sarren shivered, though he smiled at the others in his command meeting. Through bloodshot eyes, heavy with sleeplessness, he regarded them all.

‘*Stormherald* has awoken,’ he said.

Three days, just as promised, and the city shook with the tread of the god-machines.

Invigilata's engines walked, and the great gates in the northern wall rumbled open to welcome them. Grimaldus and the hive's command staff watched from atop the viewing platform. The knight blink-clicked a rune on his retinal display, accessing a coded channel.

'Good morning, princeps,' he said softly. 'Welcome to Helsreach.'

In the distance, a walking cathedral-fortress pounded its slow, stately way through the first city blocks.

'Hail, Chaplain.' The crone's voice was laden with barely-contained energy. **'I was born in a hive like this, you know.'**

'It is fitting then, that you'll be dying here, Zarha.'

'Do you say so, sir knight? Have you seen me today?'

Grimaldus watched the distant form of *Stormherald*, as tall as the towers surrounding it.

'It is impossible not to see you, princeps.'

'It's impossible to kill me, as well. Remember that, Grimaldus.'

No human had ever dared use his name so informally before. The knight smiled for the first time in days.

The city was finally sealed. Helsreach was ready.

And as night fell, the sky caught fire.



CHAPTER V

Fire in the Sky

Its name had been, in nobler years, *The Purest Intent*.

A strike cruiser, constructed on the minor forge world Shevilar and granted to the Shadow Wolves Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. It had been lost with all hands, captured by xenos raiders, thirty-two years before the Third War for Armageddon.

When a huge and shapeless amalgamation of scrap and flame came burning through the cloud cover above the fortified city, warning sirens sounded once more across the hive. The squadron of fighters in the air – commanded by Korten Barasath – voxed their inability to engage. The hulk was burning up already, and far out of their capability to damage with their Lightnings' lascannons and long-barrelled autocannons.

The wing of fighters broke away as the hulk burned through the sky.

Thousands of soldiers manning the immense walls watched as the wreckage blazed its way overhead. The air itself shook with its passage, a palpable tremor from the thrum of overworked, dying engines.

Exactly eighteen seconds after it cleared the city walls, *The Purest Intent* ended its spaceborne life as it ploughed a new scar into Armageddon's war-torn face. All of Helsreach shook to its foundations as

the massive cruiser hammered into the ground and carved a blackened canyon in its wake.

It took a further two minutes for the crippling damage inflicted by the impact to kill the immense, howling engines. Several booster rings still roared gaseous plasma and fire as they tried to propel the vessel through the stars, unaware it was half-buried in the stinging sulphuric sands that would be its grave.

But the engines failed.

The flames cooled.

At last, there was silence.

The Purest Intent was dead, its bones strewn across the wastelands of Armageddon.

‘The ship registers as *The Purest Intent*,’ Colonel Sarren read out from the data-slate to the crowded war room. ‘An Adeptus Astartes vessel, strike cruiser-class, belonging to the—’

‘Shadow Wolves,’ Grimaldus cut him off. The knight’s vox-voice was harsh and mechanical, betraying no emotion. ‘The Black Templars were with them at the end.’

‘The end?’ asked Cyria Tyro.

‘They fell at the Battle of Varadon eleven years ago. Their last companies were annihilated by the tyranid-breed xenos.’

Grimaldus closed his eyes and relished the momentary drift of focus into memory. *Varadon*. Blood of Dorn, it had been beautiful. No purer war had ever been fought. The enemy was endless, soulless, merciless... utterly alien, utterly hated, utterly without right to exist.

The knights had tried to fight their way to join up with the last of their brother Chapter, but the enemy tide was unrelenting in its ferocity. The aliens were viciously cunning, their swarming tides of claws and flesh-hooked appendages smashing into the two Adeptus Astartes forces and keeping them isolated from each other. The Wolves were there in full

force. Varadon was their home world. Distress calls had been screamed into the warp by astropaths weeks before, when their fortress-monastery fell to the enemy.

Grimaldus had been there at the very end. The last handful of Wolves, their blades broken and their bolters empty, had intoned the Litanies of Hate into the vox-channel they shared with the Black Templars. Such a death! They chanted their bitter fury at the foes even as they were slain. Grimaldus would never, *could* never, forget the Chapter's final moment. A lone warrior, a mere battle-brother, horrendously wounded and on his knees beneath the Chapter's standard, keeping the banner proud and upright even as the xenos creatures tore into him.

The war banner would never be allowed to fall while one of the Wolves yet lived.

Such a moment. Such honour. Such *glory*, to inspire warriors to remember your deeds for the rest of their own lives, and to fight harder in the hopes of matching such a beautiful death.

Grimaldus breathed out, restoring his senses to the present with irritated reluctance. How filthy this war would be by comparison.

Sarren continued. 'The latest report from the fleet lists thirty-seven enemy ships have breached the blockade. Thirty-one were annihilated by the orbital defence array. Six have crashed onto the surface.'

'What is the status of Battlefleet Armageddon?' the knight asked.

'Holding. But we have a greater comprehension of enemy numbers now. The four to nine day estimate has been abandoned, as of thirty minutes ago. This is the greatest greenskin fleet ever to face the Imperium. The fleet's casualties are approaching a million souls. One or two more days, at best.'

'Throne of the Emperor,' one of the militia colonels swore in a whisper.

'Focus,' Grimaldus warned. 'The crashed ship.'

Here, the colonel paused and gestured to Grimaldus. ‘I suggest we hold, Reclusiarch. A handful of greenskin survivors cannot hope to survive an assault against the walls. They would be insane – even for orks – to try.’

‘We are comfortable letting these survivors add their numbers to their brethren when the enemy’s main forces make planetfall?’ This, from Cyria Tyro.

‘A handful of additional foes will make no difference,’ Sarren pointed out. ‘We all saw the *Intent* hit. Not many of its crew are walking away from that.’

‘I have fought the greenskins before, sir,’ Major Ryken put in. ‘They’re tougher than a marsh lizard’s hide. Almost unbreakable. There’ll be plenty who survived that crash, I promise you.’

‘Send a Titan,’ Commissar Falkov smiled without any humour whatsoever, and the room fell quiet. ‘I am not making a jest. Send a Titan to obliterate the wreckage. Inspire the men. Give them an overwhelming victory before the true battle is even joined. Morale among the Steel Legion is mediocre at best. It is lower still among the volunteer militia, and barely existent among the conscripts. So send a Titan. We need first blood in this war.’

‘At least get Barasath’s fighters to scan for life readings,’ Tyro added, ‘before we commit to sending any troops outside the city.’

Throughout all of this, Grimaldus had remained silent. It was his silence that eventually killed all talk, and had faces turning towards him.

The knight rose to his feet. Despite the slowness of his movement, his armour’s joints emitted a low snarl.

‘The commissar is correct,’ he said. ‘Helsreach needs an overwhelming victory. The benefit to morale among the human forces would be considerable.’

Sarren swallowed. No one around the table enjoyed Grimaldus pointing out the difference in species between the humans and the genetically-

forged Adeptus Astartes.

‘It is time my knights took to the field,’ the Reclusiarch said, his deep, soft voice coming out from his skull helm as a machine-growl. ‘The humans may need first blood, but my knights hunger for it. We will give you your victory.’

‘How many of your Adeptus Astartes will you take?’ Sarren asked after a moment’s thought.

‘All of them.’

The colonel paled. ‘But surely you don’t need—’

‘Of course not. But this is for appearances. You wanted an overwhelming display of Imperial force. I am giving you that.’

‘We can make this even better,’ Cyria said. ‘If you can have your men stand in formation before they move out of the city, long enough for us to arrange live pict-feeds to all visual terminals across Helsreach...’ She trailed off, a pleased smile brightening her features.

Falkov slammed a fist on the table. ‘Let’s get started. The first charge of the black knights!’ He smiled a thin, nasty grin. ‘If that doesn’t light a fire in the heart of every man breathing, nothing will.’

Priamus twisted the blade, widening the wound before wrenching the sword clear. Stinking blood gushed from the creature’s chest, and the alien died with its filthy claws scratching at the knight’s armour.

Within the crashed ship, stalking from room to room, corridor by corridor, the Templars hunted mongrels in the name of purification.

‘This is bad comedy,’ he breathed into the vox.

The reply he received was punctuated by the dull clang of weapons clashing together. Artarion, some way behind.

‘Fall back, damn it.’

Priamus sensed another lecture about vainglory in his future. He walked on, his precious blade held at the ready, moving deeper into the darkness that his red visor pierced with consummate ease.

Like vermin, the orks scrambled through the tunnels of the wrecked ship, springing ambushes with their crude weapons and snorting their piggish war cries. Priamus's contempt burned hot on his tongue. They were above this. They were Black Templars, and the morale of the puling humans was none of their concern.

Grimaldus was spending too much time among the mortals. The Reclusiarch was beginning to think like them. It had galled Priamus to stand in ranked formation for the pict-drones to hover around and capture the knights' images, just as it galled him now to hunt the scarce survivors of this wreck. It was beneath him, beneath them all. This was work for the Imperial Guard. Perhaps even the militia.

'We will draw first blood,' Grimaldus had said to them all, as if it were something to care about – as if it would affect the final battle in any way at all. 'Join me, brothers. Join me as I shake off this disgust at the stasis gripping my bones, and slake my bloodthirst in holy slaughter.'

The others, as they stood in their foolish ranks for the benefit of the mortals, had cheered. They had *cheered*.

Priamus remained silent, swallowing the rise of bile in his throat. He had known in that moment, with clarity sharper than ever before, that he was unlike his brothers. They *cared* about shedding blood now, as if this pathetic gesture mattered.

These warriors who called him vainglorious were blind to the truth: there was nothing vain in glory. He was not rash, he merely trusted in his skills to carry him through any challenge, just as the great Sigismund, First High Marshal of the Black Templars, had trusted his skills to do the same. Was that a weakness? Was it a flaw to exemplify the fury of the Chapter's founder and the favoured son of Rogal Dorn? How could it be considered so, when Priamus's deeds and glories were already rising to eclipse those of his brothers?

Movement ahead.

Priamus narrowed his eyes, his pupils flicking across his field of vision to lock targeting reticules on the brutish shapes swarming in the darkness of the wide, lightless corridor.

Three greenskins, their xenos flesh exuding a greasy, fungal scent that reached the knight from a dozen metres away. They lay waiting in a puerile ambush, believing themselves hidden by fallen gantries and a half-destroyed bulkhead door.

Priamus heard them grunting to one another in what passed for whispers in their foul tongue.

This was the best they could do. *This* was their cunning ambush against warriors made in the Emperor's image. The knight swore under his breath, the curse never leaving his helm, and charged.

Artarion licks his steel teeth. I hear him doing it, even though he wears his helm.

'Priamus?' he asks. The vox answers with silence.

Unlike the swordsman, I am not alone. I walk with Artarion, the two of us slaying our way through the enginarium decks. Resistance is light. Most of our venture so far has consisted of kicking xenos corpses out of our path, or butchering lone stragglers.

Most of the Templars were sent across the wastelands in their Rhinos and Land Raiders, chasing down the crash survivors who sought to hide in the wilderness. I have given them their head, and let them hunt. Better the greenskins die now, rather than allow them to lie in wait and rejoin their bestial kin in the true invasion. I took only a handful of warriors into the downed cruiser to purge whatever remains.

'Leave him be,' I say to Artarion. 'Let him hunt. He needs to stand alone for now.'

Artarion pauses before answering. I know him well enough to know he is scowling. 'He needs discipline.'

'He needs our trust.' My tone brooks no further argument.

The ship is in pieces. The floor is uneven, torn and wrenched from the crash. We turn a corner, our boots clinging to the sloping decking as we head into a plasma generator's coolant chamber. As huge as a cathedral's prayer chamber, the expansive room is largely taken up by the cylindrical metal housing that encases the temperamental and arcane technology used for cooling the ship's engines.

I see nothing alive. I hear nothing alive. And yet...

'I smell fresh blood,' I vox to Artarion. 'A survivor, still bleeding.' I gesture to the vast coolant tower with my crozius. The mace flashes with lightning as I squeeze the trigger rune. 'The alien lurks beneath there.'

The survivor is barely deserving of the description. It lies pinned under metal debris, impaled through the stomach and pinned to the floor. As we approach, it barks in its rudimentary command of the Gothic tongue. Judging from the pool of cooling blood spreading from its sundered form, the alien's life will end in mere minutes. Feral red eyes glare at us. Its porcine face is curled in a rictus of anger.

Artarion raises his chainsword, gunning the motor. The saw-teeth whine as they cut through the air.

'No.'

Artarion freezes. At first, my brother knight isn't sure what he'd heard. His glance flicks to me.

'What did you say?'

'I said,' I'm stepping closer to the dying alien even as I speak, looking down through my skulled mask, '...no.'

Artarion lowers his sword. Its teeth stutter to a halt.

'They always seem so immune to pain,' I tell him, and I feel my voice fall to a whisper. I place a boot upon the creature's bleeding chest. The ork snaps its jaws at me, choking on the blood that runs into its burst lungs.

Artarion must surely hear the smile in my voice. 'But no. Look into its eyes, brother.'

Artarion complies. I can tell from his hesitation that he does not see what I see. He looks down and sees nothing but impotent rage.

‘I see fury,’ he tells me. ‘Frustration. Not even hatred. Just wrath.’

‘Then look harder.’ I press down with my boot. Ribs crunch with the sound of dry twigs snapping, one after the other, as the weight descends harder. The ork bellows, drooling and snarling.

‘Do you see?’ I ask, knowing the smile is still evident in my voice.

‘No, brother,’ Artarion grunts. ‘If there is a lesson in this, I am blind to it.’

I lift the boot, letting the ork cough its lifeblood through its blood-streaked maw.

‘I see it in the creature’s eyes. Defeat is pain. Its nerves may be dead to torment, but whatever passes for its soul knows how to suffer. To be at an enemy’s mercy... Look at its face, brother. See how it dies in agony because we are here to watch such a shameful end.’

Artarion watches, and I think perhaps he sees it, as well. However, it does not fascinate him the way it does me. ‘Let me end it,’ he says. ‘Its existence offends me.’

I shake my head. That would not do at all.

‘No. Its life’s span is measured in moments.’ I feel the dying alien’s gaze lock with my red eye lenses. ‘Let it die in this pain.’

Nerovar hesitated.

‘Nero?’ Cadon called over his shoulder. ‘Do you see something?’

The Apothecary blink-clicked several visualiser runes on his retinal display.

‘Yes. Something.’

The two of them were searching the ruined enginarium chambers on the level beneath Grimaldus and Artarion. Nerovar frowned at what the digital readouts across his eye lenses were telling him. He looked to the bulky narthecium unit built into his left bracer.

‘So enlighten me,’ Cador said, his voice as gruff as always.

Nerovar tapped a code into the multicoloured buttons next to the display screen on his armoured forearm. Runic text scrolled in a blur.

‘It’s Priamus.’

Cador grunted in agreement. Nothing but trouble, that one. ‘Isn’t it always?’

‘I’ve lost his life signs.’

‘That cannot be,’ Cador laughed. ‘Here? Among this rabble?’

‘I do not make mistakes,’ Nerovar replied. He activated the squad’s shared channel. ‘Reclusiarch?’

‘Speak.’ The Chaplain sounded distracted, and faintly amused. ‘What is it?’

‘I’ve lost Priamus’s life signs, sir. No heightened returns, just an immediate severance.’

‘Confirm at once.’

‘Confirmed, Reclusiarch. I verified it before contacting you.’

‘Brothers,’ the Chaplain said, his voice suddenly ice. ‘Maintain search and destroy orders.’

‘What?’ Artarion drew breath to object. ‘We need—’

‘Be silent. *I* will find Priamus.’

He wasn’t sure what they hit him with.

The greenskins had melted from their hiding places in the darkness, one of them carrying a weighty amalgamation of scrap that only loosely resembled a weapon. Priamus had slain one, laughing at its porcine snorting as it fell to the deck, and launched at the next.

The scrap-weapon bucked in the greenskin’s hands. A claw of charged, crackling metal fired from the alien device and crunched into the knight’s chest. There was a moment of stinging pain as his suit’s interface tendrils, the connection spikes lodged in his muscles and bones, crackled with an overload of power.

Then his vision went black. His armour fell silent, and became heavier on his shoulders and limbs. Out of power. They'd deactivated his armour. 'Dorn's blood...'

Priamus tore his helm clear just in time to see the alien racking his scrap-weapon like a primitive solid-slug launcher. The claw embedded in his chest armour, defiling the Templar cross there, was still connected to the device by a cable of chains and wires. Priamus raised his blade to sever the bond even as the alien laughed and pulled a second trigger.

This time, the channelled force didn't just overload his armour's electrical systems. It burned through the neural connections and muscle interfaces, blasting agony through the swordsman's body.

Priamus, gene-forged like all Adeptus Astartes to tolerate any pain the enemies of mankind could inflict upon him, would have screamed if he could. His muscles locked, his teeth clamped together, and his attempt to cry out left his clenched jaw as an ululating, shuddering '*Hnn-hnn-hnn*'.

Priamus crashed to the ground fourteen seconds later, when the agony finally ceased.

The greenskins hunch over his prone form.

Now they have managed to bring him down, they seem to have no idea what to do with their prize. One of them turns my brother's black helm over in its fat-knuckled hands. If it means to turn Priamus's armour into a trophy, it is about to pay for such blasphemy.

As I walk down the darkened corridor, I drag my mace along the wall – the ornate head clangs against the steel arches. I have no wish to be subtle.

'Greetings.' I breathe the word from my skulled face.

They raise their hideous alien faces, their jaws slack and filled with rows of grinding teeth. One of them hefts a heavy composite of detritus and debris that apparently serves as a weapon.

It fires... something... at me. I do not care what. It's smashed from the air with a single swing of my inactive maul. The clang of metal on metal

echoes throughout the corridor, and I thumb the trigger rune on the haft of my crozius. The mace flares into crackling life as I aim it at the aliens.

‘You dare exist in humanity’s domain? You dare spread your cancerous touch to our worlds?’

They do not answer this challenge with words. Instead, they come at me in a lumbering run, raising cleaver swords; primitive weapons to suit primitive beings.

I am laughing when they reach me.

Grimaldus swung his mace two-handed, pounding the first alien back. The sparking force field around the weapon’s head flashed as it reacted with opposing kinetic force, and amplified the already inhuman strike to insane levels of strength. The greenskin was already dead, its skull obliterated, as it flew twenty metres back down the corridor to smash into a damaged bulkhead.

The second tried to flee. It turned its back and ran, hunched and ape-like, back in the direction it had come.

Grimaldus was faster. He caught the creature in a handful of heartbeats, hooked his gauntleted fingers in the ork’s armoured collar to halt its flight, and smashed it against the corridor wall.

The alien grunted a stream of curses in Gothic as it struggled in the knight’s grip.

Grimaldus clutched at the creature’s throat, black gauntlets squeezing, choking, crunching bone beneath his grip.

‘You *dare* defile the language of the pure race...’ He slammed the alien back, breaking its head open on the steel wall behind. Foetid breath steamed across Grimaldus’s faceplate as the ork’s attempt to roar came out as a panicked whine. The Adeptus Astartes would not be appeased. His grip tightened.

‘You dare desecrate our tongue?’

Again, he bashed the greenskin back, the alien's head splitting wide as it struck a girder.

The ork's struggles died immediately. Grimaldus let the creature fall to the metal decking, where it hit and folded with a muffled thud.

Priamus.

The fury was fading now. Reality asserted itself with cold, unwanted clarity. Priamus lay on the deck, head to the side, bleeding from his ears and open mouth. Grimaldus came to his side, kneeling there in the darkness.

'Nero,' he said quietly.

'Reclusiarch,' the younger knight returned.

'I have found Priamus. Aft, deck four, tertiary spine corridor.'

'On my way. Assessment?'

Grimaldus's targeting reticule flicked over his brother's prone body, then locked on to the scrap-weapon carried by the orks he'd killed.

'Some kind of force-discharging weapon. His armour is powered down, but he's still breathing. Both his hearts are beating.' This last part was the most serious aspect of the downed knight's condition. If his reserve heart had begun to beat, there must have been significant trauma done to Priamus's body.

'Three minutes, Reclusiarch.' There was the dampened suggestion of bolter fire.

'Resistance, Cador?' Grimaldus asked.

'Nothing of consequence.'

'Stragglers,' Nerovar clarified. 'Three minutes, Reclusiarch. No more than that.'

It was closer to two minutes. When Nerovar and Cador arrived at a run, they smelled of the chemical combat stimulants in their blood and the acrid tang of discharged bolters.

The Apothecary knelt by Priamus, scanning his fallen brother with the medical auspex bio-scanner built into his arm-mounted narthecium.

Grimaldus looked at Cador. The oldest member of the squad was reloading his bolt pistol, and muttering into the vox.

‘Speak,’ the Chaplain said. ‘I would hear your thoughts.’

‘Nothing, sir.’

Grimaldus felt his eyes narrow and teeth grind together. He almost repeated his words as an order. What held him back was not tact, but discipline. His rage still boiled beneath the surface. He was no mere knight, to give in to his emotion and remain flooded by it. As a Chaplain, he held himself to a higher standard. Putting the chill of normality into his voice, he said simply:

‘We will speak of this later. I am not blind to your tensions of late.’

‘As you wish, Reclusiarch,’ Cador replied.

Priamus opened his eyes, and did two things at once. He reached for his sword – still chained to his wrist – and he said through tight lips, ‘Those whoresons. They shot me.’

‘Some kind of nerve weapon.’ Nerovar was still scanning him. ‘It attacked your nervous system through the interface feeds from your armour.’

‘Get away from me,’ the swordsman said, rising to his feet. Nerovar offered a hand, which Priamus knocked aside. ‘I said *get away*.’

Grimaldus handed the knight his helm.

‘If you are finished with your lone reconnaissance, perhaps you can stay with Nero and Cador this time.’

The pause that followed the Chaplain’s words was pregnant with Priamus’s bitterness.

‘As you wish. My lord.’

When we emerge from the wrecked ship, the weak sun is rising, spreading its worthlessly dim light across the clouded heavens.

The rest of my force, the hundred knights of the Helsreach Crusade, is assembling in the wastelands around the broken ship's metal bones.

Three Land Raiders, six Rhinos, the air around them all thrumming with the chuckle of idling engines. I think, for a strange moment, that even our tanks are amused at the pathetic hunting on offer last night.

Kill-totals scroll across my visor display as squad leaders report the success of their hunts. A paltry night's work, all in all, but the mortals behind the city walls have the first blood they so ardently desired.

'You're not cheering,' Artarion voxes to me, and only me.

'Little was cleansed. Little was purified.'

'Duty is not always glorious,' he says, and I wonder if he refers to our exile on the planet's surface with those words.

'I presume that is a barbed reference for my benefit?'

'Perhaps.' He clambers aboard our Land Raider, still speaking from within. 'Brother, you have changed since inheriting Mordred's mantle.'

'You are speaking foolishness.'

'No. Hear me. We have spoken: Cador, Nero, Bastilan, Priamus and myself. And we have listened to the talk among the others. We must all deal with these changes, and we must all face this duty. Your darkness is spreading to the entire Crusade. One hundred warriors all fearing that the fire in your heart is naught but embers now.'

And for a moment, his words ring true. My blood runs cold. My heart chills in my chest.

'Reclusiarch,' a voice crackles over the vox. I do not immediately recognise it – Artarion's words have stolen my thoughts.

'Grimaldus. Speak.'

'Reclusiarch. Throne of the God-Emperor... It's truly beginning.'
Colonel Sarren sounds awed, almost eager.

'Elaborate,' I tell him.

‘Battlefleet Armageddon is in full retreat. The Adeptus Astartes fleet is withdrawing alongside them.’ The colonel’s voice breaks up in a storm of vox-feedback, only to return a moment later. ‘...breaking against the orbital defence array. Breaking *through*, already. It’s beginning.’

‘We are returning to the city at once. Has there been any communication from *The Eternal Crusader*?’

‘Yes. The planetary vox-network is struggling to cope with the influx. Shall I have the message relayed to you?’

‘At once, colonel.’

I embark and slam the Land Raider’s side hatch closed. Within the tank, all is suffused in the muted darkness of emergency lighting. I stand with my squad, gripping the overhead rail as the tank starts with a lurch.

At last, after the vox-clicking of several channels being linked together, I hear the words of High Marshal Helbrecht, the brother I have fought beside for so many decades. His voice, even on a low-quality recording, is filled with his presence.

‘Helsreach, this is the *Crusader*. We are breaking from the planet. The orbital war is lost. Repeat: the orbital war is lost. Grimaldus... Once you hear these words, stand ready. You are Mordred’s heir, and my trust rides with you. Hell is coming, brother. The Great Enemy’s fleet is without number, but faith and fury will see your duty done.’

I curse him, without giving voice to my spite. A silent oath that I will never forgive him for this exile... For damning me to die in futility.

Behind his words, I hear the cacophony of a ship enduring colossal assault. Dull explosions, horrendous and thunderous shaking – *The Eternal Crusader*’s shields were down when he sent me this message. I cannot conceive of any enemy in history that has managed to inflict such damage to our flagship.

‘Grimaldus,’ he says my name with cold, raw solemnity, and his final words knife into me like a bitter blade.

‘Die well.’



CHAPTER VI

Planetfall

Grimaldus watched Helsreach erupting in fury.

They came through the morning clouds, fat-bellied troop landers that streaked with fire from atmospheric entry and the damage they had sustained breaking through the orbital defences.

Burning hulks juddered as their boosters fired, slowing them before they ploughed into the ground. They came from the horizon, or descended from stretches of cloud cover far from the city. Those few that sailed overhead, close enough for the city's defence platforms to reach, were subjected to horrendous battery fire, destroyed with such swift force that flaming wreckage rained upon the city below.

He stood with his command squad, fists resting on the edge of the battlements, watching the bulk landers coming down in the northern wastelands. Imperial fighters of all classes and designs flitted between the sedate troop ships, unleashing their payloads to minimal effect. The ships were too big for fighter-scale weapons to make any significant difference. As more alien scrapships broke the poison-yellow cloud cover, xenos fighter craft descended with their motherships. Barasath and his Lightning squadrons engaged these, punching them out of the air like buzzing insects.

Across the city, almost drowned out by the booming rage of the battlement guns, a siren wailed between automated announcements that demanded every soul take up arms and man their appointed positions.

The walls.

During the opening phase, Helsreach's defenders would stand upon the city's walls and be ready to repel an archaic siege. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and militia, standing vigil on walls that were as tall as a Titan.

Several bold ork drop-ships sought to land within the city. Spiretop platforms, wall guns and cannon batteries mounted upon the tops of towers annihilated those that made the attempt. The luckier failures managed to climb with enough altitude to escape the city's reach and crash on the wastelands. Most were torn asunder by unrelenting weapons fire, pulled apart and cast to the ground in flames.

Guard units stationed throughout the hive and pre-selected for the duty moved in on the downed hulks, slaughtering any alien survivors. Across the city, fire containment teams worked to put out blazes that spread from the crashing junkers.

Grimaldus looked along the walls to either side, where thousands of uniformed men stood in loose groups, every one clad in the ochre of the Armageddon Steel Legion. These were not Sarren's own 101st. The colonel's regiment remained at the command centre, as well as being spread across the city in platoons to defend key areas.

Artarion's words still burned behind the Chaplain's eyes.

'Brothers,' he spoke into the vox. 'To me.'

The knights drew closer – Nerovar watching the distant landings without a word; Priamus, his blade already in his hands, resting on one pauldron; Cador, projecting a sense of implacable patience; Bastilan, grim and silent; and Artarion, holding Grimaldus's banner, the only one of them without his helmet. He seemed to enjoy the uncomfortable glances he

received from the human soldiers as they saw his shattered face. Occasionally, he'd grin at them, baring his metal teeth.

'Helm on,' Grimaldus said, the words emerging from his vocaliser as a low growl. Artarion complied with a chuckle.

'We must speak,' Grimaldus said.

'You have chosen a curious moment to realise that,' Artarion said. The wall shivered beneath their feet again as the turrets unleashed another volley at an alien scrap-cruiser shaking the sky overhead.

'The city has awoken to its duty,' Grimaldus intoned. 'It is time I did the same.'

The knights stood and watched as xenos landers touched down on the plains several kilometres from the city. Even from this distance, the Templars could make out hordes of greenskins spilling from the grounded ships, mustering on the wastelands.

Reports clashed with each other over the vox, telling of similar landings being made to the east and west of the city.

'Speak,' Grimaldus demanded in the face of his brothers' silence.

'What would you have us say, Reclusiarch?' asked Bastilan.

'The truth. Your perceptions of this doomed crusade, and the way it is being led.'

The ork ship that had passed overhead minutes before now came down in the wasteland with slow, grinding, earthshaking force. It ploughed into the dusty ground, throwing up a trail of dust in its wake, and Helsreach shook to its foundations.

A cheer went up along the wall – thousands of soldiers crying out at the sight.

'We hold the largest city on the planet, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers,' Cadon said, 'as well as countless experienced Guard and militia officers. And we have Invigilata.'

‘Your point?’ Grimaldus asked, watching the crashed ship burn. ‘Do you think that will be even half of what we would need to repel the siege that we’ll soon suffer?’

‘No,’ Cadon replied. ‘We are going to die here, but that is not my point. My point, brother, is that the city has a command structure already in place.’

Bastilan pitched in. ‘You are not a general, Grimaldus. And you were not sent here to be one.’

Grimaldus nodded, his mind flashing back from the fire on the wastelands, snapping into recollections of the endless command staff meetings when the mortals had requested his presence.

He had thought it was his duty to be present, to grasp the full situation facing the hive. When he said these words to his brothers, he was answered with curses and smiles.

The Chaplain watched the greenskin swarm growing in size as more landers came down. The alien vessels darkened the sky, such was their number. Like steel beetles, they infested the wastelands in every direction, disgorging hosts of xenos warriors.

‘It *was* my duty to study every soul, every weapon, every metre of this hive. But I have erred, brothers. The High Marshal did not send me here to command.’

‘We know,’ Artarion said softly, his skin tingling at the change in Grimaldus’s tone. He sounded almost himself again.

‘Until this moment, until I looked upon the enemy myself, I had not resigned myself to dying here. I was... enraged... with Helbrecht for damning me to this exile.’

‘As were we all,’ Priamus said, his voice rich with the sneer he wore on his face. ‘But we will carve a legend here, Reclusiarch. We will make the High Marshal remember the day he sent us here to die.’

Good words, Grimaldus thought. Fine words.

‘He will always recall that day. It is not he who must be forced to remember the Helsreach Crusade.’ The Chaplain nodded out to the massing army. ‘It is them.’

Grimaldus looked to his left, then his right. The Steel Legion stood in organised ranks, watching the mass of enemies coming together on the plains. When his own gaze returned to the foe, he couldn’t help a smile creeping its way across his features.

‘This is Grimaldus of the Black Templars,’ he voxed. ‘Colonel Sarren, answer me.’

‘I am here, Reclusiarch. Commander Barasath reports—’

‘Later, colonel. Later. I am looking at the enemy, tens of thousands, with more landing each moment. They will not wait for their wreck-Titans to be landed. These beasts are hungry for bloodshed. The first strike will come at the north wall, within the next two hours.’

‘With respect, Reclusiarch, how will they reach the wall without Titans to breach it?’

‘Propulsion packs to gain the battlements. Ladders to climb. Artillery to pound holes in the walls. They will do whatever they can, and as soon as they are able. These creatures have been imprisoned on bulk ships for weeks, and in some cases, months. Do not expect sense. Expect madness and rage.’

‘Understood. I will have Barasath’s squadrons ready for bombing runs on enemy artillery.’

‘I would have suggested the same, colonel. The gates, Sarren. We must watch the gates. A wall is only as strong as its weakest point, and they will come at the north gate with everything they have.’

‘Reinforcements are already being rerouted to—’

‘No.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘You heard me. I will not require reinforcement. I have fifteen of my knights with me, and an entire Steel Legion regiment. I will provide updates as the situation evolves.’ Grimaldus killed the vox-link before Sarren could argue more.

The Templar watched the enemy massing in the distance for several more minutes, listening to the chatter of the Guard soldiers nearby. The men around him wore the insignia of the 273rd Steel Legion. Their shoulder badges showed a black carrion bird, clutching the Imperial aquila in its claws.

The Reclusiarch closed his eyes, recalling the personnel data meetings he’d endured. The 273rd. The Desert Vultures. Their commanding officer was Colonel F. Nathett. His second officers were Major K. Johan, and Major V. Oros.

In the distance, a great cry was raised. It barely reached the defenders’ ears over the powerful refrain of wall-guns firing, but it was there nevertheless. Thousands upon thousands of orks bellowing their racial war cry.

They were charging.

Charging alongside grumbling, rickety vehicles: troop-carriers stolen from the Imperium and subsequently junked in the spirit of alien ‘improvement’; growling tanks that already lobbed shells that fell far short of the city walls; even great beasts of burden, the size of scout-class Titans, with scrap-metal howdahs on their rocking backs, filled with howling orks.

‘We have sixteen minutes before they reach the range of the wall-guns,’ Nerovar said. ‘Twenty-two before they reach the gates, if their rate of advance remains unaltered.’

Grimaldus opened his eyes, and took a breath. The humans were muttering amongst themselves, and even though they were trained veterans, Grimaldus’s gene-enhanced senses could scent the reek of

sudden sweat and fear-soured breath through their respirators. No mortal could fail to be moved by the horde of devastation rumbling their way. Even without their greater war machines, the first ork assault was vast.

The city was ready. The enemy was coming. It was time to face up to why he was exiled here.

Grimaldus took a step up onto the battlements.

The wind was strong – an atmospheric disturbance from so many heavy craft making planetfall – but despite the powerful gale that whipped the greatcoats of the human soldiers, Grimaldus remained steady.

He walked along the edge of the wall, his weapons drawn and activated. The generator coils on the back of his plasma pistol burned with fierce light, and his crozius maul sparked with lethal force. As he moved, the eyes of the soldiers followed him. The wind tore at his tabard and the parchment scrolls fastened to his armour. He paid no heed to the anger of the elements.

‘Do you see that?’ he asked quietly.

At first, only silence followed. Hesitantly, the Guard soldiers began to cast glances to each other, uncomfortable with the Chaplain’s presence and confused by his behaviour.

All eyes were on him now. Grimaldus aimed his mace out at the advancing hordes. Thousands. Tens of thousands. And only the very beginning.

‘Do you see that?’ he roared at the humans. The closest ranks flinched back from the mechanical bark that issued almost deafeningly loud from his skull helm.

‘Answer me!’

He received several trembling nods. ‘Yes, sir...’ uttered a handful of them, the speakers faceless within the masses behind their rebreather masks.

Grimaldus turned back to the wasteland, already dark with the teeming, chaotic ranks of the enemy. At first, his helm emitted a low, vox-distorted chuckle. Within a few seconds, he was laughing, laughing up at the burning sky while aiming his crozius hammer at the enemy.

‘Are you all as insulted as I am? *This* is what they send against us?’

He turned back to the men, the laughter fading, but amused contempt filling his voice even through the inhumanising vocalisers of his helm.

‘This is what they send? This *rabble*? We hold one of the mightiest cities on the face of the planet. The fury of its guns sends all skyborne enemies to the ground in flames. We stand united in our thousands – our weapons without number, our purity without question, and our hearts beating courage through our blood. And *this* is how they attack us?’

‘Brothers and sisters... A legion of beggars and alien dregs wheezes its way across the plains. Forgive me when the moment comes that they whine and weep against our walls. Forgive me that I must order you to waste ammunition upon their worthless bodies.’

Grimaldus paused, lowering his weapon at last, turning his back on the invaders as if bored by their very existence. His entire attention was focused upon the soldiers below him.

‘I have heard many souls speak my name in whispers since I came to Helsreach. I ask you now: Do you know me?’

‘Yes,’ several voices replied, several among the hundreds.

‘*Do you know me?*’ he bellowed at them over the firing of the wall-guns.

‘*Yes!*’ a chorus answered now.

‘*I am Grimaldus of the Black Templars! A brother to the Steel Legions of this defiant world!*’

A muted cheer greeted his words. It wasn’t enough, not even close.

‘*Never again in life will your actions carry such consequence. Never again will you serve as you serve now. No duty will matter as much, and no glory will taste as true. We are the defenders of Helsreach. On this day, we*

carve our legend in the flesh of every alien we slay. Will you stand with me?’

Now the cheers came in truth. They thundered in the air around him.

‘Will you stand with me?’

Again, a roar.

‘Sons and daughters of the Imperium! Our blood is the blood of heroes and martyrs! The xenos dare defile our city? They dare tread the sacred soil of our world? We will throw their bodies from these walls when the final day dawns!’

A wave of noise crashed against his armour as they cheered. Grimaldus raised his war maul, aiming it to the embattled heavens.

‘This is our city! This is our world! Say it! Say it! Cry it out so the bastards in orbit will hear our fury! Our city! Our world!’

‘OUR CITY! OUR WORLD!’

Laughing again, Grimaldus turned to face the oncoming horde. *‘Run, alien dogs! Come to me! Come to us all! Come and die in blood and fire!’*

‘BLOOD AND FIRE!’

The Reclusiarch cut the air with his crozius, as if ordering his men forward. *‘For the Templars! For the Steel Legion! For Helsreach!’*

‘FOR HELSREACH!’

‘Louder!’

‘FOR HELSREACH!’

‘They cannot hear you, brothers!’

‘FOR HELSREACH!’

‘Hurl yourselves at these walls, inhuman filth! Die on our blades! I am Grimaldus of the Black Templars, and I will cast your carcasses from these holy walls!’

‘GRIMALDUS! GRIMALDUS! GRIMALDUS!’

Grimaldus nodded, still staring out over the wastelands, letting the cheering chant mix with the howling wind, knowing it would carry to the

advancing enemy.

A vox-voice pulled him from his reverie. 'That is the first time since we landed,' said Artarion, 'that you have sounded like yourself.'

'We have a war to fight,' the Chaplain replied. 'The past is done with. Nero, how long?'

The Apothecary tilted his head, watching the horde for several moments.

'Six minutes until they are within range of the wall-guns.'

Grimaldus stepped down from the edge of the wall, standing among the Guard. They backed away from him, even as they all still cheered his name.

'Vultures!' he called, 'I must speak with Colonel Nathett, and Majors Oros and Johan. Where are your officers?'

A great deal can happen in six minutes, especially when one has the resources of a fortress-city to call upon.

Dozens of fighters in the gunmetal grey of the 5082nd Naval Skyborne streaked over the advancing horde, punishing them from above with strafing runs. Autocannons chattered, spitting into the tide of enemy flesh. Lascannons beamed with eye-aching brilliance, destroying dozens of the few heavy tanks present in this initial ork host.

Grimaldus stood upon the battlements, weapons in hands, watching Commander Barasath's Lightnings and Thunderbolts unleashing devastation from the sky. He was a veteran of two hundred years. He knew, with cold clarity, when something was wasted effort.

Every death counts, he thought, seeking to force himself to believe it as the immense sea of foes came crashing closer.

Priamus was similarly unmoved. 'Barasath's best attempt is no more than spitting into a tidal wave.'

'Every death counts,' Grimaldus growled. 'Every life lost out there is one less enemy assailing our walls.'

A great beast, some kind of stomping mammoth covered in scales, cried out as it went down, lanced through its legs and belly by a volley of lascannon fire. The orks fell from the howdah on its back, vanishing into the swarm of warriors. Grimaldus prayed they were crushed underfoot by their allies.

On his retinal display, a runic countdown began to flicker red.

He raised his crozius.

Along the north wall, hundreds of multi-barrelled turrets began their realignment. On grinding joints, they cycled down to aim at the wastelands, leaving the city vulnerable from above.

Around each turret, a cluster of soldiers stood ready – loaders, sighters, vox-officers, adjutants, all ready for the order.

‘Wall-guns,’ Nero voxed to Grimaldus. ‘Wall-guns, now.’

Grimaldus sliced the air with his blazing maul, screaming a single word. *‘Fire!’*

Craters appeared in the enemy horde. Huge explosions of dirt, scrap metal, bodies and gore erupted from the army. With the numbers facing them, the gunners on Helsreach’s walls couldn’t miss.

Thousands died in the first barrage. Thousands more came on.

‘Reload!’ a lone figure, armoured in black, shouted into the vox.

The walls themselves shook again, tremors pulsing through the rockcrete as the second volley fired. And the third. And the fourth. In a sane army, the annihilation inflicted upon them would be catastrophic. Entire legions would be breaking and running in fear.

The aliens, blood-maddened and howling their throaty war cries, didn’t even slow down. They ignored their dead, trampled their wounded, and crashed against the towering walls like a peal of thunder.

With nothing capable of breaching the metres-thick sealed gates in the northern wall, the berserk aliens began to climb.

I have always believed there is something beautiful in the very first moments of a battle. Here are the moments of highest emotion; the fear of mortal men, the frustrated bloodlust and screaming overconfidence of mankind's enemies. In the moments when a battle is joined, the purity of the human species is first revealed to the foe.

In organised union, the hundreds of Steel Legion soldiers step forward. They move like different limbs of the same being. Like a reflection stretching into infinity, every man and woman down the line aims their lasguns over the wall, down at the greenskins howling and clambering. The aliens drag themselves up by their own claws; they climb on ladders and poles; they boost up on the whining thrusters of jump packs.

And all of it so delightfully futile.

The *crack!* of thousands of lasguns discharging in a chorus is a strangely evocative song. It sings of discipline, defiance, strength and courage. More than that, it's a furious response – the first time the defenders can vent their rage at the invaders. Every soldier in the line squeezes their triggers, letting their lasrifles shout for them, spitting death down at the foe. Lasbolts tear into green flesh, ripping orks open, throwing them to the ground far below to be pulped under the boots of their kin.

Barasath's fighters streak overhead, their weapons still stuttering into the massed horde. Their targets have changed – more often than not, they rain their viciousness upon the artillery tanks that were unloaded last from the landers, and are only now catching up to the back to the besieging army.

I watch as the first of our fighters is brought down. Anti-air fire rattles up from a junked Hydra, its two remaining turrets tracking a group of Lightnings. The explosion is almost ignorable – a crumpled pop of fuel tanks detonating, and the protests of engines as the fighter spirals down.

It impacts in a burning wreck, wings shorn off, spinning and crashing through the ranks of the enemy. Some might consider it tragic that the

pilot likely killed more of the enemy with his death than he did in life. I care only that more of the invaders are dead.

The first of the enemy to gain the ramparts does so alone. A hundred metres and more down the wall, a lone ork crashes down with his back-mounted propulsion pack streaming smoky fire. The others that were with him are either dead or dying, falling from their ascent as their bodies and thruster fuel tanks are riddled with las-fire. The one alien that touches down on the wall lasts less than a heartbeat. The creature is bayoneted in the throat, the eye, the chest and both legs by half a dozen soldiers, and their rifles blast the beast back over the edge.

First blood to Helsreach.

The minutes became hours.

The orks hurled themselves against the walls, still lacking any ability to secure a hold there, clambering up the hulls of wrecked tanks, mounds of their own dead, and ladders of twisted metal in a vain effort to reach the battlements.

Word was filtering through the wall commanders now; the east and west walls were enduring similar sieges. In the wasteland around the city, more landers were making planetfall, unloading fresh warriors and legions of tanks. While plenty of these new forces committed themselves immediately to the first attack already in progress, many more remained far from the city, making camps, clearing more landing zones and organising for a far more coordinated assault in the future.

The hive's defenders could make out individual banners among the ork swarm – clans and tribes united under the Great Enemy – many of which were now holding back rather than hurling themselves into this first, doomed attack.

Grimaldus remained with the Steel Legion troops on the northern wall, his knights spread out among the Guard's ranks, the Adeptus Astartes' own squad unity suspended. Occasionally, greenskins would manage to reach

the battlements rather than being slaughtered as they climbed. In those rare moments, Templar chainblades would shear through stinking alien flesh, before Guard-issue lasrifles would finish the job with precision beams of laser light.

At some point during the endless firing downward, Major Oros had voxed Grimaldus in bemusement.

‘They’re just lining up to die,’ he’d laughed.

‘These are the most foolish, and the least in control of themselves. They hunger to fight, no matter the odds or the war being waged. Look out onto the plains, major. Witness the gathering of our real enemies.’

‘Understood, Reclusiarch.’

Grimaldus heard the Legion officers shouting to their men then, ordering another change of rank. The soldiers at the battlements fell back to reload, to clean their weapons and cool down overheating power-packs. The next line advanced to take their comrades’ vacated positions, stepping up to the ramparts and immediately opening fire on the climbing orks.

The smell of the siege was drifting into the city now. Mountains of alien dead lay at the foot of the walls, their bodies ruptured and their tainted fluids leaking into the ashy soil. While the Templars and the Legionnaires were spared the worst of the stench by their helms and rebreathers, within the city itself, the civilians and militia forces were getting their first, foul taste of war against the ork-breed xenos. It was an unpleasant revelation.

Night was threatening to fall before the aliens finally fled.

Whether the mountain of their own dead had turned their fury to futility, or whether some cognition finally dawned over them all that the true battles were yet to come, the green tide retreated en masse. Horns sounded across the wasteland, hundreds of them, signalling a retreat that otherwise lacked even a hint of cohesion. Las-bolts flashed down from the walls as the Legion kept up a savage rate of fire, punishing the orks for their cowardice now just as they had punished them for their eager madness

before. Hundreds more of the xenos collapsed to the ground, slain by the day's last, bitterest volley.

Soon, even the stragglers were out of range, limping their way behind the horde back to their landing sites.

Ork ships covered the wasteland now from horizon to horizon. The largest ships, almost as tall as hive spires themselves, were opening to release colossal, stomping scrap-Titans. Like hunched, fat-bellied aliens in shape, the junk-giants crashed across the plains, their pounding tread raising dust clouds in their wake.

These were the weapons that would bring the wall down. These were the foes that Invigilata had to destroy.

‘That,’ Artarion nodded at the sight as the knights remained on the wall, ‘is a bleak picture.’

‘The real battle begins tomorrow,’ Cador grunted. ‘At least we will not be bored.’

‘I believe they will wait.’ It was Grimaldus who spoke, his voice less bitter now the war cries and speeches were over. ‘They will wait until they have overwhelming force with which to crush us, and they will strike like a hammer.’

The Chaplain paused, leaning on the battlements and staring at the army as sunset claimed the surrounded city.

‘I requested we withdraw all Guard forces from the wasteland installations across all of southern Armageddon Secundus. The colonel agreed in principle.’

Bastilan joined the Reclusiarch at the wall. The sergeant disengaged his helm's seals and stood barefaced, ignoring the cool wind that prickled at his unshaven scalp.

‘What's worth guarding out there?’

The Reclusiarch smiled, his expression hidden.

‘The days and days of briefings were a necessary evil to answer questions like that. Munitions,’ Grimaldus said. ‘A great deal of munitions, to be used when the hive cities fall and need to be reclaimed. But that is not all. The Desert Vultures spoke of a curious legend. Something buried beneath the sands. A weapon.’

‘We are involving ourselves in this world’s mythology now?’

‘Do not dismiss this. I heard something today that gave me hope.’ He took a breath, narrowing his eyes as he watched the sea of enemy banners. ‘And I have an idea. Where is Forgemaster Jurisian?’



CHAPTER VII

Ancient Secrets

Cyria Tyro leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes to rid her vision of the numbers she'd been staring at.

Casualties from the first day's engagement were light, and damage to the wall was minimal. Flamer teams had been lowered to drag the alien dead away from the city walls and burn them in massive pyres. It was a volunteer-only duty, and one that came with an element of risk – if the orks decided to attack in the night, there was no guarantee the hundreds of pyre-lighters outside could be brought back in time.

The funeral fires burned now, an hour before dawn, and though there were far too many bodies to complete the duty in a single night, the mounds of xenos dead were at least reduced.

For now, she sighed.

The ammunition expended on the first day alone had been... Well, she'd seen the numbers and could scarcely believe her eyes. The city was a fortress and its weapon reserves had seemed inexhaustible, but on a day of relatively sporadic fighting with only three regiments engaged, the logistical nightmare soon to be facing them was all too apparent. Their ammunition stocks would last months, but supplying it to regiments

scattered throughout the city, ensuring they were aware of boltholes, weapons caches and...

I'm tired, she thought with a dry smile. She'd not even fought today.

Tyro signed a few data-slates with her thumbprint, authorising the transferral of reports to Lord General Kurov and Commissar Yarrick, far off in distant hives, already engaged in their own sieges.

The door's proximity chime pulsed once.

'Enter,' she called out.

Major Ryken walked in. His greatcoat was unbuttoned, his rebreather mask was hanging from its cord around his neck, and his black hair was scruffy from the rain.

'It's hurling it down out there,' he grumbled. He'd come all the way from the east wall. 'You wouldn't believe what the orbital disturbance has done to the atmosphere. What did you want that couldn't be done over the vox?'

'I couldn't reach Colonel Sarren.'

'He'd not slept in over sixty hours. I think Falkov threatened to shoot him unless he got some rest.' Ryken narrowed his eyes. 'There are other colonels. Dozens of them.'

'True, but none of those are the city commander's executive officer.'

The major scratched the back of his neck. His skin was cold, itching and grimy with the faintly acidic rainwater.

'Miss Tyro,' he began.

'Actually, given my rank as adjutant quintus to the planetary leader, I'll settle for "ma'am" or "advisor". Not "Miss Tyro". This is not a society function, and if it were, I would not be spending it talking to a drowned rat like you, major.'

Ryken grinned. Tyro didn't.

'Very well, *ma'am*, how may this lowly rodent be of service? I have a storm to get back out into before dawn.'

She looked around her own cramped but warm office in the central command tower, hiding her guilty flush by faking a cough.

‘We received these from Acheron Hive an hour ago.’ She gestured at several printed sheets of paper featuring topographic images. Ryken picked them up from her messy desk, flipping through them.

‘These are orbital picts,’ he said.

‘I know what they are.’

‘I thought the enemy fleet had destroyed all our satellites.’

‘They have. These were among the last images our orbital defence array was able to send. Acheron received them, and sent them on to the other cities.’

Ryken turned one of the images to face her. ‘This one has a caffeine stain on it. Did Acheron send that?’

Tyro scowled at him. ‘Grow up, major.’

He spent a few more moments regarding the printed picts. ‘What am I looking for here?’

‘These are picts of the Dead Lands to the south. *Far* to the south, across the ocean.’

‘I paid attention in basic geography, thank you, ma’am.’ Ryken went through the picts a second time, lingering over the images of massive ork planetfall discolouring the landscape. ‘This makes no sense,’ he said at last.

‘I know.’

‘There’s nothing in the Dead Lands. Not a thing.’

‘I know, major.’

‘So do we have any idea why they landed a force there that looks large enough to take a city?’

‘Tacticians suggest the enemy is establishing a spaceport there. Or a colony.’

Ryken snorted, letting the picts drop back onto her desk.

‘The tacticians are drunk,’ he said. ‘Every man, woman and child knows why the xenos come here: to fight. To fight until either they’re all dead, or we are. They don’t raise the greatest armada in history just to pitch tents at the south pole and raise ugly alien babies.’

‘The fact remains,’ Tyro gestured to the prints, ‘that the enemy is there. Their distance across the ocean puts them out of reach for air strikes. No flyers would reach us without needing to refuel several times. They could just as easily set up airstrips in the wastelands much nearer the hive cities. In fact, we can already see they’re doing just that.’

‘What about the oil platforms?’ he asked.

‘The platforms?’ she shook her head, not sure where he was leading with this.

‘You’re kidding me,’ Ryken said. ‘The Valdez oil platforms. Didn’t you study Helsreach before you were posted here? Where do you think half of the hive cities in Armageddon Secundus get their fuel from? They take it in here from the offshore platforms and cook it into promethium for the rest of the continent.’

Tyro already knew this. She let him have his moment of feigned indignity.

‘I paid attention,’ she smiled, ‘in basic economics. The platforms are protected from these southernmost raiders by the same virtue we are. It’s just too far to strike at them.’

‘Then with all due respect, ma’am, why did you pull me off the wall? I have duties to perform.’

And here it was. She had to deal with this matter delicately.

‘I... would appreciate your assistance. First, I must disseminate this information among the other officers.’

‘You don’t need my help for that. You need access to a vox-caster, and you’re sitting in a building full of them. Why should they care, anyway?’

What does a potential colony of the enemy on the polar cap have to do with the defence of the hive?’

‘High Command has informed me that the matter is to be considered Helsreach’s problem. We are – relatively speaking – the closest city.’

Ryken laughed. ‘Would they like us to invade? I’ll get the men ready and tell them to wrap up warm and lay siege to the south pole. I hope the orks outside the city respect the fact we’ll be absent for the rest of the siege. They look like sporting gentlemen. I’m sure they’ll wait for us to return to the hive before attacking again.’

‘Major.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘High Command has informed me to spread the information and let all officers be aware of the concern. That is all. No invasions. And it is not what I require your aid with.’

‘Then what is it?’

‘Grimaldus,’ she said.

‘Is that a fact? Problems with the Emperor’s finest?’

‘This is a serious matter.’ Tyro frowned.

‘Fair enough. But talk from the Vultures said that he was finally getting involved. They apparently got one hell of a speech.’

‘He performed his duties on the wall with great skill and devotion.’ She still wasn’t smiling. ‘That is not the problem at hand.’

Ryken let his raised eyebrow do the talking.

Tyro sighed. ‘The problem is one of contact and mediation. He refuses to talk to me.’ She paused, as if considering something for the first time.

‘Perhaps because I’m female.’

‘You’re serious,’ Ryken said. ‘You truly believe that.’

‘Well... He has bonded with the male officers, hasn’t he?’

Ryken thought that was debatable. He’d heard that the only commander in the city Grimaldus had treated with anything more than disdainful

impatience was the ancient woman that led the Legio Invigilata. And even that was just rumour.

‘It’s not because you’re female,’ the major said. ‘It’s because you’re useless.’

The pause lasted several seconds, during which Cyria Tyro’s face hardened with each passing moment.

‘*Excuse me?*’ she asked.

‘Useless to them, shall we say. It’s simple. You’re the liaison between a High Command that is too busy to care what happens here, too distant to make much difference even if it did care, and off-world forces that have no need or interest in playing nice with the grunts of the Guard. Does the Crone of Invigilata need to pass orders through you? Does Grimaldus? No. Neither group cares.’

‘The chain of command...’ she started, but trailed off.

‘The chain of command is a system both the Legio and the Templars are outside. And above, if they choose to be.’

‘I feel useless,’ she finally said. ‘And not just to them.’

He could see how much that admission cost her. He could also see that she didn’t seem such a haughty bitch when her defences were down. Just as Ryken drew breath to speak, and tell her a more polite version of his current thoughts, her desk vox-speaker buzzed.

‘Adjutant Quintus Cyria Tyro?’ asked a deep, resonant male voice.

‘Yes. Who is this?’

‘Reclusiarch Grimaldus of the Black Templars. I must speak with you.’

The Crone of Invigilata floated in her fluid-filled coffin, appearing to listen to the muffled sounds outside.

In truth, she was paying little attention. The muted sounds of speech and movement belonged to a world of physicality that she barely remembered. Linked with *Stormherald*, the god-machine’s ever-present rumbling anger

infected her like a chemical injected into her mind. Even in moments of peace, it was difficult to focus on anything but wrath.

To share a mind with *Stormherald* was to dwell within a maze of memories that were not her own. *Stormherald* had looked upon countless battlefields for hundreds of years before Princeps Zarha was even born. She had only to shut down the imagefinders that now served as her eyes, and as the hazy image of her milky surroundings faded to nothing, she could remember deserts she had never seen, wars she had never fought, glories she had never won.

Stormherald's voice in her mind was an unrelenting murmur, a hum of quiet tension, like a low-burning fire. It challenged her, with wordless growls, to taste of the victories it had tasted for so long – to swim beneath the surface memories and surrender to them. Its spirit was a proud and indefatigable machine-soul, and it hungered not only for the fiery maelstrom of war, but also the cold exultation of triumph. It felt the banners of past wars that hung from its metal skin, and it knew fierce, unbreakable pride.

‘My princeps,’ came a muffled voice.

Zarha activated her photoreceptors. Borrowed memories faded and vision returned. Strange, how the former were so much clearer than the latter, these days.

Hello, Valian.

‘Hello, Valian.’

‘My princeps, the adepts of the soul are reporting discontent within *Stormherald's* heart. We are getting anomalous readings of ill-temper from the reactor core.’

We are angry, moderati. We yearn to bring the thunder down upon our foes.

‘We are angry, moderati. We yearn to bring the thunder down upon our foes.’

‘That is understandable, my princeps. You are... operating at peak capacity? You are sanguine?’

Are you querying if I am at risk of being consumed by Stormherald’s heart?

‘Are you querying if I am at risk of bekkrrssshhhhh heart?’

‘Maintenance adept,’ Valian Carsomir called to a robed tech-priest.

‘Attend to the princeps’s vocaliser unit.’ He turned back to his commander.

‘I trust you, my princeps. Forgive me for troubling you.’

There is nothing to forgive, Valian.

‘There is nothkkkrrrrrrsssssssssh.’

That would become annoying after a while, she thought, but did not pulse the sentiment to her vocaliser. Your concern touches me, Valian.

‘Your concern touches me, Valian.’

But I am well.

‘Bkrsh I am well.’

The tech-adept stood by the side of Zarha’s amniotic tank. Mechanical arms slid from his robe and began to do their work.

Moderati Primus Valian Carsomir hesitated, before making the sign of the cog and returning to his station.

We will see battle soon, Valian. Grimaldus has promised it to us.

‘We will see battle soon, Valian. Grimaldus has promised it to us.’

Valian didn’t reply at first. If the enemy was going to amass its numbers first, shelling the foe from the safety of the city walls was hardly seeing battle, in his eyes.

‘We are all ready, my princeps.’

Tomaz couldn’t sleep.

He sat up in bed, swallowing another stinging mouthful of amasec, the cheap, thin stuff that Heddon brewed in one of the back warehouses down

at the docks. The stuff tasted more than a little of engine oil. It wouldn't have surprised Tomaz to learn that was one of the ingredients.

He swallowed another burning gulp that itched its way down his throat. There was, he realised, a more than good chance he was going to throw this stuff back up soon. It had a habit of not sitting too well on an empty stomach once it went down, but he didn't think he could manage another dry meal of preserved rations. Tomaz glanced at several packets of unopened, densely packed grain tablets on the table.

Maybe later.

He'd not been anywhere near the north and eastern walls. At the south docks, there was little difference between today and any other day. The grinding joints of his crane drowned out any of the distant sounds of the war, and he'd spent his twelve-hour shift unloading tankers and organising distribution from the warehouses in his district – just as he spent every shift.

The backlog of docked tankers, and those awaiting docking clearance, was beyond a joke. Half of Tomaz's crew was gone, conscripted into the militia reserves and sent across the city to play at being Guardsmen, kilometres away from where they were really needed. He was the elected representative of the Dockers' Union, and he knew every other foreman was suffering the same lack of manpower. It made a difficult job completely laughable, except none of them were smiling.

There had been talk of limiting the flow of crude coming in from the Valdez platforms once the orbital defences fell, under fears the orks would bombard the shipping lanes.

Necessity outweighed the risk of tanker crews dying, of course. Helsreach needed fuel. The flow continued. Even with the city sealed, the docks remained open.

And they were somehow busier than before, despite the fact there was only half the manpower on the crews. Teams of Steel Legionnaires and

menial servitors manned the many anti-air turrets along the dockside and the warehouse rooftops. Hundreds upon hundreds of warehouses were now used to house tanks, converted into maintenance terminals and garages for war machine repair. Convoys of Leman Russ battle tanks shuddered through the docks, strangling thoroughfares with their slow processions.

Half-crewed and slowed by constant interference, the Helsreach docks were almost at a standstill.

And still the tankers arrived.

Tomaz checked his wrist chronometer. Just over two hours until dawn.

He resigned himself to not getting any sleep before his shift began, and took another drink from the bottle of disgusting amasec.

Heddon really should be shot for brewing this rat piss.

She stood in the storm, her Steel Legion greatcoat heavy around her shoulders.

The lashing rainfall did little to clean the streets. The reek of sulphur rose from the wet buildings around her as the acidic rain mixed with the pollution coating the stonework and rockcrete across the city.

Not a good time to forget your rebreather, Cyria...

Major Ryken escorted her along the north wall. In the dim distance to the east, the sun was already bringing dawn's first glimmer to the sky. Cyria didn't want to look over the wall's edge, but couldn't help herself. The dim illumination revealed the enemy's army, a tide of darkness that reached from horizon to horizon.

'Throne of the God-Emperor,' she whispered.

'It could be worse,' Ryken said, guiding her onwards after she'd frozen at the sight.

'There must be millions of them out there.'

'Without a doubt.'

'Hundreds of tribes... You can make out their banners...'

'I try not to. Eyes ahead, ma'am.'

Cyria turned with reluctance. Ahead of her, fifty metres down the wall, a group of giant black statues stood in the rainfall, the deluge making the edges of their armour shine.

One of the giants moved, his boots thudding on the wall as he walked towards her. The harsh wind whipped the soaked scrolls tied to his armour, and drenched his tabard with its black cross upon the chest.

His face was a grinning silver skull, the eyes staring a soulless red, right through her.

‘Cyria Tyro,’ he said in a deep, vox-crackling voice, ‘greetings.’ The Adeptus Astartes made the sign of the aquila, his dark gauntlets banging against his chestplate as they formed the symbol. ‘And Major Ryken of the 101st. Welcome to the north wall.’

Ryken returned the salute. ‘I heard you gave the Vultures a speech earlier, Reclusiarch,’ he said.

‘They are fine warriors, all,’ Grimaldus said. ‘They needed none of my words, but it was a pleasure to share them, nevertheless.’

Ryken was caught momentarily off-guard. He’d not expected an answer, let alone this unnerving humility. Before he could reply, Cyria spoke up. She looked up at Grimaldus, shielding her eyes from the downpour. The hum of his armour made her gums itch. The sound seemed to be louder than before, as if reacting to the bad weather.

‘How may I be of service, Reclusiarch?’

‘That is the wrong question,’ the knight said, his vox-voice a low growl. The rain scythed onto his armour, hissing as it hit the dark ceramite. ‘The question is one you must answer, not one you must ask.’

‘As you wish,’ she said. His formality was making her uncomfortable. In fact, everything about him was making her uncomfortable.

‘We have defensive positions in the wastelands, manned by the Steel Legion. Platoons of the Desert Vultures, among other regiments, have dug

in to hold these against the enemy. Small towns, coastal depots, weapons caches, fuel dumps, listening stations.'

Tyro nodded. Most of these outposts, and their relative strategic value, had been covered in the command meetings.

'Yes,' she said, for want of anything else to say.

'Yes,' he repeated her reply, sounding amused. 'I was informed today exactly what is stored in the underground hangar of the D-16 West outpost, ninety-eight kilometres to the north-west of the city. None of our briefings mentioned it was a sealed Mechanicus facility.'

Tyro and Ryken exchanged a glance. The major shrugged a shoulder. Although most of his face was masked by his rebreather, his eyes showed he had no idea what the Chaplain was inferring. Cyria's glance fell back to the towering knight's crimson gaze.

'I've seen little data on D-16 West's storage consignments, Reclusiarch. All I know is that a deactivated relic from the era of the First War is stored in the sub-level compound. No Guard personnel are permitted access to the innards of the facility. It is considered sovereign Mechanicus territory.'

'I learned the same today. That does not intrigue you?' the Adeptus Astartes asked.

It was a fair question. In truth, no, it didn't interest her at all. The First War had been won almost six hundred years ago, and the planet's face was one of different cities and different armies now.

'Whether I find it fascinating or not is hardly of consequence,' she said. 'Whatever is stored there is impounded under orders of the Adeptus Mechanicus – I suspect for a damn good reason – and is a secret even from Planetary High Command. Even our Guard force there is a token battle group. They are not expected to survive the first month.'

'Do you know your history, Adjutant Tyro?' Grimaldus's voice was calm, low and composed. 'Before we made planetfall here, a great deal

was committed to our memories. All lore is useful in the right hands. All information can be a weapon against the enemy.'

'I have studied several of the decisive battles of the First War,' she said. All Steel Legion officers had.

'Then you will know what Mechanicus weapon was designed and first deployed here.'

'Throne,' Ryken whispered. 'Holy Throne of Terra.'

'I... don't think you can be right...' Tyro told the Adeptus Astartes.

'Perhaps not,' Grimaldus conceded, 'but I intend to learn the truth for myself. One of our gunships will carry a small group to D-16 West in one hour.'

'But it's sealed!'

'It will not be sealed for long.'

'It's Mechanicus territory!'

'I do not care. If I am right in my suspicions, there is a weapon there. I want that weapon, Cyria Tyro. And I will have it.'

She pulled her greatcoat tighter around her body as the storm intensified.

'If it were something that would help with the war,' she said, 'the Mechanicus would have deployed it by now.'

'I do not believe that, and I am surprised that you do. The Mechanicus has committed a great deal in the defence of Armageddon. That does not mean they have the same stake in the war that we do. I have battled alongside the Cult of Mars many times. They breathe secrecy instead of air.'

'You can't leave the city before dawn. The enemy—'

'The enemy will not break the city walls in the first day. And Bayard, Emperor's Champion of the Helsreach Crusade, will command the Templars in my absence.'

'I can't allow you to do this. It will enrage the Mechanicus.'

‘I am not asking for your permission, adjutant.’ Grimaldus paused, and she swore she could hear a smile in his next words. ‘I am asking if you wish to come with us.’

‘I... I...’

‘You informed me upon my arrival that you were here to facilitate interaction between the off-world forces and those of Armageddon.’

‘I know, but—’

‘Mark my words, Cyria Tyro. If the Mechanicus has reasons for not deploying that weapon, they may not be reasons that other Imperial commanders will find acceptable. I do not care about those reasons. I care about winning this war.’

‘I’ll accompany you,’ she almost choked on the words. Throne, what was she doing...

‘I thought you would,’ said Grimaldus. ‘The sun is rising. Come, to the Thunderhawk. My brothers already wait.’

The gunship shuddered as its boosters lifted it from the landing platform.

The pilot, an Initiate knight with few honour markings on his armour, guided the ship skyward.

‘Try not to get us shot down,’ Artarion said to him, standing behind the pilot’s throne in the cockpit. They were set to fly above the clouds anyway, and take a course over the ocean and the coast before veering inland once they were clear of the besieging army and its fighter support.

‘Brother,’ the Initiate said, watching the city falling below as he applied vertical thrust, ‘does anyone ever laugh at your jokes?’

‘Humans sometimes do.’

The pilot didn’t reply to that. Artarion’s answer said it all. The gunship gave a kick as its velocity boosters fired, and through the cockpit window, the toxic cloud cover began to slide past.



CHAPTER VIII

Oberon

Domoska muttered the Litany of Focus as she looked through the sight of her lasrifle. She blinked behind her sunglare goggles, then raised them to look through the gunsight again without the tinted lenses darkening her vision.

‘Uh, Andrej?’ she called over her shoulder.

The two soldiers were at their modest camp on the perimeter of D-16’s boundaries. Sat on the desert sands, cleaning their rifles, the fact they were away from the main base also set them apart from the other forty-eight Steel Legionnaires assigned to this pointless, suicidal duty.

Andrej didn’t look up from his lap, where he was wiping laspistol power cell packs with an oily rag.

‘What is it now, eh? I’m busy, okay?’

‘Is that a gunship?’

‘What are you talking about, eh?’ Andrej was from Armageddon Prime, on the far side of the world. His accent always made Domoska grin.

Almost everything he said sounded like a question.

‘That,’ she pointed into the sky, close to the horizon. Nothing was visible to the naked eye, and Andrej groped on the coat laid out on the ground, reaching for his detached gunsight.

‘Listen, okay, I am trying to respect the spirit of my weapon, yes? What is this you want? I see no gunship.’ He stared through his sight, squinting.

‘A few degrees above the horizon.’

‘Oh, hey, yes that is a gunship, okay? You must report it at once.’

‘This is Domoska, at Boundary Three. Contact, contact, contact. Imperial gunship inbound.’

‘That is the Black Templars, yes? They are from Helsreach. I know this. I listen to my briefings. I do not sleep, like you.’

‘Be quiet,’ she murmured, waiting for confirmation over the vox.

‘I will be the one with so many medals, I think. You have nothing, eh?’

‘Be quiet!’

‘Acknowledged,’ the reply finally came. Andrej took that as his cue to speak again.

‘I hope they are saying we may return to the city, okay? That would be good news. High walls! Titans! We might even survive this war, eh?’

Neither of them had ever seen a Thunderhawk gunship before. As it came in on howling thrusters, slowing down and hovering over the almost abandoned facility of empty warehouses and storage bunkers, Domoska had a sinking sensation in her stomach.

‘This can’t be good.’ She bit her lower lip.

‘I do not agree, you know? This is Adeptus Astartes business. It will be good. Good for us, bad for the enemy.’

She just looked at him.

‘What? It will be good. You will see, eh? I am always right.’

Storm trooper Captain Insa Rashevskia glanced at the soldiers on either side of her as the gunship’s front ramp lowered on hissing hydraulics.

One thought had been rattling around her mind in the five minutes since Domoska had voxed in the sighting, and that was a very simple, clear: *Why in the hells are the Adeptus Astartes here?*

She was about to get her answer.

‘Should we... salute?’ one of her men asked from his position at Rashevsk’s side. ‘Is that what you’re supposed to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘Just stand at attention.’

The gang ramp clanged as boots descended. A human – from the Legion, no less – and two Templars.

Both Adeptus Astartes wore the black of their Chapter. One was draped in a tabard showing personal heraldry, and his helm showed an ornate death mask as the faceplate. The other wore much bulkier armour, with additional layers of ablative plating, and the war-plate whirred and clanked as its false-muscles moved.

‘Captain,’ the Legion officer said. ‘I’m Adjutant Quintus Tyro, seconded to Hive Helsreach from the Lord General’s command staff. With me are Reclusiarch Grimaldus and Master of the Forge Jurisian, of the Black Templars Chapter.’

Rashevsk made the sign of the aquila, trying not to show her unease in the presence of the towering warriors. Four machine-arms, their servo-joints grinding, unlocked from Jurisian’s thrumming back-mounted power pack. Their metal claws clicked open and snapped closed while the arms themselves extended as if stretching.

‘Greetings,’ Jurisian rumbled.

‘Captain,’ Grimaldus said.

‘We have come to enter the installation,’ Cyria Tyro smiled.

Rashevsk said nothing for almost ten seconds. When she did speak, it was with a stunned and disbelieving laugh.

‘Forgive me, is this a joke?’

‘Far from it,’ Grimaldus said, striding past her.

On the surface, D-16 West wasn’t a particularly grand site. Rising from the wasteland’s sandy soil were a cluster of buildings, all of which were solidly built and armoured – almost bunker-like in their squat construction. All were empty, save for those now occupied by the small

Steel Legion force stationed here. In those buildings, bedrolls and equipment were arranged in an order that spoke of discipline. Two expansive landing platforms, easily big enough for the bulky Mechanicus cruisers that could even carry Titans, were half buried in sand, as the desert slowly reclaimed the facility.

The only architecture of significant interest was a roadway over a hundred metres in width that led into the ground beneath the surface complex. Whatever colossal doors had once opened into the underground complex were long buried beneath the wasteland's shifting tides. It would only be a handful of decades before the last evidence of the roadway itself was covered over.

One of the bunker buildings contained nothing but a series of elevators. The bulkhead doors to each lift were sealed, and the machinery lining the walls and connected to the shafts was all powered down. Keypads with runic buttons of various colours were installed on the wall next to each closed door.

‘There is no power here,’ the Reclusiarch said as he looked around. ‘They left this place entirely devoid of energy?’ That would make reactivation – if this installation was even ever meant to be reactivated – an incredibly difficult operation.

Jurisian walked around the interior of the bunker, his thudding tread making the floor tremble.

‘No,’ he said, his vox-voice a slow, considering drawl. ‘There is power. The installation sleeps, but does not lie dead. It is locked in hibernation. Power still beats through its veins. The resonance is low, the pulse is slow. I hear it, nevertheless.’

Grimaldus stroked his fingertips along the closest keypad, staring at the unknown sigils that marked each button. The language of the runes was not High Gothic.

‘Can you open these doors?’ he asked. ‘Can you get us down into the complex?’

Jurisian’s four machine-arms extended again, their claws articulating. Two of the servo-arms came over the Techmarine’s shoulders. The other two remained closely aligned with his true arms. The Master of the Forge approached one of the other elevator bulkheads, already reaching for his enhanced auspex scanner mag-locked to his belt. The arms reaching over his shoulders took Jurisian’s bolter and blade, gripping them in claw clamps and leaving the knight’s hands free.

‘Jurisian? Can you do this?’

‘It will necessitate a great deal of rerouting power from auxiliary sources, and those will be difficult to reach from a remote connection point here. A parasitic feed is required from—’

‘Jurisian. Answer the question.’

‘Forgive me, Reclusiarch. Yes. I will need one hour.’

Grimaldus waited, statue-still, watching Jurisian work. Cyria quickly grew bored, and wandered through the complex, speaking with the storm troopers on duty. Two were returning from their shift at a boundary post, and the adjutant waved them over as she stood in the avian shadow cast by the gunship.

‘Ma’am,’ the female trooper saluted. ‘Welcome to D-16 West.’

‘Now we have Helsreach brass coming to visit, okay?’ said the other. He made the sign of the aquila a moment later. ‘I told you it would be good.’

Cyria returned their salutes, not even a little off-guard at their nonchalance. Storm troopers were the best of the best, and their distance from regular troops often bred a little... uniqueness... into their attitudes.

‘I’m Adjutant Quintus Tyro.’

‘We know. We were told this on the vox. Digging for secrets in the sand, yes? That is not going to make the Mechanicus smile, I think.’

Whether the Mechanicus would be pleased or not evidently didn't matter to this man. He was smiling, either way.

'A big risk,' he added, nodding sagely as if this were some hidden truth he had worked out alone. 'It may bring much trouble, eh?' He still seemed entertained by the concept.

'With respect,' the female trooper – her stormcoat badge read DOMOSKA in flat black letters – said, looking uncomfortable, 'Will this not anger the Legio Invigilata?'

Tyro stroked a stray lock of her dark hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. She repeated exactly what Grimaldus had said to her when she'd asked the same question during the Thunderhawk flight here.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'but it's not like they can leave the city in protest, is it?'

The doors opened.

The motion was smooth, but the noise of resistant machine-innards was immense: a squealing, unlubricated whine that split the air. Inside the elevator, the spacious car had enough room for twenty humans. Its walls were a matt, gunmetal grey.

Jurisian stepped back from the control console.

'It was necessary to power down all other ascent/descent systems. This one shaft will function. The others are now soulless.'

Grimaldus nodded. 'Will we be able to return to the surface once we go down?'

'There is a thirty-three point eight per cent chance, given current system destabilisation, that a return ascent will require additional maintenance and reconfiguring. There is a further twenty-nine per cent chance that no reconfiguring will restore function without access to the primary installation power network.'

'The word you're looking for, brother,' Grimaldus stepped towards the open doors, 'is "maybe".'

They wandered down there for hours.

The underground complex was a silent – and initially lightless – series of labyrinthine corridors and deserted chambers. Jurisian brought the installation's overhead lighting back online after several minutes at a wall console.

Cyria clicked her torch off. Grimaldus cancelled his helm's vision intensifier settings. With flickering reluctance, dull yellow lighting illuminated their surroundings.

'I have resuscitated the spirits of the illuminatory array,' Jurisian said. 'They are weak from slumber, but should hold.'

The bland greyness all around them soon grew uninspiring as they ventured deeper into the complex. Around corners, through silent chambers with inactive engines, motionless machinery and generators of unknowable purpose.

Jurisian would occasionally pause and examine some of the Mechanicus's abandoned technology.

'This is a magnetic field stabiliser housing,' he said at one point, walking around what looked to Cyria like an oversized tank engine as big as a Chimera.

'What does it do?' she made the mistake of asking.

'It houses the stabilisers for a magnetic field generator.'

Her fear of the Adeptus Astartes had dimmed some way by this point. She fought the urge to sigh, but failed.

'Do you mean,' Jurisian enquired, 'what application does this have in Imperial technology?'

'That's close to what I meant, yes. What is its purpose?'

'Magnetic fields of significant size and intensity are difficult to create and a struggle to maintain. Many of these units would be required to work in synchronicity, stabilising a powerful field of magnetic force. Such standard constructs as this housing are used in anti-gravitational technology, much of which is kept sealed by Mechanicus secrecy. More

commonly, the Imperial Navy would use these units in the construction and maintenance of starship-sized magnetic accelerator rings. Plasma weapon technology, on a grand scale.'

'No,' Cyria shook her head. 'It can't be.'

'We shall see,' Jurisian rumbled. 'This is only the installation's first level. From the angle of the buried roadway, I would conjecture that the complex proceeds beneath the earth for at least a kilometre. From my knowledge of template patterns used in Mechanicus facility construction, it is more likely to be two or three kilometres deep.'

Nine hours after Grimaldus, Jurisian and Cyria had entered the installation, they reached the fourth sublevel. The third level had taken almost six hours to traverse, with sealed doors requiring more and more intensive manipulation to coax open. At one point, Grimaldus had been certain they were thwarted. He hefted his crozius in both hands, triggering it live, ready to vent his anger on the unopening door.

'Don't,' Jurisian said, without looking up from the controls.

'Why not? You said this might be impossible, and time is not our ally down here.'

'Do not apply force to the doors. These are, as you have seen, each no less than four metres thick. While you will eventually hammer through to the other side, it will not be a rapid endeavour, and such violence is likely to activate the installation's significant defences.'

Grimaldus lowered his mace. 'I see no defences.'

'No. That is their strength, and the primary reason no living and augmetic guards are required.'

He still did not look away from his work as he spoke. Four of Jurisian's six arms all worked at the console: hitting buttons, pulling clusters of wires and cables, tying them, fusing them together, replacing them, tuning dead screens. His lower servo-arms were now coiled close to his back-mounted power pack, carrying his bolter and power sword.

‘There are,’ Jurisian continued, ‘twelve hundred needle-thin holes in the walls, spaced ten centimetres apart, in this corridor alone.’

Grimaldus examined the walls. His visor locked on to one immediately, now he knew they were there.

‘And these are...?’

‘A defence. Part of one. The application of force, no matter how righteous, brother, will trigger the machinery behind these holes – and the same holes in many other corridors and chambers throughout the complex – to release a toxic gas. It is my estimation that the gas would attack the nervous system and respiration above all, making it especially lethal to fully biological intruders.’

The Master of the Forge nodded pointedly to Cyria.

Grimaldus’s crozius went dead as he released the trigger. ‘Have there been other defences that escaped our attention?’

‘Yes,’ Jurisian said. ‘Many. From automated las-turrets to voidshield screens. Forgive me, Reclusiarch, this code manipulation requires my full attention.’

That had been three hours ago.

Finally, the doors opened to the fourth sublevel. To Cyria, the air was painfully cold, and she pulled her stormcoat tightly closed.

Grimaldus failed to notice her discomfort. Jurisian merely commented, ‘The temperature is at a survivable level. You will not suffer lasting harm. This is common in Mechanicus facilities that are left on minimal power.’

She nodded, her teeth chattering.

Ahead of them, the corridor widened to end in a huge double doorway, sealed as every other door had been so far. On this one, etched into the dull, grey metal, was a single word in bold Gothic.

- OBERON -

This was why Grimaldus hadn't noticed Cyria's shivering. He could not take his eyes off the inscription, with each letter standing as tall as a Templar.

'I was right,' he breathed. 'This is it.'

Jurisian was already at the door. One of his human hands stroked the surface of the sealed portal, while the others accessed the wall terminal nearby. Its complexity was horrific compared to those stationed at the previous doors.

'It is so beautiful...' Jurisian sounded both hesitant and awed. 'It is magnificent. This would survive orbital bombardment. Even the use of cyclonic torpedoes against nearby hives would barely harm the protection around this chamber. It is void-shielded, armoured like no bunker I have ever seen... and sealed with... with a billion or more individual codes.'

'Can you do it?' Grimaldus asked, his gauntleted fingertips brushing the 'O' in the inscribed name.

'I have never witnessed anything so complex and incredible. It would be like mapping every particle within a star.'

Grimaldus withdrew his hand. He seemed not to have heard.

'Can you do it?'

'Yes, Reclusiarch. But it will take between nine and eleven days. And I would like my servitors sent to me as soon as you return.'

'It will be done.'

Cyria Tyro felt tears standing in her eyes as she stared at the name. 'I don't believe it. It can't be here.'

'It is,' Grimaldus said, taking a last look at the doors. 'This is where the Mechanicus hid the Ordinatus Armageddon after the First War. This is the tomb of *Oberon*.'

As they returned to the surface, Cyria's hand-vox crackled for her attention, and a signal rune pulsed on Grimaldus's retinal display.

'Tyro, here,' she said into her communicator.

‘Grimaldus. Speak,’ he said within his helm.

It was the same message, delivered by two different sources. Tyro had Colonel Sarren, his voice more of an exhausted sigh than anything else. Grimaldus heard the clipped, imperious tones of Champion Bayard.

‘Reclusiarch,’ the champion said. ‘The Old Man’s predictions were correct, as you suspected. The enemy is annihilating Hades Hive from orbit. It is crudely done. Standard bombardment, with mass drivers to hurl asteroids at a defenceless city. A dark day’s work, brother. Will you return soon?’

‘We are on our way back now,’ he said, and killed the link.

Tyro lowered her communicator, her face pale.

‘Yarrick was right,’ she said. ‘Hades is burning.’



CHAPTER IX

Gambits

The enemy did not come on the second day.

The defenders watched from the walls of Helsreach as the wastelands turned black with enemy vessels and clans of orks establishing their territory, making primitive camps and raising banners to the sky. More landers brought new floods of troops. Bulk cruisers disgorged fat-hulled wreck-Titans.

Upon the enemy banners, thousands of crudely painted symbols faced the city, each one depicting a bloodline, a tribe, a xenos war-clan that would soon be hurling itself into battle.

From the battlements, the Imperial soldiers marked these symbols, and responded in kind. Standards flew above the walls – one for every regiment serving inside the city. The Steel Legion banners flew in greatest number, ochre and orange and yellow and black.

After he returned from D-16 West, Grimaldus himself planted the banner of the Black Templars among those already standing on the north wall. The Desert Vultures gathered to watch the knight ram the banner pole into the rockcrete, and swear an oath that Helsreach would never fall while one defender still lived.

‘Hades may burn,’ he called to the gathered soldiers, ‘but it burns because the enemy fears us. It burns to hide the enemy’s shame, so they need never look upon the place where they lost the last war. While the walls of Helsreach stand, so stands this banner. While one defender draws breath, the city will never be lost.’

In echo of his gesture, Cyria Tyro persuaded a moderati to plant the banner of the Legio Invigilata nearby. Lacking a banner suitable for handling by humans rather than the huge standards that were borne by the god-machines, one of the weapon-arm pennants from the Warhound Titan *Executor* was used in absentia – mounted on a pole and driven into the wall between two Steel Legion banners.

The soldiers on the wall cheered. Unused to such attention outside the cockpit of his beloved Warhound, the moderati seemed awkwardly pleased by the reaction. He made the sign of the cog to the officers present, and made the sign of the aquila a moment later, as if anxiously covering a mistake.

At night, the winds blew harder and colder. It almost cleared the air of the sulphuric stench that was forever present and, at its strongest, it dragged the standard of the 91st Steel Legion from the battlements of the west wall. Preachers attached to the regiment warned that it was an omen – that the 91st would be the first to fall if they did not stand defiant when the true storm struck.

As the sun was setting, Helsreach shook with thunder to match the maelstrom taking place on the wastelands. *Stormherald* was leading several of its metal kin to the walls, where the largest – the battle-class Titans – could fire over the battlements once the enemy came in range.

The Guard were ordered to abandon the walls for hundreds of metres around the god-machines. The sound of their weapons discharging would be deafening to anyone too close, and even being near the gigantic guns could be lethal, with the amount of energy they unleashed as they fired.

No one in Helsreach would be sleeping tonight.

He opened his eyes.

‘Brother,’ a voice called to him. ‘The Crone of Invigilata requests your presence.’

Grimaldus had returned to the city hours ago. He had been expecting this summons.

‘I am in prayer,’ he said into the vox.

‘I know, Reclusiarch.’ It was not like Artarion to be so formal.

‘Did she *request* my presence, Artarion?’

‘No, Reclusiarch. She, ah, “demanded” it.’

‘Inform Invigilata I will attend Princeps Zarha within the hour, once my ritual observations are complete.’

‘I do not believe she is in the mood to be kept waiting, Grimaldus.’

‘Nevertheless, waiting is what she will do.’

The Chaplain closed his eyes again as he kneeled on the floor of the small, empty chamber in the command spire, and once more let his mouth form the whispered words of reverence.

I approach the amniotic tank.

My weapons are not in my hands, and this time, in the close confines of the Titan’s busy cockpit chamber, the tension from before is distilled into something altogether more fierce. The crewmen, the pilots, the tech-priests... They stare with unconcealed hostility. Several hands rest on belts close to sheathed blades or holstered firearms.

I refrain from laughing at this display, though it is no easy feat. They command the greatest war machine in the entire city, yet they concern themselves with ceremonial daggers and autopistols.

Zarha, the Crone of Invigilata, floats before me. Her lined, matronly face is twisted by emotion. Her limbs twitch in gentle spasm every few moments – feedback from the link with *Stormherald*’s soul.

‘You requested my presence?’ I say to her.

The old woman suspended in the fluid licks her metallic teeth. **‘No. I summoned you.’**

‘And that was your first mistake, princeps,’ I tell her. ‘You are granted permission to make only two more before this conversation is over.’

She snarls, her face hideous in the milky fluids. **‘Enough of your posturing, Adeptus Astartes. You should be slain where you stand.’**

I look around the cockpit, at the nine souls in here with me. My targeting reticule locks on to all visible weapons, before returning to focus on the Crone’s withered features.

‘That would be an unwise solution,’ I tell her. ‘No one in this room is capable of wounding me. Should you call the eight skitarii waiting outside the doors, I would still leave this chamber a charnel house. And you, princeps, would be the last to die. Could you run from me? I think not. I would tear you from your artificial womb, and as you choked in the air, I would hurl you from the eye-windows of your precious Titan, to die naked and alone on the cold ground of the city you were too proud to defend. Now, if you are quite finished with the exchange of threats, I would ask you to move on to more important matters.’

She smiles, but the hatred curling her lips is all I see. It is, in its own way, beautiful. Nothing is purer than hatred. With hatred, humanity was forged. Through hatred, we have brought the galaxy to its knees.

‘I see you do not show your face this time, knight. You see me revealed, yet you hide behind the death mask of your Emperor.’

‘*Our* Emperor,’ I remind her. ‘You have just made your second mistake, Zarha.’

I disengage my helm’s collar seals and lift the mask clear. The air smells of sweat, oil, fear and chemical-rich fluids. I ignore the others, ignore all but her. Despite the bitterness around me that deepens with each moment, it is comfortable to stand without my senses enclosed by my helm. Since

planetfall, the only time I have removed my helm in the company of others has been on the two occasions I have spoken with the Crone.

‘I said when last we met,’ she watches me carefully, **‘that you had kind eyes.’**

‘I remember.’

‘It is true. But I regret it. I regret ever speaking a fair word to you, blasphemer.’

For a moment, I am not sure how to respond to that.

‘You stand on difficult ground, Zarha. I am a Chaplain of the Adeptus Astartes, sworn into my position with the grace of the Ecclesiarchy of Terra. In my presence, you have just expressed the notion that the Emperor of Mankind is not your god, as He is for the entire glorious Imperium. While I am not blind to the... separatist... elements within the Mechanicus, the fact remains that you are speaking heresy before a Reclusiarch of the Emperor’s Chosen.

‘You are speaking heresy, and I am charged with the responsibility of ending any heresy I encounter in the Eternal Crusade. So let us tread carefully, you and I. You will not insult me with false accusations of blasphemy, and I will answer the questions you have regarding D-16 West. This is not a request. Agree, or I will execute you for heresy before your crew can even soil themselves in fear.’

I see her swallow, and despite herself, her smile shows her amusement.

‘It is entertaining to be spoken to in this manner,’ she says, almost thoughtful.

‘I can imagine that your perceptions offer a much grander view than mine,’ I meet her optic augments with my own gaze. ‘But the time for misunderstandings is over. Speak, Zarha. I will answer what you ask. This must be resolved, for the good of Helsreach.’

She turns in her tank, swimming slowly in the fluid-filled coffin before eventually coming back to face me.

‘Tell me why,’ she says. **‘Tell me why you have done this.’**

I had not expected such a base question. ‘It is the Ordinatus Armageddon. It is one of the greatest weapons ever wielded by man. This is a war, Zarha. I need weapons to win it.’

She shakes her head. **‘Necessity is not enough. You may not harness Oberon on a whim, Grimaldus.’** She floats closer, pressing her forehead to the glass. Throne, she looks tired. Withered, tired and without hope. **‘It is sealed now because it must be sealed. It is not used now because it cannot be used.’**

‘The Master of the Forge will determine that for himself,’ I tell her.

‘No. Grimaldus, please stop this. You will tear the Mechanicus forces on the world apart. It is a matter of the greatest import to the servants of the Machine-God. Oberon cannot be reactivated. It would be blasphemy to use it in battle.’

‘I will not lose this war because of Martian tradition. When Jurisian accesses the final chamber, he will examine the Ordinatus Armageddon and evaluate the trials ahead in awakening the spirit within the machine. *Help us*, Zarha. We do not have to die here in futility. Throne of the Emperor, *Oberon* would win us this war. Are you too blind to see that?’

She twists in the fluid again, seeming lost in thought.

‘No,’ she says at last. **‘It cannot, and will not, be reawakened.’**

‘It grieves me to ignore your wishes, princeps. But I will not have Jurisian cease his ministrations. Perhaps *Oberon*’s reactivation is far beyond his skills. I am prepared to die with that as an acceptable truth. But I will not die here until I have done all in my power to save this city.’

‘Grimaldus.’ She smiles again, looking much as she did at our first meeting. **‘I am ordered by my superiors to see you dead before you continue this course of action. This can only end one way. I ask you now, before the final threats must be spoken. Please do not do this. The insult to the Mechanicus would be infinite.’**

I reach to my armoured collar and trigger the vox-link there. A single pulse answers – an acknowledgement signal.

‘You have made your third mistake by threatening me, Zarha. I am leaving.’

From the pilots’ thrones, voices begin to chatter. ‘My princeps?’ one calls.

‘Yes, Valian.’

‘We’re getting auspex returns. Four heat signatures inbound. From directly above. The city’s wall-guns are not tracking them.’

‘No,’ I say, without taking my eyes from Zarha. ‘The city defences wouldn’t shoot down four of my Thunderhawks.’

‘Grimaldus... No...’

‘My princeps!’ Valian Carsomir screams. *‘Forget him! We demand orders at once!’*

It is too late. Already, the chamber starts to shake. The noise from outside is muted by the Titan’s immense armour plating, but remains nevertheless: four gunships on hover, their boosters roaring, black hulls eclipsing the moonlight that had beamed in through the eye-windows.

I look over my shoulder, seeing the four gunships align their heavy bolter turrets and wing-mounted missiles.

‘Raise shields!’

‘Don’t,’ I say softly. ‘If you try to raise the shields and prevent my attempt to leave, I will order my gunships to open fire on this bridge. Your void shields will never rise in time.’

‘You would kill yourself.’

‘I would. And you. And your Titan.’

‘Keep the shields down,’ she says, the bitterness returning to her visage. Her bridge crew comply, reluctance evident in their every movement and whispered word. **‘You do not understand. It would be blasphemy for Oberon to enter battle. The sacred war platforms must**

be blessed by the Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus. Their machine-spirits would be enraged without this appeasement. Oberon will never function. Do you not see?’

I see.

But what I see is a compromise.

‘The only reason the Mechanicus is not committing one of its greatest weapons to the war to save this world is because it remains unblessed?’

‘Yes. The soul of the machine will rebel. If it even awakens, it will be wrathful.’

Within these words, I see the way through our stalemate. If their rites require a blessing that is impossible to give, then we must alter our demands to the most basic, viable needs.

‘I understand, Zarha. Jurisian will not reactivate the Ordinatus Armageddon and bring it to Helsreach,’ I tell her. She watches me closely, her visual receptors clicking and whirring in poor mimicry of human expression.

‘He will not?’

‘No.’ The pause lasts several heartbeats, until I say, ‘We will remove the nova cannon and bring it to Helsreach. It is all we needed, anyway.’

‘You are not permitted to defile Oberon’s body. To remove the cannon would be to sever its head or remove its heart.’

‘Consider this, Zarha, for I am finished with standing here and posturing over Mechanicus banalities. The Master of the Forge was trained on Mars, under the guidance of the Machine Cult and in accordance with the most ancient oath between the Adeptus Astartes and the Mechanicus. He reveres this weapon, and counts his role in its reawakening as the greatest honour of his life.’

‘If he were true to our principles, he would not do this.’

‘And if you were true to the Imperium, you would. Think on that, Zarha. We need this weapon.’

‘The Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus is en route from Terra. If he arrives in time, and if his vessel can break the blockade, then there is a chance Helsreach will see Oberon deployed. I can give you no more support than that.’

‘For now, that is all I need.’

I thought that would end it. Not end it *well*, by any means. But end it nevertheless.

Yet as I walk away, she calls me back.

‘Stop for a moment. Answer me this one question: Why are you here, Grimaldus?’

I face her once more, this twisted, ancient creature in her coffin of fluids, watching me with machine-eyes.

‘Clarify the question, Zarha. I do not believe you speak of this moment.’

She smiles. **‘No. I do not. Why are you here, at Helsreach?’**

Strange to be asked such a thing, and I see no reason to lie. Not to her.

‘I am here because one who was brother to my dead master has sent me to die on this world. High Marshal Helbrecht demanded that one Templars commander stay to inspire the defence. He chose me.’

‘Why you? Have you not asked yourself that question? Why did he choose you?’

‘I do not know. All I know for certain, princeps, is that I am taking that cannon.’

‘I find it difficult to countenance,’ Artarion said, ‘that your plan actually worked.’ The knights stood together on the wall, watching the enemy. The aliens were massing, forming into clusters and chaotic regiments. It still resembled a swarm of vermin more than anything else, Grimaldus thought, but he could make out distinct clan markings and the unity of tribal groups standing apart from others.

It would be dawn soon. Whether or not that was the signal the xenos were waiting for didn’t matter. The flow of landers had fallen to a trickle,

no more than one every hour now. The wastelands were already home to millions of orks. The attack would come today. The overwhelming force they needed to take the city was here.

‘It has not worked yet,’ Grimaldus replied. ‘Ultimately, it comes down to what they will allow. We need their cooperation.’ The Chaplain nodded to the gathering horde. ‘If we do not have Mechanicus aid in reactivating the cannon, these alien dogs will already be gnawing on our bones within a handful of months.’

A cry went up from further down the wall. Few Guardsmen remained posted on the battlements, and those that were served mainly as sentries. Two more of them shouted, and the call was taken up along the entire northern wall. The general vox-channel came alive with eager voices. The city’s siren once more began to wail.

Grimaldus said nothing at first. He watched the horde sweeping closer like a slow tide. What little order had been evident within the enemy’s ranks was broken now, and in the sea of jagged metal and green flesh, scrap-tanks and wreck-Titans powered forward – the former dense with aliens clinging to their sides and howling, the latter shaking the wastelands with their waddling tread.

‘I have heard it said,’ Artarion noted, ‘that the greenskins raise their Titans as idols to their strange, piggish gods.’

Priamus grunted. ‘That would explain why they are so hideous. Look at that one. How can that be a god?’

He had a point. The wreck-Titan was an iron effigy of a corpulent alien, its distended belly used to house the arming chambers for the proliferation of cannons thrusting from its gut.

‘I would laugh,’ Nero said, ‘if there weren’t so many of them. They outnumber Invigilata’s engines at a ratio of six-to-one.’

‘I see bombers,’ Cador noted, neither interested nor disinterested, merely stating a fact. A wing of ugly aircraft, over forty of them, rose

from landing platforms hidden behind the landers of the main force. Grimaldus could hear their engines from here, labouring like a sick elder ascending the stairs.

‘We should abandon the walls, brothers.’ Nero turned to watch the last Guardsmen making their way down the ramps and ladders leading from the battlements. ‘The Titans will be firing soon.’

‘So will theirs,’ Priamus smiled within his helm. ‘And these mighty walls will be reduced to so much powder.’

At that moment, a squadron of fighters soared overhead – the sleek metal hulls of Barasath’s Lightnings turned silver by the reflections of the rising sun.

‘Now that is courage,’ said Cador.

Commander Barasath had argued long and hard for permission to make his first attack run. This was principally because anyone with even a vague grasp of tactics could see full well it would almost definitely be not only his first attack run, but also his last.

Colonel Sarren had been against it. Adjutant Tyro had been against it. Even the Emperor-damned dockmaster had been against it. Barasath was a patient man; he prided himself on tact and the willingness to deliberate being among his chief virtues, but to have to sit there and listen to a *civilian* complaining and questioning his tactical expertise was beyond galling.

‘Won’t we need your planes to protect the tankers still coming from the Valdez platforms?’ the dockmaster, Maghernus, had asked. Barasath gave the man a feigned smile and a nod of acknowledgement.

‘It is unlikely the orks have the presence of mind to seek to cut our supplies of fuel, and even if they have, they would need to take the long route around the city, and risk running out of fuel themselves long before they reached our shipping lanes over the ocean.’

‘It is still not worth the risk,’ Sarren said, shaking his head and seeking to conclude the matter.

‘With all due respect,’ he said, none of his inner turmoil showing through to his demeanour, ‘This attack run offers us too much to merely dismiss out of hand.’

‘The risks are too great,’ Tyro said, and Barasath was fast coming to hate her. A petulant little princess from the Lord General’s staff – she should go back to her clerical duties and leave war to the men and women who were trained to deal with it.

‘War,’ Barasath mastered his temper, ‘is nothing but risk. If I take three-quarters of my squadron, we can destroy the enemy’s first waves of bombers and fighter support. They will never even reach the city.’

‘That is exactly why this is a fool’s errand,’ Tyro argued. She was less skilled at controlling her agitation. ‘The city’s defences will annihilate any aerial attack. We don’t even need to risk a single one of our fighters.’

My fighters, Barasath said silently.

‘Adjutant, I would ask you to consider the practicalities.’

‘I have,’ she scoffed.

Uppity bitch, he added to the previous thought.

‘This is a two-bladed attack that I suggest.’ Barasath looked at his fellow commanders gathered here in the briefing room. While the chamber itself was a bustling hive of activity, with staff and servitors manning vox-consoles, scanner decks and tactical displays, the main table that had once seated the entire city’s command section was almost deserted. Almost every regimental leader was with his or her soldiers now, standing ready.

‘I’m listening,’ Colonel Sarren said.

‘If we engage the enemy above the city, a great deal of burning wreckage will fall to the streets and spires below. Add to that the fact we will be under fire from our own defensive guns. Anti-air turrets on spires will be firing up at the sky battle, and have a significant chance of hitting my

pilots with their flak-bursts. But if we take the fight to them, their precious junk-fighters will rain down upon their own troops in flames. Once my first wave has pierced their formation, send a second and a third. We can cut overhead to perform strafing runs on their airstrips.'

Silence met this statement. Barasath capitalised on it. 'Their aerial capabilities will be butchered *in a single hour*. You cannot tell me, colonel, that such a victory isn't worth the risk. This is how we must strike.'

He could tell the colonel wasn't convinced. Tempted, yes, but not convinced. Tyro shook her head slightly, half in thought, half already preparing her advised refusal.

'I have spoken with the Reclusiarch,' Barasath said suddenly.

'What?' from both Sarren and Tyro.

'This plan. I have discussed it with the Reclusiarch. He commended me on it, and assured me that city command would allow it.'

Of course, Barasath had done no such thing. The last he'd heard of the knight leader was that Grimaldus was evidently involved in some sort of difficult negotiation with the Crone of Invigilata. But it turned Tyro's head, and that was all he needed. A wedge of doubt. A sliver of her interest.

'If Grimaldus advises this...' she said.

'Grimaldus?' Sarren arched an eyebrow. His jowly face was caught between amusement and alarm. 'A trifle familiar of you to use his name like that.'

'The Reclusiarch,' she swallowed. 'If he believes this is a sound plan, perhaps we should take that into consideration.'

Barasath was adept at hiding all emotion, not just the negative ones. He battled down the urge to grin now.

'Colonel,' he said, 'and Adjutant Tyro. I can see why you wish to hold as much of our forces in reserve as is tactically viable. This is a defensive war, and aggressive attacks will play little part in it. But my pilots and I

are useless once the walls are breached and the enemy floods the city. Even the hololith simulations made that clear, did they not?’

Sarren sighed as he linked his fingers over his belly.

‘Do it,’ he’d said. And Barasath had. His squadron was airborne an hour later, tearing over the city streets below before powering low over the wastelands.

In the tight confines of his Lightning’s cockpit, he was more than just comfortable. He was home. Both control sticks in his hands were extensions of his own body. They said infantry felt the same about their rifles, but by the Holy Throne, there was no comparison. A rifle to a Lightning was like a spear to an angel of iron and steel.

The mass of the alien invasion darkened the ground beneath them.

‘Need I remind anyone,’ he said over the squadron’s vox, ‘that bailing out over this mess is extremely ill-advised?’

A volley of ‘No sirs’ was his answer.

‘If you’re hit – and by the Throne, some of us will be – then bring your bird down into one of their fat-arsed god-walkers. Take as many of the bastards with you as you can.’

‘Gargants, sir.’ That was Helika’s voice. ‘The orks call their Titans “gargants”.’

‘Duly noted, Helika. Fifty-Eighty-Twos, on my mark, you will break formation and open fire. The Emperor is with us, boys and girls. And the Templars are watching. Let’s show them how we earned the knights’ crosses painted on our hulls.

‘For Armageddon,’ he narrowed his eyes, breathing in a lungful of the recycled oxygen offered by his facemask, ‘and Helsreach.’



CHAPTER X

Siege

When the wall is first breached, it dies in an avalanche of pulverised rockcrete.

Dark powdery dust blasts into the air, thicker than smoke and expanding like a stormcloud, blinding in its density.

I watch this from hundreds of metres away, standing with my brothers and the soldiers of the Desert Vultures. At the end of the street, the wall is no more. Our defences are broken, and behind the dust cloud, the breach gapes wide.

The true siege has begun. On every rooftop, in every alley, on every street and from every window – for kilometres around – Imperial guns stand ready, clutched in loyal hands, ready to slay the invaders.

Road by road, home by home. This was always how the Battle of Helsreach would be fought, and it is what every soul in the city stands ready for.

The great figures of the Titans begin to withdraw. Their first duty is done; they stood at the walls and pounded the enemy forces with their immense artillery. Invigilata's engines fall back now, not in defeat, nor even willingly – but because they must reload for the true battle. The Crone updated the commanders' shared tactical grid with the locations of

the Mechanicus landers within the city limits that serve as Invigilata's rearming stations. Her Titans trudge back to the closest ones now, their tread shaking the city around them. They are tall enough to darken the rising sun as they pass, even though they walk through distant streets.

Reports filter in from across the vox-network. The wall is falling to pieces, crumbling under the insane firepower of so many tanks and wreck-Titans. Around me, the smell of fear rises from the human soldiers. It is a foul musk; the sourness of breath, the tangy reek of liquid waste, and the rich, stinging scent of cold sweat. This fear-smell emanates from several of them, and while I do not hold them to the standards of Adeptus Astartes, while I acknowledge the fact the human body will always react in this way even with the bravest of souls inhabiting it, it is still hard to stand in their presence. Their fear disgusts me.

Above the dust cloud, the head and shoulders of a wreck-Titan emerge, its bulbous head of scrap metal shaped into a roaring alien maw. Throne of the Emperor, it would have towered above the wall even if our insignificant barricade were still there. Glass shatters in every window along the street as its slow march brings it closer.

A moment later, the street thunders beneath our feet. Every one of the human soldiers with us falls to the ground, their curses lost amid the noise. I maintain my balance only because of my armour's joint stabilisers compensating for the tremors. With the brightness of a flaring sun, the wreck-Titan's head detonates, showering debris into the dust cloud below.

The cheer that rises around me is the loudest sound yet.

'Engine kill,' comes Zarha's voice over the vox, sounding amused despite the interference. **'You owe me for that, Grimaldus.'**

I do not answer. The shot must have been a truly difficult challenge, but I do not care where *Stormherald* is, nor that it is retreating. My focus is here and now. Tension burns through my body like superheated blood. I feel it in my brothers, as well. Twenty of us, our breathing fast, our hands

clutching weapons that are ritually chained to our armour. Chainswords complain as they rev, cutting only air. Last-minute oaths are whispered, or sworn to the sky.

Emerging from the dust cloud, snorting their porcine war cries, come the hunched silhouettes of the enemy.

Hundreds of them, flooding into the street.

‘Fire at will!’ calls one of the Steel Legion officers.

‘Hold your fire!’ I scream, my helm’s vocalisers piercing the surrounding noise.

‘They’re in range!’ the officer, Major Oros, yells back.

‘Hold your fire!’

I am already running, sprinting, my armour joints snarling as I leave the humans behind. Proximity runes, my brothers’ life-markers, flicker on my retinal display, but I have no need for them. I know who follows me.

‘Sons of Dorn! Knights of the Emperor! Charge!’

The first of the aliens runs from the dust, its green skin plastered grey from the cloud. It raises a junk weapon in its brutish fists, and dies with my crozius annihilating its malformed face a moment later.

The two battle lines meet with a discordant crunch of weapon against weapon and flesh against armour. The sick, fungal stench of ork blood fills the air. Chainswords chew through xenos flesh. Bolters discharge their lethal loads – the crashing bangs of release followed by the muffled thumps of shells detonating within bodies.

The creatures howl and laugh as they die.

My knights remain silent as they slaughter.

Perception fades, as it always does in war, to flickering images that come moment to moment. Concentration is impossible, anathema to the holy rage that fills my senses. I grip my master’s relic weapon in both hands, and swing at three aliens before me. They are hurled back from the mace’s crackling power field, all three slain by the impact with their

chests shattered, each of them tumbling across the road to end in limp, lifeless heaps.

I kill, and kill, and kill. It does not concern me that there is no end to this horde. The enemy fall before us, thrown to the floor by the righteous arcs of sacred weapons, and all that matters is how much blood flows before we are forced to retreat.

Over the vox, I hear Oros and the men cheering. It is an easy sound to ignore.

Artarion suffers more than the rest of us. He sacrifices one hand to hold my banner aloft, his chainblade held in his other. The standard draws the enemy to him. *They want our banner. They always do.* Without even a grunt of effort, he hacks left and right, parries clumsy strikes and lashes back with vicious ripostes.

Priamus saw the danger first. I see one of the aliens behind Artarion fall in two pieces, the young knight's sword splitting the creature in twain through the torso. He kicks the biological wreckage from his blade and cleaves his way to fight side by side with Artarion.

'Reclusiarch,' Nerovar is still with me, tearing his sword free from the belly of a disembowelled greenskin. His boots crush the viscous, stinking ropes of intestine that spill to the road. 'We are being overwhelmed.'

A spear crashes against my helm, reducing my visor display to static for a moment. I swing back at the creature that hurled it, and my sight flickers back online to see the beast's skull demolished beneath my crozius. More discoloured blood spatters over my armour in a light rainfall.

Two more orks fall, one to Nero's chainsword ripping across its throat, the other to my maul, hammered into its chest and sending it flying against the wall of a nearby building. Blood of Dorn, Mordred's weapon is an incredible gift. It slays with effortless ease.

I can feel its charge and release with each alien that dies. There is a split second before every impact as the energy field around the head pulses in a

low growl, conflicted by the closeness of other material, before it unleashes its force in a snapping burst of kinetic power.

The enemy have encircled us, but that is little worry. Fighting our way free will be no effort.

‘Oros,’ I breathe into the vox. ‘We are preparing to fall back to you.’

‘Give me the mark,’ he says. ‘We’re itching for a turn ourselves.’

With the true siege under way, the Imperial forces fell into their prepared defensive strategies.

Every road had a barricade, where Steel Legion soldiers arrayed in ranks would unleash las-fire at the swarming foe. Snipers worked their deadly duties from rooftops. Battle tanks of every pattern and class ground their way down streets, shelling the first waves of enemy infantry pouring into the outlying sectors of the city.

Every road and building had its assigned piece to play in the battle. Every section had its orders to hold and inflict as much punishment upon the advancing foe as possible, before falling back to the next barricade.

Rearmed Titans stood as vigilant sentinels over entire city blocks, their weapons reaping life from the creatures that swarmed around their feet. The enemy gargants were still engaged in pulling down and breaking through the wall. In these first hours, Invigilata was unrivalled in its destruction.

The invaders spilled into Helsreach, and died in their thousands. Every metre they took was bought with foul alien blood.

Colonel Sarren watched the battle unfolding on the hololithic table. Stuttering images relayed the position of Imperial forces at the very edges of the city, inexorably withdrawing from the walls. Larger locator runes showed the position of Invigilata’s engines, or battalions of Steel Legion tanks. He had formulated this endless, relentless fighting withdrawal over the course of the past weeks, and by the Emperor, it was a fine thing to see it in action.

In this first phase, it was imperative that casualties be kept to a minimum. The grind of army against army would come in time. For now, losses must be kept light and the death toll suffered by the enemy must be kept high. Let the invaders claim the outlying city sectors. Let them purchase these abandoned, worthless zones with their lives. It was all part of the plan.

The wave would break soon.

Sarren watched the flickering icons depicting his forces across the immense map. It would come soon, that perfect moment in the shifting winds of battle when the enemy's first push would falter and slow as the advance elements outpaced their slower support units. The initial hordes of infantry would crash against Steel Legion resistance in the outer city streets that they could never break without support from their tanks and wreck-Titans.

And at that moment, the wave would break like the tide against the shore. With the ferocious momentum of the first attack lost, the defence would begin in earnest.

Counterattacks would be mounted in some streets, especially those close to Invigilata's engines or Legion armour units. In other zones, the Guard would stand fast, unable to take ground back but entrenched well enough to hold it.

All that mattered was keeping the enemy from reaching Hel's Highway.

At the last meeting, when the commanders had gathered in their battle armour, Sarren had outlined once more the necessity to holding the highway.

'It is the key to the siege,' he'd said. 'Once they reach Hel's Highway, the city becomes twice as difficult to defend. They will have access to the entire hive. Think of it as an artery, ladies and gentlemen. *The* artery. Once it is severed, the body will bleed out. Once the enemy takes the highway, the city is lost.'

Grave expressions had answered this statement.

The colonel hunched over the table now, his squinting eyes taking the scene in, road by road, building by building, unit by unit.

He watched the war in silence, waiting for the wave to break.

Barasath had hit the ground hard.

He'd seen Helika fall from the sky – and heard her, too. That'd been difficult to deal with. The night they'd spent together sharing a bunk had been almost three years ago now, when they'd both pretended to be drunker than they were, but Korten had never forgotten it, nor had he wished it to be the only one. Hearing her die had chilled his blood, and he had to fight not to deactivate his vox as she screamed on the way down, her engine trailing fire.

Her Lightning, with its white-painted wings, had ploughed into the chest of an alien god-walker. The Titan had shuddered for a moment, then vented flames and wreckage from its spine as Helika's bird – now nothing more than spinning debris – burst through its back.

The gargant kept walking as if unharmed, even with a hole blown clear through it.

That had been in the first run. Helika didn't even get time to fire.

A wicked, weaving scrap of a battle through the alien fighters saw most of them spiralling groundwards on dying engines. He'd taken cannon-fire along his hull, but a lucky shot saw him bleeding fuel instead of turned into a fireball in the sky. With the way clear and only a handful of his flyers down, Barasath's second and third waves were inbound.

That's when things had gotten really nasty.

The enemy god-walkers weren't marching idly. Turrets on their shoulders and heads aimed up into the sky spat both laser fire and solid shells at the Imperial fighters. Dodging these alone would have been a chore. Dodging these when they were joined by more ork scrap-flyers and

anti-air fire from the tanks below turned the situation into the nightmare that Colonel Sarren had promised.

Barasath's first wave scattered, boosting towards the primitive landing strips the enemy had formed in the desert.

Hundreds of ork fighters still waited on the ground, unable to take off yet, consigned to waiting their turn on the scraped-flat runways. A more pessimistic man might have noted there was little he could do to such a massive, grounded force when he led the remaining birds of an air superiority squadron. A more pessimistic man might also have circled the enemy airbase and waited for his Thunderbolt bombers in the second wave.

Korten Barasath was not a pessimistic man, and his patience took a backseat when it came to necessity. In graceful arcing dives and strafing runs, he unloaded his autocannons and drained his lascannon power packs, hurling everything he could down at the grounded fighters below. Dozens sought to take to the skies in panicked defence – most of these crashed during their ill-attempted takeoffs as their landing gear became fouled in the sandy wasteland soil. Those few that managed to get airborne were easy prey for Imperial cannons.

His second wave arrived, unleashing their payloads. Thunderbolts, much larger and heavier armed than the Lightnings, sent great plumes of smoke and dust rising from the wasteland's surface as their incendiaries impacted.

'Bomb this place to ashes,' Barasath voxed, and watched his pilots do exactly that.

Fire ripped across the wastelands in hungry trails, consuming the ragged airstrips that would never be allowed to take shape after this. Grounded junk-fighters exploded in succession.

Of course, the site wasn't completely defenceless, even with most of it in flames. A few tanks fired gamely up at the strafing Imperial flyers, with

all the grace and accuracy of old men trying to swat flies.

He'd taken fire on his last banking swoop over the airbase. A lucky – or unlucky, as Barasath saw it – shot sheared off the best part of his left wing. There would be no climbing from this death-dive. No aiming for a wreck-Titan as Helika and a handful of others had done.

He pulled the cockpit release as the fighter started to spin, ditching above the burning site. There was a moment of disorientation, the push of the wind, the world coming into focus after the twisting plunge of the falling fighter... And then he was falling into black smoke and dust clouds.

Darkness embraced him. His respirator saved him having to breathe the choking smog, but his flight goggles were unenhanced and couldn't pierce the smoke. Barasath pulled his cord, feeling himself jerked upwards as his grav-chute opened.

With no idea where the ground was, he was lucky to hit the earth without breaking both of his legs. His ankle flared up in protest, but he considered that to be getting off lightly.

Cautiously, aware of the fact that the smoke hid him as much as it hid the enemy, he pulled his laspistol and moved through the blinding darkness. It was hot, a savage heat all around him that spoke of burning planes and landers nearby, yet not enough light to offer direction.

When he finally broke through the black cloud, pistol in his sure grip, he blinked once at what stood before him, and started to fire.

'Oh Throne,' he said with surprising politeness, right before the orks lumbering ahead shot him through the chest.

Stormherald hungered.

It ached with each pounding step, its roiling plasma core burning in its chest as it reluctantly turned its back on the enemy and marched through the streets.

Its way was clear, its path already set. Buildings had been demolished earlier in the week – their foundations blown up and the hab-blocks themselves fallen to rubble – to make way for its passage.

The need to turn around and pour its hatred into the enemy was fierce, a hunter's urge, almost strong enough to overwhelm the Crone's whispers in its mind.

The Crone. Her presence was a savage irritant. Again, *Stormherald* leaned as it walked, seeking to turn with its ponderous, striding slowness. And again, the Crone's claws in its mind forced its body to comply with her intent.

We move, she whispered, to fight a greater battle soon.

Stormherald's rage faded at her voice. There was something new in her words, something its predator's mind clutched and recognised immediately. A fear. A doubt. A plea.

The Crone was weaker now than she ever had been before.

Stormherald knew nothing of pleasure or amusement. Its soul was forged in ancient rites of fire, molten metal, and plasmic energy that churned with the ferocity of a caged sun. The closest it came to an emotion approximating pleasure was the rush of awareness and the dimming of its painful anger as enemies died under its guns.

It felt a ghost of that sensation now. It complied with her urgings now, still bound to her control.

But the Crone was weaker.

Soon, she would be his.

Nightfall found Domoska with her storm trooper platoon holed up in the ruins of what had once been a hab-block.

Greenskin heavy armour had rolled through and changed all that. Now it was a tumbledown ruin of rockcrete and flakboard, and Domoska crouched behind a low wall, clutching her hellgun to her chest. Strapped to her back,

her power pack hummed. The cable-feeds between her hellgun's intake port and the backpack were vibrating and hot.

She was glad the skull-faced Adeptus Astartes and that prissy adjutant quintus had ordered them back to the city. She didn't want to admit it, but travelling in an Adeptus Astartes gunship – even just in the bay with the racked jump packs and attack bikes – had been a thrill.

She was less delighted with her platoon's assigned position in the urban war, but she was a storm trooper, the Legion's finest, and she prided herself on her devotion to duty without raising a complaint.

With the bulk of Imperial forces in slow, fighting withdrawals and protracted holding actions, units across the city were tasked with lying in wait as the orks advanced, or stalking past undetected to take positions behind the enemy.

Across Helsreach, it was almost uniformly veteran outfits and storm trooper squads tasked with these movements. Colonel Sarren was using his best soldiers to achieve the most difficult operations.

And it was working.

Domoska would have preferred to be safely crouched behind a barricade, with Leman Russ tanks in support, but such was life.

'Hey,' Andrej whispered as he ducked next to her. 'This is better than sitting on our arses in the desert, yes? Yes, it is, that's what I think.'

'Be quiet,' she whispered back. Her auspex returns were coming back clear. No enemy heat signatures or movement nearby. Still, Andrej was being annoying.

'The last one I gutted with my bayonet, eh? I am tempted to go back for his skull. Sand it down, wear it on my belt like a trophy. That would get me much attention, I think.'

'It would get you shot first, most likely.'

'Hm. Not the right kind of attention. You are too negative, okay? Yes, I said it. It is true.'

‘And I said to be quiet.’

Miraculously, he was. The two of them moved on, keeping crouched and low, moving from cover to cover. Sounds of battle were coming from the adjacent street – Domoska could hear the guttural roars and piggish snorts of embattled orks.

‘This is Domoska,’ she whispered into her hand-vox. ‘Contact ahead. Most likely the second group that passed us an hour ago.’

‘Acknowledged, Scout Team Three. Proceed as instructed, with all due caution.’

‘Yes, captain.’ Domoska clicked her vox off. ‘Ready, Andrej?’

Andrej nodded, crouched next to her once again. ‘I have three det-packs left, okay? Three more tanks must die. Then I get that caffeine the captain promised.’

The holographic table told its tale with reassuring accuracy. Sarren could not look away, despite how staring at the flickering light-images stung the eyes after a while.

The wave was breaking.

His bulwark units were digging in and holding their ground. Already, the pincer platoons were moving into position behind the first horde of invaders, ready to drive them forward and crush them between the hammer and anvil.

Sarren smiled. It had been a fine day.

Jurisian had not moved from his position in almost twenty-four hours.

He had said he would need over a week, and closer to two. He no longer believed this. This would take weeks, months... Perhaps even years.

The codes that kept the impenetrable bunker doors sealed were beautiful in their artistry – clearly the work of many masters of the Mechanicus. Jurisian feared no living being, and had slain in the name of the Emperor for twenty-three decades. This was the first time he had loathed his duty.

‘I need more time, Grimaldus,’ he had spoken into the vox several hours before.

‘You ask for the one thing I cannot give,’ the Reclusiarch had answered.

‘This might take me months. Perhaps years. As the code evolves, it breeds sub-ciphers that – in turn – require dedicated cracking. It breeds like an ecology, always changing, reacting to my intrusions by evolving into more complex systems.’

The pause had been laden with bitten-back anger. ‘I want that cannon, Jurisian. *Bring it to me.*’

‘As you will, Reclusiarch.’

Gone was the thrill of hoping to look upon *Oberon*, and being the soul to reawaken the great Ordinatus Armageddon. In its place was cold efficiency and undeniable disgust. This sealing code was one of the most complex creations humanity had pieced together from its various spheres of knowledge. Destroying it afflicted him with a pain akin to that which an artist would feel in destroying a priceless painting.

Runes spilled across his retinal display in green lettering. He solved six of the scrolling codes in the space of a single breath. The final five involved additional calculations based on the parameters established by the previous ones.

The code evolved. It reacted to his interference like a living thing, its ancient spirit fighting against his manipulations. So, so beautiful, Jurisian thought as he worked. Damn Grimaldus for asking this of him.

His servitors stood behind him, slack-jawed, dull-eyed and slowly starving to death.

Jurisian paid no heed.

He had a masterpiece to slay.



CHAPTER XI

The First Day

The shaking no longer bothered Asavan Tortellius.

His presence was an honour, and one he thanked the Mechanicus for in his daily prayers. In his eleven years of service, he'd quickly grown used to the shaking, the lurching tread, and even the rattling of weapons fire against the walls of his monastery. What Tortellius had never grown used to was the Shield.

In many ways, the Shield replaced the sky. He had been born on Jirrian – an unremarkable world in an unremarkable subsector a middling distance from Holy Terra. If Jirrian could be said to possess any attribute of note, it was its weather in the equatorial regions. The sky over the city of Handra-Lai was the deep, rich blue that poets spent so much time trying to capture in words, and imagists spent so much time trying to capture in pictis. In a world of tedious tradition and the greyness of infinite societal equality – where everyone was just as poverty-stricken as everyone else – the skies above the slum hive Handra-Lai were the one aspect of his early life worth remembering.

The Shield had stolen that from him. He still had the memories, of course. But every year, they became duller, as if the Shield's overreaching presence caused all else to fade.

It wasn't that the Shield had any particular colour, because it didn't. And it wasn't that the Shield was brazenly oppressive, because it wasn't.

Most of the time it wasn't even visible, and at the best of times, it wasn't even *there*.

And yet, in a way, it always was. It was oppressive. It was always there. It did discolour the sky. Its existence was betrayed by the abrasive electrical fizz in the air. Static would crackle between fingertips and metal surfaces. After a while, one's teeth began to ache. It was most irritating.

And to think that it could be raised any moment. Looking up at alien skies held no pleasure at all, and it was all because of the Shield. It severed any real enjoyment of the heavens. Even when deactivated, there was forever the risk of it slamming up into life without notice, cutting Tortellius off from the outside world once more.

In moments of battle, the Shield was more beautiful than threatening. It would ripple like breaking waves, the colours of oil on water cascading across the sky. The smell of the Shield as it suffered attack was a heady clash of ozone and copper that, if one stood outside on the monastery's battlements, would actually begin to make you feel light-headed after a time. Tortellius made a point of standing outside when the Shield was under siege, not for the stimulant effects of the Shield's electrical charge, but because it was a dark pleasure to see his prison's limits, rather than fear the invisible oppression.

Sometimes he would wonder if he was watching it in the secret hope it would fail. If the Shield came down... then what? Did he truly desire such a thing? No. No, of course not.

Still. He did wonder.

As he leaned on the battlements of the monastery, watching the city below, Tortellius reflected on the loathsomeness of this particular breed of xenos. The greenskins were filthy and bestial, their intelligence generously described as rudimentary, and more accurately as feral.

The mighty *Stormherald*, instrument of the God-Emperor's divine will, had come to a halt. Tortellius noticed only because of the relative silence in the wake of its crashing tread.

His monastery, only part of the cathedral of spires and battlements adorning the Titan's hunched shoulders, remained silent. Fifty metres below, he could hear the rattling of the leg turrets killing the aliens in the street. But the domed weapon mounts – each one bristling with granite gargoyles and stone representations of the angelic primarchs, those blessed slain sons of the God-Emperor – merely moved in their set alignments, their cannons ready.

Tortellius scratched his thinning hair (a curse he blamed entirely on the harsh electro-static charge of the Shield), and summoned his servo-skull. It hovered along the battlements towards him, its miniature suspension technology purring as it stayed aloft. The skull itself was human, sanded smooth and modified after it was removed from a corpse, now showing augmetic pict-takers and a voice-activated data-slate for recording sermons.

'Hello, Tharvon,' said Tortellius. The skull had once belonged to Tharvon Ushan, his favoured servant. How noble a fate, to serve the Ecclesiarchy even in death. How blessed Tharvon's spirit must be, in the eternal light of the Golden Throne.

The skull probe said nothing. Its gravity suspensors hummed as it bobbed in the air.

'Dictation,' said Tortellius. The skull emitted an acknowledgement chime as its data-slate – no larger than a human palm and built into its augmented forehead – blinked active.

What little breeze penetrated the Shield wasn't enough to cool his sweating face. The Armageddon sun might have been weak compared to the star that burned down on equatorial Jirrian, but it was stifling enough. Tortellius mopped his dark-skinned brow with a scented kerchief.

‘On this, the first day of the Siege of Hive Helsreach, the invaders have spilled into the city in unprecedented numbers. No, hold. Command word: Pause. Delete “unprecedented”. Replace with “overwhelming”. Command word: Unpause. The skies are clogged with pollution from the world’s industry, flak hanging in the clouds from the hive’s defences, and smoke from the outlying fires that ravage the outermost districts where the invaders have already conquered ground.

‘It is my belief that few chronicles of this immense war will survive to be interred in Imperial archives. I make this record now not out of a desire to spread my name in pomposity, but to accurately detail the holy bloodshed of this vast crusade.’

Here he hesitated. Tortellius struggled for the words, and as he chewed his lower lip, musing over dramatic description, the monastery shook beneath his feet again.

The Titan was moving.

Stormherald strode through the city, its passage unopposed.

Three enemy engines – the scrap-walkers that the aliens called gargants – had already died to its guns. In her prison of fluid, Zarha felt the stump at the end of her arm aching with a dull heat.

Once, she thought with an ugly smile, I had hands.

She aimed her next thought with care. *The annihilator is overheating.*

‘The annihilator is overheating.’

‘Understood, my princeps,’ replied Carsomir. He twitched in his restraint throne, accessing the status of the weapon through his hardwired link to the Titan’s heart-systems. ‘Confirmed. Chambers three through sixteen show rising temperature pressure.’

Zarha turned in her milky coffin, feeling instinctively what every other soul on board needed to perceive through calculations on monitors or slower hardwire links. She watched Carsomir twitch again, feeling the orders pulsing from his mind through willpower alone, reaching into the

cognitive receptors at the Titan's core. 'Coolant flush, moderate intensity,' he said. 'Commencing in eight seconds.'

Zarha moved her right arm in the ooze, feeling pain in fingers that no longer existed.

'Flushing coolant,' said a nearby adept, hunched over his wall-mounted control panel.

The relief was immediate and blissful, like a sunburned hand plunged into a bucket of ice. She cancelled the vision feed from her photoreceptors, immersing herself in blackness as relief washed through her arm.

Thank you, Valian.

'Thank you, Valian.'

Her vision flickered back into existence as she reactivated her optical implants. It was the work of a moment to readjust her perceptions, filtering out the immediacy of her surroundings. She took a breath, and stared out across the city with a god's eyes.

The enemy, ant-like and amusing, swarmed in the street around her ankles. Zarha lifted her foot, feeling both the rush of air on her metallic skin and the swirling of fluid around her footless limb. The aliens fled from her crushing tread. A tank died, pounded into scrap.

Incidental fire from *Stormherald's* leg battlements spilled into the road, cutting the orks down in droves.

'My princeps,' Moderati Secundus Lonn was twitching in his throne as he spoke, his muscles spasming in response to the flood of pulses from his connection to the Titan.

Speak, Lonn.

'Speak, Lonn.'

'We are venturing ahead of our skitarii support.'

Zarha was not blind to this. She hunched her shoulders, wasted muscles tensed and trembling, striding forward through the street.

I know. I sense... something.

‘I know. I sense something.’

The hab-towers on either side of the marching Titan were abandoned – this sector was one of the few lucky enough to be within easy range of the city’s scarce subterranean communal bunker complexes.

Inform Colonel Sarren I am pressing ahead with phase two.

‘Inform Colonel Sarren I am pressing ahead with phase two.’

‘Yes, my princeps.’

This sector, Omega-south-nineteen, had been one of the first to fall when the walls came down the day before. The aliens had been crawling through the area for many hours, but significant scrap-Titan strength was – as yet – unseen. It represented the perfect opportunity to slaughter legions of the enemy while their gargant groups were engaged elsewhere.

A feeling grew in the back of her head – something invasive and sharp, blooming through the webbing of veins in her brain. It was something she had not heard in many, many decades.

Someone was weeping.

Zarha felt her face locked in a rictus as the feeling blossomed and grew fangs. The sharpness was jagged now, an acidic pulse through her skull.

‘My princeps?’

She didn’t hear at first.

‘My princeps?’

Yes, Valian.

‘Yes, Valian.’

‘We’re receiving word from *Draconian*. He’s dying, my princeps.’

I know... I feel him...

A moment later, Zarha felt the full shock grasp at her senses. The mortis-cry slashed through her cognitive link like a hurricane, shrieking at a soundless pitch of pain. *Draconian* was down. The princeps aboard her, Jacen Veragon, was screaming as the aliens scuttled over his corpse, pulling at his armoured metal skin as he lay prone.

How had he fallen?

And there it was. In the screaming cry was the memory she sought. The lurching of vision as the Reaver-class engine was dragged to its knees. The sense of infuriating immobility. He was a god... How could this happen... Why would his limbs no longer function...

Everywhere around was rubble and smoke. It was impossible to see clearly.

The scream was fading now. *Draconian's* reactor-heart, a boiling cauldron of plasmic fusion, was growing cold and still.

'We've lost contact,' said Valian, a second after Zarha sensed it herself. She was weeping, though the saltwater secreted from her tear ducts was immediately dissolved in the fluid entombing her.

Lonn had his eyes closed, accessing an internal hololithic display within the cognitive link. '*Draconian* was in Omega-west-five.' His dark eyes flicked open. 'Reports show the site is the same as here: evacuated habitation towers, minimal engine resistance.'

The adept manning the scanning console, his mouth replaced by a scarab-like vocaliser, blurted a screed of machine code across the cockpit.

'Confirmed,' Carsomir said. 'We're getting an auspex return to the south. Significant heat signature. Almost definitely an enemy engine.'

Zarha heard almost none of this. Images of *Draconian's* death played out behind her false eyes like scenes from a play, coloured by the stinking taint of black emotion beneath. She sobbed once, her heart aching like it would burst. Hearing only that an enemy was nearby, she walked in the fluid, her limbs moving.

The Titan shook as it took another step.

'My princeps?' both moderati said at once.

I will have vengeance. Even in her own mind, she could barely hear herself in the words. A mechanical overtone twinned with her thoughts – and it was protective in its overwhelming rage. *I will have vengeance.*

‘We will have vengeance.’

Tower blocks passed by its shoulders as the Titan strode on.

‘My princeps,’ began Carsomir, ‘I recommend we hold here and wait for the skitarii to scout ahead.’

No. I will avenge Jacen.

‘No,’ the vox-voice was harsh. **‘We will avenge Draconian.’**

Blind to the disparity between her thoughts and the emerging voice, Zarha pushed onwards. Voices assailed her, but these she cast aside with a brush of willpower. Never before had she felt it so easy to disregard the chattering, needy voices of her lesser kin. Valian’s voice, coming from the cockpit chamber rather than the cognitive link, was another matter.

‘My princeps, we are receiving requests for Communion.’

There will be no Communion. I hunt. Communion with the Legio can come tonight.

‘There will be no Communion. We hunt. Communion with the Legio can come tonight.’

With effort, Valian turned around in his restraint throne. The cables snaking from his skull’s implant sockets turned with him, like a beast’s many tails.

‘My princeps, Princeps Veragon is dead and the Legio demands Communion.’ In his voice was the edge of concern, but never panic, nor fear. The rest of the battle group desired the momentary sharing of focus and purpose – the unity of princeps and the souls of their engines – that was tradition in the aftermath of loss.

The Legio will wait. I hunger.

‘The Legio will wait. We hunger.’

Forwards. Ready main weapons. I smell the xenos from here.

Her voice emerged as a crackle of static, but *Stormherald* marched on.

While Carsomir was not a man prone to extremes of emotion, something cold and uncomfortable crawled through his thoughts as he turned back to

watch the cityscape through the Titan's huge eye lenses.

He may not have been as connected to *Stormherald's* burning heart as the princeps was, but his own bonds with the god-walker were not devoid of intimate familiarity. Through his weaker tie to the engine's semi-sentient core, he felt a depth of fury that was almost addictive in its all-encompassing purity. The passion transferred through his empathic link into grim irritability, and he had to resist the urge to curse the inefficiency of those around him as he guided the Titan onwards. Knowing the cause of his distracted irritation was no balm for it.

The Titan's right foot came down on a street corner, pulverising a cargo conveyer truck into flat scrap. *Stormherald* turned with a majestic lack of speed, and hull-mounted pict-takers panned to show a wider avenue, and the afternoon sunlight glinting from *Stormherald's* burnished iron skin. Valian was immersed, just for a moment, in the wash of exterior imagery fed through the mind-link. Hundreds of pict-takers, each one showing pristine silvery skin, or dense armour – cracked and pitted with its legacy of small arms fire.

Ahead, down the wide avenue, was the enemy engine that blinked like a red-smeared migraine on the cockpit's auspex scanners. Valian shuddered at the sight of it, breathing deeply of the scent-thick cockpit air. As always, living within *Stormherald's* head smelled of oiled gears, ritual incense and the burning reek of crew members sweating and bleeding, their bodies exerted despite remaining motionless in their thrones.

The enemy scrap-Titan was grotesque – unappealing on a level that went far beyond mere design distaste to Valian. Its junk metal appearance showed no reverence, no respect, no care in its construction. *Stormherald's* iron bones were thrice-blessed by tech-ministers even before they were brought together as the skeleton of a god-machine. Each of the million cogs, gears, rivets and plates of armour used in the Imperator's birth was honed to perfection and blessed before becoming part of the Titan's body.

This avatar of perfection incarnate faced its hideous opposite, and every crewmember piloting the Titan felt disgust flow through them. The enemy engine was fat, big-bellied to hold troops and ammunition loaders for its random array of torso cannons. Its head, in opposition to the Gothic-style machine skull worn by *Stormherald*, was stunted and flat, with cracked eye lenses and a heavy-jawed underbite. It stared pugnaciously down the street at the larger Imperial walker, its cannons covering its body like spines, and roared a challenge of its own.

It sounded exactly like what it was: an alien warleader within the cockpit head blaring into a vox-caster. *Stormherald* laughed in response, its warning sirens slamming back with a wall of sound.

In her tank of fluids, Zarha raised her arms, her handleless stumps facing forward.

In the street, with an immense grinding of gear joints, *Stormherald* mirrored the motion.

It never fired. The trap, as crude and simple as it was, exploded around the great Titan.

‘Your request for reinforcement is acknowledged,’ the voice crackled.

Ryken lowered the vox-mic, readying his lasrifle again.

‘They’re coming,’ he hissed to Vantine. The other trooper was with him, crouched with her back to the wall, sharing his slice of cover. Her expression was unreadable, masked by her goggles and rebreather, but she gave the major a nod.

‘You said that half an hour ago.’

‘I know.’ Ryken slammed a fresh cell into his lasgun. ‘But they’re coming.’

The wall behind them buckled as it took the brunt of another shell. Debris from the ceiling clattered down onto their helmets.

Ryken’s platoon were up to their necks in trouble, and no amount of hard fighting alone was going to get them out of it. Most of his men, the ones

that weren't bleeding to death on the ground, were at the windows on the various floors of this hab-block, pouring their fire into the street outside. The rooms were still full of furniture, left by the families who were taking shelter in local underground bunkers. It was, as last stands went, a pretty terrible place to be holed up in, but their barricade had fallen half an hour before, and it was every squad for themselves until they could regroup at the next junction.

The problem was that Ryken's platoon was cut off much too fast when the last bastion fell. As rearguard covering the other squads' escapes, they'd been encircled and forced to find whatever cover they could.

'They're climbing the damn walls!' someone cried out. Ryken scrambled to the nearest window, keeping low and bracing to fire into the street again. As he rose to fire, he found himself face to face with a green-skinned creature hauling its way through the second-storey window. It reeked of mould and gunsmoke, and its piggish eyes were glazed by whatever alien emotions it felt in the heat of battle.

Ryken bayoneted the beast in the throat, firing three shots even as he stabbed. The alien was hurled back from the window to fall on its companions below.

They were indeed climbing the damn walls.

Ryken ordered three of his men to cover the window, and raced for the stairs leading down to the ground floor. The snapping *crack* of lasrifles firing was even louder from downstairs, where the bulk of the platoon was entrenched.

'Reinforcements are en route!' he called down the stairs.

'You said that half an hour ago!' Sergeant Kalas called back up.

Ryken caught a glimpse of the sergeant, his bolt pistol clutched in a two-handed grip, kneeling at a window and firing booming shots out into the road. He retreated back to a nearby window himself, adding his fire to the onslaught.

In the street, a riot of alien flesh was taking place. Only the most foolish or bloodthirsty orks were seeking to race across the road and scale the building's walls. Most of the xenos – and Ryken thanked the Emperor for small mercies – possessed enough intelligence to remain in cover themselves, behind their own junk-transports or shooting from windows of adjacent habitation blocks. They laughed and jeered as the barrage continued, and great howls of porcine laughter would rise up when another pack of baying aliens would charge across the street only to be cut down by the Steel Legion's defences. Raucous enjoyment of their own kin's death was a barbarous madness Ryken had long come to associate with this accursed xenos breed.

There was no understanding such creatures.

'We can't hold here,' Vantine crouched under cover again, whispering a rapid litany of devotion as she reloaded her rifle. 'You hear those engines? More are coming, major.'

'We're not breaking out anytime soon,' he spoke the words as a bitter curse, setting his rebreather straight. 'So we *will* hold.'

'Or we die.'

'That's not an option, and I'll shoot you the next time you give voice to it.'

She smiled behind her own gas mask, but Ryken saw none of it. He had risen to his feet and was leaning against the wall, his lasgun braced against his chest. He kept close to the wall, risking a look out of the window. What he saw made him curse more colourfully than Vantine had ever heard before.

'So,' she rose close to him, taking position on the other side of the window, 'not good news, then?'

'Tanks. The bastards are rolling armour up the road.'

Vantine chanced a look herself. Three tanks, Imperial Leman Russ chassis looted and 'improved' with crooked armour panels bolted on and

painted in mismatched hues. The jagged fronts of the three tanks showed alien glyphs of allegiance that meant nothing to human eyes.

‘We’re dead,’ she shook her head. ‘And there’s no need to shoot me. They’ll shell this block to rubble and do it for you.’

Ryken ignored her. ‘Nikov,’ he keyed his vox-bead live. ‘Nikov, how’s the launcher coming?’

Nikov was on the hab-block’s top floor, where he’d retreated with his missile launcher ten minutes before. The weapon had taken a beating when the barricade had fallen earlier.

‘It’s still jammed,’ Nikov’s reply came over the vox in a crackling hiss. After a pause of several moments, he added, ‘Did I hear you shouting about reinforcements again?’

‘They’re coming! Throne, why is everyone whining about that?’

‘I think it’s because we’d rather not die, sir.’

The west wall chose that moment to explode. Debris burst into the room, filling it with stone dust. Through his goggles, Ryken stared at a hole the size of three grown men in the hab-block’s wall. Most of the soldiers nearby picked themselves up off the floor. Two stayed where they were, mangled and unmoving.

‘Get that launcher working,’ Ryken said in the moment of eerie calm. Vantine scrambled to her feet and ran from the gaping hole in the wall.

Outside offered alien laughter, the grinding of tank treads and a distant thrum of racing engines.

‘More?’ Vantine called out.

‘That’s not the enemy,’ Ryken said. ‘Those aren’t tank engines.’

And they weren’t. His vox-bead screeched a distorted chatter of mixed channels, but one voice broke through. ‘Your request for reinforcement,’ it said, much too deep to be human, ‘is acknowledged.’

The room darkened as the gunship rattled past on whining turbines. It swooped low, strafing the street, opening up with its weapons. From its

cruising angle, it clearly didn't intend to stay long, but the pilot was inflicting all the punishment he could while the Thunderhawk remained.

Heavy bolters mounted on its wings and cheeks spat a torrent of lethal shells into the visible groups of enemy warriors. Inhuman blood misted the air as packs of the creatures burst under the explosive ammunition. Snarling, the diminishing groups of survivors returned fire – their stubbers chattering, the solid shells raining off the black gunship's hull like harmless hail.

The tanks were another matter. The first shell crashed into the gunship's side with a storm's force, and Ryken flinched back from the detonation. It spun the gunship on its axis, sending burning wind breathing from its boosters as it turned. In reaction to the attack, the avian shape gained altitude in a sudden thrust, banked over the first of the tanks, and at last dropped its cargo.

Dark figures clanged onto the surface of the tanks, as black as beetles crawling on the metal skin.

The first to fall – a figure on the roof of the lead tank – wore a silver-faced helm and wielded a mace with a sparking power field around its eagle-winged head. The weapon descended in a slice to shatter the vehicle's turret. It broke clean off and fell into the horde of aliens that mobbed the tanks from below.

'Good morning, Reclusiarch,' Ryken's voice was breathless with relief.

The knight didn't answer at first. He and his standard bearer were already engaged by the greenskins swarming up over the useless tank's hull, clambering higher in a desperate need to shed the blood of the black knights.

Artarion's bolter emitted its stuttering crash, blowing the aliens back down to the street. With the brilliance of a sun-flare, Grimaldus's plasma pistol disintegrated two of the climbing beasts, letting their burning skeletal remains tumble in pieces back into the horde.

The second tank was dead in its tracks, smoke pouring from vents and cracks in its armour. The Templars had dropped grenades into the interior, and Ryken saw two knights leaping clear, ignoring the slain vehicle as they waded into the aliens massing on the street.

‘Forgive the delay, major.’ The Reclusiarch wasn’t even out of breath. ‘We were required at the barricade breaches in south section ninety-two.’

‘Better late than never,’ Ryken replied. ‘The last word from central command suggested that Sarren’s plan in this sector was working better than almost all hololithic estimations. Are we getting redeployed for a counter-attack?’

On top of the tank, Grimaldus swung his mace in a vicious arc, pummelling an ork into ruined biological matter.

‘You are still breathing, major. Let that be enough for now.’

Dawn has brought nothing more than a continuation of the night’s bloodshed.

The Helsreach Crusade begins its first bloody day. Across the city, millions of us now fight for our lives.

The noise is like no other sound I have ever heard. In two centuries of life, I have waged war at the heels of god-machines whose weapons were louder than the death-cries of stars. I have stood against armies of thousands, while every soul that stood against us screamed their hatred. I have seen a ship the size of a hive tower crash into the open ocean on a far distant world. The plume of water it threw into the sky and the tidal wave that followed were like some divine judgement come to flood the land and erase all humanity beneath its salt-rich depths.

Yet nothing has matched the sound of Helsreach’s defiance.

In every street, humans and aliens clash, with their weapons and voices merging into a gestalt wave of senseless noise. On every rooftop, turrets and multi-barrelled defence cannons bark into the sky, their loaders never

ceasing, their rate of fire never slowing. The machine-roars of Titans duelling can be heard from entire districts away.

Never before have I heard an entire city fighting a war.

As we fight to clear the streets of Major Ryken's besiegers – and as the Legionnaires themselves leave their havens and join us in the slaughter – I keep an edge of focus for the general vox-channels.

Ryken was not wrong. While we are locked in our planned fighting withdrawal across the entire hive, precious few sectors are in unplanned retreat.

The wreck-Titans are in the city now. Coldly delivered kill ratios from Invigilata commanders are a recent addition to the chaos of communication traffic, but they are a welcome one. Helsreach stands defiant as the sun rides the sky into noon.

My brothers remain scattered across the city, reinforcing the weakest parts of the Imperial chain, supporting the defences where the orkish tide breaks into the city with overwhelming force. I regret that we did not have the chance to gather together one last time. Such a lost opportunity is another of the failings I must atone for.

The reports of their engagements reach me hourly. As yet, no casualties blacken our record. I cannot help but wonder who the first to fall will be, and how long the hundred of us will last as the hours become days, and the days become weeks.

This city will die. All that remains to be learned is just how long we can defy fate. And above all, I want the weapon buried beneath the wasteland's sands.

I am drawing breath to recall our gunship when the vox explodes with panic. It is difficult to make any sense from the maelstrom of noise. Key words manage to break through the mess: Titan. Invigilata. *Stormherald*.

And then, a voice so much stronger than all others, speaking a single word. She sounds in pain as she says it.

‘Grimaldus.’



CHAPTER XII

In a Primarch's Shadow

The gunship bursts across the sky, rattling around us in its ferocious race southwards. It is all too easy to imagine the thick Armageddon clouds left in turmoil in our wake.

Wind roars into the crew compartment through the open bulkhead door. As is my right, I am first at the portal, gripping the edge of the airlock with one hand as the wind claws at my tabard and parchment scrolls. Beneath us, the city slides by – towers aiming up, streets laid flat. The former are aflame. The latter are flooded by ash and the enemy.

Already, many of the city's outermost sectors are burning. Helsreach is what it is: an industrial city devoted to the production of fuel. There is much that will burn, here.

The flames choke the sky as the ring of fire swallowing the hive's edges creeps ever inwards. Reports of refugees spilling into the city's core have increased tenfold. Housing them is no longer even the greatest problem; the trouble in the avenues where the civilians flock is that Sarren's redeployment of his armour divisions suffers crippling congestion.

I do not judge him for this. His mastery of the city after arriving in the final weeks – only barely before we did – has been as efficient as could be expected from a human mind under such duress. I recall the initial

briefings, when he was stifled by large sections of the civilian populace refusing to abandon their homes even in the face of invasion. In truth, it is not as if the city was built with an abundance of bunkers to house refugees anyway. With reluctance, he had allowed them to remain where they were, knowing the problem was – in part – a self-correcting one. As districts fell to the invaders, the civilian death toll would be catastrophic.

‘Well,’ he had said one night to the gathered commanders, ‘it will mean fewer refugees in the siege itself.’

I had admired him greatly in that moment. His merciless clarity was most commendable.

With a lurch, the Thunderhawk begins its descent. I brace myself, whispering words of reverence to the machine-spirit within the propulsion engines now attached to my armour. The jump pack is bulky and ancient, the metal pitted and scarred and in dire need of repainting, but its link to my armour is without flaw. I blink-clink the activation rune, and the hum of the backpack’s internal systems joins the growl of my active armour.

I see *Stormherald*.

Over my shoulder, Artarion sees the same. ‘Blood of Dorn,’ he says, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

The entire scene is tainted by the grey dust clouds in the air from fallen buildings. In this cloud of grey, half buried in the debris of the exploded buildings, the Titan kneels in the street.

Sixty metres of walking lethality – an unstoppable weapons platform with the ornate cathedral adorning its shoulders – *kneels in the street*, defeated. Around it is the devastation of several fallen habitation towers. The invaders, curse their soulless lives, had set the surrounding hab-blocks to detonate and collapse on the Titan.

‘They have brought an Emperor-class Titan to its knees,’ Artarion says. ‘I never thought I would live to see such a thing.’

Hundreds of them swarm the streets now, climbing onto the defeated god-machine's back with grappling hooks and boosting up there on burning thruster packs. They crawl across its dust-coated armour like insectile vermin.

'Grimaldus,' the Titan hails me, and suddenly it is so obvious why the voice is pained. Not from agony. From shame. She has advanced ahead of her skitarii phalanxes, and is undefended against this massed infantry assault.

'I am here, Zarha.'

'I feel them, like a million spiders across my skin. I... cannot stand. I cannot rise.'

'Make ready,' I vox to my brothers. Then, to the humbled princeps, 'We are about to engage the enemy.'

'I feel them,' she says again, and I cannot tell from her machine-voice if she is bitter, delirious, or both. **'They are killing my people. My prayer-speakers... My faithful adepts...'**

I am not blind to the meaning in her words. To the Machine Cult, each death was more than a mortal tragedy – it was the loss of knowledge and perspective that might never be recovered.

'They are inside me, Grimaldus. Like parasites. Violating the Cathedral of Sanctuary. Climbing inside my bones. Drilling towards my heart.'

I do not reply to her as I watch the crumbled cityscape below. Instead, I tense myself for a moment's sensory dislocation, and hurl myself out into the sky.

Grimaldus was first to leap from the circling Thunderhawk.

Artarion, ever his shadow and still bearing his banner, was only seconds behind. Priamus, his blade in hand, came next. Nerovar and Cador followed, the first of them leaping into a dive, the latter merely stepping out in an uncomplicated plummet. Last of all was Bastilan, the sergeant's

insignia on his helm catching the dull evening light. He voxed to the pilot, wishing him well, and drew his weapons before falling into air.

Altitude gauges on retinal displays showed fast-falling numbers, the digital readouts a blur as the knights dropped from the sky. Beneath them, the kneeling god-machine presented a huge target. The multi-levelled cathedral on its shoulders was like a city in miniature – a city of spires – bristling with weapons batteries and crawling with alien vermin.

The knights saw the aliens as they descended: the beasts clambering up on tethered lanyards, or flying up on primitive rocket packs, laying siege to the stricken Titan. *Stormherald* itself was a pathetic statue depicting its own failure. It was driven to one knee, buried to the waist in the debris of six or seven fallen hab-block towers. The avenue was in ruin around it, where the detonated buildings had collapsed and levelled the city flat. The Titan's arm-guns, as large as some habitation towers themselves, were grey-white with dust and resting on the mounds of broken brick, twisted steel supports, and rockcrete stone.

Grimaldus held off firing his boosters to slow his freefall.

'Come down in the courtyard in the centre of the cathedral,' he voxed to the others. Their acknowledgements came immediately. In turn, each of them engaged their jump packs, arresting their dives into more controlled descents.

Grimaldus was the last to fire his boosters, and the first to hit the ground.

His boots thudded onto the paved courtyard, smashing the precious mosaics into gravel beneath his feet. Immediately, he leaned to the side, compensating for the angle of the ground. *Stormherald's* defeated posture was tilting the entire cathedral forward almost thirty degrees.

The courtyard was modest, ringed by nine plain marble statues that each stood four metres tall. In each of the cardinal directions, a set of open doors led into the cathedral itself. The mosaic tiles on the floor depicted

the black and white bisected, cyborged skull of the Machine Cult of Mars. Grimaldus had come down onto the dark eye socket of the skull's human side, crushing the black tiles to powder underfoot.

Nothing moved nearby. The sounds of battle, of looting, of desecration – these all came from within the surrounding building.

Priamus landed with a skid, his armoured boots tearing at the mosaics and shearing them off in a wave of broken pebbles. His blade, chained to his wrist, crackled into life.

Nerovar, Cador and Bastilan were altogether more graceful in their landings. The sergeant came down in the shadow of one of the tilted statues. Its stern face eclipsed the setting sun.

‘These are the primarchs,’ he said to the others as they readied their weapons.

All heads turned towards Bastilan. He was right.

As representations of the primarchs went, they were plain to the point of almost being crude. The sons of the Emperor were usually depicted in grandeur and glory, rather than by sculptures so subtle and austere.

There was Sanguinius, Lord of the Blood Angels, prominently unwinged, with a childlike face lowered in repose. And there, Guilliman of the Ultramarines, his robed form so much slenderer than any other depiction of him that the knights had seen before. In one hand, he clutched an open tome. The other was raised to the sky, as if he were caught and forever frozen in a moment of great oratory.

Jaghatai Khan was bare-chested, bearing a curved blade in his hands and looking to the left, as if staring at the distant horizon. His hair was shaggy and long, whereas in so many masterpieces it was shaven but for a topknot. Next to him, Corax, the Prince of Ravens, wore a plain mask that was utterly featureless but for the eyes. It was as if he were unwilling to show his face in the company of his brothers, hiding his visage behind an actor's mask.

Ferrus Manus and Vulkan shared a plinth. The brothers were bareheaded, and the only two primarchs sculpted here in armour. Both wore vests of mail, the fine links of chain on Manus's breast a counterpoint to the larger scales adorning Vulkan's. They stood back to back, facing in opposite directions, both carved to bear hammers in each hand.

Leman Russ of the Wolves stood with legs apart, head cast back, facing the sky. Whereas the other sons of the Emperor wore robes or armour, Russ was clad in rags sculpted over his chiselled musculature. He was also the only primarch with tensed fists, as if he stared into the heavens, awaiting some grim arrival.

A robed figure, hooded yet visibly slender to the point of emaciation, clutched the hilt of a winged blade, its tip between the statue's bare feet. Here was the Lion, depicted as a warrior-monk, eyes closed in silent contemplation.

And, last of all, rising above Bastilan, was Rogal Dorn.

Dorn stood apart from his brothers, neither facing his kin, nor looking into the skies above. His regal visage was aimed at the ground to his left, as if the primarch stared at something vital only he could see. The robe he wore was plainer than those adorning his brothers' icons, though it showed a cross on its breast, sculpted with care. Although he had been the Golden Lord, the commander of the Imperial Fists, his personal heraldry had inspired that of his Templars sons who followed.

His hands were what drew the knights' eyes more than any other aspect in this gathering of demigods. One was held to his chest, the fingertips joined to the cross there, frozen in mid-stroke. The other was held out in the direction Dorn stared, palm up and kindly, as if offering aid to one who would rise from the floor.

It was quite the most humble and exquisite rendition of their gene-father Grimaldus had ever laid eyes on. He fought the sudden burning urge to fall to his knees in reverent prayer.

‘This is an omen,’ Bastilan continued. Grimaldus could barely believe only a handful of seconds had passed since the sergeant last spoke.

‘It is,’ the Reclusiarch replied. ‘We will purify this temple under the gaze of our forefather. Dorn watches us, brothers. Let us make him proud of the day he sired the first Templar.’

We move without hesitation, and without caution, through the cathedral.

The angled floor is an irritation that I’ve managed to blank from my mind by the time the third alien is dead. Room by room, we move in unison. The cathedral is divided into a series of chambers ringing the courtyard, each one with its own stained glass windows now shattered and gaping like missing teeth, each room reaching high up with a pointed ceiling ending in the spire above.

The slaughter is easy, almost mindless. Priamus is like a wolf on the leash, eager to run ahead on his own.

My patience is wearing thin with him.

Each chamber also shows its own unique desecration. Tech-adepts and Ecclesiarchy priests lie dead and butchered, their bodies in pieces across the mosaic floors. Unarmed as they were, they offered little resistance to the rampaging invaders. Bookshelves are overturned, ceramic ornaments shattered... I would never put feral destruction past this xenos-breed, but it almost seems as if the greenskins sought something specific in their rabid assault.

‘The articulation structures are sealed. My bones are defended by internal forces. My heart-core is cut off from the parasites.’

Ambush or not, it is disgusting that it took them even this long to achieve such basic necessities.

‘We are retaking the Cathedral of Sanctuary,’ I tell her. ‘Resistance is minimal, Zarha. But you must stand. They are still coming. Bring the cathedral out of range of boarders, or we will be overwhelmed.’

‘I cannot stand,’ she says.

What a sin it is, for such a majestic warrior to speak with such shameful defeat tainting her words. Were she one of my men, I would kill her for such dishonour. Slowly. By strangulation. Cowardice does not deserve the rush of a blade.

‘I have tried,’ she intones.

The emotion colouring her machine-voice brings my bile rising. For all I know, she could be weeping. My disgust is so powerful I must fight the need to vomit.

‘Try harder,’ I breathe into the vox, and sever the link.

We fight our way to the outer battlements at *Stormherald*’s front, where the incline allows for easy boarding. An ork’s fat hand slaps on the red metal of the battlement’s edge, and the brute hauls itself up. My pistol meets its face, the heat exchanger vanes hissing against its skin. It has a moment to bawl its hatred at me before I pull the trigger. What remains of the alien falls from its handholds, tumbling to the ground, burning briefly on its way down as a living torch of white-hot fire.

The battlements resemble a true siege in all respects. The last remaining tech-adepts and priests defend the cathedral against boarding aliens, though no more than a small cluster remains. Few humans, augmented or otherwise, are a match for one of these beasts.

Priamus slips the leash of discipline. His charge carries him ahead, his sword flaring with light each time its power field saws into alien flesh. My brothers lay into the enemy along the besieged wall with bolter and blade. The few servitor-manned spire turrets that had been spitting solid shots into the mass of orks fall silent, not willing to risk striking any of us.

‘You will do penance for this, Priamus.’

He doesn’t answer. ‘For the Emperor!’ he cries into the vox. ‘For Dorn!’

In the pockets of battle where none of us stand, the turrets open fire once again. At least their servitors are worth something, then. The orks turn

from butchering the few priests still standing. Their bestial faces are afire with brutish, eager emotion as they come for us.

One of them... Throne of the Emperor... One of them dwarfs its piggish brethren. Its armour makes it twice the size of us, looking like scrap metal and primitive, chugging power generators bolted onto an exoskeletal frame. Its hands are industrial claws that look as if they could peel a tank apart without effort. It even kills his own kin as it strides towards us on the inclined floor. Its claws swing, battering its lesser allies aside, hurling them against the cathedral wall or over the battlement's edge.

I raise my crozius in a two-handed grip.

‘That one is mine,’ I tell my brothers.

Dorn is watching this.

‘You asked to see me, sir?’

Tomaz didn't bother to straighten his crumpled work overalls as he stood at what could loosely be called attention. Around him, the command chamber was its usual bustling hive of activity. A junior staff officer bumped him as she passed.

Tomaz said nothing. He'd worked fifteen hours straight today, on a dock backed up with dozens and dozens of ships, with almost no room to unload. Fifteen hours of shouting, of broken vox-casters and no techs spare to fix them, of cargo being dumped wherever it could be dumped – which was inevitably the wrong place (and the most inconvenient one for someone else) – necessitating its removal minutes later when another worker's already fouled-up work was fouled-up even further.

Frankly, he didn't much care if he got shoved over onto the ground. Maybe he could curl up and get some damn sleep.

‘Sir,’ he prompted.

Sarren finally looked up from the hololithic table. The colonel had aged in the last week, Maghernus could see it clearly. He looked as tired and bone-achingly sick of it all as Tomaz felt.

‘What?’ Sarren asked, narrowing his bloodshot eyes. ‘Oh. Yes. Dockmaster.’ Sarren looked back down at the hololithic display. ‘I need your crews to speed up. Is that understood?’

Maghernus blinked. ‘I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t quite hear you.’

‘I need,’ Sarren didn’t look up, ‘your crews to speed up their work. The reports I’m getting from the docks show they are at a standstill. We are talking about significant portions of the north and east perimeters of the city, dockmaster. I need to move troops. I need to store materiel. I need you to do your job.’

Maghernus looked around the room in disbelief, unsure how to respond.

‘What would you have me do, colonel? What is there that I can possibly do?’

‘Your *job*, Maghernus.’

‘Have you even seen the docks recently, colonel?’

Sarren looked up again, laughing without even a shred of humour. ‘Do I look like I have seen anything except casualty reports recently?’

‘I can’t do anything about the docks,’ Maghernus shook his head, a sense of unreality settling over him. ‘I’m not a miracle worker.’

‘I appreciate you have an... intense... workload.’

‘That’s not the half of it. We’re dealing with a backlog of weeks, months even, and no room to handle anything.’

‘Nevertheless, I need more from you and your crews.’

‘Of course, sir. I’ll be back in a moment, I feel the sudden need to piss expensive white wine and turn everything I touch into gold.’

‘This is no laughing matter.’

‘And I’m not laughing, you pompous son of a bitch. “Work harder”? “Do more”? Are you insane? There’s nothing I can do!’

Nearby officers glanced his way. Sarren sighed and rubbed his closed eyes with the tips of his fingers.

‘I respect the difficulties of your position, dockmaster, but this is the first week of the siege. This is only going to get worse. We are all going to sleep much less, and we are all going to work much harder.

‘Furthermore, I understand that you are sweating blood in an underappreciated duty, but you are not the only one suffering. You, at least, are guaranteed to live longer than many of us. I have men and women in the streets, fighting and dying for your home, so that you may continue to complain at how I crack the whip over you. I have hundreds of thousands of citizens under arms, facing the greatest alien invasion force the world has ever seen.

‘Sir,’ Maghernus took a breath. ‘I will—’

‘You will shut up and let me finish, dockmaster. I have platoons of men and women lost behind the advancing enemy line, no doubt hacked to pieces by the axes of barbarous xenos monsters. I have armour divisions running out of fuel because of resupply difficulties in the embattled sectors. I have an Emperor-class Titan on its knees, because its commander was too angry to think clearly. I have a city with its edges on fire, and its population in rout with nowhere to run to. I have tens of thousands of soldiers dying to prevent the enemy from reaching the Hel’s Highway – people dying for a *road*, dockmaster – because once the beasts reach the city’s spine, we are all going to die a great deal faster.

‘Now, am I making myself perfectly clear when I tell you that while I have sympathy for your difficulties, I also expect you to work through them? We are, just to be sure, no longer speaking past one another? We are, for the record, now on the same page?’

Maghernus swallowed and nodded.

‘Good,’ Sarren smiled. ‘That’s good. What can you do for me, dockmaster?’

‘I’ll... speak to my crews, colonel.’

‘My thanks for understanding the situation we are in, Tomaz. You are dismissed. Now, someone raise a reliable vox-signal to the Reclusiarch. I need to know how close he is to getting that Titan walking.’

In the cognition chamber, Grimaldus stood before the crippled Zarha.

His armour’s calm, measured hum was marred by a mechanical ticking sound at random intervals. Something, some internal system linking the power pack to the suit of armour was malfunctioning. His skull helm with its silver faceplate was painted with alien blood. His armour’s left knee joint clicked as he moved, the servos inside damaged and in need of reverent maintenance by Chapter artificers. Where scrolls of written oaths had hung from his pauldrons, the armour was burned, the ceramite cracked.

But he was alive.

At his side, Artarion looked similarly battered. The others remained in the cathedral above, maintaining a vigil now the orks were punished and slain for their blasphemy.

‘Your Titan,’ Grimaldus uttered the words, ‘is purged. Now *stand*, princeps.’

Zarha floated in the milky waters, not hearing him, not even moving. She looked as if she had drowned.

‘*Stormherald* has taken her,’ Moderati Carsomir said, his voice low. ‘She was ancient, and had oppressed her will over the Titan’s core for many years.’

‘She still lives,’ the knight noted.

‘Only in the flesh, and not for much longer.’ Carsomir looked pained even explaining this. His eyes were bloodshot and rimmed by dark circles. ‘The machine-spirit of an Emperor is so much stronger than any soul you can imagine, Reclusiarch. These precious engines are born as lesser reflections of the Machine-God Himself. They carry His will and His strength.’

‘No machine-spirit is the equal of a living soul,’ said Grimaldus. ‘She was strong. I sensed it in her.’

‘You understand nothing of the metaphysics at work here! Who are you to lecture us in this way? We were linked to the Titan’s core at the end. You are nothing, an... an *outsider*.’

Grimaldus turned to the crewmembers in their control seats, his broken armour joints snarling.

‘I shed blood in the defence of your engine, as did my brothers. You would be torn from your thrones and buried in the rubble of your own failure, had I not saved your lives. The next time you call a Templar *nothing* is the moment I kill you where you sit, little man. You are nothing without your Titan, and your Titan lives because of me. Remember to whom you speak.’

The crew shared uncomfortable glances.

‘He meant no offence,’ one of the tech-priests mumbled through a facially-implanted vox-caster.

‘I do not care what he intended. I deal in realities. Now. Make this Titan walk.’

‘We... can’t.’

‘Do it anyway. *Stormherald* was supposed to move in synergy with the 199th Steel Legion Armoured Division over an hour ago, and they are in full retreat due to being unsupported. The delay is finished with. Get back in the fight.’

‘Without a princeps? How are we to do that?’ Carsomir shook his head. ‘She is gone from us, Reclusiarch. The shame of it all, the rage of defeat. We all felt the Titan rush into her. Her mind has joined the union of all previous princeps, amalgamated in the Titan’s core. Her soul is buried as surely as her body would be in a grave.’

‘She lives,’ the knight narrowed his eyes.

‘For now. But this is how princeps die.’

Grimaldus turned back to the amniotic coffin, and the unmoving woman within. ‘That is unacceptable.’

‘It is the truth.’

‘Then the truth,’ the Reclusiarch growled, ‘is unacceptable.’

She wept in the silence – the way one weeps when truly alone, when there is no shame to be found in being seen by others.

Around her was nothingness absolute. No sound. No movement. No colour. She floated in this nothingness, neither cold nor hot, with no reference of direction or sensation.

And she wept.

Upon opening her eyes moments before, a thrill of fear had sliced up her spine. She did not know who she was, where she was, or why she was here.

Her memories – the fractured, flashing images that were all that kept her mind from being completely hollow – were of a hundred worlds she could not recall seeing, and a hundred wars she could not remember fighting.

Worse, they were each tainted by an emotion she had never felt – something inhuman, abrasive, sinister... and partway between exultation and terror. She saw these moments of memory, and felt the unnerving presence of another being’s emotions instead of her own.

It was like drowning. Drowning in someone else’s dreams.

Who had she been before? Did it even matter? She slipped deeper. What remaining sense of self existed began to break away and diminish, sacrificed to buy a peaceful, silent death.

Then the voice came, and it ruined everything.

‘Zarha,’ it said.

With the word came a weak understanding, an awareness. She had memories of her own – at least, she had once possessed such things. It suddenly seemed wrong to no longer have access to her own recollections.

As she resurfaced slowly, the infiltrating memories returned. The wars. The emotions. The fire and the fury. Instinctively, she pulled away again,

preparing to return deeper within the nothingness. Anything to escape the memories belonging to another soul.

‘Zarha,’ the voice clawed after her. ‘You swore to me.’

Another layer of comprehension returned. Within the revelation were her own emotions, waiting for her to reclaim them. The overwhelming sensory storm of the other mind’s memories no longer frightened her. They angered her.

She would not be so easily shackled. No false-soul’s thoughts would conquer her like this.

‘You swore to me,’ the voice said, ‘that you would walk.’

She smiled in the nothingness, rising through it now like an ascending angel. *Stormherald*’s memories assailed her with renewed vigour, but she cast them aside like leaves in the wind.

You are right, Grimaldus, she told the voice. *I did swear I would walk.*

‘Stand,’ he demanded, stern and cold and glowering. ‘Zarha. Stand.’

I will.

The voice came without warning, emerging from the vox-speakers on the coffin.

‘I will.’

Crew members flinched back from the sound, their hands white-knuckled as they clutched the backrests of their thrones. Only Grimaldus remained where he was, face to face with the glass sarcophagus, his blood-smeared skull mask glaring into the milky depths.

The old woman’s body twitched once, and her head rose. She looked around slowly, her augmented gaze at last coming to rest on the knight before her.

Rubble scattered in an avalanche, and a dust cloud rose again as the wreckage of fallen buildings went tumbling aside. With a thunderous grinding of gears and the clanging-hammering of a multitude of tank-sized

pistons in its iron bones, *Stormherald* raised its immense bulk, metre by painful, machine-squealing metre.

The avenue shuddered as its bastion of a right foot pounded onto the road. The sound was loud enough that the nearby buildings still untouched by orkish demolition charges lost their windows in a blizzard of breaking glass.

As the crystal rain fell to the scarred streets below, the Emperor raised its weapons, standing – once more – defiant.

‘Shields up,’ the Crone of Invigilata demanded.

‘Void shields active, my princeps,’ responded Valian Carsomir.

‘Make ready the heart.’

‘Plasma reactor reports all systems at viable integrity, my princeps.’

‘Then we move.’

The chamber shuddered with a familiar rhythm as the god-machine took its first step. Then a second. Then a third. Throughout the metal giant’s bones, hundreds of crew members cheered.

‘We walk.’ The ancient woman turned in her tank, looking at the tall knight once more. **‘I heard you,’** she told him. **‘As I was dying, I heard you calling me.’**

Grimaldus removed his filthy helm. Although he didn’t look a day over thirty, his eyes told his true age. Like windows into his thoughts, they showed the weight of his wars.

‘There is a story of my father,’ he said to Zarha.

‘Your father?’

‘Rogal Dorn, the Emperor’s son.’

‘The primarch. I see.’

‘It is a tale of a once-strong brotherhood, broken by Horus the Betrayer. Rogal Dorn and Horus were close before the Great Heresy. None of the Emperor’s sons were bonded as truly in the years before the malignant darkness took hold of Horus and his kin.’

‘I am listening,’ she smiled, knowing how rare this moment was. To hear a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes speak of their gene-sire’s life outside of their Chapter’s secret rituals.

‘It has always been told among the Black Templars that when the two brothers crusaded together, they would compete for the greater glory. Horus was legendarily hungry for triumph, while my father was – it is told – a more reserved and quiet soul. Each time they made war together, they were said to have made an oath in blood. Clasp hands, they would each swear that they would stand until the final day dawned. “Until the end”, they would say.’

‘That is a touching legend.’

‘More than that, princeps. Tradition. It is our most binding oath, spoken only between brothers who know they will never see another war. When a Templar knows he will die, it is the promise he gives to his brothers that he will stand with honour until he can no longer stand at all.’

She said nothing, but she smiled.

‘Yes, I called you back to this war.’ He nodded, his gentle eyes fixed upon her bionic replacements. ‘Because you made a similar oath to me. Promises like that – they matter more than anything else in life. I could not let you die in shame.’

‘Until the end, then.’

‘Until the end, Zarha.’

PART TWO

Knightfall



CHAPTER XIII

The Thirty-Sixth Day

DARGRAVIAN.

The 5th day. Meritorious defence of the Torshav refuelling complex.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

FARUS.

The 7th day. Discovered in the Kurule Junction surrounded by no fewer than twelve of the slain enemy.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

THALIAR.

The 10th day. Lost in the petrochemical explosions at White Star Point.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

KORITH.

The 10th day. Lost in the petrochemical explosions at White Star Point.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

TORAVAN.

The 10th day. Lost in the petrochemical explosions at White Star Point.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

AMARDES.

The 11th day. Unable to survive 83 per cent body tissue immolation suffered at White Star Point. Granted the Emperor's Peace.

Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

HALRIK.

The 13th day. Eyewitness reports from Armageddon 101st Steel Legion relate intense personal courage and heroism in the face of overwhelming odds. Awarded posthumous Crusade Mark of Valiant Conduct for rallying Guard forces at the fall of Cargo Bridge Thirty.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

ANGRAD.

The 18th day. Single-handedly destroyed five enemy tanks at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse. Brought down by alien treachery and lost beneath enemy tank treads.

Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

VORENTHAR.

The 18th day. Fought at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

ERIAS.

The 18th day. Fought at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

MARKOSIAN.

The 18th day. Fought at the Breach of the Amalas Concourse. Notably slew an enemy warlord in single combat, atop the alien's command tank.

Awarded posthumous Crusade Mark of Unbroken Courage. Body was incinerated by the enemy in wrathful response.

Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

It was always going to happen.

That did not make the reality any easier to bear, or the defeat any less bitter. But preparations were in place. When it happened, the Imperials were ready.

It happened first on the eighteenth day, at the Amalas Concourse, Junction Omega-9b-34. That was its assigned identifier according to the Imperial hololith displays.

Colonel Sarren was watching through heavy, fatigue-dulled eyes as the flickering holo-images moved silently back from the location of their barricade. It was such a small thing – no more than a few marking runes blinking back a few centimetres, moving away from the point of the map marked *Amalas Concourse, Junction Omega-9b-34*.

Behind the flickering holo-runes was an illusory ramp, which in turn threaded into a much, much, much wider road. Sarren watched the runes falling back along this ramp, and tried to breathe in. It took four attempts, his breath catching in his throat on the first three.

‘This is Colonel Sarren,’ he spoke into his hand-vox. ‘All units in Omega Sector, Subsector Nine. All units, prepare to retreat. Cancel assigned fallback locations, repeat: cancel withdrawal to assigned fallback locations. When the order comes, you will retreat, retreat, retreat to contingency positions.’

He ignored the storm of demands for confirmation, letting his vox-officers respond on his behalf.

‘We did well,’ he said to himself. ‘We did damn well to keep the bastards away for this long.’ Eighteen days – over half a month of siege warfare. He had every reason to colour his bitterness with that fierce core of pride.

The minutes passed in unblinking slowness. An aide came to his side, and quietly asked for his attention.

‘Sir, your Baneblade stands ready.’

‘Thank you, sergeant.’

She saluted and moved away. Finally, Sarren reached for his vox-mic again.

‘All units in Omega Sector, Subsector Nine. Retreat, retreat, retreat. The enemy has reached Hel’s Highway.’

MALATHIR.

The 19th day. Missing in action since the successful enemy siege of the Yangara Installation.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

SITHREN.

The 20th day. Fell in personal combat with an enemy Dreadnought at the Danab Junction, Titan rearming site.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

THALHAIDEN.

The 21st day. Fell in personal combat with an enemy Dreadnought at the Danab Junction, Titan rearming site. Survival depended on extensive and immediate surgical augmentation. Granted the Emperor’s Peace.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

DARMERE.

The 22nd day. Body discovered with massacred elements of the 68th Steel Legion at the Mu-15 barricades.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

IKARION.

The 22nd day. Body discovered with massacred elements of the 68th Steel Legion at the Mu-19 barricades.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

DEMES.

The 30th day. Missing in action since the fall of the Prospering Haven habitation sector. Significant civilian casualties recorded.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

GORTHIS.

The 33rd day. Led a counter-attack after the defences at Bastion IV were overrun. Also lost in the engagement were two Warlord-class Titans of the Legio Invigilata.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

SULAGON.

The 33rd day. Missing in action since the failed defence of Bastion IV. Last sighting reported his honourable conduct in the face of overwhelming enemy numbers.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

NACLIDES.

The 33rd day. Orchestrated and inspired the last stand defence at Bastion IV, seeking to hold the militia fortress until reinforcements could arrive.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

KALEB.

The 33rd day. Part of the counter-attack at Bastion IV. Body suffered extreme mutilation and dismemberment at the hands of the enemy.

Gene-seed: **Ruined / Unrecovered.**

THORIAS.

The 33rd day. Pilot of the Thunderhawk *Avenged* – vehicle destroyed by gargant anti-air fire on routine patrol.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

AVANDAR.

The 33rd day. Co-pilot of the Thunderhawk *Avenged* – vehicle destroyed by gargant anti-air fire on routine patrol.

Gene-seed: **Unfound / Unrecovered.**

VANRICH.

The 35th day. Lost in an action to mine the road before an enemy armour division.

Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

Nerovar lowers his arm, his attention drifting from his narthecium bracer-gauntlet.

Cador lies on the cracked road, the old warrior's armour broken and split.

'Brother,' I tell Nero, 'now is not the time to grieve.'

'Yes, Reclusiarch,' he says, though I know he does not hear me. Not really. With mechanical dullness, his movements are leaden as he lowers his hand to Cador's chest.

Around us, the shattered highway is deserted but for the bodies of our latest hunt. The war here is a distant thing, and though the sound of battle in other sectors reaches our ears, this far behind enemy lines, all is quiet and still. The skies are calm and untroubled – unbroken by wrathful turrets.

The sharp *crack!* of the reductor doing its work splits the silence. First once, then again. The meaty, wet sound of flesh being pulled open follows.

Nero lifts his arm, the surgical gauntlet's armour-piercing flesh drills buzzing, spraying dark, rich Adeptus Astartes blood against his armour. In his hand, with great care, he holds the glistening purplish organs that had rested within Cador's chest and throat. They drip and quiver, as if still trying to feed their host with strength. Nero slides them into a cylinder of preserving fluids, which is in turn retracted into his gauntlet's protective housing.

I have seen him perform this ritual too many times in the past month.

'It is done,' he says, dead-voiced, rising to his feet.

He ignores me as I approach the corpse, occupying himself with entering information on his narthecium's screen.

CADOR.

The 36th day. Ambush along enemy-controlled portions of Hel's Highway.
Gene-seed: **Recovered.**

The thirty-sixth day.

Thirty-six days of gruelling siege. Thirty-six days of retreat, of falling back, of holding positions for as long as we are able until inevitably overwhelmed by the insane, impossible numbers arrayed against us.

The entire city smells of blood. The coppery, stinging scent of human life, and the sickening fungal reek of the foulness purged from orkish veins. Beneath the blood-scent is the stench of burning wood, melted metal, and blasted stone – a city's death in smells. At the last gathering of commanders in the shadow of Colonel Sarren's Baneblade, the *Grey Warrior*, it was estimated that the foe controlled forty-six per cent of the city. That was four nights ago.

Almost half of Helsreach, gone. Lost to smoke and flame in bitter, galling defeat.

I am told we lack the force to take anything back. Reinforcements are not coming from the other hives, and the majority of the Guard and militia that still fight are exhausted remnants of the regiments, forever falling back, time and again, road by road. Hold a junction for a few nights, then withdraw to the next position when it finally falls.

Truly, we are fated to die in the most uninspired crusade ever to blight the name of the Black Templars.

'Reclusiarch,' the vox calls me.

'Not now.' I kneel by Cador's defiled body, seeing the holes in his armour and flesh – some from alien gunfire, two from the ritual surgery of Nerovar's flesh-boring tools.

'Reclusiarch,' the voice comes again. The rune blinking at the edge of my retinal display signifies it as from the *Grey Warrior*. I suspect I am to

be begged, again, to fall back to Imperial lines and help in the defence of some meaningless roadway junction.

‘I am administering the rites of the fallen to a slain knight. Now is not the time, colonel.’

At first, the colonel had replied to such words with the worthless, polite insistence that he was sorry for my loss. Sarren no longer says such things. The tens of thousands of lives lost in the last four weeks have utterly numbed him to such personal sentiment. That, too, is almost admirable. I see the strength in the way he has changed.

‘Reclusiarch,’ Sarren’s voice betrays how ruined by exhaustion he is. Were I in the room with him, I know I would feel the weariness in his bones like an aura around where he stands. ‘When you return from your scouting run, your presence is required in the Forthright Five district.’

Forthright sector. The southernmost docks.

‘Why?’

‘We are receiving anomalous reports from the Valdez Oil Platforms. The coastal auspex readers are suffering from offshore storms, but there *are* no storms off the coast. We suspect something is happening at sea.’

‘We will be there in an hour,’ I tell him. ‘What anomalies are we speaking of?’

‘If I could give you specifics, Reclusiarch, I would. The auspex readers look to be suffering some kind of directed interference. We believe they’re being jammed.’

‘One hour, colonel.’ Then, ‘Mount up,’ I say to my brothers. It is not a short ride down the Hel’s Highway, especially when it crawls with the enemy. Scouting teams are more often mounted on motorcycles now – the risk of Thunderhawks being shot down in enemy territory is too great.

‘It is strange,’ Nero says, cradling Cadon’s helm in his hands, as if the old warrior merely slept. ‘I do not wish to leave him.’

‘That is not Cador.’ I rise from where I have been kneeling next to the body, anointing the tabard with sacred oils, before tearing it from the war-plate. In better times, the tabard would be enshrined on the *Eternal Crusader*. In this time, here and now, I rip it from my brother’s body and tie it around my bracer, carrying it with me as a token to honour him. ‘Cador is gone. You are leaving nothing behind.’

‘You are heartless, brother,’ Nero tells me. Standing here, in this annihilated city, with the bodies of so many dead aliens around us, I almost burst out laughing. ‘But even for you,’ Nero continues, ‘even for one who wears the Black, that is a cold thing to say.’

‘I loved him as one can love any warrior that fights by your side for two hundred years, boy. The bonds that form from decade upon decade of shared allegiance and united war are not to be ignored. I will miss Cador for the few days that remain to me, before this war kills me, as well. But no, I do not grieve. There is nothing to grieve over when a life has been led in service to the Throne.’

The Apothecary hangs his head. In shame? In thought?

‘I see,’ he says, apropos of nothing.

‘We will speak of this again, Nero. Now mount up, brothers. We ride south.’

Half of the city was a wasteland, one way or the other. Some of it burned, some of it was silent in death now that the xenos had moved on to other sectors, and some of it was simply abandoned. Habitation towers stood under Armageddon’s yellow sky, lifeless and deserted. Manufactories no longer churned out weapons of war, or breathed smoke into the heavens.

Packs of orks – the jackal-like stragglers who had fallen behind the main advance – looted through the empty sectors of the city. While there was little of calculated malice in the beasts’ minds, what few human civilian survivors remained were slain without mercy when they were found.

Five armoured bikes growled their way down Hel's Highway. Their sloped armour plating was as black as the war-plate worn by each rider. Their engines emitted healthy, throaty roars that told of a thirst for promethium fuel. The boltguns mounted on the motorcycles were linked to belt-feeding ammunition boxes contained within the vehicles' main bulks.

Priamus throttled back, falling into formation alongside Nerovar. Neither warrior looked at the other as they rode, weaving through a shattered convoy of motionless, burned-out tank hulls spread across the dark rockcrete of the highway.

'His death,' the swordsman began, his vox-voice crackling from the distortion of the engines. 'Does it trouble you?'

'I do not wish to speak of this, Priamus.'

Priamus banked around the charred skeleton of what had once been a Chimera trooper carrier. His sword, chained to his back, rattled against his armour with the bike's vibrations.

'He did not die well.'

'I said I have no desire to speak of this, brother. Leave me be.'

'I only say this because if I were as close to him as you were, it would have grieved me, also. He died badly. An ugly, ugly death.'

'He killed several before he fell.'

'He did,' the swordsman allowed, 'but his death-wound was in the back. That would shame me beyond measure.'

'Priamus,' Nerovar's voice was ice cold and heavy with both emotion and threat. 'Leave me alone.'

'You are impossible, Nero.' Priamus revved his engine and accelerated away. 'I try to sympathise with you. I try to connect, and you rebuke me. I will remember this, brother.'

Nerovar said nothing. He just watched the road.

The Jahannam Platform.

Six hundred and nineteen workers stationed on an offshore industrial base. Its skyline was a mess of cranes and storage silos. Beneath it, only the deep of the ocean and the richness of the crude oil that could be refined into promethium.

A new shadow entered the depths.

Like a black wave under the water's surface, it drifted closer to the support struts that held the gigantic platform above the water. Lesser shadows, fish-like and sharp, spilled ahead of the main darkness like rainfall falling from a storm cloud.

The platform shuddered at first, as if shivering in the chill winds that always howled this far from shore.

And then, with majestic slowness, it began to fall. A town-sized, multi-layered platform fell into the ocean, crashing down into the water. The ships around it began, one by one, to explode. Each one, once breached, sank alongside the Jahannam Platform.

Six hundred and nineteen workers, and one thousand and twenty-one crewmembers from the ships died in the freezing waters over the course of the following three hours. The few men and women that managed to reach vox-casters shouted into their machines, little realising their voices were carrying no further.

The platform was eventually submerged except for a fleet of floating detritus. The ocean no longer teemed with potential profit, but the scrap metal of destroyed enterprise.

Helsreach heard nothing of this.

The Sheol Platform.

In a central spire, nestled between tall, stacked container silos, Technical Officer Nayra Racinov cast an annoyed look at her green screen, and the sudden fuzzy wash of distortion it was displaying for her.

‘You’re joking,’ she said to the screen. It replied with white noise.

She thumped the thick glass with the bottom of her fist. It replied with slightly angrier white noise. Technical Officer Nayra Racinov decided not to try that again.

‘My screen’s just died,’ she called out to the rest of the office. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the ‘rest of the office’, which usually consisted of an overweight ex-crane driver called Gruli who monitored the communications system, had gone for a mug of caffeine.

She looked back at her console. Warning lights were flickering cheerily around the confused screen. One moment, the green wash showed a chaotic burst of incoming presences on the sonar. Hundreds of them. The next, it showed a clear ocean. And the next, nothing but distortion again.

The room shuddered. The entire platform shuddered, as if in the grip of an earthquake.

Nayra swallowed, watching the screen again. The presences under the water, hundreds of them, were back once again.

She dived across the shaking room, hammering the vox-station’s transmit button with the heel of her hand.

She managed to say ‘Helsreach, Helsreach, come in...’ before the world dropped out from under her and the second of the Valdez Oil Platforms was brought down, with its steel bones burning, bending and screaming, into the icy sea.

The Lucifus Platform.

The largest of the three offshore installations was manned by a permanent work crew population twice the size of those at Jahannam and Sheol. While they were powerless to prevent their own destruction, they at least saw it coming.

Across the platform, sonar auspex readers were suddenly captured by the storm of distortion that had preceded the deaths of Sheol and Jahannam. Here, a fully-staffed control office reacted quicker, with a low-ranking tech-acolyte managing to restore a semblance of clarity to the screens.

Technical Officer Marvek Kolovas was on the vox-network immediately, his gravelly voice carrying directly to the mainland.

‘Helsreach, this is Lucifus.’ Massive, repeat, massive incoming enemy fleet. At least three hundred submersibles. We can’t raise Sheol or Jahannam. Neither platform is responding. Helsreach? Helsreach, come in.’

‘Uh...’

Kolovas blinked at the receiver in his hand. ‘Helsreach?’ he said again.

‘Uh, this is Dock Officer Nylien. You’re under attack?’

‘Throne, are you deaf, you stupid bastard? There’s a fleet of enemy submersibles launching all kinds of hell at our support gantries. We need rescue craft immediately. *Airborne* rescue craft. Lucifus Platform is going down.’

‘I... I...’

‘Helsreach? Helsreach? Do you hear me?’

A new voice broke over the vox-channel. ‘This is Dockmaster Tomaz Maghernus. Helsreach hears and acknowledges.’

Kolovas finally let out the breath he’d been holding. Around him, the world shook as it began to end.

‘Good luck, Lucifus,’ the dockmaster’s voice finished, a moment before the link went dead.

‘This is the situation,’ Colonel Sarren began.

The Forthright Sector dockmaster’s office was, putting it politely, a pit. Maghernus was not a tidy man at the best of times, and a recent divorce wasn’t helping his state of cleanliness. The sizeable room was a hovel of old caffeine mugs that were growing furry mould-masses in their depths, and unfiled stacks of papers were scattered everywhere. Here and there were some of Maghernus’s cast-off clothing from the nights he’d slept in his office rather than go back to his depressing bachelor hab – and before that, back to the woman he’d taken to calling The Cheating Bitch.

The Cheating Bitch was a memory now, and not a pleasant one. He found himself worrying against his will. Had she already died in the war? He wasn't sure his bitterness stretched quite far enough to wish something like that.

His dawdling thoughts were dragged back in line by the arrival of the Reclusiarch. In battered black war-plate, the knight stalked into the room, sending menials and Guard officers scurrying aside.

'I was summoned.' The words blasted rough from his helm's vox-speakers.

'Reclusiarch,' Sarren nodded. The colonel's bone-tiredness bled from him in a slow drip. In his weary majesty, he moved like he was underwater. The officers gathered around the room's messy table, poring over a crinkled paper map of the city and the surrounding coast.

Room was made at the table as Grimaldus approached.

'Speak to me,' he said.

'This is the situation,' Colonel Sarren began again. 'Exactly fifty-four minutes ago, we received a distress call from the Lucifus Platform. They reported they were under attack by an overwhelming submersible fleet numbering at least three hundred enemy vessels.'

The gathered officers and dock leaders variously swore, made notes on the map, or looked to Sarren to provide an answer to this latest development.

'How long until they reach—'

'...must move the reserve garrisons—'

'...storm trooper battalions to assemble—'

Cyria Tyro stood alongside the colonel. 'This is what the bastards were doing in the southern Dead Lands. It's why they touched down there. They were taking their landing ships to pieces and building this fleet.'

'It's worse than that,' Sarren gestured to the portable hololithic table with a control wand, zooming out from the city and showing a much wider

spread of the southern coast of the Armageddon Secundus landmass.

‘Tempestus Hive,’ several officers muttered.

Enemy runes flickered as they drew nearer to the other coastal hive. Almost as many as those bearing down on Helsreach.

‘They’re dead,’ Tyro said. ‘Tempestus will fall, no matter what we do. A hive half our size, and with half our defences.’

‘We’re all dead,’ a voice spoke out.

‘What did you say?’ Commissar Falkov sneered.

‘We have done all that can be done.’ The protests came from an overweight lieutenant in the uniform of the conscripted militia forces. He was calm, sanguine even, speaking with what he hoped was measured wisdom. ‘Throne, three hundred enemy vessels? My men are stationed at the docks, and we know what we can do there. But the defences are as thin as... as... Damn it, there *are* no defences there. We must evacuate the city, surely. We’ve done all we can.’

Commissar Falkov’s dark stormcoat swished as he reached for his sidearm. He never got the chance to execute the lieutenant for cowardice. A snarling, immense blur of blackness sliced across the room. With a crash, the lieutenant was slammed back against the wall, held a metre off the ground, short legs kicking, as the Reclusiarch gripped his throat in one hand.

‘Thirty-six days, you wretched worm. Thirty-six days of defiance, and *thousands upon thousands of heroes lie dead*. You dare speak of retreat when the day finally comes for you to spill the enemy’s blood?’

The lieutenant gagged as he was strangled. Colonel Sarren, Cyria Tyro and the other officers watched in silence. No one turned away.

‘Hnk. Agh. Ss.’ He fought for breath that wouldn’t come as he stared into the silver replica of the God-Emperor’s death mask. Grimaldus leaned closer, his skulled face leering, blocking out all other sight.

‘Where would you run, coward? *Where would you hide that the Emperor would not see your shame and spit on your soul when your worthless life is finally at an end?*’

‘Pl-Please.’

‘Do not shame yourself further by begging for a life you do not deserve.’ Grimaldus tensed his hand, his fingers snapping closed with wet snaps. In his grip, the lieutenant went into spasms, then thumped to the floor as the knight released his grip. The Reclusiarch strode back to the table, ignoring the fallen body.

It took several seconds for conversation to resume. When it did, Falkov saluted the Reclusiarch. Grimaldus ignored it.

Maghernus tried to make sense of the lines being drawn across the map showing troop disposition, but it might as well have been in another language to him. He cleared his throat and said, above the din, ‘Colonel.’

‘Dockmaster.’

‘What does this mean? In the simplest terms, please. All of these lines and numbers mean nothing to me.’

It was Grimaldus who answered. The knight spoke low, staring down at the map with his helm’s unblinking scarlet eyes.

‘Today is the thirty-sixth day of the siege,’ the Templar said, ‘and unless we defend the docks against the tens of thousands of enemy that will arrive in under two hours, we will lose the city by nightfall.’

Cyria Tyro nodded as she stared at the map. ‘We need to evacuate the dockworkers in the most efficient manner possible, allowing for the arrival of troops.’

‘No,’ Maghernus said, though no one was listening.

‘These avenues,’ Colonel Sarren pointed out, ‘are already clogged by inbound/outbound supply traffic. We will struggle to get all of the dock menials – no offence, Dockmaster – out in time. Let alone get troops in.’

‘No,’ Maghernus said again, louder this time. Still, no one paid him any attention.

One of the Steel Legion majors present, a storm trooper set apart by his dark uniform and shoulder insignia, traced a finger along a central spine road leading from Hel’s Highway.’

‘Evacuate the drones down the other paths and leave the highway route clear. That’ll be enough to fill the central docks with trained bodies.’

‘That still leaves almost two-thirds of the dock districts,’ Sarren frowned, ‘with no defence except the garrisoned militia. And the militia will suffer from the fleeing dock menials being in their way.’

‘Hello?’ said Maghernus.

‘We can reroute the traffic through to these secondary veins,’ Tyro pointed out.

‘Troops would trickle in,’ Sarren nodded. ‘That might not be enough, but it may be the best we can ask for in the situation.’

A sound emerged, machine-like and harsh, like the engine of a Chimera troop transport choking on the wrong fuel. One by one, heads turned to Grimaldus. The sound was emitted from his helm’s vocalisers. He was chuckling.

‘I believe,’ said the knight, ‘the dockmaster has something to say.’

All heads turned to Maghernus.

‘Arm us,’ he said.

Colonel Sarren closed his eyes. The others watched the dockmaster, unsure if they had heard correctly. Maghernus continued, as the silence spread out, ‘There are over thirty-nine thousand of us on those docks – and that’s just the workers, not including the militia. If you need time, arm us. We’ll give you the time.’

The storm trooper major snorted. ‘You’ll be dead in an hour. All of you.’

‘Maybe,’ said Maghernus. ‘But we were never going to win this war, were we?’

The major wasn't done, and his voice had less of a sneer now. 'Brave, but insane. If we allow the enemy to butcher the dockworker forces, the city won't be able to function for decades after this war. We're fighting to preserve our way of life, not just survive.'

'Let us focus,' Sarren opened his eyes, 'on surviving first. The fact remains that the majority of the Steel Legion cannot be moved. They are holding the city, and pulling them back from their positions will see the city fall as surely as if we leave the docks undefended. Invigilata and the militia can't hold everything.'

'There's little choice,' said Tyro. 'The dockworkers will die unsupported.'

'Arm them first,' Grimaldus said, his vox-voice heavy with finality. 'Then argue how long they have left to live.'

'Very well. Our course is clear.' Colonel Sarren cleared his throat. 'Dockmaster. I thank you.'

'We'll fight like... like... We'll fight damn hard, colonel. Just don't take too long getting the troops to back us up.'

'We have immense stockpiles of materiel in the dock districts.' The colonel nodded to Cyria Tyro. 'You heard the Reclusiarch. Arm them.'

She saluted with a grim smile, and left the table.

'We can hold,' Sarren told everyone that remained. 'After all we have done, I refuse to believe this will be the treacherous blow that breaks our back. We can hold. Major Krivus, the movement of storm trooper squads to the docks is already under way, but I need you to take personal command of that process immediately. Grav-chute them in if you have to. Drop them from the Valkyries that remain. Every rifle counts.'

The major saluted, and moved out of the office with all the grace and speed his bulky carapace armour allowed.

'The civilians,' Tyro murmured, staring at the hololith. Almost all of the city's reinforced shelters were situated – and sealed – within and

beneath the docks district. Sixty per cent of the hive's population, crowded in civilian shelter bunkers, now no longer away from the front lines. 'We can't have that many people left in the direct line of fire.'

'No? We can't release them onto the streets.' Sarren shook his head. 'There is nowhere for them to run, and the panic would choke the byways, preventing the Steel Legion ever reaching the docks. They are as safe as they can be in their shelters.'

'The beasts will tear down those shelters,' Tyro argued.

'Yes, they will. Nothing can be done now.' Sarren would not be deterred. 'There will be no evacuation. We can't arm them in time, and we can't protect them if they leave the shelters. They will do nothing but die in the streets and clog the veins of reinforcements.'

Tyro didn't raise another objection. She knew he was right.

Sarren continued, 'I need insurgency walkers and light armour battalions riding in from the tertiary arterial roads here, here, here and here. Sentinels, my friends. Hellhounds and Sentinels. Everything we can muster.' More officers left the table.

'Reclusiarch.'

'Colonel.'

'You know what I am going to ask of you. There is only one way we will survive this assault long enough to flood the docks with tried and tested troops. I cannot order you, but I would ask it nevertheless.'

'There is no need to ask. My knights will deploy from our remaining gunships. We will stand with the civilians. We will hold the docks.'

'My thanks, Reclusiarch. Now, we are as ready as it is possible to be, given the nature of this unwelcome surprise. We are, however, placing a great deal of pressure on Invigilata and the bulk of the Imperial Guard. The city will bleed while we divert our elite infantry to the docks, and this fight... It'll take days. At best.'

‘Let Invigilata hold the city,’ Grimaldus said, gesturing to the map with a black gauntlet. ‘Let the Steel Legion stand with them. Focus on what matters in the here and now.’

‘No grand speech? I’m almost disappointed.’

‘No speech.’ The Templar was already stalking from the room. ‘Not for you. You won’t be dying this day. I save my words for those who will.’



CHAPTER XIV

The Docks

They came as the sun began its downward arc in the sky.

The Helsreach docks took up almost a third of the hive's perimeter. Thousands of uninspiring warehouses and harbour office towers stood watch over an expansive bay which featured an endless number of quays and piers that stabbed out into the sloshing, filthy greyish water.

The air across the entire world might have always reeked of something faintly sulphuric, but here – at the heart of Helsreach's industry – the reek bordered on petrochemically unhealthy. It only took an hour for a person's clothes and hair to become saturated with the greasy, heavy stink of spilled oil and ammoniac seawater. Lifers, the dockworkers who spent their entire careers here, hacked up a fair share of blackness when they hawked and spat. Respiratory tumours were the second-largest cause of death among the populace, only behind industrial accidents by a small margin.

The chaos of the docks was a natural deterrent to the enemy assault, but not a true defence. The first sign of the enemy came as crews leaped from their vessels, risking a kilometre-long swim through pollution-foul waters to reach the docks. On dry land, the defenders of Helsreach watched as the hundreds of undocked tankers, lurking offshore with their volatile manifests, began to explode.

The men and women of Helsreach stood together on cargo crates, on the paved groundways, on steel piers, all eyes turned to the seas and the fleet of enemy vessels breaching the surface of the water, powering closer to the city. A horde of humanity, looking out to sea.

Maghernus was close to the front of one crowd, leading his worker gang in their filthy overalls, clutching a newly-forged lasgun to his chest. They were being handed out by Guard officers from weapon crates stored in warehouses across the dock districts. Every dock gang was treated to a short, simple talk on how a lasrifle was loaded, unloaded, set to safety and fired after aiming. Maghernus had felt his palms sweating as he collected the rifle and extra power cells, which now sat in a small sack hanging from the side of his belt. The hurried Guard sergeant had shouted his way through a quick demonstration, and now here Maghernus was, gun in hand, dry-mouthed.

‘Follow your assigned leaders,’ the sergeant had yelled above the noise of so many men and women gathered in one place. ‘Every dock gang, and every group of fifty people, will have a storm trooper with them. Follow that storm trooper the way you’d follow the Emperor Himself if He descended from the sky and told you what to do with your sorry arses. He will tell you when to fight, when to run, when to hide and when to move. If you do what this trooper tells you to do, you’ve got a much greater chance of getting through this in one piece, and not messing up another unit’s movements. If you don’t listen, there’s a greater chance you’ll be fouling it up for everyone else, and getting your friends killed. Understood?’

General assent answered this.

‘For the next few days, you’re in the Imperial Guard. First rule of the Guard: Go forward. If you get lost, *you go forward*. You lose your way? *You go forward*. You fall away from your group? *You go towards the enemy*. That’s where you’ll do the most good, and that’s where you’ll find your friends. Understood?’

General assent answered this, too. It came with a little more reluctance.
‘Right. Next groups!’

With that, Maghernus’s gang and several others filed from the warehouse, making room for others to get exactly the same lecture.

Outside, dozens of Steel Legion storm troopers in their ochre jackets and heavy, thrumming power generator backpacks were directing the flow of human traffic. Maghernus led his gang to one that waved him over. The man was slender, unshaven, scratching his forehead under the domed helmet he wore. His goggles were raised up, fastened around the helmet, and his rebreather mask was hanging slack around his neck. He had the look of someone who, if not lost, was at least not entirely sure where he was.

‘Hello,’ Maghernus swallowed. ‘We need an assigned soldier.’

‘Ah, I know this already. That is me. I am Andrej.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

The storm trooper laughed, slapping the dockmaster on the shoulder. ‘That is funny. “Sir”. I may keep you after the war is done, to make me feel good, eh? I am not Sir. I am Andrej. Perhaps I will be Sir after I make sure none of you are dead. I would like that. It would be nice.’

‘I...’

‘Yes, it is a big pressure. I understand this. I would like a promotion, so you must all stay alive. We play for big stakes now, no? I thank you for this idea you have given me. You have made the day more fun.’

‘I...’

‘Come, come. No time for making friends now. We will talk much soon. Hey! All of you dock-working people, come with me, yes?’

Without waiting for an answer, Andrej began to walk through the crowds, followed by Maghernus’s gang. The storm trooper would occasionally wave at other soldiers, most of whom offered silent nods or gruff greetings. One of them, a pale beauty with black hair so thick and

rich it had no business being leashed in a plain ponytail, smiled and waved back.

‘Throne, who was that?’ Maghernus asked as he trailed just behind Andrej. ‘Your wife?’

‘Ha! I wish. That is Domoska. We are squadmates. She is nice to look at, no?’

She was. Maghernus watched her leading another group through the masses. As Domoska was lost in the teeming crowds, his gaze fell on the men she was leading. Maghernus prayed he didn’t look as nervous as they all did.

‘It is very funny, I think. Her brother is the ugliest man I have ever seen, yet the sister is touched by fortune with great beauty. He must be very bitter, no?’

Maghernus just nodded.

‘Come, come. Time is running away from us.’

That had been an hour ago. Now, they stood with Andrej, unfamiliar weapons held to their chests, pressed against quickened heartbeats. Andrej was occupying himself by picking his nose. This was something he struggled to do in gloves of thick, brown leather, but he went about the task with a curiously stately tenacity.

‘Sir,’ Maghernus started.

‘A moment, please. Victory is almost mine.’ Andrej flicked something grotesque from his fingertip. ‘I can breathe again. Emperor be praised.’

‘Sir, shouldn’t you say something to us?’ He lowered his voice, stepping closer. ‘Something to inspire the men?’

Andrej frowned, absently biting his cut lip as he looked around at the other groups spread down the dock lines. ‘I do not think so. No other Legionnaire is talking. I was going to wait for the Reclusiarch’s speech, you know? Would you prefer me to speak now?’

‘The Reclusiarch will speak?’

‘Oh, yes. He is good at this. You will like it. It will happen soon, I am thinking.’

A blast of screeching feedback slashed through the air as across the docks – kilometre upon kilometre of them – every vox-tower came alive in a distorted whine.

‘See?’ Andrej grinned. ‘I am always right. It is what I do best.’

For several seconds, the people of Helsreach heard nothing but breathing – low, heavy, threatening – over the vox-speakers.

‘Sons and daughters of Hive Helsreach,’ the voice boomed across the shore districts, too low and resonant to be human, flavoured by the slight crackle of vox-corruption. *‘Look to the water. The water from which you draw the wealth of your city. The water that now promises nothing but death.’*

‘For thirty-six days, the people of your world, the people of your own city, have been selling their lives to defend you. For thirty-six nights, your own mothers and fathers, your own brothers and sisters, your own sons and daughters have been fighting the enemy to ensure that half of the hive remains in human hands. They have battled, road by road, sweating and fighting and dying so you can enjoy a handful of days of freedom.’

‘You owe them. You owe them for the sacrifices they have made so far. You owe them for the sacrifices they will make in the days and nights yet to come.’

‘Here and now, you will have the chance you deserve, the chance to repay them all. More than that, you will have the chance to punish the enemy for daring to lay siege to your city, for breaking your families apart and destroying your homes.’

‘Watch the tides. See the scrap fleet that sails into your port, bearing a horde of howling beasts. When the sun sets at the end of this week, every single invader in those surfacing ships will no longer draw breath from the’

sacred air of this world. They will fall because of you. You are going to save this city.

‘Fear is natural. It is human. Feel no shame for a heart that beats too fast in this moment, or fingers that tremble as you hold a weapon you have never wielded before. The only shame is in cowardice – in running and leaving others to die when everything comes down to your actions.

‘You are led by Guard veterans – the best of your Steel Legions – Imperial storm troopers. But they are not alone. The forces of Helsreach are coming. Stand and defy the enemy for long enough, and you will soon see thousands of tanks constructed in this very city grinding the invaders into dust. Help. Is. Coming. Until then, stand proud. Stand resolute.

‘Remember these words, brothers and sisters. “When death comes, the good we have done will mean nothing. We are judged in life for the evil we destroy”.

‘That time of judgement is upon you. I know every man and women here feels it in their blood, in their bones.

‘I am Grimaldus of the Black Templars, and this is my vow to you all. While one of us stands, these docks will never fall. If I have to kill a thousand of the enemy myself, the sun will rise once more over an unconquered city.

‘Look for the black knights among you. We will be where the fighting is fiercest, at the heart of the storm.

‘Stand with us, and we will be your salvation.’

Silence descended once more.

Maghernus sighed, tension ebbing from him as his breath misted in the cool air. Andrej was adjusting the slide rack settings on his modified lasrifle. The weapon emitted a pulsing, charged hum that set the dockmaster’s teeth on edge.

‘That was a stern talking-to, no? Not many will run now, I am thinking.’

Maghernus nodded. It took him several moments to speak. ‘What’s that rifle?’

‘This?’ Andrej finished his ministrations, gesturing to the thick power cables feeding from the rifle’s bulky stock to the humming metal power pack he wore between his shoulders. ‘We call them hellguns. Like yours, only brighter and louder and hotter and meaner. And no, you cannot have one. This is mine. They are rare, and only given to people who are right all the time.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘This is a det-pack.’ He tapped the hand-sized detonator disc hanging from his belt. ‘Used for sticking to tanks and making them explode into many pretty pieces. I once had many, now I have only one. When I use it, I will have none, and that will be a sad day.’

Maghernus wanted to ask if Andrej was really a storm trooper. He settled for saying ‘You are not exactly what I expected.’

‘Life,’ the soldier said, looking off to the side in what appeared to be distracted consideration, ‘is a series of very wonderful surprises, until a final bad one.’ Turning to the entire group, Andrej buckled his helmet’s chin strap with a grin.

‘My handsome new friends, it is soon to be time for war. So, my beautiful ladies and fine gentlemen, if you want to remain beautiful and fine, keep your heads down and your rifles up. Always aim from the cheek, with your eyes down the barrel. Do not be firing from the hip – that is the best way to feel excellent about yourself and yet hit nothing. Oh, and it will be loud and scary, no? Much panic, I think. Always wait one second before pulling your trigger, to make sure you are aiming at something you should be aiming at. Otherwise you may be shooting other people, and that is bad news for you, and worse news for them.’

The gangs of workers began to disperse across the docks, taking up positions in alleys between warehouses, behind crate stacks, around the

edges of buildings and on the various floors of multi-storey hangars and work blocks facing the sea.

‘Come, come.’ Andrej led his group into the shadows of a loader crane, ordering them to spread out and take cover around the huge metal strut columns and cargo containers close by.

‘Sir?’ called one of the men.

‘My name is Andrej, and I have said this many times. But yes, what is the problem?’

‘My gun’s jammed. I can’t get the power cell back in.’

From where he crouched at the head of the group, Andrej shook his head with a melodramatic sigh. With his goggles over his eyes and the infantile grin plastered across his features, he looked like some breed of gigantic, amused fly.

‘One has to wonder why you would be taking it out in the first place.’

‘I was just—’

‘Yes, yes. Be nice to the weapon’s machine-spirit. Ask it nicely.’

The dockworker looked awkward as he turned his gaze down at the rifle. ‘Please?’ he said, lamely.

‘Ha! Such reverence. Now click that lock switch on the other side. That is the release catch, and you need to slide it back to get the cell back in.’

The man dropped the power cell from his shaking hands, but slapped it home on the second try. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Yes, yes, I am a hero. Now, my brave friends, a siren will soon begin to sing. When it does, it means the enemy is within range of our artillery defences, which are sadly too few in number to make me smile. When I say it is time to be ready, you are all to sit up and start looking for huge and ugly beasts to shoot.’

‘Yes, sir,’ they chorused.

‘I could become used to that, oh yes. Now, listen with both ears my wonderful fellows. Aim for the bodies. It is the biggest target, and that is

what counts if you are new to this.'

'Yes, sir,' they said again.

'There is a very beautiful woman I would like to marry after this war. She will almost certainly be saying no to my proposal, but hey, we will see. If she says yes, you are all invited to my wedding, which will be in the eastern territories where the weather is much less like being pissed on by the sky every day. Also, the drinks will be free. You have my word on this. I am always truthful, this being one of my many glorious virtues.'

A few of the men smiled, despite themselves.

The siren began to wail. A banshee's keen across kilometres of docks, howling over tens of thousands of frightened Imperial souls. Muffled thumps started up in response as the Sabre-class defence platforms opened fire on the incoming fleet.

'It is time,' Andrej grinned again, 'to earn some very shiny medals.'

'For the Emperor,' one man breathed the words like a mantra, his eyes closed. 'For the Emperor.'

'Oh, no. Not for Him.' Andrej fastened his rebreather mask, but they could still hear the smile in his voice. 'He is happy on His Golden Throne, a long way from here. This is for me, and it is for you, and that is more than enough.'

The sirens began to fade, one by one, until a last lone wail sputtered out.

'Any moment now,' Andrej said, leaning up to aim over the top of the container he'd been kneeling behind. 'We will have company.'

The first vessels crashed into the docks with the noise of a storm wave breaking against the shore. With no finesse, without even slowing down, they crunched into the gangways and loading platforms, ferociously beaching themselves. Doors and portals immediately blasted open, disgorging a tide of foul alien flesh onto the docks.

The very first of the alien beasts to spill from its underwater scrap-pod was a brute, easily half again the size of its lesser brethren, bearing a

trophy rack on its hunched shoulders with human skulls and Adeptus Astartes helms from other wars on other worlds. It had been leading its tribe across the edges of the Imperium for decades, and in a fight with all else even, would have been more than a match for a lone Adeptus Astartes.

Its face, shoulder and torso disintegrated in a ruthless volley of las-fire that sent the burning remains spinning off the edge of the docks and into the polluted water below. Less than a hundred metres away, Domoska shouted encouragement to the dockworkers she led, and ordered them to fire again. Many had missed, but more than enough had struck home. It was a pattern being repeated along the Helsreach docks now, as the first wave of xenos creatures howled and laughed their way into the city.

From his makeshift cover within the den of loosely-stacked cargo containers, Maghernus fired shot after shot, feeling the rifle in his hands growing warmer with each *crack* of release. He lowered himself below the lip of the crate he knelt behind, and reloaded his lasgun with inexperienced fingers. The bastard thing was stuck.

‘Use force,’ Andrej said from his place next to the dockmaster. The storm trooper didn’t look at him, didn’t even glance away from where he was aiming and firing. Another migraine-bright beam of overcharged energy spat from the soldier’s hellgun. ‘The slides often jam on new rifles. This is a sad truth with the rifles of our home world. Their spirits take time to wake up.’

Maghernus was amazed he could even hear the other man over the din of beaching vessels, alien roars and discharging lasguns filling the air with a scattered chorus of mechanical cracks.

‘I fired a Kantrael rifle once,’ Andrej was continuing, his words punctuated by slight shifts in his posture and aim as he tracked target after target, releasing round after round. ‘It was a very keen weapon, oh yes. That world forges eager guns.’

Maghernus slotted the fresh power cell home and raised himself back into position. His back already ached from his first two minutes as a soldier. How the Steel Legion crouched like this for days on end and got used to battle was a mystery to him. He fired at distant figures, lumbering alien hulks that ran with almost no sense of direction or purpose, as if hunting for a scent – lost until they found it. Others in the emerging packs would race to the source of the las-fire being thrown at them, and were cut down in their headlong run. A few, clearly cunning by the standards of these creatures, remained back and loaded heavy weapons. These last beasts sent shrieking missiles into the entrenched Imperial lines, exploding stacks of cargo crates or pulverising the sides of warehouses.

Slowly but surely, with an insidious creep, the docks were being enveloped by thick smoke from the destroyed submersibles and burning buildings.

‘We will have to move soon,’ Andrej called over his shoulder to the others. The words proved prophetic. With a crash of metal on stone and a wave of flooding water, a submersible beached itself on the docks not thirty metres from their position. Saltwater splashed down on the crouching dockworkers. Alien growls came from the wrecked sub as its doors blasted open.

‘That is far from good,’ the storm trooper scowled behind his rebreather as he slammed back into his firing position, drawing a bead on the first creature to emerge. It dropped like a puppet with its strings cut as the harsh beam lanced through its face and blew out the back of its head.

Maghernus and the others joined their fire to his. Still more beasts came spilling from the submersible. The greenskins were charging now, having sniffed out the nearby cluster of humans behind the barricade, and following the streams of laser fire.

‘Sir...’ one of the men stammered, his eyes wide and bloodshot. ‘Sir, they’re coming...’

‘That is a fact I am aware of,’ Andrej replied, not stopping his stream of fire for a moment.

‘Sir—’

‘Please *shut up* and *keep firing*, yes?’

The beasts reached the cargo containers. They reeked of blood, smoke, bitter sweat and the alien stench of fungal corruption. Bunched muscles hauled the beasts over the barricades, and the brutes roared down at the humans – no longer in cover, but hemmed in by the cargo pods.

Las-rounds sliced up, punching dozens of the scrambling beasts back. The remnants of the first wave were joined by the second, and the creatures dropped in amongst the dockworkers, scrap-pistols barking and heavy axes swinging.

‘Fall back!’ Andrej shouted, firing his hellgun at point-blank range, using it to slash a way through the erupting melee. ‘Run!’

The dockworkers were already in a panicked flight. ‘With me, you idiots!’ the storm trooper yelled, and for a wonder, it actually worked. The dockers with enough presence of mind to clutch their lasguns in the chaos moved with Andrej, adding their fire to his again.

He left a third of his team in the shelter of the containers and crane struts. Screaming dockworkers, unable to escape the invaders. Andrej sensed a momentary hesitation in those that remained with him; a handful of seconds where they ceased against all logic, some freezing rather than open fire on their dying friends, and others mesmerised in astonished fear by the sight of such slaughter.

‘They’re already dead!’ Andrej slammed his gloved palm into the side of Maghernus’s head, jolting him back into the moment. ‘Fire!’

It was enough to break the spell. Las-fire opened up again, streaming into the embattled aliens.

‘Fall back only when you must reload! Stand and fire until then!’

Andrej swore under his breath after he gave the order. The orks were already scrambling closer in an avalanche of green flesh, axe blades and ragged armour. Around the retreating team, the docks burned and thundered with the sounds of more submersibles beaching themselves. Andrej caught a momentary glimpse of another team of dockworkers through the smoke some distance away, breaking into flight as they were chopped to pieces by the orks in their midst.

The same was about to happen to his ragtag gang, and he swore again. He hoped Domoska was faring better.

What a stupid place to die.

Kilometres away from Helsreach, beneath the sands of the wastelands to the north-west, there was a loud and unprecedented *clunk* of heavy machinery.

Jurisian, Forgemaster of the *Eternal Crusader*, rose to his feet with a slowness born of exhaustion. Tears stood in his eyes – a rarity indeed for a being that had not wept in over twenty decades. His mind pulsed with a thundering ache, a dull and thudding heat that had nothing to do with physical weakness.

He could smell his servitors now that his senses were returning from their focusless lock on his primary task. Turning to regard them where they lay, Jurisian could smell the decay setting into their organic parts. They had been dead for weeks, starved of sustenance. He hadn't noticed. They had proven useless after the first few hours, over a month ago, their internal cognitive processors unable to keep up with the ever-evolving code. Jurisian had needed to work alone, cursing Grimaldus all the while.

Another deep clunk of grinding machinery restored his attention to the present. His joints ached – both the mechanical ones and his still-human ones – from such a period of inactivity. He had been a statue in place for four weeks, his mind alive and his body in hunched, tense stasis by the console.

He had not slept. He knew that on several occasions, as his closing, exhausted mind had drifted close to shutting down, he had almost lost grip on the code. With his thoughts moving sluggishly, the code had outpaced him just as it had done to his servitors. In these moments of panicked intensity, he had resisted by silencing sections of his mind with clinical meditation, operating at a lessened capacity, but at least he was still awake.

Jurisian stared ahead at the vast doors.

- OBERON -

That word burned itself into his core, written in towering letters, more a warning than a tomb marker.

A last resonant machine-sound signalled the grinding rollback of the final interior lock. Pressurised coolant vapour flushed into the corridor as the door's seal systems vented it. It reeked of chlorine – not poisonous, but stale from being cold-cooked for so many years while the door remained silent and still. In a ballet of rumbling, shuddering technology, the portal began to open.

‘Reclusiarch,’ Jurisian voxed, horrified at the dull scratchiness of his voice. ‘The defences are broken. I am in.’



CHAPTER XV

Balance

The chamber offered nothing at first. Nothing except a powerless darkness that was blacker than black, even to Jurisian's visor lenses. A whispered keyword cycled his vision filters through a thermal-seeking infrared, through to a crude echolocation that falsified an auspex scanner's silent chimes to detect movement. He had made these modifications himself, with the proper respect to the machine-spirit of his wargear.

It was this last sense that produced a response. A vague grey blur passed his vision, and with it, the whirring of internal mechanisms. Hinges. Cogs. Fibre muscles. The sound was as familiar to Jurisian as his own breathing, but brought with it an edge of disconcerting curiosity.

Joints. He was hearing joints.

Something was wrong. The suggestion of static interference at the edges of his vision display told a tale of interference, obfuscation, more than a darkness born from a lack of light. He was being jammed, and the manipulation was insidiously subtle.

Jurisian's bolter came up in steady hands, panning left and right in the darkness as his eye lenses continued to cycle through filters. At last, a targeting monocle slid over his right eye lens – the mechanical echo of a lizard's nictitating membrane.

Better. Not perfect, but better.

‘I am Jurisian,’ he said to the creature before him, as it resolved into focus. ‘Master of the Forge for the *Eternal Crusader*, flagship of the Black Templars.’

The creature didn’t answer immediately. The size of a man, it smelled of ancient machinery and sour breath.

It was likely the thing had once been human – or some part of it was organic, even if only the smallest aspect. Hunched, robed in a ruined cloak of woven fabric, misshapen lumps in its surface area suggested additional limbs or advanced modification. It remained faceless, either refusing to look up or unable to do so.

Jurisian lowered his bolter. The servo-arms extending from his back-mounted power generator still clutched a host of weaponry, aiming it at the robed being before him. He voiced his next words through his helm’s vox-speakers, letting his armour’s spirit twist the human language into a universal, bluntly simple machine code – a basic program for communication which he had acquired during his long years of tuition and training on Mars, home world of the Mechanicus.

‘My identity is Jurisian,’ the code pulsed, ‘of the Adeptus Astartes.’

The reply came in a burst of snarled code, the words and meanings bleeding into each other. It was akin to machine-slang, evolved from the viral program that sealed the doors. This creature, whatever it was, had an accent born of hundreds of years of isolation here.

‘Affirmative,’ Jurisian responded in the foundation code. ‘I can see you. Your interference should be aborted. It is no longer relevant.’

The creature raised itself higher, no longer lurking on all fours. It now reached Jurisian’s chestplate, though it came no closer, remaining a dozen metres away. The weapons in the Forgemaster’s servo-arms tracked the being’s movements.

It pulsed another tangled mess of accented code.

‘Affirmative,’ Jurisian replied again. ‘I destroyed the sealant program.’

This time, the creature's response was rendered through a more simple code. Jurisian narrowed his eyes at this development. Like the chamber's virus lock, the creature was adapting and working with new information at a faster rate than standard Mechanicus constructs.

‘This is the sanctuary of *Oberon*.’

‘I know.’ The Forgemaster risked a panning glance left and right, seeking any resolution in the artificial darkness. His targeting monocle couldn't pierce the gloom more than a few metres ahead. Flickering static was beginning to crawl across his eye lenses. ‘Deactivate the interference,’ Jurisian raised his bolter again, ‘or I will destroy you.’

Against his will, emotion coloured the code-spoken declaration. To be limited like this was an affront to his sense of honourable conduct – there was no glory or prudence in allowing oneself to be kept at an enemy's mercy.

‘I am the guardian of *Oberon*. Your presence generates negligible threat to me.’

Jurisian tasted anger on his tongue, bitter and metallic. His finger tensed on the thick trigger of his bolter.

‘Deactivate the interference. This is your final warning.’ Static mottled his vision now, like a thousand insects clustering on his eye lenses. He could make out no more than the barest silhouette as the Mechanicus warden moved closer.

‘Negative,’ it said.

Jurisian's servo-arms, answering his mind's impulses a fraction of a second after his true limbs, had raised his axe and other weapons in a threatening display, almost akin to some feral world arachnid predator increasing its size to warn off prey.

The knight's final threat was spoken with conviction, the machine-cant laced with numerical equations indicating emphasis.

‘Then die.’

Their saviour was one of the black knights.

He charged the enemy from the sky with a whining howl of protesting thrusters. Fire streaked from his flight pack as he landed in the aliens' midst, a dark blur of movement outlined in flame.

Andrej immediately scrambled back, ordering his gang into the relative cover provided by an overturned cargo loader truck.

'Do not dare cease fire,' he shouted over the sound of alien bellowing and thousands of guns crying out. He doubted any of them heard him, but they went back to firing as soon as they slid into cover.

The Templar cut left and right with his chainsword, ripping stinking green flesh from malformed orkish bones. His bolt pistol sang out in a thudding refrain, embedding fist-sized bolts in alien bodies which detonated a moment later. Andrej, who had seen Adeptus Astartes fight before, did all he could to keep up his rate of fire in support of the suicidal bravery taking place. Several of his dockworker crew lowered their guns in slack-jawed, frightened awe.

Perhaps, Andrej cursed, they believed the Adeptus Astartes would actually survive unaided.

'Keep firing, damn you!' the storm trooper yelled. 'He's dying for us!'

The ferocious advantage of surprise did not last long. The greenskins turned to the deadly threat among them, laying about with their crude axes and firing their clattering pistols at close range. Several of them hit each other in their fury, while stragglers and those on the edges of the melee were punched down by las-fire from Andrej's gang.

The Templar screamed – a vox-distorted cry of wrath that went crawling across the skin of every human in earshot. His chainblade fell from his black hand, hanging loose on the thick chain that bound the blade to his forearm.

Behind the staggering warrior, one of the few remaining greenskins tore a crude spear back out from the knight's lower spine. The beast had no more than a moment to enjoy its victory: a searing lance of headache-

bright energy dissolved its face and blew the contents of its skull over the dying knight's armour. Andrej recharged his weapon without even needing to look away from the melee.

The Templar regained his balance, then recovered his grip on the revving chainsword a heartbeat after. He lasted for three more savage cuts, tearing gobbets of flesh and shattered armour from the orks closest to him, before the remnants of the alien pack impaled him on their spears and bore him to the ground. His flight pack crashed to the floor, rent from his body. They aimed with brutal efficiency, ramming blades into his armour joints and using their immense strength to force him to his knees. The Templar's pistol came up one final time to hammer a bolt into the chest of the nearest beast, spraying those nearby with inhuman gore as it primed and exploded.

The last three orks were scythed down by Andrej's dock team, collapsing next to the Adeptus Astartes they had slain. The scene before them was a slice of eerie calm, the heart of a storm, while the rest of the docks burned.

'Throne,' the storm trooper hissed. 'Stay here, yes?'

Maghernus didn't even have time to agree before the soldier was making a break across the rockcrete platform, crouched low, moving to the downed knight's body.

'What's he doing?' asked one of the dockworkers.

Maghernus wanted to know that himself. He moved after the storm trooper, doing his best to mimic the crouching run Andrej had just performed. Something hot and angry buzzed past his ear, like the passage of a poisonous insect. It took several seconds to realise he'd almost had his head taken off by a stray shot.

'What are you doing?' He knelt by the storm trooper.

What he was doing seemed obvious to Andrej. His gloved fingers quested under the chin of the knight's helm, seeking some kind of catch, or lock, or release. Throne, there must be something...

‘Seeing if he lives,’ the soldier muttered, clearly distracted. ‘Ayah! Got you.’

With a muted hiss almost drowned out by nearby gunfire, the helm’s seals parted and the expressionless helmet came loose. Andrej pulled it off, handing it to Maghernus. It was about three times as heavy as the dockmaster had been expecting, and he’d been expecting it to weigh a hell of a lot.

The knight wasn’t dead. His face was awash in blood, the dark fluid filming over his eyes and darkening his features as it ran from his nose and clenched teeth. Adeptus Astartes blood was supposed to clot within instants, so the tales told. It wasn’t happening here, and Andrej doubted that was a positive sign.

‘Can’t move,’ the Templar growled. His voice was wet from a burbling throat. ‘Spine. Hearts. Dying.’

‘There is something inside you, I know,’ Andrej spared a glance around, making sure they weren’t in immediate danger. ‘Something important inside you, that your brothers must reclaim, yes?’

‘Progenoid,’ the knight’s breathing was as raw as a chainsword’s snarl. The warrior’s oversized armoured hand gripped the front of Andrej’s armour. It was strengthless.

‘I do not know what that is, sir knight.’

‘*Gene-seed*,’ the Templar spat blood as he forced the words through numbing lips. His eyes were lolling now, half closed and rolling back. It was clear he was blind. ‘*Legacy*.’

Andrej nodded to Maghernus. ‘Help me move him. Do not argue. It is important that his brothers find his body. Important for their rituals.’

‘*Emperor...*’ the knight grunted, ‘*Emperor protects*.’

With those words, the hand gripping Andrej’s chestguard went slack, thumping to rest on the heraldic cross on the warrior’s own breastplate.

Their eyes met once, and the dockworker and the career soldier started dragging the dead knight.

We are dying.

We are dying, scattered across kilometres of docks, mixed in with the humans, torn from the unity of brotherhood.

‘Wear your helm,’ I say to Nero without looking over my shoulder at him. ‘Do not let the humans see you like this.’

With tears in his eyes, our healer does as I order. The list of failing life signs is transferred from his wrist display to his retinal readouts. I hear him draw a shaking breath over the vox.

‘Anastus is dead,’ he says, adding another name to those that came before.

I lean forward, the racing wind clawing over the surface of my armour, sending my parchment scrolls and tabard streaming in its grip. We are several hundred metres up, making ready to drop on the beasts below. The Thunderhawk’s turbines lower their growl as they throttle down.

The docks below us are already in ruin. They burn – black and grey, amber and orange – making the view from the polluted skies like staring down into the mouth of some mythical dragon. Percussive thumps signal the crash landings of more submersibles, or our own munitions stores going up in flames.

‘Helsreach will fall tonight,’ Bastilan says, giving voice to something we must all be thinking. I have never, in over a century of waging war at his side, heard him speak such a thing.

‘And do not lie to me, Grimaldus,’ he says, sharing the bulkhead’s space with me. ‘Save your words for the others, brother.’

I tolerate such familiarity from him.

But he is wrong.

‘Not tonight,’ I tell him, and he doesn’t look away from the skull I wear as my face. ‘I swore to the humans that the sun would rise over an

unconquered city. I do not mean to break that vow. And you, brother, will help me keep it.'

Bastilan turns away at last. What closeness had been near to the surface cools fast, leaving us distant again. 'As you command,' he says.

'Make ready to jump,' I vox to the others. 'Nero. Do you stand ready?'

'What?' He lowers his narthecium, retracting surgical saws and cutting blades. I see the empty sockets for gene-seed storage withdraw and lock under smooth armour plating.

'I need you, Nero. Our brothers need you.'

'Do not lecture me, Reclusiarch. I stand ready.'

The others, Priamus especially, are taking note now. 'Cador is dead. Two-thirds of the Helsreach Crusade will not live to see the coming dawn. You will carry their legacy, my brother. Grief has its place – none of us have suffered such losses before – but if you are lost in sorrow then you will be the death of us all.'

'I said I stand ready! Why do you single me out like this? Priamus is likely to see us all dead because he cannot follow orders! Bastilan and Artarion are not half the fighters Cador was. Yet you lecture *me* about being the weak one, the crack in the blade?'

My pistol is aimed at his head, at the faceplate marked white as a symbol of his expertise and valuable skills.

'Bitterness is taking root within you, brother. Much longer, and it will bore through you, hollowing out your heart and soul, leaving naught but empty bones. When I tell you to focus and stand with your brothers, you respond with black words and treacherous thoughts. So I tell you again, one last time, that we need you. And you need us.'

He doesn't stare me down. When he looks away, it's not in defeat or cowardice, but in shame.

'Yes, Reclusiarch. My brothers, forgive me. My humours are unbalanced, and my mind has been adrift.'

““A mind without purpose will walk in dark places,”” Artarion quotes. A human philosopher; one I don’t recognise.

‘It is fine, Nero,’ Bastilan grunts. ‘Cador was one of the Chapter’s finest. I miss him, just as you do.’

‘I forgive you, Nerovar,’ Priamus says, and I thank him on a private vox-channel for not sounding like he is sneering for once.

The Thunderhawk slows, thrusters keeping it aloft as we make ready to jump. In the air around us, snapping explosions decorate the sky.

‘Anti-air fire? Already?’ Artarion asks.

Whether they’ve beached several submersibles with surface-to-air weapons or taken control of wall defence cannons is irrelevant. The gunship swings violently, shaking as the armour plating takes its first hit. They’re firing up through the smoke, tracking the gunship through primitive methods that are apparently effective enough to work.

‘Incoming missiles,’ the pilot voxes to us. The Thunderhawk re-engages its forward thrust, boosting forward. ‘Dozens, too close to evade. Jump now or die with me.’

Priamus goes. Artarion follows. Nero and Bastilan next, launching out of the airlock.

The pilot, Troven, is not a warrior I know well. I cannot judge his temperament the way I can with my closest brothers, except to say that he is a Templar, with all the courage, pride and resolution that honour entails.

In a human, I’d call such behaviour stubbornness.

‘There is no need to die here,’ I say as I enter the cockpit. I have no idea if I’m right to say such a thing, but if this hope can be forged into the truth, I will make it happen now.

‘Reclusiarch?’

Troven has chosen to wrench the Thunderhawk through evasive manoeuvres, rather than disengage himself from the pilot’s throne and try

to leap from the gunship. Both choices, such as they are, are likely to fail. I still believe he chose wrong.

‘Disengage *now*.’ I haul him from the throne, power feeds snapping from connection ports in his armour. He spasms with the electrical feedback of an unsafe and flawed disconnect, half of his perception and consciousness still melded with the gunship’s machine-spirit. His protests are reduced to garbled, wordless grunts of pain as his armour’s power supply kicks back in and the union with the gunship’s systems dims.

The Thunderhawk tilts, diving from the sky on dead engines. Nausea fades as soon as it threatens, balanced by the gene-forged organs replacing my standard human eyes and ears. Troven’s genetic compensators take a moment longer to adjust, ruined by the disorientation of the severed connection. I hear him grunting through his helm’s vox-speakers, swallowing his bile.

This freefall will delay the missiles’ impact. I hope.

In this weakened state, he’s easy to drag from the cockpit to the open bulkhead. The visible sky is twisting as the gunship plummets. Mag-locked step by mag-locked step, my boots adhere to the iron floor, preventing the spiralling death-dive from hurling us around the cabin.

As I face the air-rushing portal, my targeting display overlays the spinning sky. I blink at a flashing rune of crossed blades pulsing in the centre. A propulsion gauge spills across my retinas, and the jump pack weighing my shoulders down whines into life.

‘You’ll kill us both,’ Troven almost laughs. I spare no more than a second’s thought for the two servitors operating the other flight stations.

‘*Brace*,’ is all I have time to say. The world around us dissolves into jagged metal and screaming fire.

Once the noises had faded and the air reeked of the powdery, familiar scent of bolter fire, Jurisian hauled himself back to his feet.

The immediate area around him was illuminated by flashing sparks and energy flares vented by his broken servo arm and savaged armour. The expulsions of electrical force from wounded metal were bright enough to leave violent smears across his sensitive eye lenses. Jurisian blanked the filters with a command word, restoring standard vision mode.

A moan of pain emerged from his vox-speakers as a harsh crackle. Even with no one nearby, it shamed him to voice his weakness in such a way. He would seek out the Reclusiarch and perform penance when... Well, there would be no *when*. This war would never be won.

Retinal displays showed in grim detail the damage to his internal biological and mechanical components. The Forgemaster spared several seconds to examine the flashing warning runes, indicating leaking vital oxygenated haemo-plasma from areas near several organs. Jurisian felt a grin steal over his face as his pain-drunk mind latched on to an altogether more human explanation.

I'm bleeding.

He barely cared. It wasn't terminal damage, neither to his living components nor his augmetic modifications. He stepped forward, crushing underfoot one of the many segmented blade-arms the warden had deployed as it launched at him only minutes before.

It lay in motionless repose, its internal power generators cycling down, descending into silence. In death, the truth was revealed with an almost melancholic clarity. The warden was no more than a shadow of what it had claimed to be.

Certainly, the creature would have been a match for most intruders – be they alien or human. But with its robe parted to show the decrepit truth it had concealed, what was once a stalwart Mechanicus tech-guardian was revealed as little more than an ancient, degrading magos, long-starved of the supplies it needed to maintain itself. Once, it had been human. And in

an era after that, it had been a powerful sentinel for the Mechanicus, watching over this most precious of secrets.

Time had robbed it of a great deal.

The ancient warden had leapt at Jurisian, its limb-blades snapping into life, stabbing and cutting as they descended on flailing mechadendrites.

The knight's own servo-arms had hit back, slower, weightier, inflicting pounding and lasting damage in opposition to the scrapes and gouges inflicted by the warden. By the time the sentinel creature had severed one of the knight's machine-limbs, Jurisian's bolter was hammering shot after shot into the guardian's torso, detonating vital systems and rupturing the human organs that yet remained. Suspension fluid and chemical lubricants ran in place of blood that would no longer flow.

Piercing pain signalled the moments that the warden punctured Jurisian's ceramite armour. It still possessed enough of its attack routines to stab for his joints and armour's weak points, but just as often as it struck a gouging hit, its efforts were deflected by the customised, revered war-plate that Jurisian had modified himself so long ago on the surface of Mars.

He rose after it had finally fallen. Damaged, but unashamed. Regretful, but with his conviction burning.

Already, the creature – the sentinel that had come so close to ending his life – was forgotten. The interference had cleared with its destruction.

Jurisian stared into the resolving darkness of the colossal chamber, and became the first living being in over five hundred years to see *Oberon*, the Ordinatus Armageddon.

'Grimaldus,' he whispered into the vox. 'It's true. It's the holy lance of the Machine-God.'

The thrusters kicked in with desperate force, arresting their insane descent. The jolt was savage – without his armour's fibre bundle musculature,

Grimaldus's neck would have snapped as soon as the boosters fired to bring them both stable.

They were still falling too fast, even with the jump pack's engines howling hot.

'Acknowledged, Jurisian,' the Reclusiarch breathed. *Of all the accursed times...*

Grimaldus grunted at the weight of Troven's armour. His pistol dangled on its wrist-bound chain, while he gripped the other knight's vambrace. Troven, in turn, hung in the air, holding to Grimaldus's own wrist. Their burning tabards slapped against their armour, caught in the wind.

With retinal gauges flashing scarlet, the Reclusiarch and the prone knight descended into the atmosphere of black smoke rising from the docks. Before their vision was blocked entirely, Grimaldus saw Troven reaching with his free hand, drawing the gladius sheathed to his thigh.

Interference crackled thick from the surrounding chaos, but Bastilan's vox-voice made it through the distortion, coloured by brutal eagerness.

'We saw that, Reclusiarch. Dorn's blood, we all saw it.'

'Then you are unfocused on the battle, and will do penance for it'.

He bunched his muscles, negating thrust in the moment before thudding into the ground with bone-shaking force. The two knights skidded across the rockcrete surface of the docks, sparks spraying from their armour.

As they both regained their footing, the hulking silhouettes of alien beasts ambled through the surrounding smoke.

'For Dorn and the Emperor!' Troven cried, and brought his bolter to bear from where it hung at his side, forever bound to his armour by the ritual chains. Grimaldus twinned his cries with Troven's, laying into the enemy.

If these docks could be saved, then by the Throne, they would be.



CHAPTER XVI

A Turning Tide

A wing of fighters bolted overhead, their engines leaving smoke-smears across the darkening sky. In pursuit, alien craft rattled after them, tracer rounds spitting across the clouds in futility as they tried to hunt the Imperial fighters back to one of the city's few remaining airstrips.

Beneath the aerial chase, Helsreach burned. Avenue by avenue, alley by alley, the invaders flooded through the docks district, gaining ground with the death of every defender.

Where the fighting was fiercest, vox-contact was a broken, unreliable mess of lucky signals breaking through the interference. The Imperials fell back through the night, sector by sector, leaving thoroughfares packed with their dead. The city added new scents to its reek of sulphur and saltwater. Now, Helsreach had come to smell of blood and flame, of a hundred thousand lives ending in fire between a single sunrise and sunset. Poets from the impious ages of Old Terra had written of a punitive afterlife, a hell beneath the world's surface. Had that realm ever existed, it would have smelled like this industrial city, dying in fire on the shores of Armageddon Secundus.

In unconnected catacombs below the ground, the citizens of Helsreach remained shielded from the slaughter above. They clustered together in the

darkness, listening to the erratic drumbeat of factories, workshops, tanks and munitions stores exploding. Although the walls of the subterranean shelters shook with tremors that bled down through the ground, the booms and thumps on the surface echoed down like peals of thunder. Many parents told their young children that it was just a violent storm above.

Across the embattled world, the besieged cities were visible from orbit as blackened patches scarring the planet's surface. As the planetary assault entered its second month, Armageddon's atmosphere was turning thick and sour with smoke from the burning hives.

Helsreach itself no longer resembled a city. With the docks under siege, the last pristine sectors of the hive were aflame, wreathing the city in a black pall born of burning oil refineries.

The hive's spine, Hel's Highway, was a wounded serpent winding through the city. Its skin was mottled with patches of light and dark: pale and grey where the fighting had ceased, leaving graveyards of silent tanks, and blackened where conflict still raged, pitting the armoured fist of the Steel Legion against the junk-tanks of the invading beasts.

The city walls were half fallen, resembling some archaeological ruin. Half of the hive was surrendered, abandoned to defeat's lifeless silence. The other half, held by Imperial forces that diminished by the hour, burned in battle.

And so dawned the thirty-seventh day.

‘Hey, no sleep for you.’

Andrej kicked at Maghernus's shin, jolting the dockmaster back to the waking world. ‘We must move soon, I am thinking. No time for sleeping.’

Tomaz blinked the stickiness of exhaustion from his eyes. He'd not even realised he'd fallen asleep. The two of them were crouched behind a stack of crates in a warehouse with the remaining nine men of Maghernus's dock gang. He met their faces now, each in turn, barely recognising any of them.

A day of war had aged them all, gifting them with sunken eyes and soot-blackened skin that brought out the lines in their middle-aged faces.

‘Where are we going?’ Maghernus whispered back. The storm trooper had removed his goggles to wipe his own aching eyes. They’d not slept – they’d barely even stopped fighting – in over twenty hours.

‘My captain wishes us to move west. There are civilian shelters above ground there.’

One of the men hawked and spat on the ground. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. Andrej didn’t think any less of him for the fact he’d been weeping.

‘West?’ the man asked.

‘West,’ Andrej said again. ‘That is my captain’s order, and that is what we will do.’

‘But the beasts are already there. We saw them.’

‘I did not say the order was what I wished to do with my retirement years. I said it was an order, and obeying orders is what we are going to do.’

‘But if the aliens are already there...’ another worker piped up, snapping Andrej’s patience.

‘Then we will be behind enemy lines and see many dead civilians we were too late to save. Throne, you think I have good answers for you all? I do not. I have no good answers, not for you, not for anyone else. But my captain has ordered us to go there, and go there we most certainly shall. Yes? Yes.’

It did the trick. A ghost of focus returned to their slack, weary gazes.

‘Let’s do it, then,’ Maghernus said, his knees clicking as he rose up. He was amazed he could still stand. ‘Blood of the Emperor, I’ve never ached like this.’

‘Why are you complaining, I wonder,’ the storm trooper refastened his goggles with a grin. ‘You worked insane shifts on these docks. This is

surely no more tiring, I think.’

‘Yeah,’ one of the others grunted, ‘but we were getting paid then.’

With muted laughter, the team moved back out onto the docks.

Colonel Sarren’s injured arm was securely fastened in a makeshift sling. What annoyed him most was the loss of his right arm to gesture with to the hololithic display, but then, that was the price to pay for foolishly leaving the *Grey Warrior* in hostile territory. Shrapnel in the arm was a lucky break, all things considered. The enemy sniper team had killed four of his Baneblade’s command crew as they surfaced from the bowels of their tank for much-needed fresh air after countless hours breathing the rank, recycled fumes of the internal filtration scrubbers.

Another sector cleared, only to be wormed through again by bestial scavengers mere hours later.

In the low-ceilinged confines of the tank’s principal command chamber, Sarren sat on his well-worn throne, letting the tension ebb from him and trying to forget the column of pain that had been a perfectly normal arm only an hour before. The sawbones, Jerth, had already recommended amputation, citing the risk of infection from dirty shrapnel and the likelihood the limb would never return to – as he put it – ‘full functionality’.

Bloody surgeons. Always so keen to graft on some cheap, jury-rigged bionic that would click every time he moved a muscle and seize up because of low-grade components. Sarren was no stranger to augmetics in the Guard, and they were a far cry from the modifications afforded to the rich and decadent.

He stared at the hololithic table now, watching the docks recede from Imperial control with agonising, desperate slowness. Seeing the flickering regiment runes and location sigils, it was hard to translate the skeletal vision to the fierce fighting that was truly taking place.

More and more Steel Legion infantry units were reaching the docks, but it was like holding the sea back with a bucket. The Guardsmen being sent

in did little but bolster the general retreat. Reclaiming ground was a distant fiction.

‘Sir?’ the vox-officer called out. Sarren looked over to him, drawn from his reverie, not realising the man had been trying to get his attention for almost a minute.

‘Yes?’

‘Word from orbit. The Imperial fleet is reengaging again.’

Sarren made the sign of the aquila – at least, he tried to, and ended with a grunt of pain as his bound arm flared up in pained protest. One-handed, he made a single wing of the Imperial eagle instead.

‘Acknowledged. May the Emperor be with them all.’

This scarce acknowledgement made, he lapsed back into watching the deployment of his forces throughout the city. Around him, the tank’s crew worked at their stations.

So the Imperial fleet was reengaging.

Again.

Every few days, the same story played out. The joint Adeptus Astartes and Naval fleet would break from the warp close to the planet, and hurl themselves at the ork vessels ringing the embattled world. The engagement would hold for several hours as both sides inflicted horrendous losses on the other, but the Imperials would inevitably be hurled back into a fighting retreat by the immense opposition.

Once they’d fallen back to the safety of a nearby system, they’d regroup over time, under the command of Admiral Parol and High Marshal Helbrecht, and make ready for another assault. It was blunt, and crudely effective. In a void war of such magnitude, there was little place for finesse. Sarren wasn’t blind to the tactics at play – lance strikes into the heart of the enemy fleet, bleed them for all that was possible before a retreat back to safety. It was a necessary grind, a war of attrition.

It was also hardly inspiring. The hive cities were on the edge now. Without reinforcements in the coming weeks, many would fall outright. The infrequent transmissions from Tartarus, Infernus and Acheron were all increasingly grim, as were Sarren's reports of Helsreach to them.

If there was no—

‘Sir?’

Sarren glanced to his left, to where the vox-officer sat at his station. The man held his headphone receivers to his ear with one hand. He looked pale.

‘Emergency signal from the *Serpentine* in orbit. She requests immediate cessation of all anti-air weaponry in the docks district.’

Sarren sat forward in his chair. There was barely any anti-air firepower left in the docks district, but that wasn't the point.

‘What did you say?’

‘The *Serpentine*, Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser, sir. She requests—’

‘Throne, send the order. Send the order! Deactivate all remaining anti-air turrets in the docks district!’

Around him, the tank's crew was silent. Waiting, watching.

Sarren breathed a single word, almost fearful giving voice to it would shatter the possibility it was true.

‘Reinforcements...’

One ship.

The *Serpentine*.

Sea green and charcoal black, it dived like a dragon of myth through the enemy fleet while the rest of the Imperial warships hammered into the orkish invaders, breaking against the ring of alien cruisers surrounding the planet.

One ship broke through, running a gauntlet of enemy fire, its shields crackling into lifelessness and its hull aflame. The *Serpentine* hadn't come to fight. As the Adeptus Astartes vessel tore through the upper

atmosphere, drop pods and Thunderhawks rained from its ironclad belly, streaming down to the world below.

Its duty complete, the *Serpentine* powered its way back into the fight. Its captain gritted his teeth against a screed of damage reports signalling the death of his beloved ship, but there was no shame in dying with such a vital duty done. He had acted under the orders of the highest authority – a warrior on the surface below whose deeds were already inscribed in a hundred annals of Imperial glory. That warrior had demanded this risk be taken, and that reinforcements be hurled down to Armageddon no matter the odds facing them.

His name was Tu'Shan, Lord of the Fire-born, and the *Serpentine* did his will.

The *Serpentine's* end never came. A black shape eclipsed the fat-hulled orkish destroyers cutting the Adeptus Astartes vessel to pieces. Another ship, a far greater ship, pounded the alien attackers into wreckage with overwhelming broadside fire, buying the *Serpentine* the precious moments it needed to escape the gauntlet it had run a second time.

As they broke clear, the *Serpentine's* captain breathed out a prayer, and signalled across the bridge to the master of communications.

‘Send word to the *Eternal Crusader*,’ he said. ‘Give them the sincerest thanks of our Chapter.’

The response from the *Eternal Crusader* came back almost immediately. The grim voice of High Marshal Helbrecht echoed across the *Serpentine's* bridge.

‘It is the Black Templars that thank you, Salamander.’

The beasts have cracked open another of the above-ground civilian shelters.

Like blood spilling from a wound, humans flood into the streets through the destroyed wall. When the choices are to die cowering, or die fleeing to a safety that may not even exist, any human can be forgiven for giving in

to panic. I tell myself this as I watch them dying, and do all I can not to judge them, to hold them to the exalted standards of honour I would demand of my brothers. They're just human. My disgust is unfair, unwarranted. And yet it remains.

As they die, families and souls of all ages, they squeal like butchered swine.

This war is poisonous. Trapped here, locked away from my Chapter, my mind echoes with bleak prejudices. It is becoming hard to accept that I must die for these people to live.

'Attack,' I tell my brothers, my voice barely carrying over the ranting of the engine. Together, we run from the moving Rhino transport, smashing into the enemy's rearguard.

My crozius rises and falls, as it has risen and fallen ten thousand times in the last month. The adamantium eagle chimes as it cuts through the air. It flares with unleashed energy as its power field connects with flesh and armour. The brazier orb built into the weapon's pommel breathes sacred incense in a grey mist, like coils of smoke weaving between us all – friend and foe.

The weariness ebbs. The grudges fade. Hatred is the greatest purifier, the truest emotion overriding all others. Blood, stinking and inhuman, rains across my armour in discoloured spurts. As it marks the black cross I wear on my chest, my revulsion flares anew.

Crunch. The crozius maul ends another alien's life. *Crunch.* Another. My mentor, the great Mordred the Black, wielded this weapon in battle against mankind's foes for almost four centuries. It sickens me to know it may never be recovered from Helsreach. Nor our armour. Nor our gene-seed. What legacy will we leave once the last of us falls to the filthy blades of these beasts?

One of them roars into my face, spattering my visor with its unclean saliva. Less than a second later, my crozius annihilates its features,

silencing whatever pathetic alien challenge I was supposed to be answering.

My secondary heart has joined the primary. I feel them thudding in concert, but not in unison. My human heart pounds like a tribal drum, fast and hot. Twinned to it in my chest, my gene-grown heart supports it in a slow, heavy thud.

They swarm over each other in their mindless fervour to claw at us. Fistfuls of scrap metal that have no right to function as weapons cough solid rounds that clang off our armour. Each shot tears more of the black paint from our war-plate but sheds none of Dorn's holy blood.

At last, they recognise the threat we represent. The aliens abandon their wanton slaughter of the fleeing civilians that still spill from the shell-broken wall. The mob of beasts, flooding the street, has turned to more tempting prey. Us.

Our banner falls.

Artarion's cry of pain carries across the close-range vox as a roar of distortion, but I hear his voice beneath the interference.

Priamus is with him before the rest of us can react. Throne, he can fight. His blade lunges and cuts, every gesture a killing blow.

'Get up,' he snarls at Artarion without even looking.

I crash the faceplate of my helm into the barking maw of the alien before me, shattering its jaw and the rows of shark-like teeth. As it falls back, my crozius crunches into its throat, hammering its wrecked corpse to the ground.

The banner rises again, though Artarion favours his left leg. The right is mauled, his thigh punctured by an alien spear. Curse the fact these beasts have the strength to violate Adeptus Astartes war-plate.

Another vox-distorted growl signifies Artarion has pulled the lance free from his leg. I have no time to witness his recovery. More beasts shriek before me – a thrashing wall of sick, jade flesh.

‘We’re losing this road,’ Bastilan grunts, his signal marred by the sound of weapons crashing against his armour. ‘We are but six, against a legion.’

‘Five.’ Nerovar’s voice is strained as he fights with his chainblade two-handed, hewing down the beasts with none of Priamus’s artistry but no less fury. ‘Cador is dead.’

‘Forgive me, brother,’ Bastilan’s voice breaks off as he fires a stream of bolter shells at point-blank range. ‘A moment’s lack of focus.’

Ahead, our targets – three junkyard tanks that have long since ceased to resemble their original Imperial Guard hulls – continue shelling the shelter block. These have none of the security offered by the subterranean shelters, for they are not civilian evacuation shelters at all. Each of these squat domes houses a thousand at capacity, designed to resist violent sandstorms and the tropical cyclones all too common on the equatorial coast – not sustained shelling from enemy armour. They are used now because there is nothing else to use, with the city grown far beyond its capacity to shelter all its citizens beneath the ground.

The beasts know us well. They seek to draw the city’s forces into the most fevered fighting, so they hurl themselves at our defenceless civilians with sick cunning, knowing we will do all we can to defend these sites above any others.

How easy it is, to despise them.

‘Gnnh,’ Nerovar voxes, his voice wet and ruined by pain. I vault the falling corpse of the alien closest to me, and stand by his side – maul swinging with relentless motion – as our Apothecary struggles to rise again.

He fails. The beasts have brought him to his knees.

‘Gnnnnnh. Not coming out,’ he coughs. His hands clutch weakly at the axe hammered into his stomach. His gauntlets stroke without strength along the haft, gaining no grip. Blood from the sunder in his armour is painting his tabard scarlet. ‘Can’t do it.’

‘In the name of the Emperor,’ my chastisement comes forth as no more than a low growl, ‘stand and fight, or we all die.’

With Nerovar wounded and prone, he becomes a lodestone for the creatures desperate to deliver the death blow to one of the Emperor’s knights. They bellow and charge.

My crozius kills one. A kick to the sternum sends another staggering back long enough for me to bring the maul down on its head. A third is claimed by plasma fire, tumbling back as a blur of white-hot flame. Stinging ash, all that remains of the wretched alien, blasts back into the eyes of its bestial comrades.

Too many.

Even for us, this is too many.

I have a momentary glimpse of human families fleeing in all directions down the burning streets, able to escape while the horde focuses its fury on us. Several of the civilians are cut down by sponson fire from the junk-tanks, but many more survive – even if only to run blind into the unsafe labyrinth of their dying city. Before this war, I would never have counted such a thing to be a victory.

With a cry that mixes anger and pain, Nero tears the axe blade from his abdomen. Any relief I feel is swallowed, for he has no time to rise before the beasts are on us.

‘I see some knights,’ Andrej said. This announcement was followed by a whispered ‘*Damn it,*’ and the humming of his hellgun powering up again.

The work gang kept their backs to the rooftop’s low wall, with only Andrej peering over the edge to look down into the street. ‘Everybody, load rifles and be very ready.’

‘How many?’ Maghernus asked. ‘How many knights?’

‘Four. No, five. One is injured. I also see thirty of the enemy, and three tanks that were once our Leman Russes. Now, no more talking. Everybody take aim.’

The dockworkers did as ordered, drawing beads on the melee unfolding below.

‘Aim low,’ Maghernus told his men, drawing a silent smile from Andrej. ‘Aim for legs and torsos.’ No one needed to be told to be careful with their fire and not hit the Templars.

The storm trooper fired first, his bright lance of laser the signal for the others to join in. Lasguns bucked in increasingly sure hands, focusing lenses burning as they spat their lethal energy into the street below. The tearing laser fire punched into shoulders, legs, backs and arms, and the Imperials had managed three volleys before the beasts ripped their hungry attention from the knights and returned fire up at the men crouching on the warehouse rooftop.

‘Down!’ Andrej ordered the others. They obeyed, sinking back into cover. The storm trooper hunched lower, but remained where he was. He risked another shot, and another, splitting two aliens through the skull with pinpoint fire.

Around him, around them all, the low wall edging the roof was shredding under the surviving aliens’ fire, but it didn’t matter. The knights were free. Andrej crouched at last, after seeing the figure of one Templar, the knight’s armour more gunmetal grey than black now from battle damage, hurl aside three attackers and lay waste to them with his monstrous, crackling relic hammer.

His last act before falling back was to untrap his last det-pack, and set the timer for six seconds. With a roar of effort, Andrej hurled it down at street towards the tanks. It exploded a half-second after clanging against the lead tank’s turret, decapitating the war machine in a burst of noise and fire.

The Templars could deal with the other two.

‘Back!’ the storm trooper was laughing. ‘Back across the roof!’

‘What the hell is so funny?’ one of the dockworkers, Jassel, was complaining as they ran in crouches away from the disintegrating roof edge.

‘They weren’t just knights,’ Andrej’s voice was coloured by a sincere grin. ‘That was the Reclusiarch we just saved. Now, quick quick, down to the street again.’

In the calm that followed, the streets gave birth to an atmosphere that was somewhere between serene and funereal. A very different warrior greeted Maghernus this time. The towering figure was far from the regal, impassive statue that merely acknowledged his existence with a nod.

The Reclusiarch’s armour still set his teeth on edge, its active hum making his eyes water if he stood too close. But Maghernus knew machines, even if he didn’t know ancient artefacts of war, and he could hear the faults in the war-plate now. Its once-smooth, angry purr had a waspish edge to its tone, and intermittent clicks told of something internal no longer running at full function. The joints of the battered armour no longer snarled with tensing fibre-cable muscles – they growled, as if reluctant to move.

Five weeks. Five weeks of fighting, night and day, in the same suit of armour, with the dock assault rising as the most punishing week yet. It was a miracle the armour still functioned at all.

The tabard was ripped and stained grey-green with alien blood. The scrolls that had adorned the warrior’s shoulders were gone, with only snapped chains showing they were ever held there at all. The armour itself was still impressive in its violent potential and faceless inhumanity, but where it had been blacker than black before the war, most of the blackness remaining was from scorch marks and laser burns marking the armour like bruises and claw wounds. Much of the war-plate was revealed in a dull, unpolished grey now that the paint was lost to a thousand weapon chops and glancing gunshots.

Somehow, it had the inelegant presence of a rifle or tank churned out of an Armageddon factory: plain, simple, but utterly brutal.

The other Templars looked no better. The one who bore the Reclusiarch's standard now bore battle damage akin to his leader. The banner itself was a ragged ruin, little more than scraps hanging from the pole. The one with the white helm was barely able to stand, supported by two of the others. The voice that rasped from his mouth grille was a wordless, hacking cough.

And rather than humanise them, rather than reveal the warriors beneath the trappings and the knightly war gear, this damage instead stole what little personality had ever been in evidence to human eyes. How could any men, even ones shaped by genetic forges on a distant world, withstand so much punishment and survive? How could they stand before others of their own species and seem so utterly unlike them?

'Hello, Reclusiarch,' said Andrej. He carried his hellgun, uncharged now, resting on his shoulder. He thought this made him look rakish and casual, and he was right. He looked that way to the dockworkers, at least.

Grimaldus's voice didn't growl or boom – it intoned, a low and bleak and grim drawl. It was all too easy to imagine this man back aboard a great, gothic warship, speaking a sermon to his brothers in the endless cold of void travel.

'You have the thanks of the Black Templars, storm trooper. And you, dockworkers of Helsreach.'

'It was good timing, I think,' Andrej continued, a vague nod and the same smile showing he thought nothing of conversations with badly-wounded towering inhuman warriors surrounded by slaughtered aliens. 'But the docks, they are not looking good. I am hearing no orders any more. So I see you, noble sirs, and I am wondering: perhaps they can give me orders.'

There was a pause, but not a silent one. The city was never silent, offering up a background chorus of gunfire rattles and the *crump* of distant explosions.

‘All units are called to the shelter blocks. Guard, militia, Adeptus Astartes. All.’

‘Even without my captain’s voice, we have followed that path. But there is more, sir.’

‘Speak.’ Grimaldus looked away now, the silver skull that served as his face glaring in the direction of a burning commerce district several streets away.

‘One of your knights fell at the docks. We have hidden his body from the enemy jackals. The etchings on his armour named him as Anastus.’

The white-helmed Adeptus Astartes spoke, his voice emerging like a man speaking through a mouthful of gruel.

‘Anastus died... as we deployed... last night. Life signs faded fast. Warrior’s death.’

Grimaldus nodded, his attention restored to the humans.

‘What is your name?’ the Reclusiarch asked the storm trooper.

‘Trooper Andrej, 703rd Steel Legion Storm trooper Division, sir.’

‘And yours?’ he asked the next man in line, taking every name until the last, whom he recognised without needing to ask. ‘Dockmaster Tomaz Maghernus,’ the knight grunted, finally. ‘It is good to see you on the field. Courage such as yours belongs at the vanguard.’

Maghernus’s skin crawled, not with distaste but raw awkwardness. How does one reply to such a thing? To say he was honoured? To admit that every muscle in his body ached and he regretted ever volunteering for this madness?

‘Thank you, Reclusiarch,’ he managed.

‘I will remember your names and deeds this day. All of you. Helsreach may burn, but this war is not lost. Every one of your names will be etched

into the black stone pillars of the Valiant Hall aboard the *Eternal Crusader*.’

Andrej nodded. ‘I am very honoured, Reclusiarch, as are these handsome and fine gentlemen with me. But if you could tell my captain about this, I would be even happier.’

The harsh sound emitted from the Reclusiarch’s vox-speakers was somewhere between a bark and a snarl. It took Maghernus several moments to realise it had been a laugh.

‘It will be done, Trooper Andrej. You have my word.’

‘I am hopeful this will also impress the lady I intend to marry.’

Grimaldus wasn’t sure how to reply to that. He settled for, ‘Yes. Good.’

‘Such optimism! But yes, I must find her first. Where do we move now, sir?’

‘West. The shelters in Sulfa Commercialia. The alien dogs are taunting us.’ The Reclusiarch gestured with his massive hammer, the weapon’s power field deactivated for now. Between warehouses and manufactories, distant domes were aflame.

‘See them. Already, they burn.’

Priamus didn’t look where the others did. His attention was lifted higher, to the smog-thick skies.

‘What’s that?’ He gestured skywards, to a ball of flame trailing down. ‘It can’t be what it looks like.’

‘It is,’ Grimaldus replied, unable to look away from the sight.

‘Ayah!’ Andrej cheered as several similar objects appeared, blazing earthwards, leading fiery contrails like comets.

‘What are they?’ asked Maghernus, caught off-guard by the storm trooper’s capering and the knights’ reverence.

‘Drop pods,’ said the Reclusiarch. His silver skull turned amber with the reflection of the burning tank hulls nearby. ‘Adeptus Astartes drop pods.’



CHAPTER XVII

Into the Fires of Battle, Unto the Anvil of War

The Sulfa Commercia district had been a bastion of militia reserves and a strongpoint for the docks' anti-air defences.

The few turrets that remained atop buildings, both automated and manned, fell silent. Around them, the district burned. Above them, ork fighters and bombers dropped their payloads with abandon, barely held in check even when the defence turrets were operational.

Sulfa Commercia, as a trading hub for the western docks that was always densely populated in times of peace, was home to a particularly large concentration of above-ground storm shelters, most of which were already broken by the besieging orks. The enemy advance was at a standstill in this section of the dockyards, not because of Imperial resistance, but because there was so much blood to shed, and so much to destroy. To leave the area devoid of life and in utter ruin meant the aliens had to linger here, slaying with wild joy in their feral eyes.

When writing of the siege in a personal journal some years after the war, Major Lacus of the 61st Steel Legion lamented the 'unbelievable loss of life' that occurred with the dock breaches, citing the destruction of the Sulfa Commercia as 'among the bloodiest events in the Helsreach siege,

which no man, no tank battalion, no legion of Titans could have dreamed of preventing’.

The trading concourse resembled little of its former grandeur. While warehouses were less in evidence here, the houses of the wealthy mercantile families of Helsreach burned just as well, and those citizens that had elected to remain in their homes rather than seek out the subterranean municipal shelters now fell to the same fate as the civilians trapped in the cracked-open storm shelters. The aliens descended without mercy, and no contingent of house guards, no matter how well trained they were, were capable of defending their lords’ estates against the xenos tide that swarmed the docks districts.

The most notable defence – one that captured the spirit of defiance surging throughout the hive’s stunted propaganda machine – was not, as might be suspected, the one that inflicted greatest harm upon the enemy. The estate defence that did the most damage numerically-speaking was performed by the House Farwellian Constabulary, employed for seven generations by the noble Farwell bloodline. Their extended survival wasn’t quite the soul-lifting story that Commissar Falkov and Colonel Sarren were seeking, as the esteemed House Farwell were, in truth, considered decadent pigs in the public eye, and its various scions were no strangers to political scandal, financial investigation, and rumours of trade double-dealing. In short, they performed so well in this district war because they had shrewdly cheated their way to immense wealth, and had a standing army of six hundred soldiers at their beck and call.

A standing army that, it was noted in Imperial records, the Farwells refused to lend to the defence of the docks or the city’s militia.

This sizeable force was also their bane. As words flashed through the orkish ranks that there was a nexus of defence formed at the House Farwell compound, the aliens stormed it en masse, ending the tenacious resistance – and the bloodline itself.

The most notable defence, as stated, was a far cry from this exercise in doomed selfishness. House Tarracine, with only five off-world mercenaries hired as protection, defended their modest estate through a series of guerrilla strikes and automated security traps for nineteen hours. Although their home was destroyed by the invaders, seven family members emerged unscathed in the days after the dock battle, leaving them in a relatively strong position for the rebuilding of the city, with Lord Helius Tarracine's four daughters suddenly pursued with great vigour by weakened and heirless noble bloodlines.

At shelter CC/46, one of the few shelters still intact as the second day of the dock war stretched on, annihilation was averted at the very last moment.

The first drop pod came down with a thunderbolt's force, striking into the roadway leading to the front doors of the sanctuary dome. The ork rabble that had been clamouring in the street was thrown into disarray, and several of the beasts were incinerated in the pod's retro burst or crushed beneath its hammering weight.

The pod's sides blasted open, slamming down into descent ramps which pulverised the beasts that had recovered enough to start beating their axe blades against the green hull.

Across the docks, several more pods rained down, their arrival mirroring the destruction unleashed by the first.

With bolters raised, crashing out round after round, and flamers breathing dragon's breath in hissing gouts of chemical fire, the Salamanders joined their Templars brothers in defence of Hive Helsreach.

'We are seventy in number,' he says to me. Seven squads.

His name is V'reth, a sergeant of the Salamanders' Sixth Company. Before I speak, he says something both humbling and unexpectedly respectful. 'I am honoured to fight at your side, Reclusiarch Grimaldus.'

This confession throws me, and I am not certain I keep my surprise from my voice when I reply.

‘The Templars are in your debt. But tell me, brother, why you have come?’

Around us, my knights and V’reth’s warriors stalk among the dead and the dying, slaying wounded orks with sword thrusts to exposed throats. The storm trooper and his dockworkers follow suit, using the bayonets of their rifles.

V’reth disengages his helm’s seals and lifts it clear. Even having served with the Salamanders before, it is difficult to look upon one of the sons of Nocturne and feel nothing at all. The gene-seed of their primarch reacts to their home world’s viciously radioactive surface. The pigmentation of V’reth’s skin is the same charcoal-black as every unhelmeted warrior of the Chapter I’ve ever seen. His eyes lack pupils and irises. Instead, V’reth stares out at the world around us through orbs of ember red, as if blood has filled his eye sockets and discoloured his eyes in the process.

His true voice is a low, aural embodiment of the igneous rock that leaves the surface of his home world dark, barren and grey. It is all too easy to see how these warriors come from a world of lava rivers and volcanic mountain ranges that turn the sky black.

‘We were the last of the Salamanders in orbit. The Lord of the Fire-born called us to him, and we obeyed.’

I am familiar with the title. I have heard their Chapter Master referred to by this name many times before.

‘Master Tu’Shan, may the Emperor continue to favour him, fights far from here, brother. The Salamanders bleed the enemy many leagues to the east, and the Hemlock river runs black with alien blood.’

V’reth inclines his head in a solemn nod, and his red-eyed gaze rises to take in the shelter dome at the end of this very street.

‘This is so, and it gladdens me to know my brothers fight well enough to earn such words from you, Reclusiarch. The Lord of the Fire-born makes his stand with the war engines of Legios Ignatum and Invigilata.’

‘So answer my question, for time is not our ally. Helsreach burns. Will you stay? Will you fight with us?’

‘We will not stay. We cannot stay.’

I bite back the wrath that rises from disappointment, and the Salamander continues, ‘We are the seventy warriors chosen to make planetfall here and stand with you until the docks are held. My lord and master heard of the assured civilian devastation in the fall of this city’s coastal districts.’

‘Few messages reach the ears of our allies elsewhere in the world. Few messages from them reach us.’

‘The Salamanders were not blind to your plight, honoured Reclusiarch. Master Tu’Shan heard. We are his blade, his will, to ensure the survival of the city’s most innocent souls.’

‘And then you will leave.’

‘And then we will leave. Our fight is along the banks of the Hemlock. Our glory is there.’

This gesture alone is enough to earn my eternal gratitude. For the first time in decades, emotion steals the words I wish to voice. This is all we needed. This is salvation.

We can hurt them now.

I remove my own helm, breathing in the first taste of Helsreach’s sulphuric air in... weeks. Months.

V’reth inhales deeply, doing the same.

‘This city,’ he smiles, teeth white against his onyx features, ‘it smells like home.’

The heated wind feels good on my skin. I offer my hand to V’reth, and he grips my wrist – an alliance between warriors.

‘Thank you,’ I tell him, meeting his inhuman eyes.

‘If you are needed elsewhere,’ V’reth matches my gaze with his own, ‘then go to your duty, honoured Reclusiarch. We stand with you, for now. And together, we will not let these docks fall.’

‘First, tell me of the orbital war. What news of the *Crusader*?’

‘The deadlock remains. It grieves me to say this, but it is so. We are shattering the enemy, battle by battle, but it is like hurling fire at stone. Little is achieved against such an overwhelming foe. It will take weeks before your High Marshal dares a full assault to reclaim the heavens. He is a shrewd warrior. My brothers and I were honoured to serve with him in the fleet.’

To hear his words is like a lifeline. A connection to existence beyond the broken walls of this accursed city. I press him for more.

‘What of Tempestus Hive? They suffered as we did.’

‘Fallen. Lost to the enemy, its forces in retreat. The last word from any remnant of command structure was that the city was being abandoned, and its retreating survivors were making their way overland to connect with the Guard regiments serving alongside my lord and master.’

Scattered defence forces and Guard units, crossing hundreds of kilometres of wasteland. Such tenacity was to be admired.

This world will never recover, that much is clear. Fatalism may not be bred into my bones, but there is no valour in living a lie. What we do here is defiance – the selling of life as dearly as possible. We are not fighting to win, but waging war out of spite.

This Salamander, brother though he may be, has a destiny beyond this city. I relent to it.

‘Coordinate the dispersal of squads with Sergeant Bastilan. Focus your efforts on the westernmost districts, where the bulk of storm shelters are to be found. Bastilan will provide you with the required vox frequencies to connect with the storm troopers leading the civilian defences. Do not

expect clarity in communications. Many of the city's vox-relay towers have fallen.'

'It will be done, Reclusiarch.'

'For the Emperor.' I release V'reth's wrist. His reply is a curious one, betraying his Chapter's unique focus.

'For the Emperor,' he says, 'and His people.'

Jurisian, Master of the Forge and knight of the Emperor, threw his head back and laughed. He had not laughed in many years, for he was not a soul given to humour. What he was seeing now however struck him as immensely funny. So he laughed, without meaning to.

The sound echoed throughout the immense chamber, resounding off metal-reinforced walls of stone and the hulking adamantium shape that stretched for fifty metres into the darkness.

The Ordinatus Armageddon. *Oberon*.

Jurisian's armour had been the only sound in the chamber for hours, the overlaid ceramite plating clacking and whirring as he moved around the great weapon. He'd circled it several dozen times, staring, scanning, taking in every detail with his own eyes and his war-plate's auspex sensors.

It was, without question, the most beautiful creation he had ever laid his augmented eyes upon.

In aesthetics, perhaps it would not appeal to a poet or a painter. But that was hardly the point. In power, it would appeal to any general in the Imperium. It was a triumph of design and intent, a glorious success in mankind's quest to master a greater ability to destroy its enemies.

The great construct consisted of a strong, three-sectioned base that held up a weapons platform on gantries and struts. Atop the platform was the weapon itself. Jurisian considered each aspect of the war machine in turn, silent in its deactivation.

From the front, *Oberon* was as wide as two bulky Land Raider battle tanks side by side. Its length was fifty metres in total, giving it the appearance of a land train, long and segmented. Immense to say the least, it was of approximate size to a towering battle Titan lying on its back.

The war machine's base was divided into three sections – a helm segment, the drive module, with a reinforced cockpit chamber; a thorax section next, pinned under the weight of massive metal stanchions; lastly, an abdomen segment, bearing the same weight as the section before. Each of these base sections was bulked up further by side-mounted power generators, shielded behind yet more armour plating. These, Jurisian knew, were the gravitational suspensor generators. Anti-gravitational technology on such a scale was no longer heard of in the Imperium, except for the deployment of war machines of this calibre.

These generators' rarity made them the most precious thing on the entire planet, bar nothing.

The stanchions and gantries supported the colossal weapons platform, which in turn housed dozens of square metres of energy pods, fusion chambers and magnetic field generators. It was as if an industrial manufactory had been installed on the back of a column of tanks.

These generators would, if active, supply power to the land train's weapon mount: a tower of a cannon forged of heat-shielded ceramite and joined to the forward power generators. Coolant vents ran the length of the cannon like reptilian scales. Like parasitic worms, nests of secondary power feed cables hung from the barrel, while industrial support claws held the weapon in place.

A nova cannon. A weapon used by starships to end one another across the immensity of the void. Here it was, mounted on priceless and infinitely-armoured anti-gravitational technology from a forgotten age.

'Titan-killer,' the Master of the Forge whispered.

Jurisian reverently stroked his gloved fingertips down the drive section's metallic skin, feeling the thick armour plating, the chunky rivets... down to the miniscule differences in the layers of adamantium: the tiniest variations and imperfections from its forging process hundreds of years before.

He'd withdrawn his hand, and that was when he'd laughed.

Oberon, the Death of Titans. It was real. It was here.

And it was his.

He gained access to the forward command module through a ladder leading to a bulkhead that required opening manually. Once inside the powerless cockpit chamber, Jurisian spared a glance for the winches, levers and black, blank screens along the drive console. It was all new, all alien to him, but nothing he considered beyond his intuition and Mechanicus training. Another bulkhead barred his way to the second module. With the *Ordinatus* powered down, this one also required him to manually turn the iron wheel on its surface.

The door squealed open with the reluctance of an unused airlock. Jurisian's gaze pierced the blackness beyond with aid from his helm's vision filters. It was confined and claustrophobic, despite there being little in the module beyond armoured pods fixed to the walls that housed the power generators for the anti-grav lifters, and crew ladders leading up into the main generatorium on the platform above. Jurisian ascended, opening another two bulkheads as he rose through the support gantries.

The innards of the platform-top generatorium were familiar enough in their cluttered, industrial layout. He stood within the heart of a spaceship's weapon system, condensed to offer less range and power, but on a more manoeuvrable and manageable scale. The projectiles from this sacred cannon didn't, after all, have to travel across thousands of kilometres of open space to strike a target.

It was, bluntly speaking, the sawn-off shotgun of nova cannon technology. The notion brought a smile to Jurisian's mirthless lips.

It took a further three hours of investigation, feed-checks and generator testing to ascertain whether the Ordinatus Armageddon could be reactivated, and how such a feat could be achieved.

The result at the close of the investigations was a bittersweet one.

This weapon of war should have been crewed by dozens of specialist skitarii, magi and tech-adepts, born and raised for this purpose above all others. It should have been ritually blessed by the Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus and its newest duty inscribed upon its hull alongside the ninety-three prayers of reawakening.

Instead of the chanting and worship due to the spirit of such a war engine, the soul of *Oberon* awoke in silence and darkness. Its vague, reforming consciousness did not detect a gestalt host of abased Centurio Ordinatus minds supplicating themselves for its attention, but a single other soul in union with its own.

This soul was strong: ironclad and dominant.

It identified itself as Jurisian.

In the drive module, his brain, spine and body armour linked via telemetry cables to the interface feeds in the princeps throne, the Master of the Forge closed his eyes. Around him, the systems flared into life. Scanners chimed as they began to see again. Overhead lights flickered and held at low illumination settings.

With a great shudder and the accompanying thrumming of power generators coming back to life, all three modules shook once, twice, and jolted hard.

In the drive section, Jurisian lurched in his seat. He hadn't jolted forward, but *up*.

Five metres up.

There the modules remained, cradled on a pulsing anti-grav field that distorted the ground below with something that was, and was not, a heat-shimmer.

‘**Activation Phase One,**’ the war machine’s voice issued from vox-speakers around the command module.

Beneath the mechanical tone seethed a roiling, uncoiling hatred. Jurisian bowed his head in respect, but did not cease his work.

‘My brothers call me to Helsreach,’ he spoke into the cold control pod, expecting no answer and receiving none. ‘And though that may mean nothing, I know that war calls to you.’

Through the interface connection, the spirit of *Oberon* growled, the sound inhuman and untranslatable.

Jurisian nodded. ‘I thought so.’

Asavan Tortellius lingered over a single phrase.

He had no idea how to describe just how cold he was.

Around him, the deserted cathedral still bore more than its share of wall scars and battle damage. On a fallen block of masonry, the acolyte composed his memoirs of the Helsreach war, while the great Titan pitched slowly forward and back in the rough rhythm of walking. Occasionally, air pressure and gravity would exert themselves on his left or right side, as *Stormherald* rounded a corner. As he had done for years, Asavan ignored these things.

The ruined cathedral around him was altogether harder to ignore. It still appeared much as it had over thirty days ago, when the alien brutes had brought the god-machine to its knees. The statues still lay as alabaster corpses in broken, facedown repose, limbs cracked off to lie several metres distant. The walls were still decorated by gunfire holes and ugly cracks that cobwebbed outwards from impact points. The stained glass windows – his only succour from the irritation of the Shield above – were

still gaping holes in the war-blackened architecture, as unpleasant to look upon as missing teeth in the smile of a saint.

Day in, day out, Asavan sat in the lonely, contemplative quiet of the cathedral, and composed what he knew full well were poorly-worded poems commemorating the coming victory in Hive Helsreach. He would destroy well over half of what he wrote, sometimes wincing as he reread the words he'd brought into being.

But of course, there was no one else to witness them. Not here.

The cathedral had stood almost empty since it had been besieged. The Templars had come, 'in purity, protecting us, and in wrath, indefatigable,' Asavan had written (before deleting the cringe-worthy words forever), but they had come too late to do much more than preserve the wounded, hollow bones of *Stormherald's* monastery. Weeks had passed since. Weeks during which nothing had changed, nothing had been repaired.

Asavan was one of the few people still living in the cathedral. His fellows consisted mainly of servitors hardwired into the battlement turrets, slaved to the targeting and reloading systems along the walls. He saw these wretches often, because it had become his duty to keep them alive. The lobotomised, augmented once-humans were little more than limbless and slack-jawed automatons installed in life support cradles next to their turret cannons, and had no means to sustain their own existences. Several had lost their feed/waste bio connection cables with the damage taken in the siege, and even all these weeks later, the remaining magi in *Stormherald's* main body had not reached repairs so minor on the long list of abuses in need of correcting. Key systems took priority, and few enough Mechanicus adepts remained alive as it was. The fighting had been fierce below, as well.

So it fell to Asavan, as one of the few cathedral survivors, to spoonfeed these mindless creatures with soft protein-rich paste in order to keep them from dying, and flush their waste filters once a week.

He did this not because he was ordered to, or because he particularly cared about the continuing functionality of the handful of battlement cannons that were still unscathed. He did it because he was bored, and because he was lonely. It was the second week when he started talking to the unresponsive servitors. By the fourth, they all had names and backstories.

At first, Asavan had sought to order one of the seven medial servitors still patrolling the cathedral to perform these actions, but their programming was cripplingly limited. One was mono-tasked with walking from room to room, broom in hand, sweeping up any dust from the boots of the faithful.

Well, there were no faithful any more. And the servitor had no broom. Asavan had known the servitor before his augmentation, as a particularly dull-witted acolyte that earned his fate for stealing coins from his lay-brothers. His punishment was to be rendered into a bionic slave, and Asavan had shed no tears at the time. Still, it was no joy to see the simple creature stagger from chamber to chamber, clacking the broken end of a brushless broomstick against the rubble-strewn ground, never getting closer to cleaning up the mess, and unable to rest until its duty was done. It refused orders to cease work, and Asavan suspected what was left of its mind had been broken at some point during the battle. An unnoticed head wound, perhaps.

Six weeks in, the servitor had collapsed in the middle of a row of broken pews, its human parts no longer able to function without rest. Asavan had done with it as he'd done with all of the slain. He and the handful of survivors threw the body overboard. A morbid curiosity (and one that he always regretted afterwards) compelled him to watch as the bodies fell fifty metres to rupture on the ground below. Asavan took no thrill or amusement from such sights, but found he could never look away. In work he quickly erased, he confessed to himself that seeing the bodies fall was a

means of reminding himself he was still alive. Whatever the truth of the situation, the sights gave him nightmares. He wondered how soldiers could get used to such things, and why they would ever want to.

His main concern this past week was the cold.

With the Titan committed to battle for this prolonged engagement, the damage it had sustained in the ambush weeks ago was forever being repaired, compensated for, and re-aggravated by new war wounds sustained in the conflict. The command crew (*'blessings be upon them as they lead us to triumph,'* Asavan still whispered) were drawing ever-increasing maintenance attention and power from secondary systems throughout the Titan.

Minor systems went unrepaired by the adept tech-teams that were already spread thin throughout the gigantic construct and dealing with the vital systems. Some systems even went powerless as energy feeds were drained and disconnected, their thrumming fuel flooded to the plasma cells used to power the Shield and the main weapons.

A week ago, the heating systems to the cathedral had been drained to the point of no longer functioning. With typical Mechanicus efficiency, there were secondary and tertiary fallback options in the case of such a development. Unfortunately for Asavan and the few acolytes left alive up there, both the secondary and tertiary contingencies were lost. The secondary fallback had been a smaller, self-sustaining generator that fed itself from a power source reserve that was linked to nothing else, and could therefore never be drained for other purposes. The generator was now no more than scrap metal in the ruined mess that had once been the cathedral's maintenance deck.

The generator's destruction also annihilated the tertiary contingency plan, which was for four mono-tasked servitors – good for nothing else – to be activated and set to turn the generator's manual pumps by hand. Even

if the generator had been fully functional, all four of the servitors were killed in the battle five weeks ago.

Asavan had gamely tried to turn the first of the hand-cranks himself, but lacking a servitor's strength meant all he achieved was a sore back. The crank never moved a centimetre.

So now, here he sat on a fallen pillar, trying to compose something to describe how bone-achingly cold he was, and how bone-achingly cold he had been for the last six days.

In place of organs, *Stormherald* possessed a generator core of intensely radioactive and fusion-hot plasma. Asavan found it a curious paradox that the heart of a sun was hermetically sealed and insulated many decks below him, yet here he was, on the edge of freezing to death.

These were the kinds of observations that he would write down, and then destroy in shame at daring to complain while so many innocent Imperial souls were out there in the burning city, dying moment by moment.

It was in that moment Asavan Tortellius decided he would change fate himself. He would not freeze to death on the Titan's back, in this hollow monastery. Nor would he gripe about the cold while thousands of deserving and loyal people died in their droves.

His fellow acolytes had never been kind to him regarding his intelligence, but people could say what they wished about his wits, slow or otherwise – Asavan liked to believe he always arrived at the right answer eventually. And now he had.

Yes. It was time to make a difference to the people of Helsreach.

It was time to leave the Titan.



CHAPTER XVIII

Consolidation

Three more nights passed as every day had passed before them. The docks were lost at dawn on the sixth day after the submersible assault.

The defeat was unusual enough to bring the Imperial commanders together again. Around the battle-damaged hull of the *Grey Warrior*, Sarren gathered the leaders. In the dawn gloom, most of the Guard colonels were dead on their feet with fatigue, several showing telltale signs of combat narcotics to keep them going – a twitch here, a shiver there. Overtaxed minds and muscles could only be kept active for so long, even with stimulants.

Sarren wouldn't reprimand them for this. In times of need, men did as they must in order to hold the line.

'We've lost the docks,' he said, and his voice was as tired and scratchy as he felt. This was not news to any of the gathered officers. As the colonel outlined the details of what little remained of the dock districts, a Chimera rumbled up to park in the *Grey Warrior's* shadow. The crew ramp slammed down, and two people disembarked. The first was Cyria Tyro, her uniform still clean but clearly ruffled from constant wear. The second was dressed in a pilot's grey flightsuit.

‘I’ve found him,’ Tyro said, leading the pilot to the gathered commanders.

‘Captain Helius reporting,’ the pilot saluted Sarren. ‘Commander Jenzen died two nights ago, sir.’

Third in line, after Jenzen and Barasath? They were lucky to have any flyers left.

‘A pleasure, captain.’

‘As you say, sir.’

Sarren nodded, returning the aquila salute with his wounded arm still aching like a jungle wildfire. A morning breeze, chilling and unwelcome, gusted across the stretch of the Hel’s Highway. The Baneblade’s hull blocked most of the wind, but not enough as far as Sarren was concerned. Throne, he was tired of aching all over.

‘Remaining forces?’

‘Three airstrips, though it looks like the Gamma Road will fall today; it’s been besieged for days now. At last count, we had twenty-six Lightnings remaining. Only seven Thunderbolts. Gamma Road is already being evacuated and the fighters are landing on the Vancia Chi Avenue.’

Sarren made a grumbling noise. He still lamented the loss of Barasath and the majority of his air power, even after all this time.

‘Intentions?’

‘Currently, no change from Jenzen’s orders. Provide air support for embattled Titan forces and armour battalions. The enemy are still showing next to no offensive capacity in the air. It’s reasonable to suggest that, this far in, they’ve simply got nothing left.’

‘Was that a barb, captain?’

Helius saluted again. ‘By no means, sir.’

Sarren smiled, the indulgent grin ruined by weariness. ‘If it was, it’s forgiven. Barasath was right, and he sold his life at great cost to give us an edge in the air. The beasts have thrown up nothing but a handful of scrap-

fighters since the siege began, and I've already noted on the campaign record – as well as Barsath's personal file – that he made the right call.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm sorry to hear about Jenzen. She was an asset we'll greatly miss: solid, reliable, steady.'

And she had been. Commander Carylin Jenzen, for better or worse, had been a by-the-book flyer, dependable and constant, if rather uninspired. Under her, the city's air forces had maintained a campaign of reliable defensive support for over a month. The Crone of Invigilata herself had commended Jenzen's endeavours in recent weeks.

'Sir...' Helius began.

Here it comes... Sarren thought.

'I had hoped to discuss the possibility of a more aggressive tactical pattern.'

Yes. Yes, of course you had hoped to discuss that.

'In good time. For now, the docks.'

Sarren nodded back to the gathered officers. Cyria Tyro and Captain Helius joined them, standing next to one another. Major Ryken scowled at the pilot, and Sarren resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *Bloody Throne, Ryken. Now is hardly the time for schoolyard jealousy.*

'We did not lose the docks,' one of the Adeptus Astartes argued, his vox-voice laden with resonant calm. Colonel Sarren had not met Sergeant V'reth of the Salamanders before this morning. He knew from vox-traffic that the green-armoured warriors had deployed close to the remaining civilian shelters and their valour was directly responsible for a great many lives spared.

But it seemed his tactical outlook varied wildly from the colonel's.

'I'm not sure I understand, sir,' Sarren offered.

V'reth's armour was dented and scratched, but remained pristine in comparison to the wreckage worn by the Reclusiarch at his side. A golden-

eyed helm glared down at the human officers.

‘I am merely stating, Colonel Sarren, that we did not lose the docks. The enemy is beaten. The seaborne invasion was denied, for the city still stands. The invaders lie dead at the docks.’

This was and wasn’t true, from the way Sarren looked at it. The disparity was the reason the colonel had called this gathering.

‘Allow me to amend my appraisal. The docks are gone. As an industrial factor in Armageddon’s collective output, Helsreach no longer exists. We’re receiving reports now of ninety-one per cent harm to the city’s refinery infrastructure, taking into account the loss of the offshore oil platforms.’

The soldiers shared uncomfortable glances. The Imperium demanded heavy tithes of materiel from Armageddon. If the other hive cities suffered as Helsreach had, the grade of Exactis Extremis would be lowered significantly. Certainly to Solutio Tertius, and perhaps to Aptus Non. If Armageddon provided nothing, it would be offered little in return. The Imperium would turn away. Without the support and finances to recover after the war, the world might never recover.

‘However, all is not dark. As the noble Sergeant V’reth makes clear, thanks to the tenacity of the dockworker population, our own storm troopers, and our Adeptus Astartes allies, the xenos were repelled.’

At insane cost, he decided not to add. Tens of thousands dead in four days. The city’s industry reduced to a worthless husk.

‘We have received further word from the Crone of Invigilata,’ the colonel continued. What he had to say next almost caught in his throat. ‘The most honourable Legio Invigilata has been petitioned by outside forces to leave the city.’

‘She will stay.’ The Reclusiarch’s tone was cold even through his helm’s vox-speakers. ‘She swore to fight.’

‘As I understand it, the Imperial advances along the length of the Hemlock River are grinding to a halt. The settlements there, protected by the Salamanders and regiments of the Cadian Shock, are now considered a higher priority than the city.’ Sarren let the words resonate for a few moments. ‘This is from the Old Man himself. It came over the vox an hour ago.’

Grimaldus snarled as he spoke, ‘I do not care. Our mandate is to defend Helsreach.’

‘*Our* mandate, yes. But Princeps Zarha’s mandate was to deploy where she desired. Most of the Legio Invigilata is already stationed along the Hemlock and across the wastelands, alongside elements from Ignatum and Metalica.’

‘She will not leave,’ Grimaldus snorted. ‘She is here until the end.’

Sarren felt his ire rising at the way the Reclusiarch dismissed his concerns with such blasé finality. On another day, another morning, after any other week of fighting, he would have reined in his emotions better. As it was, he sighed and closed his gritty eyes.

‘Enough, *please*, Reclusiarch. *Stormherald* is embattled seven kilometres down the Hel’s Highway, with an enemy scrap-Titan battalion in the Rostorik Ironworks. She has given no further word of her decision.’

Grimaldus crossed his arms over his ruined heraldry. ‘Tartarus Hive and the battles along the shores of the Hemlock will be won and lost without us. This war has taken everything from the city, and we are reduced to fighting like desert jackals over Helsreach’s bones. The only question that matters to us is: What can we still save?’

Ryken removed his rebreather and took a deep breath. ‘It may be time to consider the last fallback point.’

Sarren nodded. ‘That’s why we’re here. We stand in the heart of a dying city, and the time has come to decide where we will make our final stand. What of the... weapon, Reclusiarch?’

‘A fool’s hope. The Master of the Forge is a single soul. Without Mechanicus support, Jurisian has been able to do nothing more than activate *Oberon*’s core systems. He can certainly not crew it alone. As of four nights ago, the *Ordinatus* has locomotion, and on his own the Forgemaster is able to fire the Oberon Cannon once every twenty-two minutes. But that is all. It cannot be defended by a lone pilot. It is worthless in battle.’

The colonel’s ire rose again. ‘You waited four days to tell me of this? That the *Ordinatus* has power once more?’

‘I have not waited. I filed coded confirmation across the command network the same night I learned *Oberon* was operational. Yet as I said, it is almost worthless to us.’

‘Is your Forgemaster bringing the weapon to the city?’

‘Of course.’

‘Has the Mechanicus been informed we are defiling their weapon and dragging it into a warzone, almost certain to lose it in its first engagement against the enemy?’

‘Of course not. Are you insane, human? The best weapons are those that remain secret until wielded. This truth would force *Invigilata* to act against us, or to leave the city.’

‘You are not the commander of this city. You surrendered that honour to me. This is information I have been eagerly awaiting, only to find it denied to me because of broken vox-traffic?’

The silver skull breathed out a mechanical growl.

‘I was knee-deep in alien dead at the docks, Sarren, selling the lives of my brothers to ensure the people of your home world lived to see another sunrise. You are tired. I understand the limitations of the human form, and you have my sympathies for them. But remember to whom you are speaking.’

Sarren bit back his disappointment. It wasn't supposed to be like this, yet with the Adeptus Astartes, it always was. Compliant and valuable one moment, superior and distant the next, shaped as much by their fierce independence as they were by their loyalty to the Imperium.

It felt... petty. That was the only word that encapsulated it in the colonel's mind. An awkward divide between humans fighting for their home, and once-humans fighting for intangible ideals and heroic codes of conduct.

'Well...' Sarren began, but knew he had nowhere to go with the words.

'I am not to blame for your malfunctioning vox. It is a plague upon the city's defence, and a burden we must bear. I was not about to abandon the docks to deliver the news into your ears like some enslaved courier, nor would I entrust such a development to any other soul. If the Mechanicus learns of this, we lose Invigilata.'

'None of us had much hope pinned on the Ordinatus,' Ryken said, seeking to defuse the tension. 'It was the longest of long shots, any way you slice it.'

'Have you tried the Mechanicus forces again?' Cyria Tyro asked. Her tone didn't hide the fact she still pinned a great deal of hope on the weapon, despite what Ryken had just said.

'Of course.' The Reclusiarch gestured west along the Hel's Highway, in the direction of *Stormherald* fighting out of sight in the Ironworks. 'Zarha refused as she refused before. It is blasphemy to do what we have done.'

'Still no word from Mechanicus royalty,' Sarren put in. 'Wherever this arch-priest of theirs is, he's not responding to any of our astropathic pleas.'

He spat onto the broken roadway beneath his feet. Indeed, whoever this Lord of the Centurio Ordinatus was, his arrival in the Armageddon system would be far too late to make a difference to Helsreach.

‘At least the weapon may yet be put to use in the defence of other cities,’ the colonel forced a chuckle. ‘We stand on the very edge now. The fallback plan is, however, not something I wish to consider any more. There are few enough surviving Imperial forces left in the city. Let us not gather together for the last days of our lives and offer an easy target.’

‘So it’s over,’ one of the captains said.

‘No,’ Grimaldus answered. ‘But we must keep the enemy locked in the city as long as we can. Each day we survive increases the chances of reinforcement from the Ash Wastes. Each day we hold out costs the enemy more blood, and keeps them here in Helsreach, where they cannot add their axes to the beasts besieging the other cities.’

Ryken scratched at his collar, soothing an itching scar he’d earned the week before.

‘Uh. Sir?’ he said to Sarren.

‘Major?’

Ryken let his expression of disbelief do the talking. Sarren rubbed grit from his eyes with dirty fingertips as he answered. ‘I have studied the hololithic projections in the wake of the dock siege. I have managed, blessings upon the Emperor, to actually maintain a conversation over the vox with Commissar Yarrick that lasted for more than ten seconds, and offered more productivity than merely listening to the crackle of static for once. We are following a pattern being used in several of the other hive cities. The Steel Legion will disperse throughout the city, centring at population centres that remain untouched.’

‘What about the highway?’

‘The enemy already claims most of it, Captain Helius. Let them have the rest. As of this morning, we are no longer fighting to preserve the city. We are fighting to save every life that can be saved. The city is dead, but over half of its people are not.’

The captain scowled, rendering his handsome face immediately unattractive. Unreliable friends borrowed a great deal of money with expressions like that.

‘None of our remaining airstrips are anywhere near civilian population centres. Forgive me for pointing it out, colonel, but that was the very point of setting them up where we did. To hide them.’

‘You did well. And I’m certain you will hold off the enemy for an admirable space of time before you are overrun. Just like the rest of us.’

‘We need to be defended!’

‘No. You would *like* to be defended. You do not wish to die. None of us do, captain. But I command the Steel Legion, and the Steel Legion marches in defence of the hive’s people now. I cannot spare regiments of men just to continue covering the air squadron’s inexorable dance across the city. The plain truth is that there are no longer enough of you to be worth defending. Hide when you must, and fight when you can. If Invigilata stands with us, fly in support of them. If Invigilata leaves, then fly in support of the 121st Armoured Division, who will be based at the Kolav Residentia District, defending the entrances to the subterranean bunkers. Those are your orders.’

The captain’s salute was reluctant. ‘Understood, sir.’

‘The coming weeks will go into Imperial records as the ‘hundred bastions of light’. We no longer have the forces required to defend large swathes of territory. So we will fall back to the cores – the most vital points – and die before we ever give another metre of ground. The Jaega District, with its storm shelters. The Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, at the heart of the Ecclesiarchal sector. The Azal Spaceport in the Dis industrial sector. The Purgatori Refinery, that blessedly still stands on the docks. A list of primary and secondary defence points is being circulated over the vox-network and via hundreds of courier teams throughout the city.’

The colonel turned to the hulking figures of the Adeptus Astartes. ‘Sergeant V’reth, the people of Helsreach and Armageddon offer their thanks to you and your brothers for the assistance. You’ll quit the city today?’

‘The Lord of the Fire-born calls.’

‘Quite so, quite so. I offer my personal thanks. Without your arrival, many more would have lost their lives.’

V’reth made the sign of the aquila, his green gauntlets forming the familiar shape to mirror the bronze eagle on his chest.

‘You are fighting with ferocity unmatched, Steel Legionnaire. The Emperor sees all and knows all. He sees your sacrifices and your courage in this war, and you are earning your place in the Imperium’s legends. It was an honour to fight at your side, on the streets of your city.’

Sarren glanced between the two Adeptus Astartes – the warrior and the knight. He could not doubt the valour of the Templars in past weeks, but Throne, if only he’d had the Salamanders here. They were everything the Templars were not: communicative, supportive, *reliable*...

He found himself offering his hand. A moment’s tension followed the gesture, as the towering warrior remained unmoving. Then, with care, the Salamander held the colonel’s small, human hand in a shake. The joints of the sergeant’s power armour hummed with the minor movement.

‘The honour was ours, V’reth. Hunt well in the wastelands, and give my thanks to your lord.’

The Reclusiarch watched this in silence. No one knew what expression was masked by his relic helm.

Once the discussion is done, I walk from the gathered humans. V’reth remains with me, shadowing my movements. Away from the pitted and cracked hull of Sarren’s Baneblade, I slow in my stride to allow him to catch up. Does V’reth not have his own orders to obey? Does the Hemlock not call? Curious that he chooses to remain.

‘What do you want, Salamander?’

As we walk along the Hel’s Highway, I cannot help but stare at the city below. The platformed road rises above the habitation blocks here, once allowing traffic to rattle through the heart of the city between the spires of its tall residential towers. Now it remains aloft – a rockcrete wave riding above urban devastation. The buildings here are flattened, reduced to rubble by the enemy’s scrap-Titans and shelling from our own forces.

Across the city, the Highway has come down in several places. Fortunate that it has not done so here, as well.

‘To speak, if you are willing, Reclusiarch.’

‘I would be honoured,’ I tell him, but this is a lie. We have spent a week fighting together, side by side, and although his presence was invaluable, his warriors are not knights. Too often, they fell back to guard civilian shelters rather than press the attack and prevent the enemy from escaping. Too often they withstood repeated assaults rather than strike first and eliminate any need of further retaliation.

Priamus loathes them, but I do not. Their ways are not our ways. It is not cowardice that drives them to these tactics, but rather tradition. Yet still, their valour is as alien to me as the disgusting savagery of the orks.

It is difficult to hold my tongue. I wish him to leave before honesty stains the deeds we have achieved together, and before truth spoken too brutally threatens the alliance between our respective Chapters.

‘My brothers and I came to this city without the illuminating guidance of our Chaplain. We would offer reverent thanks if you would lead us in prayer before we quit the city and rejoin our Chapter by the shores of the Hemlock.’

‘I know little of your Chapter’s cult and creed, Salamander.’

‘We know this, Reclusiarch. Still, we would offer sincere thanks.’

It is a magnificent and bold gesture, and I know it honours me far more than it would honour them if I agreed. To lead brothers from another

Chapter in prayer is beyond merely rare. It is almost unheard of. In my life, I can recall only one such instance, and that was with our gene-brothers and fellow sons of Dorn, the Crimson Fists, when the Declates system burned.

‘Think of the battle last night,’ I tell him. ‘Think of the rooftop battle in the Nergal district. There was one moment in the chaos that still preys upon my mind. It casts a shadow over us now, like an enemy’s spear threatening to fall.’

He hesitates. This is clearly not the way he thought his request would be answered. ‘What aspect of the battle troubles you, Reclusiarch?’

A fine question.

The beast falls from my hands, its skull broken, to die at my feet.

I hear the burning hiss of Priamus’s blade tearing through alien flesh. I hear the strained snarls of meat-clogged chainblades. I hear the yelling of panicked humans as they cower in the storm shelter, their fear reaching my senses through the armour-plated walls.

Another creature snarls in my face, spitting thick saliva over my faceplate. It dies as Artarion’s bolter kicks once from a few metres away, shearing its malformed head off in a burst of gore.

‘Focus,’ he grunts over the vox.

I return the favour a moment later, my maul pounding into a beast that sought to leap at him from behind.

The battle is close, down to pistols, blades and the crashing beat of fists into faces. In the centre of the expansive plaza, the thickly-armoured storm shelter endures siege from close to two hundred of the enemy.

Footing is treacherous. Our boots are stamping down on pools of cooling blood and the bodies of dead dockworkers. The Salamanders are...

Curse them all...

Priamus blocked a cut from the closest ork, the beast's chopping sword deflected with a shower of sparks from the brief blade contact.

He killed it with the riposte – an ugly strike he felt no pride for, slipping past the creature's non-existent guard and ramming the blade's point into the beast's exposed neck.

The brute's axe slammed with clanging force against the side of his helm. His vision receptors showed angry static for two seconds.

Not deep enough. The swordsman yanked back with the blade, and on the second plunge he hilted it in the ork's collarbone. The beast collapsed in a heap of dead limbs.

Priamus resisted the urge to laugh.

The next ork to leap at him came with two of its brothers. The first fell to Priamus's blade lashing out to carve through its torso, the energised blade going through meat and bone like soft clay. The second and third would have had a fair chance at overpowering him, had they not been battered to the ground by a sweep of the Reclusiarch's maul.

'Where are the Salamanders?' he voxed, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

'They're holding.'

'They're what?'

Bastilan's fist vibrated with the crashing judder of his bolter. Streaks of alien blood painted his battered armour yet again.

Recriminations spilled out over the vox. The Salamanders weren't advancing with the Templars. The Templars were pushing ahead too far, too fast.

'Follow us, in the name of the Throne!' Bastilan added his voice to the vox-chatter.

'Fall back,' came the staid voice of Sergeant V'reth. 'Fall back to the eastern platform and be ready to engage the second wave.'

‘Advance! If we strike now, there will be no second wave. We’re at the warlord’s throat!’

‘Salamanders,’ V’reth spoke calmly, ‘Hold and be ready. Cut down any stragglers that seek to breach the shelter.’

Bastilan kicked a hunched alien in the chest, breaking whatever passed for its rib structure. In the moment’s respite, he ejected his spent bolt magazine and slammed a fresh one home.

They were advancing unsupported, away from the shelter, in pursuit of the fleeing orks. Ahead, through the crowd of panicking beasts, Bastilan could see the armoured warlord of this wretched tribe, its staggering gait made all the more pronounced by the ablative armour plating that seemed surgically bolted to its nerveless flesh.

Bolts slashed after the retreating warleader, roaring from the muzzles of Templars fighting their way through a bestial and ferocious rearguard. Several shells detonated against the creature’s armour, while others smacked into the backs and shoulders of fleeing orks around their commander.

‘He’s getting away,’ Bastilan grunted. The words shamed him even to speak them.

‘Fall back,’ came the Reclusiarch’s growl.

‘Sir,’ Bastilan began, coupled with Priamus’s decidedly more annoyed ‘No!’

‘Fall back. This is not worth dying over. We do not have the numbers to spill the warlord’s blood now.’

V’reth, to his credit, nods.

‘I see. You consider this a stain on your personal honour.’

He does not see. ‘No, brother. I consider it a waste of time, ammunition, and life. Two of your own squad were killed in the successive waves that followed. Brother Kaedus and Brother Madoc from my own force were slain. If we had pursued in unity, we could have broken through to the

enemy leader and taken his head. The rest of the beasts would have scattered, and the bulk could easily have been purged by kill-teams in the aftermath.'

'It is tactically unsound, Reclusiarch. Pursuit would have left the shelter undefended and vulnerable to regrouping waves attacking from other sectors. Three thousand lives were saved by our defiance last night.'

'There were no attacks from other sectors.'

'There may have been, had we pursued. And there was still no guarantee we would have overpowered the rearguard quickly enough to reach the warlord.'

'We weathered six further assaults, wasted seven hours, lost four warriors, and expended a hoard of ammunition that my knights can ill-afford to throw away.'

'That is one way of seeing the final cost. I see it more simply: we won.'

'I am finished with this... debate, Salamander.' Again, I recall the grinding cut of Nero's medicae-saw, and the puncturing retrieval of cutting tools extracting glistening gene-seed organs from the chests of the slain.

'It grieves me to hear you speak this way, Reclusiarch.'

Listen to him. So patient. So calm.

So blind.

'Get out of my city.'



CHAPTER XIX

Fate

The giant stood above its worshippers in silence.

Its skin and bones were harvested from crashed and salvaged ships, each column, gear, pylon, girder and plate of armour that went into its birth stolen from something else. Although the giant was not alive, living creatures served it in place of blood and organs. They clambered through the god's form, insulated by the armour, hanging from the metal bones, moving like the blood cells in sluggish arteries.

The giant had taken over two thousand labourers over a month to build. It had finally awoken outside the walls of Hive Stygia three days before, to great roars of praise from its devoted faithful.

And then, in its first hours of life, it had wiped the hive city from the face of the planet. Stygia was a modest industrial city, defended by the Steel Legion and its own militia with little in the way of Adeptus Astartes or Mechanicus support. From the moment the giant awoke to the moment the last vestiges of organised Imperial resistance was crushed, the city lasted a total of five hours and thirty-two minutes.

And now, the giant stood silent, idle, making ready for its journey south.

Its face was piggish and round-eyed, all jagged jaw and red-iron tusks. Behind the broken windows that served as its eyes, hunched crewmembers

moved in loping gaits, attending to their bestial imitations of Imperial Titan command.

The giant's name, splattered across its ugly, fat-bellied hull in crude alien hieroglyphs, was *Godbreaker*.

With a slow tread that shook the earth around it, *Godbreaker* began to move south, towards the coast.

Towards Helsreach.

If it could remain mobile without breaking down – a difficult feat given the skills of its creators – it would arrive by dawn the following day.

In a fateful sense of opposed unity with the *Godbreaker*, another powerful war machine drew nearer to Helsreach. Its journey was a far longer one, and its progress was a melancholy fraction of what it might have been in a better age.

Waves of ashy soil blew aside in the land train's wake, as its gravity suppression field exerted its influence on the ground below the rattling, serpentine vehicle. Jurisian felt its resistance in every touch upon its controls. The soul of the machine was rising from its slumber now, finding itself disrespected and on the edge of lashing out at the living being responsible.

'Reclusiarch,' he spoke into the vox again, once more receiving no answer.

Oberon's existence in his mind was akin to a beast alone in the woods. Jurisian could keep it at bay as long as he focused on its presence, just as a traveller could face down a wolf in the wild if he kept watch for the beast and carried a torch of flame to ward it away. It was a game of focus, and despite his weariness, the Master of the Forge possessed focus in abundance. He was a conscientious and patient soul, devoted to each of his tasks like a predator hunting prey. This demeanour and dedication, coupled with his ability and deeds of honour, had seen him promoted to his rank aboard the *Eternal Crusader* nineteen years before.

Jurisian had been present at Grimaldus's induction into the inner circle, and though it shamed him to admit it now – even silently, even only to himself and the lurking soul of the war machine – he had cast his vote against the Chaplain ascending to Mordred's role as Reclusiarch.

'He is not ready,' Jurisian had said, adding his voice to Champion Bayard's. 'He is a master of small engagements, and a warrior beyond peer. But he is not a leader of the Chapter.'

'The Forgemaster speaks the truth, High Marshal,' Bayard had added. 'Grimaldus is flawed by hesitation. A second's delay in all he does, and it is no secret why. He holds himself to his master's standards. Doubt clings to him, darkening his place in the Chapter.'

'He is shaken by Mordred's death,' Jurisian had pressed. 'He seeks his place in the Eternal Crusade.'

Helbrecht had sat musing on his throne, his cold eyes lowering the temperature of the room.

'In the coming war, I will give him the chance to find that place.'

Jurisian had spoken no more, and inclined his head in a bow. The Emperor's Champion was not so subdued, and had put forward his recommendations for warriors other than Grimaldus to succeed Mordred.

The High Marshal had kept his own counsel, but the voices of the Sword Brethren around Helbrecht's dais sounded out in jeers as fists crashed against shields. Grimaldus was the chosen of Mordred the Avenger, and skilled in personal combat beyond question. Two centuries of valour and glory; two hundred years of unrelenting courage and a host of enemy dead across a horde of worlds; his short years as the youngest Sword Brother in the history of the Chapter – there was no arguing with such truths.

Jurisian and Bayard had relented. The following night, they watched Grimaldus accept Mordred's mantle.

Oberon tilted as it rose over an ash dune, the anti-grav field changing its tone to a more strained whine.

On the horizon, a blanket of blackness rose from a burning city.

‘Reclusiarch,’ he voxed, trying once more to speak with the warrior that did not deserve the title he now carried.

Leaving the Titan had proved less of a trial than Asavan had feared.

He’d managed it two days ago, and had been on the streets of the city ever since. All it had taken was a slow descent through the decks, and what felt like about eight million spiral staircases, each one shaped from dense bronze and riveted heavily to the walls.

Well. Perhaps closer to four staircases. But by the time Asavan was approaching ground level, he was blinking sweat from his eyes and cursing his lack of fitness. On the Titan’s lower levels, all was emergency red lighting, narrow corridors, and stuffy air filled with the smell of sacred incense holy to the Machine-God, as well as His disciples chanting blessings in His name. Through their devotion was *Stormherald* empowered. Praise be.

‘Halt,’ a machine-voice barked, and Asavan did exactly as he was told. He even raised his hands in the air, mimicking some unnecessary surrender. ‘What are you doing here?’ the voice demanded.

Here was at the base of the Titan’s pelvis, in one of the lowest accessible chambers, lit by a flickering yellow siren light. Six augmented skitarii stood stationed around a bulkhead in the floor. The room itself rocked back and forth, tilting with the Titan’s tread.

‘I’m leaving the Titan,’ the priest said.

The skitarii glanced at each other with focus lenses instead of eyes. The air buzzed with inter-vox communication. They were confused. This... this made no sense.

‘You are leaving the Titan,’ one of them, apparently their leader, said. His eye lenses revolved, scanning the unaugmented human.

‘Yes.’

More vox-chatter. The leader, his face noticeably more bionic than the others', emitted a blurt of machine code. Asavan knew an error/abort complaint when he heard one.

'Stormherald is engaged in locomotive activity.'

Asavan was aware of this. The entire room was, after all, moving. 'The Titan is walking. I know. I still wish to leave. This service maintenance ladder will take me down the left leg struts to the shin-fortress, will it not?'

'It would,' the skitarii leader allowed.

'Then please excuse me. I must be going.'

'Halt.' Asavan did, again, but he was growing tired of this. 'You wish to leave the Titan,' the skitarii repeated. 'But... why?'

This was hardly the ideal setting for a debate on crises of faith and the sudden revelatory desire to walk among the city's people and help them with one's own hands.

Asavan reached for the medallion around his neck, marking him as an honoured member of the Ecclesiarchy of Terra and a minister ordained to preach the word of the Emperor in His aspect as the Machine-God of Mars.

The skitarii stared at the icon for several moments – the double-headed eagle and the divided skull backing it – and lowered their weapons.

'My thanks,' the sweating priest said. 'Now if it's not too much trouble, could you open that bulkhead for me?'

His stomach lurched at the sight beyond the opened trapdoor. Beneath, the broken rockcrete of Hel's Highway passed by, a good twenty-five metres down. Pudgy hands gripped the black iron service ladder as he descended, rung by rung, through the wind, hanging on to the Titan's thigh. Above him, the bulkhead slammed with a chime of finality.

So be it. Down, he went.

Behind the god-machine's knee, another bulkhead blocked his descent into the bulky lower leg section. Below, Asavan heard the servos of turrets mounted on the shin-walls panning back and forth, seeking targets.

It took almost a full minute to work the bulkhead's wheel lock, but he was energised now, drawing close to his objective. Once more, he descended into red-lit, downward spiralling corridors, avoiding the troop chambers where ranks of skitarii stood in tomb-like silence.

The Titan's movement now was almost unbearable, slamming him to the wall and rocking him from his feet on several occasions. This low, the gravitic stabilisers were little use against the sheer degree of movement necessary for each leg to make. His surroundings rumbled with sickening violence every eleven seconds, as the foot came down on the road below. Asavan vomited against a wall, and tried not to laugh. He was trying to keep his balance while walking through the steel bones in the ankle of a striding machine giant. Perhaps this wasn't such a wonderful idea, after all.

And now came the hardest part.

This last bulkhead opened onto the Titan's tiered claw-toes, which formed steps by which the skitarii battalions in the leg-fortresses could ascend and descend, when *Stormherald* was at rest.

Disembarking with the Titan in motion was going to be... exciting.

Asavan pulled the door open on squealing hinges, gripping a nearby handrail and watching the ground in bug-eyed horror, waiting for it to level out with the foot touching down. It did, with a bone-jarring rumble of thunder, and the fat priest ran, huffing and puffing, down the tiered stairs.

The other foot came down, shaking the ground and sending Asavan tumbling down the last steps to land in a heap of overweight flesh and filthy robes on the dirty surface of the highway.

A metre away, the stairs rose again as the great war machine lifted its foot to take another step. Squealing without even realising he was doing

so, Asavan Tortellius sprinted, with his additional chins shaking, away from the leg's ascent and inevitable descent. He hurled himself the last few metres, landing hard.

As the Titan walked on, monstrous feet still pounding into the ground, the priest lay on his back, breathing in ragged gasps.

And thus was completed the least dignified disembarkation from an Emperor Titan in the history of the Imperium.

That had been two days ago.

Since then, Asavan had not improved his situation by a great deal, but by the Throne, he was doing the Emperor's work. And that was a start.

His journey along the Hel's Highway (which he was resolutely calling his 'pilgrimage') had begun on an uninspiring note. Hauling himself to his unsteady feet and recovering the shoe he had lost in his fall, he began to make his way down the wide road, clutching his bag of dehydrated foodstuffs and electrolyte fluid packs.

Away from the Titan, with *Stormherald* thumping away in the far distance now, he realised how utterly silent a dead city could be. The crashing of weapons and war machines was a muted murmur, seeming a world away. His immediate surroundings were quiet almost to the point of eeriness.

He left the highway to trudge through an abandoned commercial district that had been punished heavily weeks before. Slain tanks littered the central market zone, both Imperial and alien, and each one commanding its own mound of nearby bodies. Red flies – the bloated and oversized tropical vermin that bred like a plague in the jungles to the west – were here in swarms, blanketing the dead and feeding from them.

He'd not been prepared for the smell of a city at war. On the back of a Titan, one strode the battlefield like a colossus, far from what the princeps, blessings upon her, referred to as the 'distasteful biological carnage'.

The smell was somewhere between untreated sewage and spoiled food. He vomited again halfway across the plaza, releasing a stringy ooze that stuck to his teeth. Fluid packs and dehydrated foodstuffs were not wonderful for the digestion.

That night, he'd camped in the broken shell of a Leman Russ. The tank was half buried in a fallen wall, which evidently it had rammed. Whatever had become of its crew was a mystery Asavan didn't feel like looking into. He was glad enough that they weren't there, slouched and rotting in their seats like so many others had been.

When he finally slept, he dreamed of everything he'd seen that day. After three hours of dreaming that every corpse he'd passed was staring at him, he gave up the attempt to find rest and instead pushed on deeper into the city.

On the second day, he had found his first survivors. In the ground floor of a collapsed habitation block, movement drew his eye.

He'd voiced a tremulous 'Hello?' before he'd even realised he might be calling out to one of the invaders. The sound of scampering footsteps emboldened him. Alien beasts would not run from a lone human's cry.

'I've come to help,' he called.

Silence was the only answer.

'I have food,' he tried.

A filthy face rose from behind a pile of rubble. Narrowed eyes never left him – bright and quick like a scavenger's gaze.

'I have food,' Asavan said again, lowering his voice this time. With no sudden movement, he unslung the satchel from his back and held up a dehydrated food pouch in its silver packaging. 'It's dehydrated. Rations. But it's food.'

The face became a person, a middle-aged woman, as she left her hiding place and drew closer. Gaunt and wild-eyed, she moved with the caution of the forever fearful. It took three attempts for her to speak. Before the

words left her mouth in a scratchy whisper, she had to clear her throat repeatedly.

‘You’re a priest?’ she asked, still not coming within arm’s reach. She pointed at his white and violet robes, her gesture weak and dismissive.

‘I am. The God-Emperor sent me to you.’

She had wept in that moment, and soon after, they shared a small meal in the ruins of her hab-chamber. He asked questions of her life, and the losses she’d suffered. Before he left an hour later, he made sure she had several days’ worth of food and fluid, and blessed her in the name of the God-Emperor. It was strange to be ministering to the genuinely needy, and the fully-fleshed. So many of his sermons had been to fellow clerics and machine-altered skitarii that a weeping woman praising the Emperor was quite beyond his experience.

It was strange, but it was good. It was worthy.

Asavan Tortellius’s first meeting with a survivor had gone well. He walked on, similar encounters repeating themselves over the next day and night. It was only on the third day that he ran into trouble.

A small group of ragged survivors huddled around a trash-fire, warming their hands as night fell over another tank graveyard along the Hel’s Highway. Asavan cleared his throat as he approached, raising a hand in greeting.

The survivors whirled, bringing lasguns to bear. Several of the group were in workers’ overalls, blood-spattered and dark with grime. One of them was clad in a Guard uniform, a bulky power pack on his back and a cabled lasrifle aimed at Asavan’s face.

‘No more surprises, please, yes?’ The soldier spat onto the ground, his thin face marked with suspicion. ‘I am tired and I am cold and I am sick to my core of shooting looters in the skull.’

‘I’m not a looter.’

‘That is not a surprise to me, given what I have just said I do to looters.’

‘I’m a priest.’

‘Explains the robes,’ one of the workers chuckled. ‘I think he’s telling the truth, Andrej.’

‘A priest,’ the storm trooper repeated.

‘A priest,’ Asavan nodded.

The storm trooper lowered his rifle. ‘That is most definitely a surprise. I am Andrej of the Legion. These are my friends, who were unlucky enough to be born in Helsreach instead of a city worth defending.’

The workers snickered.

‘I am Asavan Tortellius, of *Stormherald*.’

‘The god-machine?’ Andrej barked a laugh. ‘You are far from your walking throne, fat priest. Did you fall off and fail to catch up?’

Asavan drew nearer to the fire, and the workers made room for him.

‘Tomaz Maghernus.’ One of them offered his hand for the priest to shake. ‘Don’t mind Andrej, sir. He’s not all there.’

‘All of me is exactly where it needs to be.’ The storm trooper shook his head, his dark, weasel eyes glinting with the fire’s reflection. ‘Throne, I have never been so cold. We are all lucky that our balls have not frozen and cracked by now.’

‘Good to see you,’ one of the other men muttered to the priest.

‘Yeah,’ another nodded, his voice sincere despite not meeting the newcomer’s eyes. Asavan was touched by their almost-shy gratitude to see a priest amongst all this.

‘Looters?’ Asavan asked. ‘Did I hear that correctly?’

‘You did,’ Maghernus breathed into his hands, before holding them out to the flames. ‘Dockworkers. Militia and Guard deserters. It’s ugly out here. They’re going through the habs, stealing credits and whatever else they can find.’

‘May I ask, why are you out here?’

Andrej shook his head as he joined the group. ‘Do not sound so suspicious, holy man. We are not hiding from duty. We are merely the Forgotten, lost in the dead city, making our way back to... wherever the closest front line might be.’

‘You have no contact with the rest of the Guard?’

‘Ha! I like this. I like the way you think. You fell off your Titan, fat man. Do you have a vox-link back to ask your Mechanicus masters for advice? No. Exactly. You were not at the docks, priest. Half the city died last week. The Guard is broken, and the vox is no more than a hundred frequencies of hissing noise. If I am right, and I hope to be wrong, then no Imperial force is able to contact any other in perhaps half of the city.’

‘What do you intend to do?’

‘We are moving west. The Templars went to the west, and so shall we. Why are *you* here?’

Asavan shrugged. It wasn’t something he could explain with any conviction. ‘I wanted to walk the streets and help where I could. I was serving no one on the back of a Titan.’

A few of the group made the sign of the aquila and murmured their admiration.

‘You wish to come with us, fat priest? You will like what is in the west, I am thinking.’

‘What’s in the west?’ Asavan asked.

‘A great number of burning industrial sectors, too many looters for my innocent heart to consider at this moment in time, and of course, the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.’

‘What is this temple you speak of? A monastery? A cathedral?’

Maghernus shook his head. ‘Both. Neither. It’s a shrine – built by the original colonists who came to Armageddon.’

In his surprise, Asavan almost ordered a servo-skull to take a dictation. ‘You are telling me that the first church ever built in Helsreach still

stands? It endured the First War against the daemon armies? It remained unbroken through the Second War, when the Great Enemy first came to this world?’

‘Well... yeah,’ Maghernus replied.

This was providence. This was why he had left the Titan, and this was why the God-Emperor had guided him through the city to these men.

Andrej snorted at his questions. ‘It is not simply the first church built in Helsreach, my fat friend. It is the first church ever raised in the whole world. When the first settlers prayed to the Emperor, they prayed in the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.’

Asavan felt his hands trembling. ‘How do we reach it?’

Andrej gestured to the expansive, raised road in the distance. ‘We walk the Hel’s Highway. How else?’

Artarion stood away from the others.

The building they occupied had once been a small temple, serving as the spiritual heart of this industrial sector. Now it was a tumbledown ruin, no longer fit to house dawn and dusk prayers for the local workers. In the altar room, Artarion had paused his bored exploration, finding bloodstains on some of the fallen rubble that had buried the floor in broken architecture.

The blood-scent was old, the stains themselves flaking. Whoever was entombed beneath had been dead for days. Artarion breathed in through his helm’s filters. Female. Had not bled much after being crushed. Dead for perhaps three days; the delicate scent of decomposition was little more than spice on the air.

He’d removed himself to perform the rites of maintenance on his weapons, as well as to get away from Priamus muttering about the Salamanders.

As he lowered himself to sit on the dead woman’s cairn, the knee joint of his armour locked for several seconds. Runic warnings flickered across his

visor display. Instead of blanking them, he disengaged his helm's seals, removed it, and breathed in the smell of the fire, ash and brick dust that was all Helsreach had become. The faulty joint crunched back into motion, eliciting a grunt from the knight as he sat.

His bolter, chained to his thigh and mag-locked in place, was starved of ammunition. He had not spoken of this to the others yet, but knew they must surely be approaching similar difficulties. Before the week of bloodshed at the docks, the supplies brought down by the Helsreach Crusade from the *Eternal Crusader* so long ago had been reduced to a Thunderhawk cargo bay half full of bolts and an almost-empty crate of replacement tooth-tracks for chainswords.

The gunship itself sat cold and silent in the courtyard of a factory complex, almost two kilometres to the west, in a sector of the city still securely in Imperial control.

Artarion examined the bolter's fire-blackened muzzle, turning the weapon over in his hands as he followed the path of winding, once-gold inlaid scriptures etched along the gun's sides. A list of enemies slain, battles won, worlds defended...

In wordless silence, he lowered the bolter again.

'There is nothing to like in them,' Priamus spat as he paced the prayer room. 'They wage war to defend, to preserve. Everything in their way is devoted to maintaining what humanity already has.'

Bastilan was sharpening his combat blade, running a whetstone along the gladius's killing edges. The small chamber was filled with Priamus's crunching footsteps and the *resssh, resssh* of the whetstone scraping.

'It is flawed,' the swordsman added. 'I mean no offence to them as warriors. But drop podding into the city purely to defend civilians? Madness.'

Resssh, resssh.

'Why do you not answer, brother?'

‘I have little to say.’ *Resssh, resssh.*

‘Do you think ill of me for my beliefs? Bastilan, please, you know I am right.’

‘I know you are treading on unstable ground. Do not besmirch the honour of our brother Chapter. The Salamanders shed as much blood as we did this week.’

‘That is not the point.’

Resssh, resssh. ‘That is where you and I disagree, brother. But you are young. You will learn.’

Priamus didn’t bother to hide his disgusted sneer from infecting his voice. ‘Do not patronise me, old man. You know of what I speak. You are just quietened by the mounting years and too reserved to say it aloud.’

‘I am not that old,’ Bastilan laughed. The boy was annoying, but he certainly knew how to drag out a smile or two with his misguided fervour.

‘Do not laugh at me.’

‘Then stop making me laugh. What two Chapters fight the same? What two Chapters wage war according to the same principles? We are all born of different worlds and trained by different masters. Accept the differences and stand with them as allies.’

‘But they are *wrong*.’ Priamus stared at the older warrior in disbelief. How could he be so obtuse? ‘They could have landed anywhere in the city. They could have struck at one of the alien commanders. Instead, they crash down amongst us at the docks to defend the humans.’

‘That is why they came. Do not mistake their compassion for tactical idiocy.’

‘That is my point.’ Priamus resisted the rising urge to draw his blade. There was nothing to cut beyond the air before him, yet he felt a keen need to draw steel. ‘They preserve. They defend. We are Adeptus Astartes, not Imperial Guard. We are the spear thrust to the throat, not the blunt anvil. We are all that remains of the Great Crusade, Bastilan. For ten thousand

years, we and we alone have crusaded to bring the Emperor's worlds into compliance. We do not fight for the people of the Imperium, we fight for the Imperium itself. We attack. We *attack*.'

Resssh, ressh. 'Not here. Not at Helsreach.'

Priamus lowered his head, unwilling to concede the point, despite the fact he knew he was defeated. That bastard Bastilan always did this to him. A few quiet words and he'd puncture all of what Priamus was trying to say. It was far, far beyond annoying.

'Helsreach is...' the swordsman's voice was lower now – less bitter, and somehow less confident. 'Nothing about this war has felt right.'

Nerovar had also retreated from the others.

But apparently not far enough.

'Brother,' came a voice. Grimaldus had returned. Nero acknowledged him with a nod, and returned to his feigned examination of the blistered and burned mural on the temple wall. Scenes of the Emperor watching over Helsreach: a golden god with His radiant visage regarding scenes of great industry below. With the wall ruined by flame and the artwork charred, it now resembled the city outside more than it ever had.

'How was the command meeting?'

'A tedious discussion of last stands. In that respect, it was no different from any other time. The Salamanders have withdrawn.'

'Then perhaps Priamus will cease his complaints.'

'I doubt that.'

Grimaldus removed his helm. Nerovar watched him as he examined the paintings, seeing the Reclusiarch's scarred features set in a thoughtful frown.

'How is the wound?' Grimaldus asked, his voice both deeper and softer now, unfiltered by helm vox.

'I will live.'

'Pain?'

‘Does it matter? I will live.’

The chains binding his weapons to his armour rattled as the Reclusiarch moved across the chamber. Ceramite armour boots thudded on the dusty mosaics, breaking them underfoot. In the centre of the room, Grimaldus looked up at the holed ceiling, where a stained glass dome had once mercifully blocked the view of the polluted sky.

‘I was with Cador,’ he said, staring up into the heavens. ‘I was with him at the end.’

‘I know.’

‘So you will believe me when I say that you could have done nothing for him had you been at our side? He was dead the moment the beast struck him.’

‘I saw the death wound, did I not? You are telling me nothing I do not already know.’

‘Then why do you still mourn his fall? It was a magnificent death, worthy of a vault on board the *Crusader*. He killed nine of the enemy with a broken blade and his bare hands, Nero. Dorn’s blood, if only we could all inscribe such deeds on our armour. Humanity would have cleansed the stars by now.’

‘He will never rest in that vault, and you know it.’

‘That is not worth mourning over. It is just a regrettable truth. Hundreds of our own heroes have fallen and remained unrecovered. You carry Cador’s true legacy. Why is that not enough? I wish to help you, brother, but you are not making it easy.’

‘He trained me. He taught me the blade and bolter. He was a father in place of the parents I was stolen from.’

Grimaldus had still not looked at the other knight. He watched as an Imperial fighter streaked overhead, and wondered if it was Helius, the heir to Barasath and Jenzen.

‘It is the way of the warrior,’ he said, ‘to outlive the ones that train us. We take their lessons and wield them as weapons against the enemies of Man.’

Nero snorted.

‘Did I say something amusing, Apothecary?’

‘In a way. Hypocrisy is always amusing.’ The Apothecary removed his own helm. As he did so, he could suddenly feel the unwelcome weight of the cryo-sealed gene-seed in his forearm storage pod.

‘Hypocrisy?’ Grimaldus asked, more curious than annoyed.

‘It is not like you to comfort and console, Reclusiarch. Forgive me for saying so.’

‘Why would I need to forgive you for speaking the truth?’

‘You make it sound so clear and easy. None of us have been truthful with you since... we came here.’

Grimaldus lowered his gaze from the dark skies. He fixed his eyes – eyes that the commander of a god-machine had called kind, of all things – on Nerovar’s own.

‘You say “Since we came here”. I sense another lie.’

‘Very well. Since before we came here. Since Mordred died. It is difficult to be near you, Reclusiarch. You are withdrawn when you should be inspiring. You are distant when you would once have been wrathful. I believe you are wrong to lecture me on Cador’s death when you have been lost to us since Mordred fell. There are flashes of fire beneath the cold surface, and we have warned you of these changes before. But to no avail.’

Grimaldus chuckled, the sound leaving his lips as a soft exhalation through a reluctant smile.

‘I am seeing the world through his eyes,’ he said, looking down at the silver skull mask in his hands. ‘And I am seeing, night after night, that I am not him. I did not deserve this honour. I am no leader of men, nor am I skilled at dealing with the humans. I should not be wearing the mantle of a

Reclusiarch, yet I was certain once the war began, my doubts and discomforts would fade away.'

'But they have not.'

'No. They have not. I will die on this world.' Grimaldus looked at the Apothecary again. 'My master died, and mere days later, I was consigned to die on a world that has no hope of surviving an ugly war, far from my brothers and the Chapter I have served for two centuries. Even if we win, what does victory buy? We will be kings astride a ruined world of dead industry.' He shook his head. 'And this is where we will die. A worthless death.'

'It is glorious, in its own way. The Helsreach Crusade. Our brothers and the people of this world will remember our sacrifice forever. You know this as well as I.'

'Oh, I know it. I cannot escape it. But I do not care for *glory*. Glory is earned through a life lived in service to the Throne. It should not be a consolation gift, or something sought to sate a hunger. I want my life to matter to my brothers, and I want my death to further the cause of the Imperium. Do you not recall Mordred's last words to me? They are written in gold upon the plinth of the statue that honours him.'

'I remember them, Reclusiarch. "*We are judged in life for the evil we destroy*". And we will be judged well, for a great many have fallen before us already.'

'Our deaths inspire no one. They benefit no one. Do you recall the Shadow Wolves? When we saw the last of that Chapter die, I felt my heart sing. Never before had I craved the taste of alien blood as I did in that moment. Their deaths mattered. Every warrior clad in silver armour died in true glory that day. What of Helsreach? Who will draw courage from a footnote in the archives of a fallen city?'

Grimaldus closed his eyes. He did not open them again, even as he heard Nerovar approaching. The fist crashing against his jaw knocked him to the

ground, where he at last looked back at the Apothecary. Grimaldus was smiling, though in truth he had not expected the blow.

‘How dare you?’ Nero asked, his teeth clenched and his fist still tight. ‘*How dare you?* You throw filth on our glory here, yet you dare tell me Cador’s death means something? It means *nothing*. He died as we will all die: unremembered and unburied. You are my Reclusiarch, Grimaldus. Do not lie to me. If our glory matters to no one, then Cador’s death is meaningless and I have every right to mourn him as you mourn for all of us.’

The Chaplain licked his lips, tasting the chemical-rich blood that marked them. In silence, he rose to his feet. Nerovar did not back away. Far from it, he stood his ground, and activated his bracer-mounted storage pod. A plastek vial slid from its secure housing, and Nerovar threw it to Grimaldus.

The Reclusiarch caught it in hands that threatened to shake. NACLIDES, the script on the vial denoted. The gene-seed of a brother fallen days before.

‘Nero...’

Nerovar ejected another tube and tossed it to the Reclusiarch. DARGRAVIAN, it read. He had been the first to fall.

‘Nerovar...’

The Apothecary ejected a third vial. This one he held in his fist, his gauntlet clutching it just shy of crushing it into shards. CADOR showed between Nero’s fingers.

‘Answer me,’ the Apothecary demanded. ‘Is what we do here worthless? Is there nothing to be proud of in our sacrifice?’

Grimaldus didn’t answer for several moments. He looked around the modest, broken temple, the light of thought bright in his eyes.

‘The city is falling, brother. Sarren and the other humans faced that fact today. The time has come for us to choose where we will die.’

‘Then let it be where we will be remembered.’ Nerovar reverently handed the vial bearing Cador’s cryogenically frozen gene-seed organs to the Chaplain. ‘Let it be where our deaths will matter, and give birth to tales worthy of being recorded in humanity’s history.’

Grimaldus looked at the three vials resting in his gauntleted palm.

‘I know of a place,’ he said softly, a dangerous flicker appearing in his eyes as he looked back up at his battle-brother. ‘It is far from here, but there is no holier place on this entire world. There, we shall dig our graves, and there, we will ensure the Great Enemy forever remembers the name of the Black Templars.’

‘Tell me why you have chosen this place. I must know.’

The truth is... surprising, but as I speak the words, there is no doubt within them. This is what we must do, and it is how we must die. Our lives are sacrifice, from implantation of the gene-seed to its extraction from our bodies.

‘We will die where our deaths matter. Where we can spite the enemy with our last breaths, and inspire the warriors of this city.’

‘Now those,’ Nero says, ‘are at last the words of a Reclusiarch.’

‘I am a slow learner,’ I confess. This brings a smile to my brother’s lips.

‘Mordred is dead,’ Nero said, keeping his voice low. ‘But he trusted you as his heir above any other for one reason. He believed you were worthy.’

I say nothing.

‘Do not die without ever living up to him, Grimaldus.’



CHAPTER XX

Godbreaker

Maralin moved across the botanical garden, her fingertips trailing along the dewy leaves and petals of the rosebushes.

They were not hers, but that didn't stop her admiring them. Only one of her sisters had the patience and skill to grow roses in the choking air and sickened soil of the city, and that was Alana. All other blooms in the botanical garden were raised by cultivation servitors, and in Maralin's opinion, it showed. Her fingers danced along the wet petals of the soot-darkened roses, amazed as always at how lovelier and fuller Alana's flowers were in comparison to the modest blooms grown by the augmented slave workers.

They lacked inspiration, clearly, and no doubt the severance of their souls had much to do with it.

Passing through the spacious garden, she entered the rectory. The building's air filters were straining, keeping the main chamber cooled. Prioress Sindal was sat, as she almost always was, at her oversized desk of rare stonewood, scribing away in meticulous handwriting.

She looked up as Maralin entered, peering through the corrective eyelenses that had slipped to the end of her nose.

'Prioress, we've received word from Tempestora.'

Sindal's cataracted eyes narrowed, and she gently sprinkled sand across her parchment, drying the fresh ink. She was seventy-one years old, and she didn't just look it – she also sounded it when she spoke.

'What of the Sanctorum?'

'Gone,' Maralin swallowed.

'Survivors?'

'Few, and most are wounded. The hive has fallen, and the Sanctorum of the Order of Our Martyred Lady is overrun by the enemy. We received word now that there aren't enough survivors to retake their Sanctorum as of yet. Our own sisters in the Ash and Fire Wastes are moving to support.'

'So Tempestora is gone. What of Hive Stygia to the north?'

'Still no word, prioress. They are surely enduring the siege as we are.'

The old woman's hands were palsied, though she found that writing always steadied them for reasons beyond her understanding. They shook now as she set the completed parchment aside, on a loose pile of several others.

'Helsreach has weeks left, but little beyond that. The siege is almost at our own gates.'

'That... brings me to the second of the morning's messages, prioress.' Maralin swallowed again. She was clearly uncomfortable, and resented being the one sent to deliver these messages, but she was the youngest, and often relegated to these tasks.

'Speak, sister.'

'We received a message from the Adeptus Astartes commander in the city. The Reclusiarch. He sends word that his knights are en route to stand with us in the defence.'

The prioress removed her eyeglasses and cleaned them with a soft cloth. Then, carefully, she placed them back onto her face and looked directly at the young girl.

'The Reclusiarch is bringing the Black Templars here?'

‘Yes, prioress.’

‘Hmph. Did he happen to say why he felt the sudden wish to fight alongside the Order of the Argent Shroud?’

He had not, but Maralin had been paying close attention to the scraps of information that made it over the vox with any clarity. This, too, was one of her duties as the youngest, while her sisters were preparing for battle.

‘No, prioress. I suspect it ties into Colonel Sarren’s decision to break up the remaining defenders into separate bastions. The Reclusiarch has chosen the temple.’

‘I see. I doubt he asked permission.’

Maralin smiled. The prioress had fought with the Emperor’s Chosen before, and many of her sermons had included irritated mentions of their brash attitudes. ‘No, prioress. He didn’t.’

‘Typical Adeptus Astartes. Hmph. When do they arrive?’

‘Before sunset, mistress.’

‘Very well. Anything more?’

There was little. The compromised vox-network had offered several suggestions of severe enemy Titan movement to the north, but confirmation wasn’t forthcoming. Maralin relayed this, but she could tell the prioress’s mind was elsewhere. On the Templars, most certainly.

‘Damn it all,’ the old woman muttered as she rose from her chair, placing the quill in the inkpot. ‘Well, don’t just stand there gawping, girl. Prepare my battle armour.’

Maralin’s eyes widened. ‘How long has it been since you wore your armour, prioress?’

‘How old are you, girl?’

‘Fifteen, mistress.’

‘Well, then. Let’s just say you couldn’t wipe your own backside the last time I went to war.’ The old woman’s forehead barely reached Maralin’s

chin as she shuffled past. ‘But it’ll be good to deliver a sermon with a bolter in hand again.’

Elsewhere in the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, the sisters were making ready for war. The Order of the Argent Shroud were not in Helsreach in any significant force, their contributions thus far being little more than a series of fighting withdrawals from churches across the city.

Ninety-seven battle-ready sisters manned the temple’s walls and halls, standing guard over several thousand menials, servitors, preachers, lay sisters and acolytes. The temple itself was formed of a central basilica, surrounded by high rockcrete walls bedecked in leering angels and hideous gargoyles staring out at the city beyond. Between the walls and the central building, acre upon acre of graveyard reached out from the basilica in every direction. Thousands of years before, they had been lush garden grounds, grown and tended by the first of Armageddon’s settlers. Those same settlers were buried here, their bones long turned to dust and their gravestones weathered faceless by time. Interred alongside them were generations of their descendants; holy servants of the Imperium; and the respected dead of Armageddon’s Steel Legions.

No one was buried here now; the graveyard was considered full. Official records numbered the graves around the basilica as nine million, one hundred and eight thousand, four hundred and sixty. Currently, only two people knew this was incorrect, and only one of them cared about the discrepancy.

The first was a servitor who had been a gardener in life, and had devoted several of his living years, before the augmetics had stolen his reason and independence, to counting the graves as he tended the gardens around them. He’d been curious, and it had satisfied him to learn the truth. He kept it to himself, knowing to report it to his superiors might bring down accusations of laxity in his primary duties. He was, after all, a garden-tender and not a stock-counter or cogitator. Three months after he had

satisfied himself with the truth, he was found stealing from the temple's tithe boxes, and sentenced to augmetic reconfiguration.

The second person who knew the truth was Prioress Sindal. She had also counted them herself, over the course of three years. To her, it was a form of meditation; of bringing herself to a state of oneness with the people of Armageddon. She had not been born here, and in her devoted service to the people of this world, she felt her meditative technique was apt enough.

She had, of course, filed amendments to the records, but they were still locked in the bureaucratic cycle. The temple's cardinal council were notoriously foul at having their staff deal with paperwork.

Most gravestones were stacked close together in clusters of bloodline or fealty, and there was no conformity in the markers – each was a slightly different size, shape, material or angle to those nearby, even in sections where the rows were ordered in neat lines. In other parts of the graveyard district, finding one's way along a pathway was akin to navigating a labyrinth, with weaving a way between the graves taking a great deal of time.

The Temple of the Emperor Ascendant itself was, by Imperial standards, a thing of haunting and gothic beauty. The spires were ringed by stone angels and depictions of the Emperor's primarchs as saints. Stained glass windows displayed a riot of colours, showing scenes of the God-Emperor's Great Crusade to bring the stars into union beneath humanity's vigilant guidance. Lesser depictions were of the first settlers themselves, their deeds of survival and construction exaggerated to deific proportion, showing them as the builders of a glorious, perfect world of golden light and marble cathedrals, rather than the industrial planet they had founded in truth.

The Sisters of the Order of the Argent Shroud had not been idle during the months of warfare that ravaged the rest of the city. Lesser shrines in the graveyard were both heavy weapon outposts and chapels to their

founder, Saint Silvana. Angular statues of solid silver – each one of the weeping saint in various poses of grief, triumph and contemplation – stood silent watch over turret pods and barricaded gun-nests.

The walls themselves were reinforced in the same way as the city walls, and bore the same ratio of defence turrets per metre. These remained manned by Helsreach militia.

The temple courtyard's great gates were not closed. Despite the protestations of the cardinal council, Prioress Sindal had demanded the doors be kept open until the last possible moment, allowing more and more refugees to enter over the weeks of siege. The basilica's undercroft housed hundreds of families who hadn't been able to enter the subterranean shelters, for reasons of criminal activity, administrative error, or outright bad luck. Bunched together in the gloom, they came up for morning and evening prayer, adding their voices to the singing pleas that reached up to the immaculately-painted ceiling, where the God-Emperor was depicted staring off into the heavens.

The Temple of the Emperor Ascendant was, in short, a fortress.

A fortress filled with refugees, and surrounded by the largest graveyard in the world.

We are the last to arrive.

Twenty-nine of my brothers already await my arrival, with our cargo gunship grounded nearby. It brings our total force to thirty-five, if one was to count Jurisian labouring on the forlorn hope, trying to bring the weapon across the Ash Wastes.

Thirty-five of the hundred that landed in Helsreach five weeks before.

One of those awaiting our arrival is the one warrior I have done all I can to avoid for the last five weeks.

He kneels before the open gates of the temple's compound, his black sword plunged into the marble before him, helmed head lowered in reverence. As with the Templars around him, almost all evidence of

scripture parchment, wax crusader seals and cloth tabard is gone from his armour. I recognise him because of his ancient armour and the dark blade he prays to.

Jurisian himself has worked on that armour, repairing it with reverence each time he has been honoured with the chance to touch it. Before Jurisian, a host of other Masters of the Forge maintained the relic war-plate through the centuries, back to its original forging as a suit of armour for the Imperial Fists Legion.

While our armour shows dull grey wounds under the stripped paint, this knight's war-plate, forged in a time when primarchs walked the galaxy, shows gold beneath the battle damage. The legacy of Dorn's Legion is still there if one knows where to look; between the cracks, revealed by war.

The knight rises, pulling the sword from the marble with no effort at all. His helm turns to face me, and a faceplate that once stared out onto the battlefields of the Horus Heresy regards me with eye lenses the colour of human blood.

He salutes me, sword sheathed on his back and his gauntlets making the sign of the aquila over his battered breastplate. I return the salute, and rarely in my life has the gesture been so heartfelt. I am finally ready to stand before him, and endure the judging stare of those crimson eyes.

'Hail, Reclusiarch,' he says to me.

'Hail, Bayard,' I say to the Emperor's Champion of the Helsreach Crusade.

He watches me, but I know he is not seeing me. He sees Mordred, the knight whose weapon I bear, and whose face I wear.

'My liege.' Priamus comes forward, kneeling before Bayard.

'Priamus,' Bayard vox-laughs. 'Still breathing, I see.'

'Nothing on this world will change that, my liege.'

'Rise, brother. The day will never come that you must kneel before me.' Priamus rises, inclining his head in respect once more before returning to

my side. ‘Artarion, Bastilan, it is good to see you both. And you, Nero.’

Nerovar makes the sign of the aquila, but says nothing.

‘Cador’s fall tore at my heart, brother. He and I served in the Sword Brethren together, did you know that?’

‘I knew it, my liege. Cador spoke of it often. He was honoured to serve at your side.’

‘The honour was mine. Know that fifty of the enemy died by my blade the day I heard of his passing. Throne, but he was a warrior to quench the fires of the stars themselves. I miss him fiercely, and the Eternal Crusade is poorer without his sword.’

‘You... do great honour to his memory,’ Nero’s voice is choked with emotion.

‘Tell me, brother,’ Bayard’s tone lowers, as if the refugees standing and staring at us outside the great gates have no right to hear of what we speak. ‘I heard his death-wound was in the back. Is this so?’

Nero’s nod comes with reluctance. ‘It is.’

‘I also heard he killed nine of the beasts alone, before succumbing to his wounds.’

‘He did.’

‘Nine. *Nine*. Then he died facing his enemy, as a knight must. Thank you, Nero. You have brought me comfort this day.’

‘I... I...’

‘Welcome, brothers. It has been too long since we stood united.’ There are general murmurs of assent, and Bayard looks to me.

I smile behind my mask.

They rode in the back compartment of a trundling Chimera armoured personnel transport, their backs thumping against the metal walls with each sharp turn. It had been parked on the highway itself, riddled with bullet holes and las-burns, but still very much fuelled and ready to roll. Andrej and the others had dragged the bodies of dead Legionnaires out

onto the road, and the storm trooper had forced the dockers to say a short prayer over the corpses before he would, as he put it, 'steal their ride'.

'Manners cost nothing,' he told them. 'And these men died for your city.'

The troop section in the back of the Chimera was a typical slice of Guard life, smelling of blood, oil and rancid sweat. On creaking benches, Maghernus and his dockers, along with Asavan Tortellius recruited to their cause, sat and waited for Andrej to get them all the way down the Hel's Highway.

He was not a good driver. They had mentioned this to him, and he professed not to know what they were talking about. Besides, he'd added, the left tank tread was damaged. That was why he kept skidding.

Also, he'd amended last of all, they should shut up. So there.

Andrej cycled through vox-channels, still getting no luck on any frequency. Whether every vox-tower in the city was gone or the orks had some intense jamming campaign going on was beside the point at this stage. He couldn't get in touch with his commanders, and that left him to his own devices. As always, he would *go forward*. It was the way of the Legion, and the creed of the Guard.

The way he saw it, the Reclusiarch owed him a favour. In this case, *going forward* meant making a stand with the black knights until he could find someone, anyone, from his command structure.

There'd been a particularly galling moment when he'd managed to contact elements of the 233rd Steel Legion Armoured Division, but they were in the middle of being annihilated by an enemy scrap-Titan formation and had no time for pleasantries. Fate was laughing at him, Andrej was sure of it – the one Imperial force he'd been able to reach were minutes from being wiped out anyway.

This was no way to fight a war. No communication between any forces? Madness!

Smoke and flames were on the horizon ahead, but that indicated next to nothing of any use in determining direction or destination. Smoke and flames were on every horizon. Smoke and flame was all each of the horizons had become.

Andrej was not laughing. This did not amuse him, no sir.

He changed gear with a nauseating grind of metal hating metal. A chorus of complaints jeered from the back as the Chimera juddered in protest and shook his passengers around some more. He heard someone's head clang off the interior wall. He hoped it was the fat priest's.

Andrej sniggered. At least that was funny.

'...ckr... sn... tl...' declared the vox.

Aha! Now this was progress.

'This is Trooper Andrej, of the—'

He closed his mouth as the transmission crackled into a semblance of clarity. The burning district ahead, through which he'd need to pass to reach the distant temple... It was the Rostorik Ironworks. The vox told of a Titan's death-wails.

'Hold on,' he called back, and accelerated the battered transport along the Hel's Highway, towards the emerging shape of *Stormherald* above the surrounding industrial towers.

The link was savaged by *Bound in Blood*'s mortis-cry. Zarha twisted in her coffin, trying to filter the empathic pain from the influx of sensory information she needed to focus on.

Her fistless arm pushed forward in the milky fluid, and the Titan obeyed her furious need.

'Firing,' Valian Carsomir confirmed.

In the centre of the industrial sector, ringed by burning towers and crushed manufactories, the Emperor Titan weathered a hail of enemy fire from scrap-walkers that barely reached its waist. Its shields rippled with searing intensity, corona-bright and almost blinding.

The plasma annihilator amassed power, sucking in a storm of air through its coolant vanes and juddering as it made ready to release. Around the god-machine's legs, the waddling ork walkers blared sirens and howling warnings to one another. Burning vapour clouded around the shaking plasma weapon as it vented pressure, and with a roar that shattered every remaining window in a kilometre-wide radius, *Stormherald* fired.

Three of the lesser scrap-Titans were engulfed in the flood of boiling plasma that surged from the weapon, melting to sludge in the white-hot sunfire.

Zarha's arm was aflame with sympathetic agony. She did her best to blank it from her mind, focusing instead on the rattling crawl of insects over her body. Her shields were taking grave damage now. *Stormherald* could not linger here for much longer.

'*Bound in Blood* isn't rising, my princeps.'

Zarha knew this. She'd heard its soul scream across the Legio's princeps-level link.

He is dying.

'He is dying.'

'Orders, my princeps?'

Stand. Fight.

'Stand. Fight.'

The Titan shuddered as another wreck-walker staggered closer, its shoulder cannons booming. Standing above the downed Reaver-class Titan *Bound in Blood*, *Stormherald* returned fire with its incidental weapon batteries, flash-frying the lesser machine's void shields in a hail of incendiary fire.

Zarha pushed her other arm forward through the ooze, laughing as she moved. *Stormherald*'s other arm, the colossal hellstorm cannon, thrummed

as its internal mechanics chambers and drive engines cycled up to firing speed.

‘My princeps...’ Lonn and Carsomir warned in the same breath. Zarha cackled in her tomb of fluid.

Die!

‘Die!’

The enemy scrap-Titan was shredded by five energy lances blasting from *Stormherald*’s hellstorm cannon. In less than three seconds, its plasma core was breached and critically venting, and in less than five it had exploded, taking the bulk of the fat-bodied gargant with it. Shrapnel shards the size of tanks hammered off the Emperor’s void shields, leaving distortions of bruising while the generators struggled to compensate.

‘Secondary impact from the turbolaser batteries... Cog’s teeth, we struck the G-71 orbital landing platform. My princeps, I implore you to use caution...’

Engine kill. She licked her cold, wrinkled lips. *Engine kill.*

‘Engine kill.’

Half a kilometre behind the dead enemy walker – its foundation struts destroyed by the laser salvo from *Stormherald*’s hellstorm cannon – a sizeable landing platform crashed down to the ground, sliding on fouled gantries to smash through the roof of a burning tank manufactorum. An avalanche of rockcrete, broken iron and steel was all that remained of both installations, at the heart of a cloud of grey-black smoke and rock dust.

The ironyard had played host to the pitched battle between Titans and infantry for several days. Little was left, yet neither side was giving ground.

‘My princeps...’

No more lectures. I do not care.

‘No more lectures. I do not care.’

‘My princeps,’ Valian repeated, ‘new contact. Behind us.’

She spun in the fluid, fish-like and alert. *Stormherald* followed with ponderous slowness, its fortress-legs thudding down onto the ground. The cityscape view through the Titan’s eyes panned, showing nothing but devastation.

‘The scanner blur is either several walkers together, or a single engine of our size.’

The adept hunched by the auspex console turned to regard the pilot crew with three bionic eyes, each with a lens of dark green glass. A blurt of machine-code disagreed with Lonn’s appraisal.

[/Negative. Thermal signature registers distinct single pulse.]/

One enemy engine.

That isn’t possible, she thought, but never let it reach her vocalisers. An uneasy tremor was running through the Titan’s bones, and she felt it as keenly as she’d once felt the wind on her skin in another lifetime.

‘My princeps, we must disengage,’ Lonn said, staring out into the burning ironyard. ‘We need to rearm and cool the plasma core in standard sustained venting procedure.’

I know that better than you, Lonn.

‘I know that better than you, Lonn.’

But I am not abandoning a district I have spent four nights fighting to hold.

‘But I am not abandoning a district I have spent four nights fighting to hold.’

‘My princeps, there’s precious little left standing to defend,’ Lonn pressed. ‘I repeat my recommendation to withdraw and rearm.’

No. I am sending Regal and Ivory Fang north to hunt the inbound enemy engine and confirm with visual scanning.

‘No. I am sending Regal and Ivory Fang north to hunt the inbound enemy engine and confirm with visual scanning.’

Lonn and Carsomir shared a glance from across the command deck. Both men were restrained in their control thrones, and both men wore the same expression of frustrated doubt.

‘My princeps,’ Carsomir tried, but he was cut off.

‘See? They move.’ On the hololithic display screen, the runes denoting the scout Titans *Regal* and *Ivory Fang* broke away from their perimeter-stalking patrol to the west, and strode northwards in search of the incoming thermal pulse.

‘My princeps, we do not have the ammunition reserves required to inflict destruction-level damage on an enemy engine of comparable size to us.’

‘I am venting the heart-core’s excess fusion matter and flushing the heat exchangers.’ Even as she vocalised the orders, she was sending empathic pulses through her links to make it so.

‘My princeps, that is not enough.’

‘He is right, my princeps,’ Carsomir had turned in his throne, and was looking back at her fluid tank now. ‘You are too close to *Stormherald*’s wrath. Return to us and focus.’

‘We are defended by three Reavers and our own scout screen. Be silent.’

‘Two Reavers, my princeps.’

Yes. Two. She pulled back from the immersion of rage. Yes... two. *Bound in Blood* was silent and dead, its power core cooling and its princeps voiceless. In her confused thinking, she did not mean to vocalise her next words.

‘We have lost seven engines in one week of battle.’

‘Yes, my princeps. Prudence would serve us best now. If the auspex is true, we must withdraw.’

She floated in her coffin, hearing the curious humanity in their voices. Such emotion. Such curious intensity, affecting their speech tones. She

recognised it as fear, without truly recalling what the sensation felt like.

‘We have killed almost twenty of the foe’s engines... but I concede. Sound the withdrawal as soon as the Warhounds have confirmation.’

The first Imperial engine to bear witness to the *Godbreaker* was *Ivory Fang*. It stalked fast and low on its backwards-jointed legs, the side-to-side pitch of its stomping gait adding a feral, if mechanical, grace to its dawn hunt.

Warhound-class. And it suited the name, lone wolfing its way through the wrecked industrial sector, striding around the shells of tanks destroyed in the week-long struggle for the Rostorik Ironyard. Sometimes, its hooved feet would crunch down on the soft meat of burned bodies and render them into pulped smears along the ground. Dead skitarii, Guardsmen, factorum workers and greenskins littered the district.

Ivory Fang was commanded most ably by a princeps by the name of Haven Havelock. Princeps Havelock dreamed, as did most of his ilk, of one day mastering a great battle-Titan, and perhaps even one of Invigilata’s precious few Imperators. His fellow princeps – equals and superiors alike – spoke well of him, and he knew his place in the Legio as a solid, reliable scout-Titan commander was assured, valued, and deserved.

Patience was foremost among his virtues – patience and cunning. That reasoned, meticulous hunting instinct bled through the mind-bond into *Ivory Fang*. Twinned, man and machine were past masters at the kind of deep-urban stalks where Warhound Titans most excelled.

The rough link between Titan commanders maintained throughout the city had suffered just as Imperial vox had suffered, but Havelock was reassured by the fragments of meaning that pulsed through the chaos. If there truly was an enemy scrap-Titan out there, it was nothing the battle group could not deal with. *Stormherald* was no more than two kilometres to the south, and with it were *Danol’s Retribution* and *The Ghoul*, both

Reavers with victory banners descending from their armour plating that would put mid-range Titan princeps from any other Legio to shame.

Nothing the beasts could hurl at them would break such a formation. Even the largest gargant would fall to *Stormherald*.

I see nothing, came the aggravated spurt of machine code from his fellow princeps, Feerna of *Regal*.

Havelock spent a quarter of a second consulting his internal tracking runes. The link to his Titan's auspex sensors formed a rough, instinctive knowledge of his kin's locations in his mind.

Regal was a half-kilometre to the north-east, moving at speed through a small cluster of iron smelteries. It would have been in visual range, had the space between the two Titans not been obstructed by ruined manufactories.

I see nothing, either.

It's the heat, she complained. *Hunting for thermal signatures in this inferno is like seeking black in the night sky. My auspex readers show nothing but thermal disruption. Horus himself could be hiding in here, and I would not kn—*

Feerna? Feerna?

'Registering energy discharge of significant size to the north-east,' Havelock's moderati called out.

'Confirmed,' murmured the tech-adept that hunched in a station behind the princeps throne.

Feerna? Havelock tried once more. 'Bring us about and move north-east at aggressive intent speed. Everyone be ready.' He twitched in his restraint throne as the Titan obeyed his pilot's urgings. The connection feeds were alive with subtle static, itching at his nerves. *Ivory Fang* was keen. It had sensed something.

And then it hit Havelock, too.

‘Hnnngh,’ he drooled through clenched teeth, shuddering against the leather bindings that restrained him in place. ‘Hnn... Hvv...’

The pain of *Regal*’s mortis-cry faded, and Havelock breathed again. Feerna was gone, as was her Titan. She’d been a Warhound, and her link to the others was tenuous and weak in comparison to the strength of a bond to the greater god-machines. The pain bled away fast, bringing relief in its wake.

The Titan clanked its way down a subsidiary alley, its weapon-arms rising in readiness. Havelock sent several mental urgings in quick succession, triggering autoloaders, coolant valves and bracing pistons into activity. *Ivory Fang* rounded the corner at the alley’s end, stalking out into the main street. As it had been since this morning, this sector was still aflame because of the destroyed refineries and petrochemical stores, with about half the buildings finally quieting into smouldering ruins.

But the fighting was done here.

‘Where is the bastard?’ Havelock whispered.

The auspex chimed – once, weak.

‘We have movement,’ the tech-adept grumbled, not looking up from his scanner console. ‘There is—’

‘I see, it, I see it. Back away *now!*’

It came from the black clouds, rumbling forward on a clumsy mess of tank treads and crushing feet. Its body was slanted, tapering to a head that was all brutal jaw and piggish, alien eye-windows. Every metre of its scrap metal torso bristled with tiered weapons platforms.

It was quite the ugliest and most offensive thing Havelock had ever seen, and that was more than simply because it was an affront to the purity of Mechanicus god-machine creation. No, more than that, it offended him because its manifestation before him made no sense. It... dwarfed *Stormherald*.

It seemed impossibility given form, striding, limping from the oily smoke that blanketed the district.

Havelock pulsed a digitally-translated pict of the enemy gargant across the mind-bond to Princeps Zarha and any other Titan commander in range. It was all the warning he would be allowed to send, for *Godbreaker* opened fire the very moment its main armaments cleared the smoke.

Ivory Fang was pulverised beneath enough solid, laser and plasma weapon fire to level a city block. Its demise, and the end of Havelock's mediocre career, was marked by a vast crater that would remain for decades after the war had bled the whole world almost dry.

Godbreaker moved onwards.



CHAPTER XXI

Stormherald Down

The two engines faced one another across the burning ironyard, as alike in power as they were unlike in dignity. Both were ablaze, both bleeding fire and smoke into the clouded air.

The air between them was a blizzard of weapon fire as secondary turrets and battlement guns spat anti-infantry firepower at each other in the hopes of inflicting as much damage as possible. Inside both Titans, it sounded like a flood of pebbles clattering against the armour-plated hulls.

Inside *Stormherald*, the sirens were wailing long and loud.

Zarha writhed in her fluid-filled tomb, her limbs pushing through the blood-pinked water. Psychostigmata was ravaging her, as *Stormherald*'s wounds played out in a map across her naked body. Where the Titan was battered, she was discoloured by bruising or bent by broken bones. Where the god-machine was rent and torn, her flesh smiled and bled in open wounds. Where *Stormherald* burned, she was haemorrhaging internally.

The Titan's command deck smelled of burning oil and rancid sweat.

'Primary shield layer restored,' Carsomir announced, his hands working at his console with a near-furious focus. 'Core containment holding.'

Raise... raise shields...

'Krrrssshhhhh.'

RAISE THE SHIELDS.

‘Raise the shields.’

‘Already done, my princeps.’

She was slowing down. The pain stole so much of her attention now. With a moan that was swallowed into silence by the water, she pulsed orders to the various decks and pushed both of her arms forward through the pinkish ooze.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, screaming into the oxygen-rich fluid, the stumps of her hands thumping against the front of her coffin.

Nothing.

‘Plasma annihilator venting for sixteen more seconds, my princeps. Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve.’

Fire the... the... other arm. Fire it.

‘Krrrrssssshh.’

FIRE THE HELLSTORM CANNON. Her stunted right limb thudded over and over against the glass side of her amniotic tank.

‘Fire the hellstorm cannon.’

‘As soon as it has recharged, my princeps,’ Lonn replied, half-ignoring her now. She’d given the order to fire at will several minutes before. Drifting in her pain as the Titan fell to pieces, she was barely trustworthy now. Carsomir and Lonn worked almost independently of their princeps’s wishes. They only had one more shot at walking away from this – the enemy Titan was already advancing over the mangled body of *The Ghoul*, which had lasted less than a minute beneath the *Godbreaker*’s initial volleys.

The scrap-Titan was capable of a merciless amount of firepower. None of *Stormherald*’s command crew had seen anything like it before, let alone suffered on the receiving end. Only a few minutes into the god-machines’ duel, and the Imperator was wreathed in flame, temperature gauges

whining and warning lights flashing throughout the confined corridors threading through the giant's steel bones.

The multitude of layered energy screens that served the Titan as void shields had been torn apart with insane, laughable speed by the ork walker.

‘I’m ready,’ Carsomir announced. ‘Firing.’

‘Wait for the stabilisers to come back online!’ Lonn yelled. ‘They only need another minute.’

Carsomir thought his fellow pilot's faith in the tech-crews working in the shoulder joints was admirable, but unbelievably misguided given the circumstances. He blinked once, wasting precious seconds to even think about listening to Lonn's plea.

‘The arm isn't badly damaged. I'm taking the shot. I can make it.’

‘You'll miss, Val! Give them thirty seconds, just thirty more seconds.’

‘Firing.’

‘You son of a bitch!’

Stormherald's knees locked in preparation and the plasma annihilator tower that served as its left arm began its air-sucking inhalation of coolant.

‘You've killed us,’ Lonn breathed, watching the enemy Titan through the steamed-up view windows. An unremitting torrent of incidental fire rained against *Stormherald's* shields, turning them violet with strain.

‘Void shields buckling,’ one of the tech-adepts called from a side terminal.

‘Enemy engine making ready to fire primary weapons,’ another said.

‘They'll never get the chance...’ Valian Carsomir smiled with a wicked light in his eyes.

Lonn's shouted protest was drowned out in the roar of discharging sunfire. A beam of plasma – roiling, boiling and white-hot – vomited from the cannon's focusing ring, blasting across the four hundred metres separating the two Titans. *Stormherald* stood rigid, defensive, no longer

advancing after the first two minutes of punishing exchange. *Godbreaker* had not stopped its thunderous, slow charge.

‘You bastard!’ Lonon yelled. Carsomir had missed. The jet of plasma blanketed the ground to the left of the closing ork gargant, where it began to dissolve everything it touched in a vast pool of acidic corruption.

Lonon had been right. The arm-weapon had strayed despite targeting locks, as the supreme force of its own firepower sent it veering off-centre.

‘I had the shot,’ Carsomir shook his head.

‘Void shields failing,’ the tech-adept announced without any emotion whatsoever.

‘I had the shot,’ Carsomir repeated, unable to look away from the wreck-Titan bearing down upon them. Behind the moderati thrones, Zarha floated in her suspension tank, slack and unconscious.

‘No, no, no...’ Lonon worked at his console, his brow furrowed. ‘This can’t be.’

The Titan began to shudder around them as the void shields died again, the Imperator’s dense armour taking the brunt of the alien attack.

Lonon had never worked like this before in his life. It was a flurry of effort, performed half in the flesh and half with the mind. He could feel the Titan falling into slumber, and its dimming consciousness dragged at his thoughts, slowing them to a crawl. Where he met resistance like this in the mind-link, he compensated by overrides on his command console.

The command deck grew dark as he worked. The enemy gargant eclipsed all outside light, looming before the idle *Stormherald*.

‘Why hasn’t it fired?’ Carsomir worked as Lonon did, cooling essential systems, ordering repair teams to afflicted joints, feeding power from the coughing shield generators to the thirsty weapon energy cells.

To Lonon, the reason was obvious. Like the savages that acted as the gargant’s puppeteers, the scrap-Titan was built to kill with its hands. Several of the thing’s weapon mounts were taken up by crude arms that

ended in spears and claws of salvaged metal. It wanted to savour *Stormherald's* death, like some many-armed daemon from the impure millennia of pre-Imperial Terra.

Zarha's augmetic eyes flicked back to active as the chamber grew dark. She awoke, seeing the doom bearing down on her, feeling secondary fire devastating her armour plating like she was being skinned alive.

Through the bloody fluid and maddening pain, she raised her shivering arms. *Stormherald* mirrored the gesture as it was pummelled under *Godbreaker's* guns. Jagged metal fell from the Mechanicus giant like rainfall, ripped from its body and crashing to the ground below. Many of the Emperor's crew that had the sense of self-preservation to flee were killed by the falling chunks of armour plating.

Zarha put the last of her strength, and the last of her life, into throwing both her arms forward. The plasma annihilator did not fire. Neither did the hellstorm cannon. Both were locked in the time-consuming process of recharging from depleted power generators.

Both towering weapon-arms speared forward, hammering through the fat hull of *Godbreaker* and impaling it in place. The cry of tearing scrap metal was cacophonous as *Stormherald's* cannons pushed deeper, stabbing like daggers through meat, seeking to grind and crush the enemy's heart-reactor.

Grimaldus. I stood until the end, as promised. Awaken Oberon. Awaken it, or die as we have.

Perhaps her thoughts echoed across the empathic link to her moderati, for one of them voiced something of her sentiments.

'We're dead,' Carsomir murmured. He wanted to rise from his throne, but the restraints and connection cables bound him too completely. He settled for closing his eyes.

Lonn had sensed the Crone's intent. He leaned all his weight on the control levers, adding his demands to Zarha's, plunging the arms deeper

into the enemy Titan's chest with scraping, grinding slowness. He felt sick to stare up through the darkened viewports to see the bestial, tusked aliens clambering along the impaling arm-cannons, using them as bridges to board *Stormherald* as they bled from the wounds in their own Titan's body.

With no peaceful fade or foreshadowing, the power died, leaving him in darkness. He eased up on the levers, knowing without needing to look that the Crone was gone.

Stormherald was a statue, joined to the war machine that was slowly carving it to pieces with great chops of its bladed limbs. As endings went, Lonn mused, this was neither grand nor glorious.

As the command deck shook with rhythmic violence from the *pound, pound, pounding* of *Godbreaker's* many weapon-arms, Lonn drew his laspistol, and watched the sealed doors, ready for the aliens to eventually breach them. His skin crawled at the gentle sound of Zarha's corpse bumping against the glass front of her coffin, in time to the Titan's shaking.

'I... I had the shot,' Carsomir stammered from the adjacent throne as he waited to die in the dark. 'I had the shot...'

The side of his head burst open as a las-beam slashed through his skull.

'You bastard,' Lonn said to the twitching body. Then he lowered his pistol, took a deep breath, and began the laborious process of disengaging himself from the control throne.

There was something human in the way *Stormherald* died. The way it went slack, the way it staggered, the way it crashed to the ground, its heart-core cold, swarming with enemy bodies like insects feeding upon a corpse.

The god-machine shook the earth when it finally toppled. The spined, spiked cathedral tumbled from its back in a spillage of priceless architecture, left as no more than rubble and scraps of armour plating in a mountain of wreckage by the Titan's head. *Stormherald's* arms were wrenched from the torso, squealing free of the ruptured shoulder joints

when the ancient engine hammered into the ground with enough force to send tremors through the entire city.

The head itself was torn free before the main body fell, leaving a socket of trailing power cables and interface feeds, like a nest of a million snakes. Gripped in the lifter-claw at the end of one of *Godbreaker*'s many arms, the Titan's head was clamped and crushed, then hurled aside as a twisted ball of scrap metal. Its landing flattened a small manufactorum, as the armoured command chamber weighing several dozen tonnes blasted through the building's side wall and pulverised several support pillars.

On board *Godbreaker*, the bestial creature in charge ranted at its subordinates for destroying and discarding the Titan's head in such a way. To the beast's mind, it would have made a very impressive trophy to mount on their own god-machine.

The few Legio crew members, skitarii defenders and tech-adepts that survived *Stormherald*'s fall scrabbled from exits and breaks in the behemoth's skin. In the midday light of Armageddon's weak sun, they were cut down by the ork reavers around the dead Titan.

Miraculously, Moderati Secundus Lonn was one of these. He had managed to break free of the bindings and interface cables linking him to the dying god-machine, and make it out of the bridge by the time *Godbreaker* decapitated *Stormherald*. In the following fall, he broke his leg in two places, earned a concussion as the tilting corridor sent him falling down a flight of spiral stairs, and busted several of his teeth clear out of his gums when his head smacked off a handrail.

On hands and knees, dragging his dead leg and half drunk with concussion, Lonn hauled himself out of an emergency bulkhead to lie on the warm armour plating of *Stormherald*'s torso. There he remained, panting and bleeding in the thin sunlight for several seconds, before starting to crawl his slow way down to the ground. He was killed less than

a minute later by the marauding greenskins swarming over the downed Titan.

Through the pain, he was laughing as he died.

Grimaldus came at last to the inner sanctum.

He was no longer a warrior here, but a pilgrim. Of this he was certain, though in the wake of his words with Nero, he felt certain of little else.

It had taken very little time within the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant to bring about this certainty within him, but the feeling was undeniable. He felt home, on familiar and sacred ground, for the first time since he had left the *Eternal Crusader*.

It was purifying.

The cool air didn't taste of fire and blood on a world he had no wish to walk upon. The silence wasn't broken by the drumbeat of a war he had no stake in.

Augmented infants – the lobotomised bodies of children kept eternally young through gene manipulation and hormone control – were enhanced by simple Mechanicus organs and pressed into service as winged cherub-servitors, hovering on anti-grav fields as they trailed prayer banners through the halls and arched chambers.

In the myriad rooms of the basilica, the devoted and the faithful of Helsreach went about their daily reverence despite the war blackening their city. Grimaldus walked through a chamber of monks offering prayer through inscribing hundreds of saints' names on thin parchments that would hang from the weapons of temple guards. One of the holy men kneeled as the Adeptus Astartes passed, imploring the 'Angel of Death' to wear the parchment on his armour. Touched by the man's devotion, the knight had accepted, and voxed an order to the rest of his men scattered throughout the temple grounds to acquiesce to any similar charity.

Grimaldus let the lay brother tie the scroll to his pauldron with twine. The offered parchment was a modest but appreciated replacement for the

iconography, oathpapers and heraldry that had been scoured from his armour in the last five weeks of battle.

The Reclusiarch had ventured alone into the undercroft, wishing to bear witness to the civilians there in his patrol to examine all defences and locations within the basilica. The subterranean expanse might once have been austere and solemn, featuring little more than infrequently-spaced sarcophagi of black stone. To the knight's eyes, it was a refugee bunker, packed tight with humans that smelled both unwashed and afraid as they sat around in family clusters – some asleep; some speaking quietly; some comforting crying babies; some spreading out meagre possessions on dirty blankets, taking stock of everything they now owned in the world, which was all they had managed to carry with them as they'd fled their homes.

Wordlessly, he'd walked among them. Every one of them had moved from his path; every one of them so openly awed by their first sighting of an Adeptus Astartes warrior. Parents whispered to children, and children whispered more questions back.

'Hello,' a voice called from behind him as he was moving back up the wide marble stairs. The Reclusiarch turned. A girl-child stood at the bottom of the staircase, clad in an oversized shirt that clearly belonged to a parent or older sibling. Her ratty blonde hair was so dirty that it snarled quite naturally into accidental dreadlocks.

Grimaldus descended again, ignoring the girl's parents hissing at her, calling her back. She was no older than seven or eight. She stood up straight, and reached his knee.

'Hail,' he said to her. The crowd flinched back from the vox-voice, and several of those closest gasped in a breath.

The girl blinked. 'Father says you are a hero. Are you a hero?'

Grimaldus's gaze flicked across the crowd. His targeting cursor danced from face to face, seeking her parents.

Nothing in two centuries of war had prepared him to answer this question. The gathered refugees looked on in silence.

‘There are many heroes here,’ the Chaplain replied.

‘You are very loud,’ the girl complained.

‘I am more used to shouting,’ the knight lowered his voice. ‘Do you require something from me?’

‘Will you save us?’

He looked at the crowd again, and chose his words with great care.

That had been an hour ago. The Reclusiarch stood with his closest brothers and the Emperor’s Champion in the basilica’s inner sanctum.

The chamber was expansive, easily able to accommodate a thousand worshippers at once. For now, it stood bare, the hundreds of Steel Legionnaires that were bunking here in recent weeks currently out on their patrols through the graveyard and surrounding temple district.

The few dozen that had been off-duty were ushered out by monks when the Adeptus Astartes had entered. Almost immediately, the knights were joined by a new presence. An irritated presence, at that.

‘Well, well, well,’ the irritated presence said in her old woman’s voice. ‘The Emperor’s Chosen, come to stand with us at last.’

The knights turned in the sunlit chamber, back to the entrance where a diminutive figure stood in contoured power armour. A bolter, cased in bronze with gold-leaf etchings, was mag-locked between her shoulders. The gun was a smaller calibre than Adeptus Astartes weaponry, but still a rare firearm to see in the possession of a human.

Her white power armour was bedecked in trappings that marked her rank in the Holy Order of the Argent Shroud. The old woman’s white hair was cut severely at her chin, framing a wrinkled face with icy eyes.

‘Hail, prioress,’ Bayard acknowledged her with a bow, as did the others. Grimaldus and Priamus made no obeisance, with the swordsman remaining unmoving and Grimaldus instead making the sign of the aquila.

‘I am Prioress Sindal, and in the name of Saint Silvana, I bid you welcome to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.’

Grimaldus stepped forward. ‘Reclusiarch Grimaldus of the Black Templars. I cannot help but notice that you do not sound welcoming.’

‘Should I be? Half of the Temple District has already fallen in the last week. Where were you then, hmm?’

Priamus laughed. ‘We were at the docks, you ungrateful little harpy.’

‘Be at ease,’ Grimaldus warned. Priamus replied with a vox-click of acknowledgement.

‘We were, as my brother Priamus explained, engaged in the east of the hive. But we are here now, when the war is at its darkest, as the enemy approach the temple doors.’

‘I have fought with Adeptus Astartes before,’ the prioress said, her armoured arms crossed over the fleur-de-lys symbol that marked her sculpted breastplate. ‘I have fought alongside warriors who would have given their lives for the Imperium’s ideals, and warriors that cared only for accruing glory, as if they could wear their honour like armour. Both breeds were Adeptus Astartes.’

‘We are not here to be lectured on the state of our souls,’ Grimaldus tried to keep the irritation from his voice.

‘Whether you are or not doesn’t matter, Reclusiarch. Will you dismiss your fellow warriors from the chamber, please? There is much to speak of.’

‘We can speak of the temple’s defence in front of my brothers.’

‘Indeed we can, and when the time comes to speak of such things, they will be present. For now, please dismiss them.’

‘Did you cleanse yourself, by the Stoup of Elucidation?’

This is the question she asks in the silence that descends once my brothers are gone, and the doors are closed.

The stoup she speaks of is a huge bowl of black iron, mounted upon a low pedestal of what looks like wrought gold. It stands by the double doors, which are themselves bedecked in imagery of warlike angels with toothed swords, and saints bearing bolters.

I confess to her that I did not.

‘Come then.’ She beckons me to the bowl. The water within reflects the painted ceiling and the stained glass windows above – a riot of colour in a liquid mirror.

She dips a bare finger into the water after taking the time to detach and remove her gauntlets. ‘This water is thrice-blessed,’ she says, tracing her dripping fingertip across her forehead in a crescent moon. ‘It brings clarity of purpose, when anointed onto the doubting and the lost.’

‘I am not lost,’ I lie, and she smiles at the words.

‘I did not mean to imply that you were, Reclusiarch. But many who come here are.’

‘Why did you wish to speak with me alone? Time is short. The war will reach these walls in a matter of days. Preparations must be made.’

She speaks, staring down into the perfect reflection offered by the bowl. ‘This basilica is a bastion. A castle. We can defend it for weeks, when the enemy finally gathers courage enough to besiege it.’

‘Answer the question.’ This time, I could not keep the irritation from my voice even if I had wished to.

‘Because you are not like your brothers.’

I know that when she looks at my face, she does not see me. She sees the death mask of the Emperor, the skull helm of an Adeptus Astartes Reclusiarch, the crimson eye lenses of humanity’s chosen. And yet our gazes meet in the water’s reflection, and I cannot completely fight the feeling she is seeing *me*, beneath the mask and the masquerade.

What does she mean by those words? That she senses my doubts? That they drip from me like nervous sweat, visible and stinking to all who stand

near me?

‘I am no different from them.’

‘Of course you are. You are a Chaplain, are you not? A Reclusiarch. A keeper of your Chapter’s lore, soul, traditions and purity.’

My heart rate slows again. My rank. That is all she meant.

‘I see.’

‘I am given to understand Adeptus Astartes Chaplains are invested with their authority by the Ecclesiarchy?’

Ah. She seeks common ground. Good luck to her in this doomed endeavour. She is a warrior of the Imperial Creed, and an officer in the Church of the God-Emperor.

I am not.

‘The Ecclesiarchy of Terra supports our ancient rites, and the authority of every Chapter’s Reclusiam to train warrior-priests to guide the souls of its battle-brothers. They do not invest us with power. They recognise we already hold it.’

‘And you are given a gift by the Ecclesiarchy? A rosarius?’

‘Yes.’

‘May I see yours?’

The few Adeptus Astartes singled out for ascension into the Reclusiam are gifted with a rosarius medallion upon succeeding in the first trials of Chaplainhood. My talisman was beaten bronze and red iron, shaped into a heraldic cross.

‘I no longer carry one.’

She looks up at me, as if the reflection of my skull visage was no longer clear enough for her purposes.

‘Why is that?’

‘It was lost. Destroyed in battle.’

‘Is that not a dark omen?’

‘I am still alive three years after its destruction. I still do the Emperor’s work, and still follow the word of Dorn even after its loss. The omen cannot be that dark.’

She looks at me for some time. I am used to humans staring at me in awkward silence; used to their attempts to watch without betraying that they are watching. But this direct stare is something else, and it takes a moment to realise why.

‘You are judging me.’

‘Yes, I am. Remove your helm, please.’

‘Tell me why I should.’ My voice is not pitched to petulance, merely curiosity. I had not expected her to ask such a thing.

‘Because I would like to look upon the face of the man I am speaking with, and because I wish to anoint you with the Waters of Elucidation.’

I could refuse. Of course I could refuse.

But I do not.

‘A moment, please.’ I disengage my helm’s seals, and breathe in my first taste of the crisp, cool air within the temple. The fresh water before me. The sweat of the refugees. The scorched ceramite of my armour.

‘You have beautiful eyes,’ she tells me. ‘Innocent, but cautious. The eyes of a child, or a new father. Seeing the world around you as if for the first time. Kneel, if you would? I cannot reach all the way up there.’

I do not kneel. She is not my liege lord, and to abase myself in such a way would violate all decorum. Instead, I lower my head, bringing my face closer to her. The joints of her pristine armour give the smooth purr of clean mechanics as she reaches up. I feel her fingertip draw a cross upon my forehead in cold water.

‘There,’ she says, refastening her gauntlets. ‘May you find the answers you seek in this house of the God-Emperor. You are blessed, and may tread the sacred floor of the inner sanctum without guilt.’

She is already moving away, her milky eyes squinting. ‘Come. I have something to show you.’

The prioress leads me to the centre of the chamber, where a stone table holds an open book. Four columns of polished marble rise at the table’s cardinal points, all the way to the ceiling. Upon one of the columns hangs a tattered banner unlike any I have ever seen before.

‘Hold.’

‘What is it? Ah, the first archive.’ She gestures to the sheets of ragged cloth hanging from the war banner poles. Each once-white, now-grey sheet shows a list of names in faded ink.

Names, professions, husbands and wives and children...

‘These are the first colonists.’

‘Yes, Reclusiarch.’

‘The settlers of Helsreach. The founders. This is their charter?’

‘It is. From when the great hive was no more than a village by the shore of the Tempest Ocean. These are the men and women that laid the temple’s first foundations.’

I let my gloved hand come close to the humming stasis field shielding the ancient cloth document. Parchment would have been a rare luxury to the first colonists, with the jungle and its trees so far from here. It stands to reason they would have recorded their achievements on cloth paper.

Thousands of years ago, Imperial peasants walked the ashen soil here and laid the first stone bones of what would become a great basilica to house the devotions of an entire city. Deeds remembered throughout the millennia, with their evidence for all to see.

‘You seem pensive,’ she tells me.

‘What is the book?’

‘The log from a vessel called the *Truth’s Tenacity*. It was the colonisation seeding ship that brought the settlers to Helsreach. The four pillars house a

void shield generator system, protecting the tome. This is the Major Altar. Sermons are given here, among the city's most precious relics.'

I look at the tome's curled, age-browned pages. Then at the archive banner once more.

Last of all, I replace my helm, coating my senses in the selective vision of targeting sights and filtered sounds.

'You have my thanks, prioress. I appreciate what you have shown me here.'

'Am I to expect any more of your kind arriving to bolster us, Adeptus Astartes?'

I think, for a moment, of Jurisian, bringing the Ordinatus Armageddon overland, uncrewed, at minimal power and of little to no use once it arrives.

'One more. He returns to join us and fight by our sides.'

'Then I bid you welcome to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, Reclusiarch. How do you plan to defend this holy place?'

'We are past the point of retreat now, Sindal. No finesse, no tactics, no long speeches to rally the faint of heart and those that fear the end. I plan to kill until I am killed, because that is all that remains for us here.'

Both the Reclusiarch and the prioress turned at the pounding upon the door.

Grimaldus blink-clicked the rune to bring his vox channels live again, but it wasn't any of his brothers seeking his attention.

Prioress Sindal waved her hand in a magnanimous gesture, as if there were a crowd to impress. 'Do come in.'

The great metal-wrought doors rumbled open on clean but heavy hinges. Eight men stood framed by the doors and the austere corridor beyond. Each of them bore a filthy share of blood, mud, soot and oil stains. They carried lasguns with the practiced ease of men who had become utterly familiar with the weapons, and all but two of them wore dirty blue

dockworkers' overalls. One of those that did not was dressed in the robes of a priest, but not the cream and blue weave of the temple's own residents. He was from off-world.

The leader of the group raised his goggles, letting them clack back on the top of his helmet. He regarded the knight with wide eyes.

'They said you would be here,' the storm trooper said. 'I beg the many forgivings of this holy place for my intrusion, but I bring news, yes? Do not be angry. The vox is still playing many unamusing games and I could not speak with anyone in any other way.'

'Speak, Legionnaire,' said Grimaldus.

'The beasts, they are coming in great force. Many are not far behind us, and I have heard vox-chatter that Invigilata is leaving the city.'

'Why would they leave us?' the prioress asked, horrified.

'They would quit the city at once,' Grimaldus admitted, 'if Princeps Zarha was gone. Mechanicus politics.'

'She is gone, Reclusiarch,' Andrej finished. 'An hour ago, we saw *Stormherald* die.'

Behind the Guardsman, a warrior-maiden in the white power armour of the Order of the Argent Shroud caught her breath, staring at the prioress with her features flushed.

'Prioress!'

'Take a breath, Sister Maralin.'

'We've received word from the 101st Steel Legion! Invigilata's Titans are abandoning Helsreach!'

Andrej looked at the newcomer as if she had announced that gravity was a myth. He shook his head slowly, a deep and solemn pity written across his face.

'You are late, little girl.'

The first wave to break against the walls was not a horde of the enemy.

Close-range vox detected them first, with reports of elements from three Steel Legion regiments engaged in panicked retreat. Grimaldus responded with the temple's vox-systems, boosted far beyond what the squad-to-squad comms systems were currently capable of.

He gave the order to any Helsreach forces receiving the message to fall back to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant, abandoning any further struggle to hold the few remaining sectors in the Ecclesiarchy District. Several lieutenants and captains sent affirmative responses in reply, including a captain of the hive militia still leading over a hundred men.

The fleeing Imperials began to arrive less than an hour later.

Grimaldus stood with Bayard at the gates, looking out into the city. A dark-hulled Baneblade command tank rolled past, guided into the graveyard sector by a platoon of Guardsmen waving directions to the driver. Behind it, a cadre of Leman Russ battle tanks with various turret weapons trundled in loose formation. Mingling between the rolling armour and trailing behind were several hundred Legionnaires, ochre-clad and visibly weary. Wounded were being stretchered by their fellows in serious numbers, and there were plenty of wails and moans calling out over the grind of tank engines.

Two soldiers passed by the watching knights, bearing the writhing body of a junior officer on a cloth stretcher. The man had lost an arm and a leg, at the elbow and knee respectively. His face was a contorted mess of whatever he really looked like, his visage ruined by the pain flowing through him.

One of the stretcher-bearers nodded to Grimaldus as he passed, and muttered a respectful 'Reclusiarch.'

The Templar nodded back.

'Fought with them?' Bayard asked over the vox.

'Desert Vultures. I was with them when the first walls fell. Good men, all.'

'Very few left,' Bayard said, a strange edge to his voice.

Grimaldus turned his skulled face to the Champion. ‘There will be enough. Have faith in your brothers’ blades, Bayard.’

‘I have faith. I am sanguine with my fate, Chaplain.’

‘My rank is Reclusiarch. Use it.’

‘By your will, brother, of course. But we stand vigil over the city’s death with a handful of bleeding humans, Reclusiarch. I am sanguine, but I am also a realist.’

Grimaldus’s vox-snarl drew stares from the soldiers passing nearby. ‘Have faith in the people of this city, Champion. Such condescension is beneath you. We are the last guardians of the relics prized by the first of Armageddon’s colonists. These people are fighting for more than their homes and lives. They are fighting for their ancestors’ honour, on the holiest ground in the entire world. The survivors of this war across the globe will take heart from sacrifices made by the thousands destined to die here. Blood of Dorn, Bayard... the Imperium was *born* in moments such as this.’

The Emperor’s Champion watched him for a long moment, during which Grimaldus found his heart thumping faster. He was angry, and feeling the anger rise was as purgative as his time within the temple’s serene halls. Bayard spoke, his voice sincere despite the crackle of vox-breakage.

‘My voice was one of the few that spoke against your ascension to Mordred’s rank.’

Grimaldus snorted, returning to watching the arriving forces. ‘I would have said the same in your place.’

Seventy soldiers of the Steel Legion 101st came together in a battered convoy of Chimera transports. The ramp slammed down as the lead vehicle pulled up to a halt. A squad of Legionnaires disembarked, not a one of them free of bloodstains or bandaging.

‘Leave the Chimeras outside,’ Major Ryken ordered the others. Half of his face was wrapped in grubby cloth bandages, and he leaned heavily on

an aide's shoulder, limping as he walked.

‘Shouldn't we take them inside?’ Cyria Tyro asked. She looked back over her shoulder at the tanks being abandoned.

‘To hell with them,’ Ryken spat blood as she led him to the two knights. ‘Not enough ammunition in the turrets to make it worthwhile.’

‘Grimaldus,’ she said, looking up at the towering warrior.

‘Hail, Adjutant Quintus Tyro. Major Ryken.’

‘We got cut off from Sarren and the others. The 34th, the 101st, the 51st... They're all in the central manufactory sectors...’

‘It does not matter.’

‘What?’

‘It does not matter,’ Grimaldus repeated. ‘We are defending the last points of light in Helsreach. Fate brought you to the temple. Fate sent Sarren elsewhere.’

‘Throne, there are still thousands of the bastards out there.’ He spat pinkish spit again, and Tyro grunted as she took more of his weight. ‘And that's not the worst of it.’

‘Explain.’

‘Invigilata has gone,’ Tyro said. ‘They left us to die. The enemy still has Titans – and there's one that you'll never believe until you look upon it with your own eyes. We saw it march from the Rostorik Ironworks, collapsing habitation towers in its wake.’

‘The 34th Armoured rolled out to stop it,’ Ryken winced as he spoke. His bandages were growing more stained, around what was likely an empty eye socket. ‘It flattened most of them in the time it takes a desert jackal to howl at the full moon.’

A curious local expression. Grimaldus nodded, catching the meaning, but Ryken had more to add.

‘*Stormherald* is down.’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘This *Godbreaker*... It killed the Crone, and slew *Stormherald*.’

‘I know.’

‘You know? So where’s the damn *Ordinatus*? We need it! Nothing else will kill that gigantic clanking... thing.’

‘It is coming. Move inside and see to your wounds. If the end is coming to these walls, you will need to stand ready.’

‘Oh, we’ll all be ready. The bastards took my face, and that made it personal.’

As they moved away, Grimaldus heard Tyro gently teasing the major for his bravado. When they were beyond the gates but still in sight, the Reclusiarch saw the general’s adjutant kiss the major on his unbandaged cheek.

‘Madness,’ the knight whispered.

‘Reclusiarch?’ Bayard asked.

‘Humans,’ Grimaldus replied, his voice soft. ‘They are a mystery to me.’



CHAPTER XXII

Emperor Ascendant

At last, vox reports began to trickle through to the defenders gathered in the temple's graveyard district. Across Helsreach, Sarren's plan, the 'one hundred bastions of light', was in effect, with Imperial forces massing in defensive formations around the most vital parts of the city.

Contact was erratic at best, but the fact it even existed was a boost to morale. Every point of focused defence was holding well, with all divisions breaking down between storm troopers, Guard infantry, Steel Legion armour units, militia and armed civilians who chose to take to the streets rather than cower in their shelters.

The city was fighting to keep its heart beating, and the orks no longer found themselves advancing against a mobile wave of human resistance. Now the aliens were breaking against a multitude of last stands, hurling themselves against defenders that had nowhere left to run.

Fortunately for the Imperials, enemy scrap-Titans were few in number. With recent engagements such as the Battle of the Rostorik Ironworks, the greenskins' complement of god-machines had suffered furious losses in the face of Legio Invigilata's wrath.

Even as Invigilata recalled its last remaining Titans from the city in the wake of *Stormherald*'s death, the Titans were forced to fight their way free

of the orks flooding through Helsreach's unprotected streets. Although several Titans escaped through the broken walls and into the Ash Wastes beyond, the Warlord-class engine *Ironsworn* was brought down by a massed infantry assault in an ambush similar to the one that had laid *Stormherald* low all those weeks before.

The last of the Imperial Navy forces in the city had based themselves at the Azal spaceport, where they continued to mount bombing runs and offer limited air support to the tank battalions ringing the Jaega District's surface shelters. The fighting here was among the thickest and fiercest seen in the entire siege to date, and the archives which would catalogue the Third War for Armageddon came to consider many of the glorious propaganda falsehoods born here as cold fact. Many of these heroic twists of the truth were due to the writings of one Commissar Falkov, whose memoir, entitled simply '*I Was There...*', would become standard reading for all officers of the Steel Legions in the years after the war.

Although there was absolutely no truth in the tale, Imperial records would state that acting-Commander Helius sacrificed his own life by ramming his Lightning into the heart-reactor of the enemy gargant classified as *Blood Defyla*. The truth was rather more mundane – like Barasath before him, Helius was shot down and torn to pieces shortly after disentangling from his grav-chute on the ground.

The presence of *Godbreaker* was a bane to any Imperial resolve nearby. Although the god-machine appeared a shadow of its former self, bearing a legion of wounds and missing limbs from its death-duel with *Stormherald*, with Invigilata marching away across the badlands the defenders of Helsreach had little in the way of firepower capable of retaliating against the gargant.

After laying waste to the Abraxas Foundry Complex, the mighty enemy engine adopted a random patrol of the city, engaging Imperial forces wherever it chanced upon them.

Imperial records would state that while the Siege of the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant was entering its second day, the alien war machine *Godbreaker* was destroyed on its way to finish the temple defenders once and for all.

This, at least, was perfectly true.

Jurisian watched the mechanical giants stride from the city, stepping through its sundered walls. There were three – the first escapees of Legio Invigilata – and the Master of the Forge stared from the quiet confines of *Oberon*'s command module as the Titans left the burning city behind.

The first was a Reaver-class, a mid-range battle Titan that appeared to have sustained significant damage if the columns of smoke rising from its back were any indication. Its flanking allies were both Warhounds, their ungainly gait rocking their torsos and arm-cannons side to side, step by step across the sands.

The wastelands outside Helsreach's walls resembled nothing more than a graveyard. Thousands of dead orks lay rotting in the weak sun: killed in Barasath's initial attack runs or slaughtered in the inevitable inter-tribal battles that arose when these bestial aliens gathered.

Ruined tanks were scattered in abundance, as was the wreckage from countless propeller-driven planes, each one made out of scrap and reduced back to it. The orks' landing vessels stood abandoned, with every xenos capable of lifting an axe now waging war inside the city. The primitive creatures were here to fight and destroy, or fight and die. They cared nothing for what fate befell their vessels left in the desert. Such forethought and consideration was beyond the mental capacity of most greenskins.

Jurisian made no attempt to hide his presence. There would be little point in making the attempt, for he knew the approaching Titans would be able to read *Oberon*'s energy shadow on their powerful auspex scanners. So he waited, all systems active, as the Invigilata Titans drew near. The

ground began to shiver with their closing tread, which Jurisian noted by the twisted metal and bodies across the desert floor shaking in rhythm with the god-machines.

The wounded Reaver came to a halt, its immense joints protesting that it was still forced to remain standing. It was damaged enough that a second's focus-drift might see the princeps losing control over the engine's stabilisers. It slowly aimed its remaining weapon arm at the command module, and Jurisian looked up into the yawning maw of a gatling blaster cannon.

With *Oberon*'s shields up, the Master of the Forge would have estimated the Ordinatus could tolerate several minutes of sustained assault even from a weapon as destructive as this Reaver's main armament. But *Oberon* had no shields. They were one of many secondary systems that Jurisian had lacked the time, expertise and manpower necessary to reengage.

He knew what a gatling blaster was capable of. He'd seen them devastate regiments of tanks, and rip the faces and limbs from enemy Titans. *Oberon*'s armour plating would last no more than a handful of seconds.

The Titan stared down at him in silence, no doubt while the princeps decided how to deal with this unbelievable blasphemy. Hunchbacked and striding with arm-cannons raised in threatening salute, the two Warhounds circled the immobile Ordinatus. Their posturing amused the Forgemaster. How they played at being wolves.

'Hail,' he said into a broad range of vox-channels. In truth, he was growing bored of the silence. He was far, far from intimidated.

'*What blasphemy is this?*' crackled the reply through the command module's internal speakers. '*What heretic dares defile Oberon's deserved slumber?*'

Jurisian leaned back in the control throne, elbows on the armrests and his gloved fingers steepled before his helmed face.

‘I am Jurisian of the Black Templars, Master of the Forge aboard the *Eternal Crusader*, and trained by the Cult Mechanicus for years on the surface of Mars itself. I am also in possession of the Ordinatus Armageddon, after subduing its defences and reawakening its soul, force-binding it to my will. And, lastly, I am summoned to Helsreach to aid wherever I am able. Aid me, or stand aside.’

The delay was significant in duration, and in other circumstances, that would have made it insulting. Jurisian suspected his words were being transmitted to all nearby princeps, almost definitely summoning them to this position.

Half a kilometre away, another Reaver Titan was breaching the city walls, emerging into the Ash Wastes. The knight watched it begin its halting stride in this direction, noting that it was relatively undamaged.

‘You are blaspheming against the Machine-God and its servants.’

‘I am wielding a weapon of war in defence of an Imperial city. Now aid me, or stand aside.’

‘Leave the Ordinatus platform, or be destroyed.’

‘You are not about to open fire on this holiest of artefacts, and I am not empowered by my liege lord to comply with your demands. That brings us to a stalemate. Discuss useful terms, or I will take *Oberon* into the city unprotected, surely to be destroyed without significant Mechanicus support.’

‘Your corpse will be removed from the sacred innards of the Ordinatus Armageddon, and all remnants of your presence will be eradicated from memory.’

As Jurisian drew breath to offer terms, his vox-link flickered into life. Grimaldus, at last.

‘Reclusiarch. I trust the time has finally come?’

‘We are embattled at the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. How soon can you bring the weapon to us?’

The Master of the Forge looked out of the reinforced windows at the patrolling Titans, then at the city beyond, beneath a smoke-blackened sky. He knew the hive's layout from studying the hololithics before his exile into the desert.

‘Two hours.’

‘Status of the weapon?’

‘As before. *Oberon* has no void shields, no secondary weapon systems, and suspensor lift capability is limited, hindering speed to a crawl. Alone, I can fire it no more than once every twenty minutes. I need to recharge the fuel cells manually, and regenerate flow from the plasma containment ch—’

‘I will see you in two hours, Jurisian. For Dorn and the Emperor.’

‘By your will, Reclusiarch.’

‘Heed these last words, Forgemaster. Do not bring the weapon too close. The Temple District is naught but fire and ash, and we are surrounded on all sides. Take the shot and flee the city. Pursue Invigilata's retreating forces, and link up with the Imperial assault along the Hemlock.’

‘You wish me to run?’

‘I wish you to live rather than die in vain, and save a weapon precious to the Imperium.’ Grimaldus broke off for a moment, and the pause was filled with the anger of distant guns. ‘We will be buried here, Jurisian. There is no dishonour that your fate is elsewhere.’

‘Call the primary target, Reclusiarch.’

‘You will see it as you manoeuvre through the Temple District, brother. It is called the *Godbreaker*.’

Four Titans soon barred his path.

Mightiest among them – and the last to arrive – was a Warlord, its armour plating black from paint, not battle-scarring. Its weapons trained down – immense barrels aimed at the Ordinatus platform. The

numerological markings along the engine's carapace marked it out as the *Bane-Sidhe*.

'I am Princeps Amasat of Invigilata, sub-commander of the Crone's forces and heir to her title in the wake of her demise. Explain this madness immediately.'

Jurisian looked at the city, and thought about his offer carefully before making it. He spoke with confidence, because he knew full well the Mechanicus had little other choice. He was going back into the city, and by the Machine-God, they were going to come with him.

The graveyard – that immense garden of raised stone and buried bone – played home to the storm of disorder that had until recently been raging its way through the Temple District.

The enemy had breached the temple walls at dawn on the second day, only to find that the graveyard was where the real defences stood in readiness. As tanks pounded the walls down and beasts scrabbled over the rubble, thousands of Helsreach's last defenders waited behind mausoleums, gravestones, ornate tombs of city founders and shrines to treasured saints.

Burning beams of las-fire cobwebbed across the battlefield, slicing the alien beasts down in droves.

At the vanguard, a warrior clad in black and wielding a relic warhammer battled alongside a dwindling handful of his brothers. Every fall of his maul ended with the crunch of another alien life ended. His pistol, long since powered down and empty, dangled from the thick chain binding it to his wrist. Where the fighting was thickest, he wielded it like a flail, lashing it with whip-like force into bestial alien faces to shatter bone.

At his side, two swordsmen moved and spun in lethal unison. Priamus and Bayard, their bladework complementing one another's perfectly, cutting and impaling with the same techniques, the same footwork, and at times, even in the very same moments.

With no banner to raise, not even the barest scraps left, Artarion laid about left and right with two chugging chainblades, their teeth-tracks already blunted and choked with gore. Bastilan supported him, precision bolter rounds punching home in alien flesh.

Nero was always moving, never allowed to rest for even a moment's respite. He vaulted the enemy dead, bolter crashing out round after round as he blasted the beasts away from the body of another fallen brother, buying enough time to extract the gene-seed of the honoured dead.

This he did, time after time, with tears running down his pale face. The deaths did not move him; merely the feeling of dread futility that all his efforts would be in vain. Their genetic legacy might never escape this hive to be used in the creation of more Adeptus Astartes, and no Chapter could afford to bear the loss of a hundred slain warriors with easy dignity.

Around the time Jurisian was entering the city, escorted by five Titans from Legio Invigilata, the Imperial defences were straining to hold the outer limits of the graveyard. Cries of 'Fall back! Fall back to the temple!' started to spread through the scattered lines.

Assigned squads, appointed teams, random groups of men and women – all began to back away from the unending grind of the alien advance.

The Baneblade exploded, sending flaming shrapnel spinning in a hundred directions. The Imperials nearest to the tank – those that weren't thrown from their feet – started to flee in earnest.

But there is nowhere to fall back to. Nowhere to run.

Like a lance pushed close to breaking point, our resistance is bending, the flanks being forced back behind the centre.

No. I will not die here, in this graveyard, beaten into darkness because these savages have greater numbers than we do. The enemy does not deserve such a victory.

My boots clang on the sloped armour plating as I leap and sprint up the roof of the crippled, burning Baneblade. In the maelstrom around the

rocket-struck tank, I see the 101st Steel Legion and a gathering of dockworkers trying to fall back in a panicked hurry, their forward ranks being scythed down by bloodstained axes in green-knuckled fists.

Enough of this.

The beast I am seeking seeks me out in turn. Huge, towering above its lesser kin, packed with unnatural muscle around its malformed bones and reeking of the fungal blood that fuels its foul heart. It launches itself onto the tank's hull, perhaps expecting some titanic duel to impress its tribe. A champion, perhaps. A chieftain. It matters not. The brutes' leaders rarely resist the chance to engage Imperial commanders in full view – they are loathsomely predictable.

There is no time for sport. My first strike is my last, hammering through its guard, shattering its crossed axes and pounding the aquila head of my crozius into its roaring face.

It topples from the Baneblade, all loose limbs and worthless armour, as pathetic in death as it had been in life.

I hear Priamus laughing from the tank's side, voxing it through his helm's speakers, mocking the beasts even as he slays them. On the other side, Artarion and Bastilan do the same. The orks redouble their assault with twice the fury and half the skill, and though I could reprimand my brothers for this indignity, I do not.

My laughter joins theirs.

Asavan Tortellius was serene, and that surprised him given the shaking of the walls and the sounds of war's thunder. This was no Titan's fortress-cathedral back, where he had learned to worship in safety. This was a temple besieged.

It had not taken long to find work to do within the basilica. He quickly came to realise that he was the only priest with experience of preaching on the battlefield. Most of the lay brothers and low-ranking Ecclesiarchy servants spent their time attending to their daily tasks in hurried

nervousness, praying the war would remain outside the walls. Several others cowered in the undercroft with the refugees, doing more harm than good and failing to ease a single soul with their stuttering, sweating sermons.

Asavan descended into the sublevel, immediately marked out from the other preachers by his grimy robes and dishevelled hair. He walked among the people, offering gentle words to families as he passed. He was especially patient with the children, giving them the blessing of the God-Emperor in His aspect as the Machine-God, and saying personal prayers over individual boys and girls that seemed the most weary or withdrawn.

There was a lone guard stationed at the bottom of the stairs. She was slight of frame, both short and slender, wearing a suit of power armour that seemed too bulky to be comfortable. In her hands was a boltgun, the weapon held across her chest as she stood to attention.

Asavan moved over to her, his worn boots whispering across the dusty stone.

‘Hello, sister,’ he said, keeping his voice low.

She remained unmoving, at perfect attention, though he could see the tremor in her eyes that betrayed how difficult she found it to bear this rigid nothingness.

‘My name is Asavan Tortellius,’ he told her. ‘Will you please lower the weapon?’

She looked at him, her eyes meeting his. She didn’t lower the bolter.

‘What is your name?’ he asked her.

‘Sister Maralin of the Holy Order of the Ar—’

‘Hello, Maralin. Be at ease, for the enemy is still outside the walls. Might I ask you, please, to lower the weapon?’

‘Why?’ she leaned closer to whisper.

‘Because you are making the people here even more nervous than they already are. By all means, be visible. You are their defender, and they will

take comfort in your presence. But walk among them, and offer a few kind words. Do not stand there in grim silence, weapon held tight. You are giving them greater reason to fear, and that is not why you were sent down here, Maralin.'

She nodded. 'Thank you, Father.' The bolter came down. She mag-locked it to her thigh plate.

'Come,' he smiled, 'let me introduce you to some of them.'

The Bane-Sidhe's void shields rippled and rained sparks, brought into visibility as another layer was stripped by the explosive shells raining against them. A short growl of accumulating power ended in a blasting discharge of energy as the Warlord annihilated the tanks laying claim to the Hel's Highway ahead.

A black, smoking scorch smear was all the evidence that the tanks had ever existed. Behind the striding *Bane-Sidhe*, *Oberon* drifted forward on its gravity suspensors, gently cruising over any obstructions in its path. Bringing up the column's rear were the clanking, ungainly Warhounds that *Bane-Sidhe* had ordered back into the city.

The agreement made was monumentally simple, and that was why Jurisian was certain it would work.

'Defend *Oberon*,' he'd said. 'Defend it for long enough to take a single shot, to down the enemy command gargant. Then the Ordinatus will be surrendered into your control during the retreat towards the Hemlock River.'

What choice did they have? Amasat's voice over the vox was harsh with the promise of recrimination should the plan fail to run smooth. Jurisian, for his part, could not have cared less. He had the support he needed, and he had a primary target to destroy.

Infantry resistance was met with punishing and instant devastation. Armour formations endured no longer. Through the Temple District, they encountered precious little in the way of enemy engines.

‘That is because, blasphemer, Invigilata left the enemy Titan contingent in ruins.’

‘Except for the *Godbreaker*,’ the Forgemaster replied. ‘Except for the slayer of *Stormherald*.’

Amasat chose not to retort.

‘I have nothing on my auspex,’ he said instead.

‘Nor I,’ reported one of the Warhound princeps.

‘I see nothing,’ confirmed the other.

‘Keep hunting. Draw closer to the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.’

The Mechanicus convoy traversed the urban ruination in bitter dignity for another eight minutes and twenty-three seconds before Amasat voxed again.

‘Almost one quarter of the enemy inside this hive is embattled at the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. You are threatening Oberon with destruction as well as desecration? Does your heresy know no end?’

It was Jurisian’s turn to abstain from the argument.

‘I have a thermal signature,’ he said, studying the dim auspex console to the left of his control throne. ‘It has a plasma shadow, much too hot to be natural flame.’

‘I see nothing. Coordinates?’

Jurisian transmitted the location codes. It was on the very edge of scanning range, and still several minutes away.

‘It is moving to the temple.’

‘Locomotion qualifiers?’

‘Faster than us.’

The pause was almost painful, broken by Amasat’s sneering tone. *‘Then I will give you the victory you require. Talisman and Hallowed Verity – remain with the blessed weapon.’*

‘Yes, princeps,’ both Warhounds responded.

Bane-Sidhe leaned forward, its armoured shoulders hunching as it moved into a straining stride. Jurisian listened to the protesting gears, the overworked joints, hearing the engine's machine-spirit cry out in the stress of metal under tension. He said a quiet word of thanks for the sacrifice about to be made.



CHAPTER XXIII

Knightfall

Andrej and Maghernus skidded into the basilica's first chamber, their bloody boots finding loose purchase on the mosaic-inlaid floor. Dozens of Guardsmen and militia dispersed through the vast hall, catching their breath and taking up defensive points around pillars and behind pews.

The final fallback was beginning in earnest. The graveyard outside was blanketed in enemy dead, but the last few hundred Imperials could no longer hold any ground with their own numbers depleted.

'This room...' the former dockmaster was breathing heavily, '...doesn't have much cover.'

Andrej was unslinging his back-mounted power pack. 'It is a nave.'

'What?'

'This room. It is called a nave. And you are speaking the truth – there is no defence here.' The storm trooper drew his pistol and started running deeper into the temple.

'Where are you going? What about your rifle?'

'It is out of power! Now follow, we must find the priest!'

Ryken fired with his autopistol, taking a moment between shots to regain his aim. It was a custom, heavy-duty model that wouldn't have been out of place in an underhive gangfight, and as he crouched by a black stone

shrine to a saint he didn't recognise, the gun barked hot and hard in his fist, ejecting spent cartridges that clattered off nearby gravestones.

'Fall back, sir!' one of his men was yelling. The alien beasts crashed through the graveyard like an apocalyptic flood, a unbreakable tide of noise.

'Not yet...'

'Now, you ass, come on!' Tyro dragged at his shoulder. It threw off his aim, but to hell with it – it was like spitting into the ocean anyway. He scrambled away from the relative cover of the weeping statue just in time to miss it being shattered into chips and shards by raking fire from a fully-automatic enemy stubber.

'Are they coming?' he shouted to his second officer, limping badly now.

'Who?'

'The bloody Templars!'

They were not coming.

To the retreating human survivors, it seemed as if the black knights had lost all sense, all reason, cutting their way forward while the humans that had supported them broke ranks and fled back.

No one could see why.

No one was getting a clear answer from the vox.

Bayard was dead.

Priamus saw the great champion fall, and all flair in his killing strokes was abandoned in a heartbeat. He slew with all the grace of a peasant chopping lumber upon the face of some backwater rural world, his masterwork sword reduced to a club with a vicious edge and draped in lethal energy.

'Nerovar!' he screamed his brother's name into the vox. '*Nerovar!*'

Other Templars took up the cry, summoning the Apothecary to extract the gene-seed of a Chapter hero.

Bayard stood almost slouched against the wall of an ornate mausoleum shaped from pink-veined white stone. The body had not fallen only because of the crude spear pinning it through the throat. A killing blow, without a shadow of doubt. Priamus spared a moment of desperate blocks and thrusts, taking an axe blow against his pauldron, risking a second's distraction to pull the spear free. The ork's axe threw off sparks as it crashed aside from the ceramite shoulder guard. The corpse of the Emperor's Champion slumped to the ground, freed of its undignified need to stand.

'Nerovar!' Priamus cried again.

It was Bastilan that reached him first. The sergeant's helm was gone, revealing a face so bloody only the whites of his eyeballs revealed him as human any more. Torn flaps of skin hung in wet patches, leaving his head open to the bone beneath.

'The Black Sword!'

Priamus deflected another dozen cuts in four beats of his pounding twin hearts. He had no time to reach for the blessed weapon Bayard had dropped in death.

Bastilan's ruined face vanished in a burst of red mist. Priamus had already rammed his power sword through the chest of the bolter-wielding ork behind the sergeant by the time Bastilan's headless body crashed to the ground with the dull clang of ceramite on stone.

'Nerovar!'

With Bastilan's last words, something changed within the Templars.

Twelve remained. Of these, only seven would escape what followed.

The knights pulled together, their blades slashing and carving not only to kill their foes, but to defend their brothers alongside them. It was an instinctive savagery born of so many decades fighting at each others' sides, and it spread through their failing ranks now as they stood on the precipice of destruction.

'Take the sword!' Grimaldus roared. His charge carried him ahead of the others, hammering his crozius in arhythmic fury, smashing a bloody path through to Priamus. *'Recover the Black Sword!'*

We cannot leave it here. It cannot lie abandoned on a battlefield while one of us yet lives.

Over the vox, the humans are calling us insane and begging us to fall back with them. To them, this bloodshed must seem like madness, but there is no choice. We will not be the only Crusade to violate our most sacred tradition. The Black Sword will remain in black hands until there are none left to bear it.

I have a moment – just a single moment – of reflexive pain when I see Bayard's body next to Bastilan's. Two of the finest Sword Brethren ever to serve the Chapter, now slain in glory. More alien bodies block my view. More xenos bleed as I force my way closer to Priamus.

A sense of bloodthirsty, eerie calm descends between us. The battle rages, weapons clashing against our armour, but I speak in a fierce whisper that I know carries over the vox to him and him alone.

'Priamus.'

'Reclusiarch.'

My maul sends two of the beasts flying back, and for a heartbeat's span, there are no alien barbarians separating us. Our eye lenses meet for that precious second, before we are both forced to turn and engage other foes.

'You are the last Emperor's Champion of the Helsreach Crusade,' I tell him. *'Now recover your blade.'*

Major Ryken spoke into his hand-vox, repeating the same words he'd been saying for almost a minute. His voice echoed around the nave in curiously calm counterpoint to the ragged breathing and moans of pain from the wounded.

‘Any armour units still outside the basilica, respond. The *Godbreaker* has been sighted due south of the temple walls. Any armour units still outside, engage, engage.’

From his viewpoint by one of the broken stained glass windows, he watched the gargant’s torso rising above the broken graveyard walls in the distance.

He didn’t recognise the voice that eventually answered. It sounded both bitter and disgusted, but it still made Ryken grin.

‘*Engaging.*’

‘Hello? Identify yourself!’

‘*I am Princeps Amasat of the Warlord Titan Bane-Sidhe.*’

The Bane-Sidhe, named for a shrieking monster from ancient Terran mythology, did everything in its power to gain the *Godbreaker*’s attention. Opening salvoes from its arm-cannons and shoulder-mounted weapon batteries lashed against the larger Titan’s force fields. Siren horns, used to warn loyal infantry of the Titan’s passing close – or even through – their regiments, blared now at the enemy engine. Whatever primitive communications array passed for a vox system on board the *Godbreaker* was scrambled into white noise by a focussed spike of machine-code from *Bane-Sidhe*’s tech-adepts.

All of this was enough to drag the towering beast-machine away from its intent to flatten the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant.

The Warlord, thirty-three metres of armour plating and city-killing weaponry forged into an iconic image of the Machine-God Himself, began its shameful retreat. All guns fired at will as it clanked backwards, drawing the *Godbreaker* away from the last Imperials alive in the hive’s most sacred sector.

‘May I have a weapon, please?’

Andrej shrugged as he cleaned his goggles with a dirty cloth. ‘I have no other pistol, fat priest. For this, I apologise.’

Tomaz Maghernus shook his head when Asavan looked his way. 'I don't, either.'

Several maidens of the Order of the Argent Shroud came down the wide stairs into the undercroft. Prioress Sindal led them, carrying her bolter with ease due to the machine-muscles of her power armour.

'It is time to seal the undercroft,' the old woman said, her voice low. She, at least, knew the merits of not panicking the refugees gathered in the sublevel. 'The beasts have reached the inner grounds.'

'May I have a weapon, please?' Asavan asked her.

'Have you ever fired a bolter?'

'Until this month, I had never even seen a bolter. Nevertheless, I would like a weapon with which to defend these people.'

'Father, with the greatest respect, it would do you no good. My thanks for comforting the flock, but it is time to prepare for the end. Everyone who is staying behind, be ready to be sealed down here within the next three minutes. The oxygen should last a month, as long as the xenos do not destroy the air filtration systems above ground.'

Andrej raised a singed eyebrow. 'And if they do?'

'Use your imagination, Guardsman. And return to the surface, quickly. Every able body is needed in defence of the temple.'

'A moment, please.' Andrej turned back to Asavan. 'Fat priest. You are destined to either survive this, or die at least some time later than I.' He handed the holy man a small leather pouch. Asavan took it, clutching it tight in fingers that would have trembled in this moment only weeks before.

'What is this?'

'My mother's wedding ring, and a letter of explanation. Once this is over, if you are still drawing breath, please find Trooper Natalina Domoska of the 91st Steel Elite. You will recognise her – this, I promise to you. She is the most beautiful woman in the world. Every man says so.'

‘*Move*, young man,’ the prioress insisted.

Andrej snapped a crisp salute to the overweight priest, and made his way back up the stairs, his laspistol held in both hands. Maghernus followed him, casting a lingering look back at Asavan and the refugees. He waved as the underground bulkheads slammed closed. Asavan didn’t seem to see, preoccupied with the refugees who were rising to their feet in panic and protest.

Several of the battle-sisters remained at the base of the stairs, entering codes to seal the doors and imprison the civilians away from harm. The prioress managed to keep up with Andrej and Maghernus. The dockmaster smiled at her, knowing the gesture was meaningless and filled with melancholy. She returned the smile, her expression carrying the same emotions as his. The temple was shaking as the orks battered at its walls.

The next time Maghernus would see Prioress Sindal of the Order of the Argent Shroud, she would be a mangled corpse in three pieces, spread across the floor of the inner sanctum.

That would be in less than one hour’s time, and her body would be one of the last things he saw before he was killed by a bolt-round in the back.

Bane-Sidhe tore clean through the Hel’s Highway when it fell.

The Warlord had made it half a kilometre before its void shields burst out of existence and its front-facing armour began to suffer the assault from the *Godbreaker*’s guns. No matter how thick the ceramite and adamantium plating covering the Warlord’s vital systems, the sheer level of firepower hurled at *Bane-Sidhe* meant that once its shields died, its existence was measured in minutes.

It was perhaps unfair that such a noble example of the Invigilata’s god-machines met its end as a sacrificial lure, but within the Legio’s archives, both *Bane-Sidhe* and her command crew were given the highest honours. The wreckage of the Titan would come to be salvaged by the Mechanicus in the following weeks, and restored to working order fourteen months

later. Its destruction at Helsreach was marked upon its carapace with a six-metre square engraved image upon its right shin, depicting a weeping angel over a burning, metallic skeleton.

Unable to withstand any more punishment, with flames pouring from its bridge, the great Warlord fell backwards on howling joints. Its immense weight was enough to break the rockcrete columns holding up the Hel's Highway, sending the *Bane-Sidhe* and a significant section of the main road crashing down to land in a mountain of rubble.

The *Godbreaker* stood over the crater of broken road, as if staring down at the body of its latest kill.

Fourteen seconds after the Warlord's shattered remains came to a rest, a flare of sun-bright and fusion-hot energy screamed across the Hel's Highway. It was the shape of a newborn star, flaring with arcing coils of plasma light and surrounded by a blinding corona.

The *Godbreaker's* shields disintegrated at the sunfire's touch. Its armour disintegrated mere seconds later, as did its crew, skeletal structure, and all evidence that it had ever existed.

Jurisian drooled through clenched teeth, feeling the untamed machine-spirit's quivering rage at being used without being ritually blessed and activated via the correct rituals. As the knifing pain in his skull faded to tolerable levels, he opened a vox-link to Grimaldus, and breathed two words.

They were laden with both agony and meaning – symbolising the completion of his duty, and a final farewell.

‘Engine kill,’ he said.

‘The Godbreaker is dead,’ Grimaldus voxed to anyone still listening to the comms channels. The news brought no relief to him, and no joy, even for thought of Jurisian's glory. There was nothing now beyond the next second of battle. Step by step, the Reclusiarch and his last brothers were pushed backwards through the basilica, room by room, hall by hall.

The air reeked of alien breath, spilled innards and the sharp overcooked ozone scent of las-fire.

The walls still shook as xenos tanks shelled the holy temple even while their own forces stormed through it.

A young girl in Argent Shroud battle armour was cut down, wailing as she was disembowelled by the horde. Artarion's two blades, both inactive from meat-clogging and no more use than jagged clubs, ripped across the face and throat of the girl's killer. Then he too was beaten back by the four beasts that took the dead brute's place.

A voice rose above the carnage – harsh and enraged.

'Kill them all! Let none survive! Never has an alien defiled this holiest of places!'

Grimaldus dragged the closest ork against him, gripping its throat and thudding his skulled helm against its face to shatter its hideous bone structure. The voice was the prioress's, and he realised now where he was.

No.

No, how could it all be over already?

We have been beaten back to the inner sanctum in mere hours. Sindal's cries of defiance have the worst effect: they awaken everyone from the mindless heat of battle and bloodshed, dragging us back to face the truth.

The inner sanctum is a gore-slick mess of heaving, slashing, shooting humans and orks. We are beaten. No one in this room is going to survive more than a few more minutes. Already, others have sensed this and I see them through the crowd, trying to run from the room, seeking a way past the orks rather than lay down their lives at the last stand.

Militia. Civilians. Guard. Even several storm troopers. Half of our pathetic remaining force is breaking from the battle and trying to run.

With my hand still at the ork's throat, I drag the kicking beast up with me, standing atop the Major Altar. The beast struggles, but its clawing is weak with its skull broken and its senses disoriented by pain.

My plasma pistol is long gone, torn from me at some point in the last two days of battle. The chain remains. I wrap it around the beast's throat, and roar my words to the painted ceiling as I strangle the creature in full view of everyone in the room.

'Take heart, brothers! Fight in the Emperor's name!' The beast thrashes as it dies, claws scraping in futility at my ruined armour. I tense my grip, feeling the creature's thick spinal bones begin to click and break. Its piggish eyes are wide with terror, and this... this makes me laugh.

'I have dug my grave in this place...' An explosive round detonates on my shoulder, blasting shards of armour free. I see Priamus kill the shooter with the Black Sword in a one-handed grip.

'I have dug my grave in this place, and I will either triumph or I will die!'

Five knights still live, and they roar as I roar.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!'

The walls shudder as if kicked by a Titan. For a moment, still laughing, I wonder if the *Godbreaker* has returned.

'Until the end, brothers!'

The cry is taken up by those of us that yet draw breath, and we fight on.

'They're bringing the temple down!' Priamus calls, and there is something wrong with his voice. I realise what it is when I see my brother is missing an arm and his leg armour is pierced in three places.

I have never heard him in pain before.

'Nero!' he screams. 'Nerovar!'

The beasts are primitive, but they are not devoid of intelligence and cunning. Nero's white markings signal him as an Apothecary, and they know of his value to humanity. Priamus sees him first, two dozen metres away through the melee. An alien spear has punched its way through his stomach, and several of the beasts are lifting him from the ground, raising him like a war banner above the carnage.

Nerovar dies like no warrior I have ever seen before. Even as I try to kill my way closer to him, I see him gripping the spear in his fists, hauling himself down the weapon, impaling himself deeper on it in an attempt to reach the aliens below.

He has no bolter, no chainblade. His last act in life is to draw his gladius from its sheath at his thigh and hurl it down with a Templar's vengeance at the ork with the best grip on the spear. He'd dragged himself down to get close enough to ensure he wouldn't miss. The short sword bit true, sinking into the beast's gaping maw and rewarding the xenos with an agonising death, choking on a sword blade that had ravaged its throat, tongue and lungs. With the beast unable to keep hold, the spear falls and Nero plunges into a seething mass of greenskins.

I never see him again.

Priamus, one-armed and faltering now, staggers ahead of me. A detonating round crashes against his helm, spinning him back to face me.

'Grimaldus,' he says, before falling to his knees. 'Brother...'

Flames engulf him from the side – clinging chemical fire that washes over his armour, eating into the soft joints and dissolving the flesh beneath. The ork with the flamer pans the weapon left and right, dousing Priamus in corrosive fire.

I am hammering my way with painful slowness to avenge him when Artarion's blade bursts from the ork's chest. He kicks the dying ork from his broken chainsword. With vengeance taken, my standard bearer turns with as much grace as can be salvaged in this butchery, and his back slams against mine.

'Goodbye, brother.' He's laughing as he says the words, and I do not know why, but it brings out my own laughter.

Blocks of the ceiling are falling now, crushing those beneath. The orks in here with us, paying for every human life with five of their own, pay no

heed to their kin outside damning them by destroying the temple with them still inside.

Not far from the altar, I catch a final glimpse of the storm trooper and the dockmaster. The former stands above the dying latter, Andrej defending the gut-shot Maghernus while he tries to comprehend what to do with his bowels looping across his lap and the floor nearby.

‘Artarion,’ I call to him, to return the farewell, but there is no answer. The presence against my back is not my brother.

I turn, laughing at the madness before me. Artarion is dead at my feet, headless, defiled. The enemy drive me to my knees, but even this is no more than a bad joke. They are doomed as surely as I am.

I am still laughing when the temple finally falls.



EPILOGUE

Ashes

They call it the Season of Fire.

The Ash Wastes are choking with dust from roaring volcanoes. Planet-wide, the pics show the same images, over and over. Our vessels in orbit watch Armageddon breathe fire, and send the images back to the surface, so that those there might witness the world's anger in its entirety.

Fighting across most of the world is ceasing, not because of victory or defeat, but because there can be no arguing with Armageddon itself. The ash deserts are already turning dark. In a handful of days, no man or xenos beast will be able to breathe in the wastelands. Their lungs would fill with ashes and embers; their war machines would grind to a halt, fouled beyond use.

So the war ceases for now. It does not end. There is no tale of triumph and victory to tell.

The beasts stagger and crawl back to cities they have managed to hold, there to hide away from the Season of Fire. Imperial forces consolidate the territories to which they still lay claim, and drive the invaders out from those where the orks have managed to grasp no more than a weak hold.

Helsreach is one of these places. That necropolis, in which one hundred of my brothers lie dead alongside hundreds of thousands of loyal souls...

That tomb-city, so much of which is flattened by the devastation of two months' road-by-road warfare, with no industrial output left at all...

Imperial tacticians are hailing it as a *victory*.

I will never again understand the humanity I left behind when I ascended to the ranks of the Templars. The perceptions of humans remain alien to me since the moment I swore my first oaths to Dorn.

But I will let the people of this blighted world claim their triumph. I will let the survivors of Helsreach cheer and celebrate a drawn-out defeat that masquerades as victory.

And, as they have requested, I will return to the surface once more.

I have something of theirs in my possession.

They cheer in the streets, and line Hel's Highway as if in anticipation of a parade. Several hundred civilians, and an equal number of off-duty Guard. They stand in crowds, clustered either side of the *Grey Warrior*.

My helm's aural receptors filter the noise of their cheering to less irritating levels, the way it would do if an artillery battery was shelling the ground around me.

I try not to stare at them, at their flushed faces, at their bright and joyous eyes. The war is over to them. They care nothing for the orbital images that show entire ork armies taking root in other hives. For the people of Helsreach, the war is over. They are alive, so they have won.

It is hard not to admire such simple purity. Blessed is the mind too small for doubt. And in truth, I have never seen a city resist invasion so fiercely. The people here have earned the lives they still have.

This part of the city, not far from the accursed docks, is relatively unscathed. It remained a stronghold firmly in Imperial control. I am given to understand that Sarren and his 101st fought here to the last day.

A gathering of figures clusters by the *Grey Warrior*. Most wear the ochre uniforms of the Steel Legion. One of them, a man known to me, beckons me over.

I walk to him, and the crowd erupts into more cheers. It is the first time I have moved in almost an hour.

An hour of listening to tedious speeches transmitted from the gathered group, over to a vox-tower nearby that blares the words across the sector.

‘Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Black Templars,’ the vox-voice booms. More cheers as I draw close. The soldier that beckoned to me offers quiet greetings.

Major, or rather, *Colonel* Ryken has regained much of his face since I last saw him. Burn scars spread across much of the remaining skin, but over half of his features are dull-metalled augmetics, including significant reconstruction to his skull. He makes the sign of the aquila, and only one of his hands is his own. The other is a skeletal bionic, not yet sheathed in synthetic skin.

I return the salute. The vox-speech – the speaker is a member of General Kurov’s staff I have never met before – drones on about my own heroism alongside the Steel Legion. As my name is shouted by thousands of humans, I raise my fist in salute to them all.

And all the while, I am thinking how my brothers died here.

Died for them.

‘Did Adjutant Quintus Tyro survive?’ I ask.

He nods, his ruined face trying to make a smile. ‘Cyria made it.’

Good. I am pleased for him, and for her.

‘Hello, sir,’ another of the Legionnaires says. I glance behind Ryken, to a man several places down the line. My targeting reticule locks on him – onto his grinning face. He is unscarred, and despite his youth, has laugh lines at the corner of his eyes.

So. He’s not dead, either.

This does not surprise me. Some men are born with luck in their blood.

I nod to him, and he walks over, seemingly as bored with proceedings as I am. The orator is declaring how I ‘smote the blaspheming aliens as they

dared defile the temple's inner sanctum'. His words border on a sermon. He would have made a fine ecclesiarch, or a preacher in the Imperial Guard.

The ochre-clad soldier offers his hand for me to shake. I humour him by doing the same.

'Hello, hero,' he grins up at me.

'Greetings, Andrej.'

'I like your armour. It is much nicer now. Did you repaint it yourself, or is that the duty of slaves?'

I cannot tell if this is a joke or not.

'Myself.'

'Good! Good. Perhaps you should salute me now, though, yes?' He taps his epaulettes, where a captain's badges now show, freshly issued and polished silver.

'I am not beholden to a Guard captain,' I tell him. 'But congratulations.'

'Yes, I know, I know. But I must be offering many thanks for you keeping your word and telling my captain of my deeds.'

'An oath is an oath.' I have no idea what to say to the little man. 'Your friend. Your love. Did you find her?'

I am no judge of human emotion, but I see his smile turn fragile and false. 'Yes,' he says. 'I did find her.'

I think of the last time I saw the little storm trooper, standing over the dockmaster's bloody corpse, bayoneting an alien in the throat, only moments before the basilica fell.

I find myself curiously glad that he is alive, but expressing that notion is not something I can easily forge into words. He has no such difficulty.

'I am glad you made it,' he uses my own unspoken words. 'I heard you were very injured, yes?'

'Not enough to kill me.'

But so close. I quickly grew bored of the Apothecaries on board the *Crusader* telling me that it was a miracle I clawed my way from the rubble.

He laughs, but there is little joy in it. His eyes are like glass since he mentioned finding his friend.

‘You are a very literal man, Reclusiarch. Some of us were in lazy moods that day. I waited for the digging crews, yes, I admit it. I did not have Adeptus Astartes armour to push the rocks off myself and get back to fighting the very next day.’

‘The reports I have heard indicated no one else survived the fall of the basilica,’ I tell him.

He laughs. ‘Yes, that would make for a wonderful story, no? The last black knight, the only survivor of the greatest battle in Helsreach. I apologise for surviving and breaking the flow of your legend, Reclusiarch. I promise most faithfully that I and the six or seven others will be very quiet and let you have all the thunder.’

He has made a joke. I recognise it, and try to think of something humorous with which to reply. Nothing surfaces in my mind.

‘Were you not injured at all?’

He shrugs. ‘I had a headache. But then it went away.’

This makes me smile.

‘Did you meet the fat priest?’ he asks. ‘Did you know him?’

‘I confess, I do not recall anyone by that name or description.’

‘He was a good man. You would have liked him. Very brave. He did not die in the battle. He was with the civilians. But he died two weeks after, from a problem with his heart. Ayah, that is unfair, I think. To live through the end and die at the new beginning? Not so fair, I am thinking.’

There is a twisted poetry to that.

I would like to speak words that comfort him. I would like to tell him I admire his courage, and that his world will survive this war. I want to

speaking with the ease Artarion would have done, and thank this soldier for standing with us when so many others ran. He honoured us all in that moment, as did the dying dockmaster, the prioress, and every other soul that faded from life on the night only I survived.

But I say nothing. Further conversation is broken by people chanting my name. How alien it sounds, voiced by human throats.

The orator whips the crowd up, speaking – of course – of the relics. They want to see them, and that is why I am here. To display them.

I signal the cenobyte servitors forward. Augmetic servants, vat-grown by the Chapter's Apothecaries and augmented by Jurisian to haul the temple's artefacts. None of the mindless wretches bear a name; just a relic that represents all I could do to ease my guilt at such a shameful defeat.

The crowd cheers again as the servitors move from the vulture shadow of my Thunderhawk, each of the three carrying one of the artefacts. The ragged scraps of the banner. The cracked stone pillar, topped by the shattered aquila. The sacred bronze globe, sloshing with its precious holy water.

My voice carries with ease, amplified by my helm. The crowd quietens, and Hel's Highway falls silent. I am reminded, against my will, of the impenetrable silence beneath the mountain of marble and rockcrete when the temple came down upon us all.

'We are judged in life,' I tell them, 'for the evil we destroy'.

Never my words. Always Mordred's.

For the first time, I have an answer to them. A greater understanding. And my mentor... You were wrong. Forgive me, that it took so long to leave your shadow and realise it. Forgive me, that it took the deaths of my brothers to learn the lesson they each tried to teach me while they yet drew breath.

Artarion. Priamus. Bastilan. Cadon. Nero.

Forgive me for living, while you all lie cold and still.

‘We are judged in life for the evil we destroy. It is a bleak truth, that there is nothing but blood awaiting us in the spaces between the stars. But the Emperor sees all that transpires in His domain. And we are judged equally for the illumination we bring to the blackest nights. We are judged in life for those moments we spill light into the darkest reaches of His Imperium.

‘Your world taught me this. Your world, and the war that brought me here.

‘These are your relics. The last treasures of the first men and women ever to set foot upon your world. They are the most precious treasures of your ancestors, and they are yours by right of legacy and blood.

‘I return them to you from the edge of destruction. And I thank you not only for the honour of standing by the people of this city, but for the lessons I have learned. My brothers in orbit have asked me why I dragged these relics from beneath the fallen temple. But you have no need to ask, for you each already know the answer. They are *yours*, and no alien beast will deny the people of this world the inheritance they deserve.

‘I dragged these relics back into the sunlight for you – to honour you, and to thank you all. And in humility now, I return them to you.’

This time, when the cheers come, they are shaped by the orator. He uses the title I swore to High Marshal Helbrecht, standing before Mordred’s statue, that I would not refuse when it was formally awarded to me.

‘I am told,’ the High Marshal had said afterwards, ‘that Yarrick and Kurov have spoken with the Ecclesiarchy. You are being given the relics, to carry Helsreach’s memory and honour with you, in the Eternal Crusade.’

‘When I return to the surface, I will offer the icons back to the people.’

‘Mordred would not have done so,’ Helbrecht said, masking any emotion, any judgement, from me.

‘I am not Mordred,’ I told my liege. ‘And the people deserve the choice. It is for them that we waged that war, for them and their world. Not purely

for the holy reaping of inhuman life.'

And I wonder now, as they chant my new title, what they will decide to do with the relics.

Hero of Helsreach, the crowd cheers.

As if there is only one.



RYNN'S WORLD

STEVE PARKER





RYNN'S WORLD BATTLE MAPS







RYNN'S WORLD



Steve Parker



PROLOGUE

Transmission

There won't be time to broadcast again, so this is it. We've held out for as long as we can, but they'll breach within the hour, and this array, the only real hope we had, will be lost to us. There isn't time to scuttle it properly. Sergeant Praetes wants us to leave immediately. The greenskin artillery barrage is creeping closer by the second. They've already obliterated the government buildings and the collegium, and neither of those is far from here. But I have to try, just one last message before we pull out for good. If we're lucky, the orks will reduce this facility to rubble behind us, not recognising its value.

I've already started moving the last of the Lammasian squads out of the north gate. I'll retreat with the rearguard as soon as this is sent. The final party of civilians and wounded troopers left yesterday with an escort of able-bodied men from the 18th Mordian. There aren't many left. That goes for civilians and soldiers both. I'm down to a handful of combat platoons cobbled together from what's left of three shattered regiments.

It has fallen to me to lead them. Six days ago, I assumed overall command, and not by choice. The entire cadre of senior officers was wiped out in some kind of greenskin stealth attack. That might sound implausible given the nature of the foe, but on my honour, they were in and out like

ghosts, leaving a room full of headless corpses behind them. I suppose they wanted more foul trophies, though Emperor knows, they should have enough of them by now.

My own head would be hanging from the belt of some greenskin savage right now were it not for my duties. I was executing a trio of faithless deserters at the time.

I see the Emperor's hand in that.

My own faith, the fuel by which I continue to fight, tells me that He must be watching over me. All things are part of His great plan. I will not allow myself to fall into a deadly despair. I know that Rynn's World is not far from here, barely two weeks' travel as the warp flows. If the Emperor wills it, the Crimson Fists may have received word of our plight already. Lord of Mankind, grant that they are en route even as I speak.

It is not an unreasonable supposition. We have been transmitting steadily, every hour, on the hour, since the first of the greenskin assault ships cut across the sky. Surely someone has heard our call.

(Sound of muffled artillery fire and explosive impacts.)

Damn the filthy xenos! Their shells are definitely getting closer. It won't be long now. I... I can still barely comprehend the numbers we face. The orbital defence grid was overstretched from the start. The sky went dark with their ships. I should have executed someone for that; according to records, the missile and plasma defence batteries hadn't been inspected by a tech-priest in over three hundred years!

At the very least, there should have been some kind of warning. Why was there no word from the relay station on Dagoth? I can only imagine that the orks struck there first, and with such speed that there was no time to alert the rest of the sector. Now Badlanding pays the price.

If anyone receives this – it doesn't matter who you are – you must send word to the Crimson Fists. Do not try to aid us alone. Only the Adeptus Astartes can help us now. This is no fight for a lesser force. An ork

incursion of this magnitude... it has to be a Waaagh! And, if it isn't checked here, it will grow. By Throne, will it grow.

Lord of Mankind, don't let it be too late.

To the Space Marines of the Crimson Fists, I say this: if you receive this message in time to offer us any hope of rescue, know that we have abandoned Krugerport for the cave networks beneath the Scratch Mountains just north of the city. We'll dig in there for as long as we can. There is no other refuge left to us.

Our supplies are expected to last another week, perhaps two if we—

(Sound of distant stubber-fire answered immediately by the closer, louder crack of las-weapons. Urgent shouting from multiple individuals at once.)

The artillery has ceased. They're making an infantry push!

We're pulling out. I'm sending this without encryption.

In the name of the Immortal Saviour, I pray that someone hears it.

Hurry! Get this message to Rynn's World! If we are to die here so that others might be warned, then so be it. But let our deaths not be in vain.

This is Commissar Alhaus Baldur signing off.

Munitorum Identicode (verified): CM41656-18F Timestamp
(IST): 17:44:01 3015989.M41

PART ONE

*'When a man dies before his time, how much is truly lost?
'More than just a life, certainly. A branch withers and bears no
more fruit. Futures are erased. Paths close that can never be re-
opened. Would his offspring have been saints? Killers? Both?
'When a man dies before his time, the answers go with him.
'This begs the question: should not all men be saved?'*

Extract: *Diary of a Survivor* Viscount Nilo Vanader Isopho
(936.M41-991.M41)



ONE

Arx Tyrannus, Hellblade Mountains

‘Upheaval,’ said Ruthio Terraro, staring down at the cards he had pulled from the deck. They lay in the pattern known as *The Burning Star*, a dark omen in itself. He did not remember touching a single one, nor had he consciously chosen their arrangement, but the absence of those memories did not surprise him. The deep trance was always the same. So was the awakening. Like a vivid dream of falling to one’s death, it always ended with a shout and a shudder and a gasping for breath.

That he still emerged from the trance this way angered Terraro, for it was the mark of a Librarian yet to fully master his gifts, and the other Codiciers had already moved beyond it. But if it bothered the giant figure on Terraro’s right, there was no indication.

‘Upheaval,’ echoed the giant. ‘Go on, my brother.’

‘A struggle against great odds,’ Terraro continued, turning from the cards. ‘Oceans of blood. Storm clouds, dark and heavy with impending violence. Below them, a fork in the road, signifying choice. Two paths, one leading to day, the other to night. So it has been the last four times, honoured brother, and with only the most minor variations. Do you wish me to try again?’

The giant, Eustace Mendoza, Master of the Librarius, moved to the Codicier's shoulder and stood over him, glaring down with dark, hooded eyes at the ancient cards. Their stylised images seemed to move, to dance in the glow from the golden candelabras, while the rest of the chamber remained thick with shadow.

'No, Ruthio,' he said, his voice a deep baritone. 'That will not be necessary. Your interpretation corroborates Brother Deguerro's visions. The currents of time and the immaterium will reveal nothing more to us tonight. The Epistolaries and I will discuss the matter at the next council. For now, you must return to your quarters and have the Chosen attend you. Full plate and arms, do you understand? We must look our finest. First light will break in four hours, and the Day of Foundation shall be upon us. There is a great deal of ceremony to observe.'

With a nod, Terraro gathered up his cards, pushed his chair back from the broad oak desk, and rose to his feet. Standing two metres tall, he was still a head shorter than the Master of the Librarius, but equally broad across the shoulders. On one of those shoulders, his master now placed a big calloused hand and, together, they walked from the room.

'Until the coming day is over,' Eustace Mendoza told Terraro as they passed into the echoing, lamplit corridor beyond, 'the future will have to wait.'

Alessio Cortez, who by his own confession lacked the slightest interest in the musical arts, found himself deeply moved by the hymn that now echoed from the Reclusiam's dark stone walls. It was as mournful as it was ancient, its every beautiful note a heart-rending lament to the battle-brothers the Chapter had lost, not just in the last hundred years, but in all the long millennia since its glorious inception.

Cortez had heard the hymn just three times in his life, for it was only sung on the Day of Foundation, but his perfect recall of those previous times did nothing to dull its effect now. All those deaths, all the one-sided

farewells, they came back to him, just as they were meant to. This was the time to mourn properly. This was the time to remember the sacrifice his noble brothers had made, and his heart was heavy with the sorrow of it. More importantly, it was also filled with pride.

There was no guilt to dampen that feeling. He had survived three and a half centuries of war, and he was long past survivor's guilt. A Space Marine lived or died by his skills and attributes, his teamwork, his unending dedication to perfecting the art of war and to the oaths of honourable service he had made. Death was inevitable, even for a Space Marine. It was just a matter of time. Immortality was the province of the Emperor alone, regardless of what anyone else said.

He looked across the Reclusiam to the opposite arm of the transept, studying the servitor-choir from which the hymn continued to pour forth. What pitiful creatures they were! Their skinny, limbless bodies were fixed to short pillars of black marble which concealed the mechanical workings that kept them half-alive. Every eye-socket was bolted over with iron plate. From every mouth, a black vox-amp grille protruded, and from each pale, hairless head, ribbed cables extended, linking them together in perfect synchronicity, their rudimentary intellects united and focussed only on the song.

On the gallery to Cortez's right, high above the Reclusiam's entrance, yet another servitor sat, hardwired into a massive mechanical steam organ that boomed out dour musical accompaniment.

Wretches all, thought Cortez. But perhaps it is better they sing our sadness for us than that we try to sing it for ourselves.

He almost grinned, thinking that his own rough voice, if forced into song, would do no honour to the dead. In fact, it was more likely to cause insult.

This was not an original thought. He made the same joke to himself every century, and let it pass just as quickly. Matters which did not involve

the killing of the Chapter's many foes seldom held Cortez's attention for more than a few seconds.

Pedro was always chastising him for that.

The hymn came to an end now, its final sorrowful note reverberating in the minds of the congregation for moments after the sound itself had ceased. Cortez let it go, feeling unburdened somehow, and turned his attention towards the apse, to an altar of gilt-edged black marble where High Chaplain Tomasi now stepped forwards and began reciting words of remembrance from the *Book of Dorn*.

He was an impressive figure, Marqol Tomasi. As High Chaplain, he needed to be, for he was often required to command the absolute attention of large congregations such as this. There was no room for self-doubt or diffidence in a man of his station. It was his duty, and the duty of his subordinate Chaplains, to safeguard the faith and obedience of every last battle-brother and serf in the service of the Chapter. When he spoke, others had to listen, had to believe in him and in the religious strictures he espoused.

Cortez respected Tomasi a great deal, perhaps even liked him a little. The High Chaplain was a ferocious close-quarters fighter with almost as many high-profile kills to his name as Cortez himself claimed. But, more than this, they shared a certain outlook on life, characterised by its elegant simplicity. The enemies of the Emperor must be sundered, and the honour of the Chapter maintained. With these two things taken care of, all else was moot. What more could there be? Why did Pedro concern himself with secondary and tertiary matters, like the annual petitioners, or planetary law reforms, or pan-sector trade relations? What did any of that matter to a Space Marine?

After a few minutes, Tomasi stopped reading aloud from the *Book of Dorn*, and stepped around to the front of the golden lectern on which it rested. His armour was utterly black, polished to such a sheen that it

gleamed like a dark mirror in the light from the wall sconces and the thousands of votive candles on either side of the apse. His ceramite breastplate and pauldrons were adorned with the gleaming bones of fallen foes and with wax-and-parchment purity seals, each delineated with a blessing written in blood. His helmet, with its distinctive faceplate – an extremely detailed rendition of a skull cast in flawless, polished gold – was clipped to his belt, leaving his harsh, deeply-lined features in plain view. Even among the Crimson Fists, few dared to hold that fearsome gaze for long.

This was the part of the service where Tomasi called out to the Emperor and to the Primarch Rogal Dorn to look down on the congregation and bless them in all the bloody work ahead. He spoke of the Chapter's hated enemies and of the slaughter they sought to perpetrate, the rape of worlds, the subjugation or destruction of all mankind.

His words took their intended effect, gradually charging the air as if an electrical storm were building. Cortez felt something rise within him and knew it was hate, pure and powerful and always there, his constant companion, fuel for the fire that burned inside.

Every century, scores of Crimson Fists gave their lives in battle to protect the Imperium from the foul maladies that infected it. From the outside, stabbing inwards with inexplicable hatred and barbarity, myriad alien races sought to undo all that the Imperium had struggled for ten thousand years to build. From the inside, perhaps the most contemptible of all, came the unforgivable corruption and madness of the traitor, the mutant and the foul, ungrateful heretic.

Aye, damn them all, Cortez cursed, fists clenched at his side. There will be no mercy for them, no quarter given. Their blood will turn the very stars red.

Tomasi was a master at this. Once every century, with the whole Chapter gathered here at Arx Tyrannus, he turned their brotherly grief into

something far more potent, far more valuable and deadly. Cortez knew this feeling better than most; he had lived with it longer, and had embraced it without reserve. On all too many occasions during a lifetime filled with violence and slaughter, he had lain broken and bleeding in a bunker or in the back of a Rhino transport, and had heard the Apothecaries mutter that he would not survive his injuries this time. Every single time, his body had fought through the most horrific damage to mock their pronouncements, found the strength somewhere to heal itself and rise again and carried him back to war to execute the Chapter's never-ending duties.

He knew exactly where that strength came from, and he hoped his Fourth Company would learn to embrace their hatred as he had. Not just in word or deed, but deeper, in the core of their souls, where it would bring them through horrors they would otherwise not survive.

Thinking of the battle-brothers under his command caused him to avert his gaze from the altar. He looked out along the central section of the great nave. In all, exactly nine hundred and forty-four Space Marines stood there, every last one dressed in full battleplate, each pauldron and vambrace polished to perfection for this most important of days. They looked glorious, assembled together in their perfect ordered rows, facing the altar with their eyes fixed on Tomasi as he lifted a beautifully crafted bolter over his head and gave thanks to the Emperor and to the forges of Mars for the Chapter's long-serving weapons of war.

Among all the blue-armoured forms, Cortez picked out his own company, easily identified by the deep green trim on their pauldrons.

Under his leadership, the name Fourth Company had become synonymous with the kind of decisive, all-or-nothing gambits which Cortez had always favoured. So others thought them reckless and brash – what of it? The surfaces of their armour were acid-etched with more glories, decorated with more honours than any other company save the Crusade Company, the elite First Company of the Crimson Fists.

As a sergeant, Cortez had once been a part of that glorious elite. All company captains earned their command that way, proving themselves worthy through years of exacting service under the Chapter Master's immediate personal command. But it was among his beloved Fourth Company that Cortez knew he belonged, commanding some of the finest battle-brothers with whom he had ever marched into battle. Iamad, Benedictus, Cabrero, old one-eyed Silesi, vicious, unrelenting Vesdar. They were all born killers.

His focus rested momentarily on each of them, and he allowed himself the smallest of nods. Fine discipline. He expected no less. Not one of them moved. Not one spoke. All were utterly fixated on the solemn ceremony as it came, now, to its close.

High Chaplain Tomasi finally lowered the venerable gold-chased bolter from above his head and boomed, 'For each drop of our blood that is spilled, may crimson floods spill forth from the wounds of our enemies. For each scratch on our sacred armour, may their flesh and bone be cleaved apart by our blades, pulverised and shattered by our fists. The Imperium will endure. This Chapter will endure. Each of you shall endure. This we pray in the name of the primarch who shaped us, and in the name of the Emperor who made us.'

'For Dorn and the Emperor,' the assembly intoned. 'For the glory and honour of the Crimson Fists.'

Cortez lent the full power of his voice to the response. Standing beside him in the western transept, the other members of the Chapter Council did likewise.

'So we pray,' added the High Chaplain, more subdued now. 'So shall it be.'

Tomasi turned and nodded to a towering figure standing in a shadowed alcove to his left, then retreated from the altar to the reliquary at the rear

of the Reclusiam, there to return the magnificent relics he had used during the service to their rightful place.

The tall figure on the left emerged from the shadows now, striding forward on long legs to take centre stage in front of the altar. Revealed in all his splendour, he was a breathtaking sight to behold. Light glittered from his gem-encrusted breastplate and from the shimmering golden halo behind his head. Golden skulls and beautifully embossed eagles graced his gorget, knee-plates and greaves. From his armoured waist, a tabard of red silk hung, proudly displaying the Chapter icon, a clenched red fist on a circular field of black. The ancient purity seals that hung from his pauldrons fluttered as he came to a stop.

Immediately, with the exception of the members of the Chapter Council, the congregation dropped to one knee.

Cortez and his council brothers simply bowed their heads, a privilege of their rank, and waited for the figure to speak. The voice, when it came, was strong and deep, warm like the currents of the South Adacean, a great bass rumble that was impossible to ignore.

‘Stand, brothers. Please.’

Cortez had spent most of his life listening to that voice, doing as it commanded and, on no small number of occasions, debating fiercely with it. It was the voice of his closest friend, but also of his lord and leader. It belonged to Pedro Kantor, twenty-ninth Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists, and, barring perhaps the eight mighty Dreadnoughts who stood with their engines idling at the back of the nave, by far the most impressive figure in the Reclusiam that day.

‘We have observed remembrance,’ said the Chapter Master, ‘for all those honoured brothers lost to us in the last hundred years. Their names have been inscribed on the walls of Monument Hall, and the records of their deeds have been committed to the *Book of Honour*. Any of you wishing to pay personal tribute after today may approach one of the

Chaplains at a suitable time and request the proper prayers and offerings. This I strongly encourage you to do, as is our tradition, as is our obligation.’ His eyes scanned the rows of silent Space Marines. ‘We are the Crimson Fists,’ he told them. ‘We do not forgive, and we do not forget. The dead live on in our memories and through the progenoid, and our deeds must always – *always* – serve to honour them.’

In salute to the fallen, the Chapter Master balled his right gauntlet into a fist and clashed it three times against the sculpted left pectoral of his exquisitely crafted cuirass.

He watched the assembled warriors mirror him. ‘We salute the fallen,’ they intoned as one. ‘We honour the dead.’

The Chapter Master waited for the echo to finish ricocheting from the shadowed rafters high above, then said, ‘In a moment your captains will lead you out. We shall assemble on the Protheo Bastion, there to witness the Miracle of the Blood and receive the first of the day’s battle-blessings. There will be no repast this day. The Day of Foundation requires us to fast, and you will all hold to that. After receiving our blessings on the Protheo Bastion, we shall return here for the initiations and the Steeping.’

Was it Cortez’s imagination? For a split second, he was sure the Chapter Master had flicked a discreet glance in his direction before he continued, saying, ‘We shall be joined today by members of the Upper Rynnhouse, who are travelling from New Rynn City to pay their respects to our Chapter and its traditions, and to celebrate the anniversary of our Founding with us. Some of you have made your objections known regarding this, and to these I say this: do not underestimate the importance of our relationship with the Rynnite nobility. In accepting the great responsibility of this star system’s political governance, they have lifted from our shoulders all those burdens which do not befit men of war.’

He paused briefly before adding, ‘See the value in that, as I do. They shall be landing at Tarvo Peak shortly and are here by my invitation. In all

likelihood, you will not need to speak to them, but, if you do, you will show tolerance and courtesy. Remember, in a galaxy such as this, they are but children, and we are their protectors.'

Cortez frowned, certain, now, that much of this was directed his way. He and Kantor had locked horns over permitting the spoiled, self-indulgent aristocrats inside the sacred walls of the fortress-monastery, but the Chapter Master's word was law. With little choice, Cortez had ultimately backed down, stalking off to vent his frustrations on a combat drone in the training pits.

Cortez believed it was far better to be feared than loved. He knew Tomasi would have agreed. Better to maintain as much distance as possible from the weakling masses. The shameless way they threw themselves into utter dependence on those stronger than themselves sickened him. And what did inbred, soft-bellied socialites know of the meaning of sacrifice? What did the Imperium mean to them, save the security, comfort and personal profit it brought? Even those rare nobles who opted to spend a few years in the Rynnsguard only did so for the right to wear a dress uniform on festival days. Their terms of so-called active service were famously short and without incident.

The Chapter Master resumed speaking, abruptly cutting across Cortez's train of thought.

'My brother Adeptus Astartes,' he said. 'This service is ended. Go with honour, with courage and with the Emperor's blessing, remembering always your sacred duty.'

'By your command,' replied the ranks.

The incense-thick air of the Reclusiam soon shook with the sound of armoured boots on stone as each of the captains led their companies through the sanctum's vast bronze doors. Cortez's turn came, and he moved out of the transept and down the central aisle, leaving only Captains Ashor Drakken and Drigo Alvez to follow.

Cortez threw the servitor choir a last brief, disdainful look as he left, noting that they had already been powered down. In their stationary silence, they now seemed little more than a row of hideous alabaster busts.

At a nod, Fourth Company fell in behind him.

As he marched them under the great arched portal and out into the wide, snow-carpeted courtyard beyond, Cortez looked to the sky. Two hours ago, when the service had started, it had been a starless, midnight black. Since then, morning had broken over the Hellblade Mountains, bringing snowfall and a crisp, icy air that refreshed him, purging the unpleasantly rich incense from his nostrils.

As he marched, he wondered if, by the next Day of Foundation, his own name would be etched on the walls of Monument Hall. He had never feared death, always throwing himself headlong into even the most hopeless of battles with far more thought for the objective than for his own survival. Perhaps, coupled with his bottomless reserve of hatred for the enemy, that was exactly *why* he always survived. To fight without fear of death was liberating. Not that he was foolish enough to believe the myths that had sprung up around him, of course – myths in which the men of his company, marching in unison behind him, seemed to take a great and obvious delight.

Cortez the Immortal, they called him out of earshot.

He was certainly *not* immortal, despite popular speculation. One day, he knew, he would meet his match, and the preposterous rumours would be proven false. A part of him almost looked forward to that. If nothing else, it would be a most memorable fight.

When that day finally arrived, he wanted only two things from it.

The first was to die well, to sell his life dear with power fist smashing through armour and bone, pistol barking in his hand and a bloodcurdling battle cry on his lips.

The second was that the brothers who received organs cultured from his progenoid glands would honour him with their deeds, one day becoming heroes of the Chapter themselves.

It pleased Alessio Cortez to imagine such things.

Neither hope seemed particularly unreasonable.

When he and his men were halfway across the courtyard, his attention was suddenly diverted. A small, robed figure burst from a stone archway to the right, stumbled, and fell face-down in the snow. He got up immediately, ignoring the clods of white that now caked him, and continued his run in the direction of the Reclusiam's main entrance. The cog symbol on his left breast identified him as a serf belonging to Javier Adon's Technicarum. The runes underneath it showed that he served in the tower known as the Communicatus.

'You there!' Cortez barked. 'Halt!'

The man's legs froze before his mind even had time to process the words, such was the razor-sharp edge of authority in Cortez's voice.

'Are you so eager to die, Chosen?' asked Cortez, glaring over at him. 'You must know what will happen if you step beyond those doors.'

The men of Fourth Company came to a smart halt behind their captain. They, too, stood facing the lone figure.

If the little man set one foot within the sanctum's walls, he was as good as dead. The strictures prohibited it. With the exception of the rare individuals who served the Sacratium, and servitors, only a full-blooded Adeptus Astartes could enter the Reclusiam and live.

The man bowed low to Cortez, then once again to the battle-brothers behind him, and said, 'Honoured lord, I am imprinted with a message for the Chapter Master. Its urgency was deeply impressed upon me by the Monitor. I... I am ordered to deliver it no matter the consequences to my person.' He indicated the Reclusiam's wide entrance. 'I thought perhaps to catch Lord Kantor as he leaves.'

‘He will not come out that way,’ said Cortez, punctuating the remark with a small thrust of his chin in the direction of the great bronze portal. ‘And Durlan Cholo knows better than to bother our lord on the Chapter’s Day of Foundation. What kind of message warrants such urgency, I wonder?’

The serf fixed his gaze on the ground at Cortez’s feet and replied, ‘I was placed in trance for the imprinting, lord, so the content is unknown to me. I know only what the Monitor told me. He was most insistent that Master Kantor hear it at once.’

Cortez moved closer, his armoured boots crunching virgin snow, until he stood looking down on the little man from only a few metres away. ‘Relay the message to me,’ he said. ‘I will go back inside immediately and pass it to his lordship on your behalf.’

The serf weighed the offer for only a heartbeat. Any longer would have been a grave insult, for every living soul in Arx Tyrannus knew that Pedro Kantor loved and trusted Alessio Cortez above all others. To Cortez’s knowledge, there were no secrets between the two of them.

His decision made, the serf smiled gratefully and dipped his head. ‘The famous captain is both kind and wise. I shall sign the activation code to you now. Speak it back to me, lord, and I will automatically recount the message.’

Cortez nodded and watched closely as the serf’s fingers fluttered, making a series of rapid symbols on the air.

‘I have it,’ said Cortez. ‘*Fifteen Theta Cerberus.*’

The serf’s body immediately stiffened as if it had just received a massive electric shock. His head rolled to one side, his eyes glazed over, and he began speaking in a voice that bore no resemblance whatsoever to the one he had used only moments before.

‘Emergency communication from Imperial commercial transport vessel *Videnhaus*. Omega-level encoding. Relay of deep space pulse-burst signal

transmitted by Commissar Alhaus Baldur. Identicode verified. Message content follows...'

The voice changed again, dramatically.

Cortez felt a flood of mixed emotions wash over him as he listened to the little serf replay the words of the desperate Commissar Baldur, words that had been flung out into deep space weeks ago. The message had taken its time, but it had at last reached its destination. The odds that there were any defenders left alive on Badlanding were slim, to say the least. Then came mention of the ork Waaagh.

Cortez felt his pulse quicken. He heard blood rushing in his ears. Restless energy welled up inside him, charging his muscles, readying him for combat on the strength of the words alone.

A Waaagh!

Yes, this was something Pedro Kantor had to hear at once, regardless of ceremony, regardless of everything this day signified. The orks wouldn't wait. Ceremony and tradition meant nothing to them. There were few things in the galaxy more lethal and destructive than a full-scale Waaagh. Even now, the greenskins might be forcing their way further into the Loki Sector, smashing aside unprepared naval patrols and planetary defence forces. Badlanding would be an ideal beachhead.

The serf came to the end of his message and returned to full consciousness with a start. For a moment, Cortez thought the man would fall over in the snow and have some kind of seizure, but he steadied himself and looked up meekly. 'If my lord wishes me to repeat...'

Cortez shook his head. 'What is your name, Chosen?' he asked.

'Ha- Hammond, my lord,' said the man, clearly flattered to be asked. 'Hammond, if it please you.'

'Return to the Communicatus, Hammond,' said Cortez, 'and tell Cholo... tell the Monitor that Captain Cortez sends his gratitude. You have

fulfilled your duty with distinction. On my honour, I go now to relay your words to the Chapter Master.'

Hammond's eyes started to glisten as the compliment registered. With some effort, he managed to hold back tears of joy and pride while still under Cortez's gaze. He bowed low once again, then made the sign of the aquila upon his chest and said, 'My lord's intervention has spared this unworthy life. He is as munificent as he is skilled in war. Truly, may the Emperor's glorious light ever shine upon him.'

Cortez silently prayed that his munificence and his skill in war were *not* equal. He would be dead many times over if they were.

He dismissed Hammond with a nod towards the stone archway through which the serf had come, then turned and walked back towards the Reclusiam's entrance. Over his shoulder, he called out, 'Sergeant Cabrero, lead the men to Protheo Bastion and wait for me there. I will join you momentarily.'

'At once, your munificence,' said Cabrero, almost managing to suppress a grin.

Cortez grinned back. His spirits, he realised, had been lifted by the very thought of going to war, and not just against any old opponent, but against the savage, filth-eating orks. Now *there* was an enemy who knew how to fight!

'You'll find out how munificent I am tomorrow on the training fields,' he told Cabrero.

The sergeant looked a lot less jovial at this prospect. He saluted stiffly, right fist to breastplate, and led Fourth Company away as instructed.

Cortez walked back the way he had come, boots retracing the trail he and his men had just cut in the snow.

Ashor Drakken was emerging from the shadows of the Reclusiam's granite portico, leading his Third Company out into the wintry air. As

Cortez marched in his direction, Drakken remarked dryly, ‘Aren’t you going the wrong way, brother?’

Cortez slowed only a little as he passed his fellow captain. ‘This cannot wait, Ashor. Be ready to attend council. A session will surely be called.’

‘Not today,’ said Drakken, voice edged with arrogant certainty.

Cortez said no more. Grinning like a wolf, he turned, strode on and disappeared through the sanctum’s doors.



TWO

Tarvo Peak, Hellblade Mountains

Ramir Savales forced himself to straighten up. The mountain air held an icy chill this early in the morning, particularly now that Primagiddus, the Month of First Cold, was here, and he realised he had been hunching over to protect himself from its bite. That wouldn't do. One did not meet the planetary governor and the members of the Upper Rynnhouse standing stooped like an old man, whatever one's actual age.

Pulling a battered brass chronometer from his hip pocket, he checked the time. The shuttle still had a few more minutes to go before it could rightly be called late. He saw, too, that his fingers were reddish-pink, raw with the cold, and tried to rub some warmth into them.

Every year, the winter was getting marginally worse, or so it seemed to him. Life in the Hellblade Mountains became that little bit harder, and the Month of First Warmth all the more welcome when it came. But he knew it wasn't the climate that was changing. Not really. It was his body, plain and simple. His best years were well behind him. Soon, he would have to approach the master about selecting an apprentice. Pride and simple stubbornness had delayed that particular conversation for far too long already.

He had been waiting for almost an hour now, standing on the periphery of the Tarvo Peak landing pad, just beyond the thick yellow line that marked the edge of the safety zone. The pad was a broad circle about a hundred metres across, projecting slightly outward from the gentle lower slope of the mountain like an oversized discus, supported from underneath by massive iron stanchions as thick as any of the limlat trees that grew in the far north. Tiny red lights winked in unison all along its circumference and, painted in the very centre with its wings spread wide, was a massive white icon – a stylised eagle with two heads. He had supervised the repainting of it himself last summer. Its lines were still fine and sharp, though the day's snowfall was just starting to cover them.

Above the mountains, the clouds were the colour of wet slate. Bright, fat snowflakes spiralled down onto the shoulders of his all-weather greatcoat.

Underneath the coat, Savales wore a formal dress tunic, midnight-blue like the armour of his lords and decorated at the breast with the icon of the Chapter. It was a great honour to wear that icon, but the tunic wasn't doing much to keep him warm. Idly, he wondered how much more comfortable he might have been in the robes he usually wore about the fortress. His winter set, woven from thick *raum* wool, was much more suitable for this weather. He donned the dress uniform only once or twice a year, and was thankful that most of those occasions fell within the spring and summer seasons.

A freezing gust of wind from the slope behind him cut through his coat and made him curse out loud. He turned to look over his shoulder, but neither the wind nor the curse seemed to bother the silent, stationary figures standing in a long double row behind him.

Servitors. Nothing bothered *them*. They patiently awaited his command, each pair holding a lacquered black palanquin between them.

Savales faced front again, muttering to himself.

Damn it, he swore, have I really become so fragile?

To think that he had once been an aspirant, had even passed the Trial of the Bloodied Hand. He might have been a battle-brother now, practically impervious to pain and discomfort, but the critical implant process had failed. Without the sacred implants, no matter how good a fighter he was, he was still just a man, and his destiny was to live and die as one, and to feel the cold in his aching old bones.

The seventeen sacred implants that would have made him a Crimson Fist...

He had been only fourteen summers old when the Chapter's Apothecaries had attempted the first procedure, and he would have given anything, anything at all, for it to have succeeded.

How cruel the fates had been!

How many nights since then had he dreamt of the life he might have led, sharing in the strength and glory of the armoured giants who had traversed the gulf between stars to find him and test him? How many nights had he awoken, cheeks damp with tears, weeping quietly into the dark silence of his room, lamenting all that might have been?

He had passed every test administered, mastered every task set. Death had done its best to stop him, and had taken all but one of his rivals, but it had not been able to reap the soul of Ramir Savales. He had survived, and he had earned his rightful place among the mighty while the other boys, all but Ulmar Teves, lay paralysed, drowning or bleeding to death in the stinking black marsh-waters of their home world.

The last test had been the hardest. The vicious sting of the bloated barbdragon had almost pierced his skin. Just one microgram of its burning venom would have brought him unbearable agony, then madness, then finally death. Three times that lethal barb had almost pricked his wrists as he grappled with the noxious creature, but he had won out in the end. He had earned his place. No one, least of all Savales himself, had imagined that his own body, his own blasted flesh, would undo all his dreams.

With the cold momentarily forgotten, his face twisted at the thought. Fifty-seven years had passed, and he could still hear the words of the hard-eyed Apothecary who had leaned over the table to which he had been strapped – words that had all but crushed his soul:

It is not to be, young one. Your body rebels. The implants will not take.

You are not destined to serve as we do.

You will never be Adeptus Astartes.

It stung him even now, a wound that had never fully healed, though it had dulled significantly over the long years. Back then, he had wished for death to take him, to end the agony of his disappointment. It would have been the ultimate kindness. Instead of death, another kind of salvation presented itself, and it had come from an unexpected quarter. Pedro Kantor, Master of the Chapter, Lord Hellblade himself, had come to the teenage Savales in person as the boy sat weeping in the solitude of a dark stone cell deep below the surface of the Chapter's mountain home.

The master had spoken of the worth he saw in the broken-hearted youth, of potential that should not be wasted. So Savales was not to be an Adeptus Astartes, the master had said. Regrettable, certainly, but perhaps the Emperor had another destiny laid out for him. The Chapter did not survive by the blood of its Space Marines alone. In his wisdom, Pedro Kantor had offered the failed neophyte another means by which to serve.

The young Savales had been apprenticed to the lord's ageing major-domo, Argol Kondris, eventually replacing him when the older man passed away.

Ordinator of the House, the master's seneschal, highest ranking of all the Chosen – it was as grand a destiny as any mere mortal had the right to hope for, an honour beyond words. Savales had given thanks to the Emperor and His saints every single day since, just as he had prayed for the safety and long life of the one who had given him his glorious second

chance, the very one who had charged him with greeting the Rynnite nobles out here on this bitter winter morning.

Yes, he thought, it is on the master's behalf that I stand here now. It is my duty, and that duty is a great blessing. So to hell with the blasted cold!

Mouthing Saint Serpico's *Ninth Litany of Resilience*, he lifted his eyes to the sky once more and tried to pierce the veils of falling snow for sign of an approaching craft.

Nothing.

His brow furrowed. He was about to check his chronometer again when he heard, ever so faintly, the distant, throaty hum of powerful turbine engines. The noise grew steadily louder and, seconds later, a black bulk resolved itself in the distance, just a shadow at first, but growing more solid, more detailed, as it closed the gap.

So it begins, thought Savales. At least they are on time.

Within minutes, the roar of the shuttle became deafening. As it swung in for its descent, vertical thrusters scorching the surface of the pad, its underside blotted out a good portion of the sky, and Savales allowed himself a moment in which to be impressed. The Peregrine was a fine craft, almost thirty metres long, he judged, and perhaps fifteen in height, with a wingspan to match. Its prow was decorated with a gleaming eagle sculpted from solid gold. Unlike the icon painted on the landing pad, this one boasted only a single head. The craft's sleek gunmetal flanks bore the crests of the planetary government and each of the families that ruled the nine provinces, all beautifully rendered in gems and precious metals.

As the engines powered down, shifting from a rib-shaking roar to a gentle purr, Savales adjusted the lapels of his coat, smoothed his thinning grey hair, tugged his sleeves down, and stepped forward. He could feel welcome heat radiating from the massive turbines and willed his body to soak it in. Then, as he stood there in the shadow of the long, pointed prow, he heard a new sound – the whine of electric motors. The shuttle's belly

eased open, forming a ramp down which two men marched in the bright, cream-coloured livery of the Rynnsguard. At the bottom of the ramp, each stepped aside, one to the left, the other to the right, and rested highly-polished lasguns against their right shoulders. They did not make eye contact with him.

Savales felt a smile twitch the corners of his mouth. Overgrown pageboys, he thought with a private chuckle. They wouldn't last half a day back on Blackwater. The drechnidae would eat them alive, if the marsh-wallocs didn't get them first.

But that was unfair, and he felt a momentary stab of guilt. Lord Kantor had taught him better than that. The planetary defence forces *did* have a role to play. The nobles needed their bodyguards, and there were always some segments of the populace that needed to be kept in line, even here on Rynn's World, both of which were duties far beneath the notice of the legendary Adeptus Astartes.

More footsteps rang on the polished metal plates of the ramp now, and a pair of slender ankles appeared at the top, soon joined by more as the planetary governor and her entourage began descending towards Savales.

He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and readied himself to greet the most powerful bureaucrats on the planet, hoping to Holy Terra that they wouldn't do anything stupid while they were here.

Lady Maia Cagliestra's palanquin was well cushioned, but the ride was rough and the mountain road was often steep and uneven. Still, nothing could dampen her spirits on this most auspicious of days. She had waited all her life for this. To imagine that she would finally enter Arx Tyrannus. She almost felt like singing. Only decades of well-practiced restraint, of rigidly adhering to the rules of conduct her late mother had so sadistically impressed on her, kept her from externally expressing her joy. Ninety-seven years old – though anyone asked to guess would have wagered her a

strikingly beautiful forty – yet she felt as giddy as a child on the morning of the Harvest End festival.

Even the icy air and the dark vista of the brooding black crags to either side of the road merely served to heighten the experience. These were the Hellblade Mountains, the domain of the legendary Crimson Fists.

He was here.

She had waited seven years just to see him again, and soon he would be before her, resplendent as always in his ceramite plate of blue and red and gold.

At a signal from the man who had introduced himself as Ordinator Savales, the hooded servitors carrying her conveyance came to a complete stop. The convoy had reached the end of the mountain road. Leaning out of her palanquin's left aperture, she saw that the column stood on the precipice of a yawning black chasm which separated them from their destination.

The ordinator walked back to the side of the governor's carriage, and, bowing slightly, said to her, 'We've reached the main gates, ma'am. I thought you might like to watch the bridge extend.'

From the palanquin's shadowed interior, Maia smiled up at him and held out her hand. Her senior secretary, whom she affectionately called Little Mylos, was already hurrying forward from the rear of the column to attend to her, but he was too late. Savales gently helped her to her feet. As she grasped the seneschal's forearm for support, she remarked to herself on the ropey hardness of his muscles.

He must have been a fine specimen once, she thought. I wonder how old he is.

Once she was standing, Ordinator Savales gestured to his left, and Maia turned her eyes to follow. There before her, towering above the far lip of the chasm, were the great outer gates of the fortress-monastery Arx Tyrannus.

For a few seconds, Maia Cagliestra forgot to breathe.

‘By the Golden Throne,’ she gasped at last.

None of the pictographs in her extensive library could hope to do the sight justice. The gates were at least a hundred metres tall. As a child, so very long ago, she had read all about them. She knew that they had once comprised the prow armour of the legendary starship, *Rutilus Tyrannus*, the original spacefaring home of the Chapter in the long millennia before the Crimson Fists had been given domain over Rynn’s World. Even today, the heritage of those gates was unmistakable. They still bore the vast shining aquila design that had decorated the front of the mighty craft.

The gates were set between two massive, square-cut towers that bristled with artillery and missile batteries, all pointed upwards at the dark grey sky, ready to fend off a threat that Maia couldn’t imagine ever daring to approach. Even the foulest and most violent of the xenos races surely weren’t foolish enough to attack a Space Marine home world.

Extending from either side of the towers were the fortress-monastery’s gargantuan ramparts, thrusting up at sharp angles from the black rock, as timeless and immovable as the mountains themselves, as if they, too, had been formed in some distant, pre-historic age. The walls, like the gates, had been built from the stuff of *Rutilus Tyrannus*, and were studded all along their length with devastating long-range weaponry, much of which had no doubt once graced the port and starboard batteries of the ship.

How many enemy craft had those guns obliterated in their battles between the stars, Maia wondered?

High on the slopes of nearby peaks, she saw other structures, smaller but similarly fortified against attack. The appearance of most of these gave little clue as to their purpose, but one bore large arrays of deep-space receivers and transmitters, and she recognised it from her books as the *Communicatus*. As she looked, a bulky Thunderhawk gunship hove into view just below the cloud line, arriving from the north-west and slowing to

land on the roof of a large cylindrical building that jutted from a hazardous-looking slope to the north.

She heard Savales say something – she didn't quite catch it – and turned to look at him. He had one finger pressed to a small mechanical device that encircled his left ear.

‘I'm sorry, ordinator,’ she said. ‘Were you talking to me?’

Savales didn't answer immediately. Any words would have been drowned out by the tremendous metallic groan that now issued from the far side of the chasm.

Maia turned and watched, her mouth slightly agape, as the gates of Arx Tyrannus creaked slowly open and, from a broad horizontal housing in the rock below them, a metal bridge extended.

It was almost four minutes before the noise finally stopped. When it did, the bridge was firmly locked into place, spanning the width of the chasm, and the gates were thrown as wide as they would go.

On the far side, Maia saw large humanoid figures marching out to meet them. Her heart leapt. Surely these were the first Crimson Fists she would lay eyes on today. As they moved out from the shadows of the gates she saw instead that they were hulking gun-servitors led by one of the Chapter's senior serfs. They took up positions on either side of the bridge, facing inward like statues lining a long hall. They did not look in the direction of the nobles.

Perhaps reading disappointment on Maia's face, Ordinator Savales said, ‘It is a rare occasion that no Adeptus Astartes mans the gates, but today is just such an occasion, my lady. On the Day of Foundation, every battle-brother who is able is required to attend the ceremonies.’ He gestured to Maia's palanquin. ‘Shall we proceed?’

Maia was still a little overwhelmed by the cold, dark grandeur of Arx Tyrannus and didn't trust herself to speak, but she nodded and accepted the ordinator's help in returning to her seat, absently noting his quiet strength

for the second time. Moments later, as the palanquins passed before the dull, expressionless eyes of the gun-servitors, Maia felt a chill that even her thick furs could do nothing to abate. This was most definitely not the warm welcome she had imagined. On either side of the bridge, the lobotomised living weapons tracked the palanquins as they passed. Their weapons were powered up. Maia could hear the hum of deadly, constrained energies. Her skin prickled and her breath became tight in her chest. No one had ever aimed a weapon at her before, at least not overtly. There had been a few failed assassination attempts over the years, but she had only learned of those after the fact.

Now, she forced her eyes forwards, willing her heartbeat to slow back down.

It didn't return to its regular rhythm until she was beyond the gates.



THREE

Arx Tyrannus, Hellblade Mountains

From high atop the black stone walls of the central keep, banners of blue, crimson and gold rippled and snapped in a cold wind, each beautifully decorated with the proud heraldry of the Chapter's ten companies and the iconography of a thousand glorious crusades.

On the spacious, snow-dusted grounds of the Protheo Bastion, a hundred metres below those banners, the Space Marines of the Crimson Fists stood in perfect formation, each armoured warrior a metre apart from the battle-brothers to either side, all arranged according to company, squad and seniority.

Trails of steamy breath and exhaust fumes rolled into the air from the vents in their helmets and backpacks. Their broad-barrelled boltguns were held rigidly in front of them, gripped in gauntleted hands, muzzles pointing skyward.

Behind the Space Marines stood over six thousand of the Chosen, all robed in blue to match the armour of their masters, all with hooded heads bowed.

No one, neither Space Marine nor serf, turned or gave even a flicker of notice as Ordinator Savales led Lady Maia and her party beneath the vast south-western archway and out onto the grounds.

From the line of nobles following in Savales's wake, there came a jumble of gasps and suitably hushed exclamations. Savales let the moment pass of its own accord and kept walking, anxious that his charges be seated out of the way as quickly as possible. To that end, he led them north along the base of the towering inner wall, thirty metres back from the closest row of Crimson Fists, guiding the nobles straight towards a small wooden terrace that had been constructed by the Chosen specifically for the purpose of their visit.

Despite the brisk pace he set at the front of the line, he suddenly found himself addressed by the governor. She had come up alongside him, matching his stride easily with her long slender legs. 'They're incredible, ordinator,' she breathed, making no effort to disguise the depth of her awe. 'I mean, I've seen them before in the capital, but never like this. Never all together like this. I... I don't think I've ever felt the Emperor's presence as surely as I do right now.'

Savales glanced at her, intending to express his agreement in the briefest possible terms, but the words died on his lips the moment he saw that the governor was actually weeping. Tears were running in two glistening tracks down her soft, powdered cheeks.

He and the governor came from different worlds, both literally and figuratively speaking, but here, in her reaction to the great spectacle before her, was something he could truly identify with. The assembled Adeptus Astartes were a sight to stir the heart of any Imperial loyalist.

He didn't slow his pace, but his voice was kind as he answered, 'No one has seen the Chapter together like this for a hundred years, ma'am. Not even I. It is indeed a magnificent sight, as you rightly say. My heart is gladdened that it affects you so.'

The governor smiled a little self-consciously at that, then quietly dropped back beside her secretary, who offered her a small square of silk with which to dab at her face.

If the nearest of the Space Marines had heard the exchange – and of course they had, for their powers of hearing went far beyond those of a normal man – they showed no sign of interest. Both they and the Chosen remained as still as marble sculptures, awaiting the arrival of the Chaplains and the members of the Chapter Council.

Savales and his wealthy charges soon reached a set of shallow wooden stairs that led up into the small terrace. The ordinator stopped beside them and helped Lady Maia up the first few steps, more out of propriety than anything else. The lady clearly had no need of a man's steadying arm, but took it anyway, no doubt as a point of etiquette.

'Your party shall have an excellent view of the proceedings from here, ma'am,' said Savales to her back as she stepped through the doorway at the top.

And it will keep you all penned in very nicely, he thought to himself. No one must interfere with the procession.

Once the last of the entourage from the capital had climbed the stairs, Savales ascended them himself and found most of the nobles already seated in the well-cushioned ebonwood chairs that had been laid out for them. A handful of the Chapter's most junior serfs stood silently in the shadows at the back, awaiting any command Savales might deign to give. As he looked along the front row, Savales saw that the chair closest to Lady Maia remained curiously empty. Standing in front of it, looking slightly put out, was Viscount Isopho, Minister of Trade, senior representative for the Province of Dorado.

'I don't understand, Maia,' he said, absentmindedly addressing her as if no one else were within earshot. 'It is quite clearly my seat. Why in blazes—'

Lady Maia threw him the kind of smile that Savales judged she must have used countless times to get her own way. It was dazzling and absolutely filled with promise. 'My dear, gallant Nilo,' she said. 'Your

close company is always a great blessing, as I've expressed before. But I *had* hoped Ordinator Savales might sit beside me today, unless you feel that you can explain the various elements of the procession better than he.'

The viscount, a slim, dapper, thickly-moustached man in his mid-fifties, threw Savales a brief, hard glance. He was obviously incensed that the governor wished him to defer to someone who was still, technically, a member of the peasant class, no matter what Savales's status within these hallowed walls might be. After a few seconds the viscount mustered a fairly convincing smile of his own, bowed to the lady, and said, 'As you wish, of course.' Then he turned towards Savales, walked down the row of seats towards him, and said, 'Might one of your people bring another chair, ordinator?'

Secretary Mylos, who was seated at the near end of the front row, leapt to his feet. 'There's no need for that, sir,' he said. 'Please, take mine. I'll be quite content to sit with the other aides in the second row.'

Isopho muttered something vaguely appreciative to Mylos, and dropped himself into the seat, dropping his smile at the same time.

Savales noticed Lady Maia gesturing to him and, with some reluctance, for he had no wish to talk during the procession, took the proffered seat next to her. On his right sat Margravine Lyotsa of Macarro Province, a slightly plump woman who was beaming with enthusiasm for the whole affair. 'Do you think the Chapter Master might wave to us as he passes?' she asked Savales.

It was a preposterous question, and Savales fought to hold back a sharp retort. Did the woman think this some kind of carnival? Instead, he feigned an apologetic tone and answered, 'I shouldn't think so, my lady. In truth, the Day of Foundation is a time of great solemnity and reflection, not celebration. As I tried to impress on your honoured personage during the journey here, we who bask in the glory of the Crimson Fists this day must make ourselves all but invisible during their observances. To draw

undue attention, to interfere in even the smallest of ways, so much as a well-meaning wave of your hand, for example, would be a very grave insult to the honour of our protectors. We must conduct ourselves just as if we were in the Great Basilica. One refrains from calling out to Archbishop Galenda during his famous sermons, does one not?’

The margravine looked horrified at the thought. ‘By the Golden Throne,’ she huffed, ‘I would never... Your point is well taken, ordinator. I shall be as invisible as my countenance allows.’

Savales wasn’t sure what she meant, but it hardly mattered. He was pleased to see the expression on her round face settle into something more appropriate to the solemnity of the occasion. It was then that he felt the lightest touch of fingertips on the back of his left hand and turned to face Lady Maia again.

‘How long will they stand immobile like this?’ the governor asked him, looking out at the rigid Space Marines. ‘Not one of them has so much as twitched a muscle since we arrived. If not for their breath on the air, I would swear those suits of armour were empty.’

As Savales listened to her, he eased the old brass chronometer from his pocket and stared at its face in confusion.

It must be broken, he thought. This cannot be correct.

But no, one hand was still ticking off the seconds as steadily as it had always done. The chronometer was an ancient piece, inherited from old Kondris, and it had not dropped a second in all the years Savales had owned it. What its elegant metal hands told him now was that something must be wrong. He watched more seconds tick off, filled with a mounting sense of unease.

The morning procession should have started by now. And Lord Kantor, as Ramir Savales knew better than anyone else, was never late.

The great domed and pillared hall of the Strategium was quiet, but it was far from empty. Only two of the heavy, square-cut onyx chairs arranged

around the massive crystal table at its centre remained unoccupied.

Where the devil are they, thought Cortez? He had been the third member of the council to arrive, and now he was becoming restless.

He had passed Hammond's message to the Chapter Master in the nave of the Reclusiam, and had watched the words take effect. The Chapter Master had reacted exactly as Cortez had known he would: calm, controlled, only the slight narrowing of his eyes betraying a hint of anger that news of the attack on Badlanding should reach Arx Tyrannus now, on this of all days. Inconvenient, yes, but none who had faced the might of the greenskins before and survived would dare to take such news lightly. The message's significance could not be ignored. Like a thunderstorm gathering on the horizon, its charge building on the wind, it seemed the threat of a major war here in the Loki Sector was closer than it had been in over a millennium.

Orks!

Give or take a dozen light-years, Badlanding essentially lay on a straight line between the Rynnstar system and the domain of Charadon, a star cluster that was absolutely infested with the savage beasts. If the transmission from the struggling commissar was to be believed, and a Waaagh was indeed gaining momentum on the fringes of the sector, then the Crimson Fists were the only force within a year's warp travel that had a chance of reacting in time and with the appropriate level of force. Founding Day or not, action in the face of a major Waaagh could not be postponed.

So where in blazes are you, Pedro, thought Cortez?

He drummed his gauntleted fingers on the table, the sound cutting sharply across a tense silence. A few of the other council members glared over at him in irritation.

'What?' he said in a challenging tone, but he stopped drumming.

After another minute of silence, he said, 'If we have to wait much longer I think I'll chair the meeting myself.'

Raphael Acastus, Master of Siege, Captain of the Ninth Company, snorted out a laugh. No one took the comment seriously. Cortez was famously impatient and rarely disinclined to express it. But Drigo Alvez, Master of the Shield, Captain of Second Company, saw a chance to knock Cortez down a peg. He met his gaze and said, ‘Actually, Alessio, that duty would fall to me. Still, I commend your enthusiasm. If only you could channel it into sitting still...’

A few of the other captains raised half-smiles at this. Cortez grunted. He and Alvez had no great love of each other. The Second Company captain was as dour and over-starched a Space Marine as Cortez had ever met, unimaginative in the extreme, but it was these very qualities that apparently inspired the Chapter Master’s confidence in him. Besides, Alvez was wrong. It was, in fact, Eustace Mendoza, Master of the Librarius, who would preside over the Strategium in the event of the Chapter Master’s absence. And if Mendoza were absent, the duty would fall to High Chaplain Tomasi.

For a moment, Cortez considered pointing this out, but before he spoke, his eyes flicked towards the old Librarian, and he noticed that Mendoza was looking straight back at him. The Librarian held his gaze, giving a barely perceptible shake of his head.

In Cortez’s mind, the powerful psyker placed three words.

Leave it, brother.

Cortez responded with a tiny shrug and resumed drumming his fingers on the tabletop, once again drawing the eyes of the others towards him.

Ishmael Icario, Master of Shadows, Captain of the Tenth Company, laughed aloud. ‘Alessio,’ he said, ‘of every battle-brother I have ever known, none are as restless as you. Chapter Master Traegus said it best, I think. *Only in the absolute stillness of the body and the complete silencing of the voice can we hear the truth of our inner thoughts, and so hearing, know ourselves that much the better.*’

Cortez threw Icario a dangerous look.

Algernon Traegus had been the controversial sixteenth Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists, a particular favourite of Icario's, judging by the frequency with which the Scout captain quoted the late Master's writings. Many of the older members of the Chapter were wary of Traegus's teachings. It was Traegus who had initiated the controversial breeding programmes – programmes by which the Chapter's failed aspirants, those who had survived the trials and had not been rendered sterile, were bred with women of suitable genetic stock in the hope of creating male offspring strong enough to swell the ranks of the Chapter one day as full Adeptus Astartes.

Unfortunately, the results had been unpredictable and disappointing.

Upon his accession, the seventeenth Chapter Master, Klede Sargo, had immediately halted his predecessor's plan, and no Chapter Master had attempted to revive it since.

Responding to Icario, Cortez said, 'I can hear my inner voice fine, brother. It speaks with the volume of a thunderstorm, and right now, it tells me there are xenos to kill. The sooner we engage them, the better.'

'And so we shall,' answered a sonorous voice from the far side of the hall. The words echoed for a moment, bouncing back from the frescoed inner surface of the dome. The seated Adeptus Astartes twisted and saw Pedro Kantor closing two massive ebonwood doors. They rose to their feet as the Chapter Master turned and descended the steps of the main aisle, walking between steeply tiered rows of white marble benches, down onto the Strategium floor. With a long, easy stride, as if his heavy power armour weighed little more than cloth, he crossed to the onyx throne at the head of the table and seated himself, gesturing for the others to do likewise. The chair beneath him detected his weight as he sat, and gear assemblies sunk into the floor groaned and rattled as they pulled him in towards the table's edge.

The Chapter Master rested his heavy vambraces on the gently glowing crystal surface, meshed his armoured fingers together and leaned forward. ‘My apologies, brothers, for keeping you waiting these extra moments. I wished to talk to the Monitor directly, and to send word to Ordinator Savales that there would be a slight delay to the day’s proceedings. You all know by now the reason this impromptu session has been called.’

Captain Acastus stared pointedly at the only onyx chair which remained empty. ‘Shall the High Chaplain not be joining us, my lord? Should we not wait for him?’

Kantor angled his head towards Acastus, and said, ‘The great majority of this day’s responsibilities fall on Tomasi’s shoulders, certainly far more than fall on mine. He cannot be distracted before the Miracle of the Blood. I will apprise him later of what is said here, but we will hear Brother Adon’s report without him.’

Having said this, Kantor nodded to a member of the assembly who, on appearance alone, truly stood out among the rest. This was the Forgemaster, Javier Adon, Master of the Technicarum, the Chapter’s supreme Techmarine. His great affinity with the machine-spirits was all too evident in the clash of meat and metal that he had become. His armour bore the iconography of both the Chapter and the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the powerful servo-arms which sprouted from his back gave him something of the aspect of a mighty mechanical arachnid. When he spoke, the sound reverberated from a grille that masked the lower half of his face, and his words emerged in a rasping, grating mechanical buzz without tone or inflection.

‘Assembled brothers,’ he began. ‘At 07:58hrs on this Day of Foundation, our near-space communications array received and decoded a pulse-burst signal with an Omega-level Imperial encryption key. The signal was broadcast repeatedly at fifteen-second intervals, originating from a

commercial transport that slid from the warp two astronomical units outside the orbit of Phraecos.’

One of Adon’s mechanical appendages swung up and over his right shoulder with a whirring sound. It slotted a thick, digit-mounted data plug into a socket set in the table’s rim and pressed it home with an audible click. At once, the quartz tabletop began to glow brighter, to pulsate with light, and a ghostly hololithic view of the local star system manifested in the air above it.

The assembled Adeptus Astartes raised their eyes.

‘The transmitting vessel’s identicode has been verified,’ Adon continued. ‘The ship is known as the *Videnhaus* and is properly registered. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of her transmission, though the encryption was added later by the ship’s captain. The original message, we now know, was transmitted raw from the planet Badlanding.’

‘And the content of that transmission?’ asked Ashor Drakken, Captain of Third Company, Master of the Line.

There was a short burst of static, and the voice of Commissar Alhaus Baldur filled the air. ‘There won’t be time to broadcast again,’ said the voice, ‘so this is it...’

Forgemaster Adon played the message in its entirety while the others listened with rapt attention. By the end of it, Cortez could barely sit still. Hearing it for the second time, he found his urge to ship out for Badlanding was even stronger. Battle beckoned him.

‘That is all,’ said Adon when the commissar’s voice stopped. ‘There is no more.’

‘It is enough in any case,’ said Cortez. He locked eyes with Kantor. ‘Send my Fourth Company, lord. Badlanding will be purged of the greenskin taint. We will descend on them like holy fire.’

‘Send the Seventh,’ said Caldimus Ortiz, Master of the Gates, with equal passion. ‘If not alone, then in support of Brother-Captain Cortez.’

Kantor unlocked his fingers and raised both hands into the air, calling for calm. The captains always vied with each other for the honour of deployment. He expected no less, but his decision would, as always, be based on tactical analysis. He did not play favourites, despite his friendship with Alessio Cortez.

‘Forgemaster, show us Badlanding in relation to Rynn’s World. And give me an estimate of travel time, both best- and worst-case scenarios.’

Javier Adon remained still, but above the table the ghostly view of the Rynnstar system zoomed out with dizzying speed to show the relative positions of both Rynnstar and Freiya, the K-type star around which Badlanding orbited. Figures began to scroll down past each of the tiny flickering points of light.

After a moment, the figures stopped scrolling, and Adon said, ‘If the warp is calm, and the tides and eddies favour us, one of our cruisers could reach high orbit around the target planet in approximately three hundred and sixty-eight standard hours.’

‘That’s almost two weeks,’ growled Cortez. ‘The greenskins might have moved on by then. We should mobilise at once!’

‘If the warp is turbulent,’ Adon continued, ‘and the tides are against us, the journey could take many times longer. A worst-case scenario is beyond my ability to accurately calculate with the information I currently have. Perhaps the Master of the Librarius would offer comment.’

Eustace Mendoza angled his head towards Pedro Kantor. ‘Local warpflow appears relatively untroubled at this time. The Librarius has detected no significant disturbances that would present a problem to travel.’

As he watched and listened, Cortez had the feeling that Mendoza was preoccupied with something else, and it wasn’t just the Day of Foundation. In the shadowed corridors of the fortress-monastery, it was cautiously whispered that some of the other Librarians had been reporting dark

omens with increasing frequency. Was the master psyker holding something back?

An impressive figure seated on the Chapter Master's immediate right cleared his throat, drawing all eyes in his direction. His power armour was highly ornate, and his left pauldron, rather than bearing any form of company-centric iconography, was fashioned into a great silver eagle with two heads. This was Ceval Ranparre, Master of the Fleet, Hero of Hesperidon.

‘Two weeks then,’ he said. ‘Trust me, Chapter Master, as you have always done. I can get a force to Badlanding in that time, ill tides or otherwise. If you will permit it, I shall send *The Crusader*. Of all our fleet, she is the most reliable when a swift warp transit is of the essence.’

Kantor accepted the suggestion with a nod. ‘Then I shall focus my attention on who is to go.’

‘The Fourth,’ said Cortez again. ‘There is no time to debate it, not if we are to make any kind of difference to Commissar Baldur and his remaining men.’

Drigo Alvez snorted derisively at this. Cortez knew as well as anyone that the Imperial forces on Badlanding were almost certainly dead to a man.

Kantor cast his eyes around the assembled leaders. He laid his palms flat on the table and pushed himself to his feet. With his weight no longer on the black throne, the servos jerked into action again and moved the chair out from under the table. Standing there like a vision of ancient glory, an echo of the primarch remembered from the time of the Great Crusade, the Chapter Master towered over the rest of the council.

‘Let us be realistic, brothers. This will be no rescue mission. Those men are dead. Our priority at this point must be to gather intelligence on the threat of this alleged Waaagh. We have put down many significant ork incursions over the years, and the cost in the Adeptus Astartes lives has

ever been great. If there is a way to rob this Waaagh of its momentum before it threatens the rest of the sector, I want it found and exploited.'

As one, the figures around the table rose to their feet and clashed their fists against their ceramite cuirasses. 'In the primarch's name,' they intoned.

Kantor nodded, then turned from the table and began striding back up the broad steps towards the Strategium's double doors. At the top, he stopped, looked back at the council members, and said, 'Ranparre, issue preparation orders to the crew of *The Crusader* as soon as the Miracle of the Blood is over. Forgemaster Adon, have the Techmarines ready weapons and equipment for a company-strength force.'

'Aye, my lord,' buzzed Adon.

Kantor paused with one hand on the heavy bronze ring of a door handle, and added, 'The procession will begin in fifteen minutes. The rites must be properly observed. Make sure you are all in place before it starts. As for my decision regarding which captain shall have the honour of this task, I will let you know after the Steeping.'

There was a groan of iron hinges, then the heavy wooden doors crashed shut behind the Chapter Master's back.

In the sunken circle of the Strategium floor, the council members saluted each other and disbanded, each captain hoping that the honour of battle in the Emperor's name would fall to him.

'The procession is starting,' said Savales, relief evident in his voice.

Twenty minutes earlier, a message from Lord Kantor had arrived. A short emergency session of the Chapter Council had been called. The ordinator had been on edge ever since. What could be so grave as to interrupt this holiest of days? His knuckles had been white, fingers clenched tightly around his chronometer until, now, at last, he placed the old heirloom back in his pocket.

'It is starting, ma'am,' he said again.

Maia leaned forward in her chair and drew an excited, trembling breath.

A tall, dark figure appeared, striding through a twenty-metre archway to the far left of the bastion grounds. All the Chosen standing in line behind their Adeptus Astartes masters immediately dropped to their knees.

Maia's heart leapt. It was him at last! She felt like she would burst at the sight of him. He was shining with an incredible light, resplendent in armour so polished that it was almost too glorious to behold.

She had waited a long time to lay eyes on Pedro Kantor again. It had been seven years since she had last spent thirty all-too-brief minutes in council with him at the capital. He had seen many battles since then, but, if his armour had been damaged in the fighting, it showed no sign of it now. The Chapter's artificers were unequalled in their skill.

He was every bit the vision of strength and honour she recalled.

As if reading her mind, Ordinator Savales whispered, 'He is an unforgettable sight, isn't he? And look, here comes High Chaplain Tomasi and the members of the Sacratium. Do you see the crystal sceptre?'

Maia nodded. She could hardly miss it, a mass of sculpted gold and las-cut crystal that surely weighed twice what she herself did. For all its weight, the terrifying figure of the High Chaplain carried it with deceptive ease.

The Miracle of the Blood.

Maia's father had spoken of it only once. It was, he had told her, a thing too great, too powerful and significant, to be shared through a medium as limited as language. He had died hoping she would see it for herself one day.

Now, watching High Chaplain Tomasi march gravely down the avenue between the Adeptus Astartes ranks, a chill ran up Maia's spine. The Chaplain was the stuff of nightmares, a vision of death, and she forced her eyes to stay on the beautiful sceptre itself, rather than gaze into the black hollows of his skull-helm's eye sockets for any length of time. By contrast,

the sceptre's head was like a shimmering golden sunburst. Rays of metal surrounded a perfect sphere of transparent crystal, and that sphere was half-filled with what appeared to be dried blood.

As Tomasi took step after measured step, following the Chapter Master's exact path, he swung the head of the sceptre slowly from left to right above him. Behind him came a score of other Chaplains, also dressed in black armour, faces likewise encased in leering ceramite skulls. Some of these were hooded, the lipless lower jaws of their death-masks protruding from deep shadow. Others were not. All carried items of holy significance. For some, it was censers that swung like pendulums, filling the air with strongly-scented blue smoke. For others, it was ancient tomes, the leather covers of which were embossed with the Imperial aquila and the fist symbol of the Chapter. Others carried ancient weapons, no doubt priceless beyond measure and surely once belonging to heroes long gone but not forgotten.

All chanted blessings as they moved, their voices merging, blending in a low hypnotic hum.

'Watch the sceptre,' Savales told her.

Maia fixed her eyes on it, following it left and right, left and right. Gradually, she realised that something was happening. A change was taking place within the crystal sphere at the top.

'The blood,' she breathed.

As the High Chaplain passed, still swinging the head of the sceptre in time with his steps, the dried blood visible within the sphere began to revert to liquid.

Maia gasped, unsure of what her eyes were reporting, but Savales's hushed voice confirmed it.

'The crystal sphere holds the blood of Rogal Dorn himself,' he said. 'Imagine that, my lady. We are witnessing the blood of the primarch reverting to liquid form, ten thousand years after it was sealed inside! A

true miracle! That blood was preserved by an Apothecary after the primarch was wounded in the defence of Holy Terra. To see it change before us now...’

Maia felt faint, dizzy. Though she looked young, she was not. She became afraid that her heart would betray her, that this was all simply too much. The blood of Rogal Dorn, son of the Emperor Himself... Her mind spun with the significance of it. She could offer the ordinator no response.

The other nobles, too, were deeply affected by the change in the crystal sphere. They had heard Savales’s whispered explanation, and they sat stunned. Some wept quietly, their faith in the Imperial Creed somehow finally vindicated by this one inexplicable event.

Maia heard Viscount Isopho, his voice low and reverent, ask, ‘But what does it *mean*, ordinator?’

Savales kept his unblinking eyes on the sceptre as he answered.

‘It means that the primarch is still with us, viscount. He still watches over the Crimson Fists. Mankind is not alone, even now, even after ten thousand years of war and darkness and ceaseless slaughter. And if the primarch is with us, then the Emperor is, too.’

Maia felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. She believed it, everything the ordinator was saying. The Miracle of the Blood was like nothing she had ever known. Archbishop Galendra constantly insisted that faith was its own reward. But here... here was proof!

She sat stunned, her body numb throughout the rest of the procession.

For three whole days after her return to the capital, she refused to see or speak to anyone, such was the effect of what she had seen. It had shaken her, shaken the way she viewed so many things. She felt lost at first, needing to understand her place in the Imperium under this new light. When she finally returned to her official duties, it was with a dedication and commitment that even her greatest detractors could not deny. Her faith blazed inside her. Others saw it in her eyes.

Maia Cagliestra did not know it then, of course, but she would need every last bit of that faith in the grim, blood-sodden days to come.



FOUR

Space, Badlanding

Large pict-screens dominated the curving forward wall of the command bridge aboard *The Crusader*, auspex data pouring across them like torrents of glowing rain down a hundred black windowpanes. On the largest and most central of them, no data flowed at all. Instead, its pixels displayed the image of the ship's senior astropath, a pale, wizened man by the name of Cryxus Gloi. He looked to be well into his ninth decade of life when, in fact, he was a mere forty-four years old. The rigours of his calling had robbed him of much, including conventional sight. His eyes had atrophied during the soul-binding, when his mind had been reshaped by the Emperor until all that was left were two dark, hollow sockets, but their loss mattered little. Gloi had sight of another, far more potent kind.

Captain Ashor Drakken stood in full armour, staring at Gloi's face on the screen, fists clenched at his sides. The honour bestowed by Kantor on his former company must be repaid. Drakken could not allow the mission to fail. 'There must be a way,' he growled. 'Master Kantor must be apprised at once. If this moon can hide us from their scanner arrays, surely it can cover an astropathic transmission.'

Gloi's brow furrowed. 'Nothing, captain, can cover an astropathic transmission. The moment I attempt to send any kind of word out, every ork psyker on those ships will know exactly where we are, I promise you.'

If you wish me to manipulate the ether without alerting our foes, we must return to the far fringes of the system where we last exited the warp. From there, I might safely send word, but no nearer. It would invite a ship-to-ship conflict that you and I both know we would not survive.'

Gloi was no coward. He had served on *The Crusader* for over twenty years, performing his duties flawlessly under battle conditions, and had earned the right to speak plainly to whomever he served. Those without the witch-sight seldom understood much about the warp. The smart ones quickly learned to trust those who did.

'Very well, Gloi,' said Drakken. 'That is all for now.'

He dropped the pict-link and turned to his second in command, who stood patiently by his side.

'Comments, Leo?'

Sergeant Leoxus Werner looked thoughtful. He was not a man to make pronouncements lightly. Both his gauntlets were crimson, marking him as a veteran of the Chapter. He had been decorated numerous times in his century and a half of service, and rightly so. His face was a map of deep, angry scars, every last one a testament to victories bought with blood, to a life spent purging the galaxy of man-hating alien fiends. The greatest mark of honour Werner bore was not on his face. It was on his left pauldron. Rather than display the Chapter's standard iconography there, Werner wore the exquisitely cast skull sigil of the legendary Deathwatch, chamber militant of the Holy Inquisition's Ordo Xenos.

He had served that august body for seven years before returning to his Crimson Fist brothers, and even then, he could tell them nothing of his time away. He had been sworn to secrecy.

Drakken never asked about it. He knew that Werner would honour his oath of non-disclosure until the day he died. Integrity was the sergeant's byword.

‘Sixteen ork battleships that we can see,’ said Werner, meeting his captain’s gaze, ‘and that’s just on this side of the planet. Five of those are equivalent in size to the Navy’s Emperor-class ships, and each of those, knowing the greenskin propensity for arms over armour, almost certainly has the edge in firepower. I find myself in agreement with Cryxus Gloi, brother-captain. All we have in our favour is our speed and the fact that they haven’t sniffed us out yet – two advantages I think we ought to hold on to. If we were to go straight for them, prow guns blazing...’ He shook his head. ‘A cudbear doesn’t pick a fight with five swamp tigers unless he knows something they don’t.’

Drakken accepted this with a nod, but countered, ‘Still, we didn’t come all the way out here to count ships and turn back. Alessio Cortez would have a bloody field day with that. The Chapter Master gave me full discretion on this one, and I intend to use it.’

‘A ground operation, lord?’

Captain Drakken’s narrow lips curved into a cold smile. ‘Precisely,’ he said. ‘Three Thunderhawks go in on their blind side. We stay dark for as long as we can. Once we have our reconnaissance, we unleash hell on the beasts, do as much damage to them as we can and pull out before they can coordinate any kind of proper response.’

‘Our targets?’ asked the sergeant.

Drakken turned towards one of the three large work-pits sunk into the floor of the bridge and strode towards it. Werner followed. The pits were filled with a mix of servitors and human officers, all connected by cables and head-mounted apparatus to the banks of glowing consoles in front of them. In a station close to Drakken’s feet, a scrawny tech-priest sat in the thick cotton robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus’s *Divisio Linguistica*. His sallow features were lit by the flickering green screen over which he hunched. A morass of thin metal tendrils trailed from his socket-pocked skull to the data transfer ports set into the sides of his console.

‘Adept Orrimen,’ boomed Drakken. ‘Have those cogitator-banks finished the translation yet?’

The tech-priest spoke without turning or moving his jaw, his eerie voice emanating from speakers set into the sides of his head. ‘The translation is coming through now, my lord,’ he rasped. ‘Do you wish me to relay it verbatim, or would you prefer a summary?’

‘Just give me something we can use.’

‘Summary, then,’ said the tech-priest. ‘The broadcast is a message spoken in a dialect of the orkish tongue known to be used among several of the largest clans in the Charadon Sector. Clans using this form of the language include those labelled under Ordo Xenos classification systems as Goffs, Blood Axes, Deathskulls, Evil Suns and thirty-three lesser clans so far recorded. The speaker identifies itself as the warlord Urzog Mag Kull, a known lieutenant of Snagrod, the self-proclaimed Arch Arsonist of Charadon. The message is intended for all ork parties currently active in the spinward sectors of the Segmentum Tempestus and the trailward sectors of the Ultima Segmentum. It instructs all ork ships in these sectors to rally under the banner of the Arch Arsonist. It also declares that Snagrod’s Waaagh has begun, that it cannot be stopped, and that it is the divine will of the ork gods, Gork and Mork.’

With that, Orrimen finished his report, but when the silence became drawn out, he added, ‘Does the captain wish to query?’

Drakken didn’t answer. He turned back to face Werner, gesturing with a raised eyebrow for the sergeant’s comment. Werner looked darkly dismayed.

‘Sounds like Commissar Baldur had it right. But how many other worlds have they taken in the time it took us to get here? How many other worlds might they be broadcasting from?’

‘Not from this one for much longer,’ said Drakken. ‘That signal is being boosted by the ships, but it’s definitely coming from Krugerport. We will

cut it off at the source. I want their ground-based long-range communications knocked out for good. Get our brothers ready, Leo. We have our target. We deploy within the hour.'

Werner locked eyes with his captain and said, 'It's clear we'll be facing tall odds down there, lord. Losses are likely. If I may, I'd like to request the honour of leading the operation personally.'

Drakken frowned, keenly aware that Werner was attempting to protect him.

'No, Leo. I'll be leading this one myself. Master Kantor gave me this honour. He expects a detailed report on my return. I will see Krugerport for myself. Of course, if you can think of another way to hurt them, another worthy target...'

Werner thought in silence for a moment, then said, 'Badlanding is practically a dead world. Most of the water there is lethally toxic, and orks need potable water just as much as the human settlers did. Krugerport has a single large purification facility.'

Drakken nodded. 'Just inside the curtain wall of the south-eastern precinct. Yes, I saw it on the maps.'

'I think it's fair to assume that the orks are stocking their ships from it in preparation for the next phase of their incursion. Hitting the comms array will help to delay the Waaagh, but, if we strike the purification plant, too, we can force them to supply their ships from elsewhere. That will delay them even further. It may even force them to split their forces.'

Drakken thought about it for only a moment. It made solid sense. 'Very well,' he said. 'Any delay we can create will give the Chapter Master more time to alert Segmentum Command. Congratulations, Leo. It looks like you will be commanding a detachment after all.'



FIVE

Krugerport, Badlanding

Service in the Tenth Company, the Chapter's Scout company, was about proving oneself. It was about the mastery of war and of the body. As a Scout, one learned to employ his implanted organs, to trust them, to become one with them. One learned to perfect the art of the kill. Years of service would prove a Scout's readiness, and then the call would come. He would be ordered to return to Arx Tyrannus to attend the Steeping. It was an ancient rite dating back to the time when the primarch had walked among them. Dorn had once welcomed battle-brothers into his ranks by cutting his palm and sharing his blood directly with them. Now his blood was a holy relic, sharing only its presence. Time had wrought its changes on the Chapter's rites. Nowadays, a Scout being elevated to full battle-brother status would dip his left hand in the blood of a foe he had slain himself. The ritual had changed, but the meaning and significance of it had not. The fist literally became crimson. It was the final step in becoming a full battle-brother, the final step before being assigned to one of the other nine companies.

Unlike some, Scout-Sergeant Ezra Mishina was in no great rush to be elevated. His duties had often called for him to act as a sniper. Long days waiting for a perfect kill shot had taught him patience. His years as a sergeant, guiding younger and far less experienced men, had reinforced the lesson. The call for him to attend the Steeping would come when the time

was right. For the moment, all he cared about was doing his best, doing his duty as he was supposed to. Right now, that meant serving as forward eyes and ears for Captain Drakken's Third Company.

Mishina had been specially selected by Captain Icario to accompany the Third on this mission to Badlanding, and, if he were being honest, there was nowhere else he would rather have been. This was where he belonged, in the thick black shadows of a hostile town, stalking alien sentries with his silenced bolt-rifle slung over his back, combat knife in hand, eyesight augmented by the sensitive optical lenses of his night-vision goggles. Already, he had silenced the grunting breaths of half a dozen filthy greenskin scum. His boots and fatigues were flecked with their blood.

Five hours ago, with the local star, Freiya, still bright in the afternoon sky, the Third Company's Thunderhawk gunships had landed in a deep wadi some thirty kilometres to the south-west. They had flown in low with the sun at their backs, using its blinding glare to mask the telltale glow of hot plasma from their thrusters.

Mishina and the three Scouts under his command had then pushed out towards the town, scouring the land for threats well ahead of the Tactical squads that followed behind them.

They had reached the town's shell-pocked, fire-blackened curtain wall just as the sun slid below the horizon. Perfect timing. The orks here were complacent. It looked like they had slaughtered the Imperial Guard forces to a man. As far as they were concerned, the fighting was over for now. That was perfect, too. They had neither patched nor barricaded any of the gaping breaches that their artillery assaults had blasted in the high sandstone walls. Mishina and his Scouts waited for the very last of the twilight to bleed away, for night to cloak them in its veils. When it had, they slid into the town in silence, killing the orks they caught unawares by thrusting their long combat knives neatly between the third and fourth vertebrae as they had trained so relentlessly to do.

With their nerve bundles neatly severed, the orks went down quick and quiet, the trademark kill of a true Adeptus Astartes Scout.

Mishina had taken many lives in this way. It was as instinctive a process to him now as breathing silently and moving from cover to cover, all of which he did without need for conscious thought. He was pleased with the performance of the other Scouts, too, though it was far too early to start handing out compliments. Captain Icario had assigned him some promising men. Two of them had only ever experienced the slaughter of a greenskin through the sensorium-link downloads available in the Chapter's Librarium, but they had bloodied themselves for real this night, and there was more killing to come.

Careful to make as little noise as possible, Mishina placed a booted foot on the edge of an old wooden crate and boosted himself up to the flat roof of an abandoned single-storey hab. From there, he surveyed the layout of the town. The planet's solitary moon, in the shadow of which *The Crusader* still held station undetected, had not risen yet, but the Scout-Sergeant's goggles showed him all he needed to see with the clarity of a dull, slightly muddy afternoon.

Aside from the town's curtain wall and a smattering of prominent two-storey structures, Krugerport was built low to the ground, the vast majority of its buildings topping out at about five or six metres in height. Most of the streets were narrow, giving the habs the aspect of short, blocky figures huddled close together against the wind-blown dust. It was an ugly place, and not just because so much of it had been blasted to rubble. There was little sign of artistry here. A kind of scrappy functionality ruled, as if everything had been put together as quickly as possible and maintained on the very edge of working condition. There were no parks or museums.

Mishina had seen towns like this before. They were hastily built to exploit local resources and, when those resources were finally gone, when the mines or promethium fields ran dry and the wealth dried up with them,

the population gradually died too, shrinking to nothing in a remarkably short space of time.

The walls all around him were plain sandstone. They might once have borne bright posters calling for faith in the Emperor and diligence in one's job, but now they were marked only by the telltale signs of heavy street-fighting, of las and plasma burns, and countless black holes cut by the impacts of so many solid metal rounds. From his new vantage point, Mishina spotted a number of small market squares and plazas where it looked like a few token statues had once stood. These were little more than rubble now. Most of them would probably have been carved in the image of the Emperor and His saints, but it was impossible to tell the standard of quality to which they had been finished. The orks had smashed all of them to rubble, not with the hate-fuelled malice of traitors and Chaos-tainted scum but, more likely, in a mindless expression of their raw love for destruction in all its forms.

They were simple beasts, the greenskins. In Mishina's eyes, there was little more to them than muscle and aggression, and that was just as well.

From his perch atop the modest hab, he contacted the other Scouts and queried their positions. As each reported in, Mishina found himself nodding. None had been spotted by the enemy. No one had given himself away. Each had positioned himself in the location to which Mishina had sent him, and had done so in good time.

So far, so good.

Mishina ordered them to hold position and await further orders.

To the north, almost eight kilometres away according to the laser rangefinder incorporated into his goggles, he saw the tall, rooftop-mounted, wrought-iron latticework that identified one particular building as the Krugerport communications bunker. Atop the latticework's eighty-metre height, he saw a cluster of dishes mounting powerful broadcasting antennae. Near the base of the pylon, the orks had decorated the iron

girders with some kind of rusty metal sigil. Painted red, it was made of iron plates arranged in the rough likeness of a leering alien face.

Increasing magnification, Mishina noted the fortified rooftops surrounding the communications bunker. Their corners were piled high with sandbags, and they bristled with heavy weapons, many of which looked like Guard-issue lascannons and heavy bolters.

That's going to mean trouble if they get the drop on us, Mishina thought.

Hulking forms moved to and fro by the light of cooking fires. The orks had spitted meat over these. It hung roasting, licked by orange flames, and Mishina noted with revulsion and anger that some of those spits carried hunks of meat that bore the unmistakable silhouette of human limbs.

The smell corroborated his worst suspicions. The scent was close to that of roasted grox, but sharper in the nostrils. He had smelled it before, a funeral pyre stink.

Turning away from the sight, and zooming out to normal magnification again, he tracked right and found what he was looking for. To the east, nine-point-six kilometres away, he easily identified the water purification plant by its bulky rectangular profile and by the vast metal tanks that stood arrayed along its southern flank.

Mishina raised a gloved hand to the comms rig on his left ear, keyed the Third Company's command channel, and said, 'Brother-captain, this is Shadow One.'

Drakken's gravelly voice answered, 'Go ahead, Shadow One.'

'Shadow Team in place, my lord. Visual perimeter established. We've marked a path for you. Clear to follow us in whenever you're ready.'

'Understood, Shadow One. Moving up now. Keep me apprised of movement.'

Drakken is solid, thought Mishina. His is a name with more than a few legends attached. He's not prone to careless mistakes, I know that much.

But even so, I have the damndest feeling, like a mental itch. There's something I don't like about this. Perhaps it just seems too easy.

Or perhaps it's something else.

Trying to move silently in Mark VII power armour, Drakken knew, was like trying to reload a bolter with just your teeth – damned near impossible and usually not worth the bother. Sooner or later, the orks would wake up to Third Company's presence here, and when they did, the real work, the righteous work he lived for, would begin proper.

He led his Adeptus Astartes through the breach in the curtain wall that Mishina and his Scouts had marked out for them. Orks wouldn't see those marks. The Scouts left little splashes of a liquid that was only visible in infrared. The helmet visors of the Crimson Fists picked up those splashes as if they were blazing neon lights, and the Space Marines followed them into the town of Krugerport, knowing that the path they followed had been cleared for them.

Once Drakken and his men were beyond the outer walls, the captain opened a channel to Sergeant Werner, who was about twenty metres to the rear, preparing to lead his own group in through the breach. Drakken had assigned him command of three ten-man squads. 'This is where we part, Leo. Follow the Scouts' markings, and may the Emperor watch over you.'

'As He watches over you, my lord,' replied Werner, then he and his men split off from the main group, disappearing into the inky shadows of a narrow avenue to the right.

Drakken watched the last of Werner's Adeptus Astartes disappear, then gave the signal to his own squads to move out in single file.

The streets of Krugerport were, in the main, too tight for heavy vehicles to negotiate. In some settlements, this would have been a strategy to prevent enemy armour making headway during an assault. In Krugerport, however, Drakken had the feeling it merely represented the human tendency to seek closeness with others when in hostile places. This planet

was a merciless rock, its winds choking everything with corrosive dust, its chemical seas capable of eating the flesh from a man's bones in moments.

So why had men settled here at all? It was no great mystery. There were two things in Badlanding's favour. First, the atmosphere was breathable, which made it a relatively rare and valuable find among the millions of worlds man had discovered since the first days of his expansion into space. Despite the vast size of the Imperium, the ratio of naturally habitable worlds to non-habitable was far below one per cent. The second reason Badlanding had been colonised was just as simple: the Scratch Mountains, towards which Commissar Baldur had claimed he would lead his survivors, were rich in seams of adamantium and proteocite, the latter a compound used in the production of rare ceramite, the material from which much of the Adeptus Astartes battleplate was made.

Thinking of the Scratch Mountains made Drakken scowl. He had brought eighty-three Space Marines with him on this operation, not to mention numerous serfs, pilots, technicians, communications specialists and the like, all of which were absolutely essential to the smooth operation of the Crimson Fists fleet. Of the eighty-four Adeptus Astartes, he personally led a detachment of thirty, Werner led another thirty. Four Crimson Fists from Tenth Company were acting as advance scouts. Eight more battle-brothers had been assigned landing-zone patrol duties on the perimeter of the broad wadi in which the Thunderhawks rested well out of sight, and another ten had been sent in an arcing path well out from the town, skimming over the dust dunes in Land Speeders, racing to the last known location of the Imperial Guard forces.

What that latter force had already reported made for grim news. The cave complex to which Baldur had retreated was now nothing but a mass grave. Desiccated corpses, most with their heads taken for trophies, lay in heaps at the back of the tunnels. There were a number of ork dead, too, but not enough by half. It was clear that Baldur and the remnants of his forces

had been backed into a corner and slaughtered to a man. They had been completely overwhelmed. How the orks must have revelled in all that killing!

Only the fact that he wore his helmet stopped Drakken from spitting on the ground in disgust. He hated the greenskins with a lethal passion. Throughout much of his life as a battle-brother, he had fought to purge Imperial outposts and trade routes of their savage kind, but year after year they would come back, making fresh incursions from frontier worlds on the periphery of the Loki Sector. It seemed an endless task. No matter how many one killed, no real headway was ever truly made. Success was measured in distance, in how far the alien hordes were kept from civilised space.

In two millennia, Rynn's World itself had known the footsteps of aliens only once, and not at all since the Crimson Fists had taken up residence there. In the subsequent years, a number of potentially devastating Waaaghs had been averted, defused by surgical strikes which had been masterfully conceived by Pedro Kantor. Drakken had earned great honours for his part in these, but the real glory belonged to the Chapter Master.

No wonder they call him the second coming of Pollux, Drakken thought as he scanned the shadows up ahead for traces of ork.

He had a deep and abiding respect for Kantor, though the bond of brotherhood was more tenuous between them than it was between the Chapter Master and Alessio Cortez. This wasn't something that bothered Drakken much. Friendship meant little to him, certainly far less than good solid leadership, as it should to any Adeptus Astartes worth his salt.

He had no strong love of Cortez, that was for sure. The man was arrogant, opinionated, noisy and boorish, and his status as some kind of invincible hero of the Chapter consistently got under Drakken's skin.

It is the Blackwater thing, he thought to himself as he moved out from the corner of a sandstone hab and signalled his men to follow. The way

they all stick—

Scout-Sergeant Mishina's voice cut him off mid-thought.

‘Brother-captain,’ said the Scout over the link. ‘This is Shadow One. I have movement at the objective.’

Drakken's hand went up immediately, motioning for his men to move back into cover. ‘Details, Mishina.’

‘A convoy of ork light armour, brother-captain. It's moving along the main road towards the communications tower. The lead machines have already pulled up in the plaza out in front.’

‘Numbers?’

Mishina went quiet for a few seconds, then replied, ‘At least thirty vehicles that I can see, and dust clouds from more at the rear. If they wake up to our presence prematurely, my lord, we're going to have trouble. A lot of it.’

Sergeant Werner and his party moved east at the base of the curtain wall, following the infrared splashes left by Scouts Vermian and Rogar, both of whom had been tasked with reconnoitring the route from the wall breach to the water purification plant.

So far, not a single bolt had been fired.

On a surgical strike like this, thought Werner, the longer it stays that way, the better.

He had to admire his Tenth Company kinsmen. Every few blocks, with his visor's night-vision mode turning inky night into murky day, he would spot the crumpled bodies of ork sentries hidden in burned out doorways or stuffed between bullet-riddled barrels and crates.

In the shadows, nothing beat the quiet goodnight of a knife in the neck.

The Scouts were good. If they kept this up, Werner and his squads would get all the way to the purification plant without any of the alien filth raising the alarm. Once there, of course, any pretence at stealth would have to be abandoned. Things would become more overt. The melta

charges would see to that. Once they were detonated, the whole damned planet would know that the Crimson Fists had come calling to dispense death and destruction in the Emperor's name. Werner expected a fierce firefight on the way out. The streets would fill up quickly with the bestial scum. But, once the Fists were beyond the wall again, it would be a simple matter of calling in the Thunderhawks for pickup and holding a defensive perimeter until they arrived.

Whatever happened after that was for pilots, gunners and Navigators to worry about. Werner didn't concern himself with things he couldn't influence. It wasn't his way.

He heard Drakken hailing him on the comm-link.

'Leo, respond.'

'Here, my lord. Go ahead.'

'Status?'

'About one kilometre out from our objective now. Scouts moving into sniping positions. Ork presence minimal so far, but I don't think it'll stay that way for long.'

'You're not wrong,' said Drakken. 'The comms tower is crawling with greenskin filth. I'm afraid we have to alter the plan as a result.'

Werner called his men to an immediate halt, and they went into overwatch, their bolter muzzles swinging up and around to cover every street corner, door and alleyway.

'I'm listening, brother-captain,' said Werner.

'We've got ork light armour that just came in from the north. I've checked with Sergeant Solari. He is adamant that his Speeders weren't spotted and neither were any of his men. They're back aboard their Thunderhawk now, waiting to offer us close support should we need it. Listen closely, Leo, I know we discussed a simultaneous strike, but our best hope of knocking out that communications tower now depends on you

drawing some of the defenders away. I need your team to strike first, and to make as much damned noise as you can.'

Inwardly, Werner cursed. The captain's logic was sound, of course, the reasoning faultless, but it meant dropping his men right in the heat of things. Ork light armour might look like worthless junk, but it could move fast and, when they functioned properly, the greenskins' heavy weapons packed as hard a punch as anything in the Imperial arsenal. The narrow streets would protect his men for the most part, but they would have to cross several wide roads on their way back to the rendezvous point. That meant a dash over open ground, probably under intense fire.

It couldn't be helped. Orders from a brother-captain might just as well be orders from the Emperor Himself. They were to be obeyed no matter what. Werner was a Space Marine; he would walk straight into certain death if his superiors ordered it. How he died didn't bother him at all. It was how he lived that counted. 'Leave it to us, my lord,' he said. 'I'll light the facility up so bright the damned orks will think the sun's come up early.'

'Good. Make it happen, Leo,' said Drakken. 'I want to know the minute you're in position. Command, out.'

Werner waved his Adeptus Astartes on, and with righteous murder on their minds, they closed in on their target.

Mishina was about as close as he wanted to get. There was little more he could do for Captain Drakken's party now, save cover them with sniper fire and keep them apprised of enemy movements. There was no more quiet clearance work to be done. That phase of the operation was over. After muttering a short prayer of gratitude to his deadly blade, he sheathed it for what he supposed would be the last time tonight. It had claimed the lives of sixteen of the oversized alien abominations.

Not a bad tally for a night's work, he told himself.

He wondered how many xenos his sniper rifle would claim once the shooting started. More than sixteen, he hoped.

The other Scout assigned to provide forward eyes and sniper cover for Drakken's team was a fairly fresh initiate by the name of Janus Kennon.

Brother Kennon was young, and Mishina had expressed concerns to Captain Icario that the inexperienced Scout needed more training before a critical deployment like this. But Kennon's innate skills had apparently marked him out for great things. In over a hundred years, no other initiate had come close to matching his scores on the practice range, even in thick simulated fog. Kennon's accuracy and targeting abilities bordered on the preternatural, and Mishina got the impression that Captain Icario saw a potential protégé in the young Space Marine.

Kennon was currently crouching on the corner of a dust-covered rooftop about eight hundred metres to the north-west of Mishina's current spot, covering the ork defensive post on top of the comms tower from a western flanking position.

At least, that was where Mishina had told Kennon to go. Had it been anyone else, Mishina would have assumed his orders were being followed to the letter, but not so with Kennon. The boy was far too sure of himself. The captain's praise had gone to his head.

Mishina couldn't help himself. For a brief moment, he turned his goggles north-west and increased magnification.

He soon detected Kennon's heat signature... exactly where it was supposed to be.

Mishina felt the briefest flash of shame for doubting a fellow Crimson Fist.

Jealous, Ezra, he asked himself? Jealous of the boy's talent? You've no reason to doubt him. He went through the same psycho-indoctrination programmes you did. Trust in Captain Icario's choice.

These thoughts had barely filtered through to the front of Mishina's mind when Kennon's voice addressed him over the comm-link.

'Shadow Four to Shadow One. Can you hear me, sergeant?'

‘I hear you, brother,’ said Mishina. ‘Speak.’

‘Sergeant, I’m not sure whether you can see this or not, but a monster of an ork just dismounted from some kind of truck in the middle of the plaza. He’s climbing a stair on the west side of the building. It must be the greenskin leader. The beast is as broad as Brother Ulis!’

Mishina doubted that. Ulis was a Dreadnought, one of the Chapter’s revered Old Ones, and about four metres across from shoulder to shoulder. The largest ork Mishina had ever seen in person had been almost three metres across. It had taken a direct hit from a Predator tank to slay that bastard.

Mishina squinted up ahead, but, from this angle, he couldn’t see the creature Kennon was talking about. He was about to move to a neighbouring rooftop for a better angle when Kennon reported, ‘He’s going up to the rooftop of the bunker. I have his ugly face right in the centre of my crosshairs, sergeant. Requesting immediate permission to take the shot.’

‘Request denied, brother,’ said Mishina. ‘Hold position while I—’

‘I can take him out, sergeant,’ Kennon insisted. ‘He must be the leader. One kill-shot could put their entire force in disarray. Again, I strongly request permission to fire.’

Mishina’s words were as hard as bolts themselves. ‘You will *not* take the shot until Captain Drakken gives the order. Is that understood?’

Kennon was silent.

‘I said is that understood, brother?’

Reluctantly, not bothering to mask the contempt and disappointment in his voice, the young Scout replied that it was. Mishina immediately contacted Captain Drakken and said, ‘Shadow Four reports that he has what he believes to be the ork leader in his crosshairs, captain. He is requesting permission to take the shot.’

Drakken barely needed time to think about it.

‘Negative, Shadow One. Authorisation denied. Sergeant Werner and his squads are preparing to assault the water purification facility as we speak. I want those orks drawn off before we strike the comms bunker. Is that absolutely clear?’

It was. If Brother Kennon took the shot – hit or miss – the orks at the comms bunker would deploy all their light armour against the most local, most immediate threat.

Mishina could understand Kennon’s eagerness well enough. It was a shot he would like to take himself, a single squeeze of the trigger, one muffled cough from his weapon’s muzzle that would garner the kind of glory and honour few brothers in Tenth Company would ever have a chance to claim. To think that a single shot might defuse, or at the very least, greatly delay a potential Waaagh...

Not just a triumph for Kennon, thought Mishina, but something the entire company could be proud of. There would be decorations for everyone deployed here.

At the very back of his mind, a tiny voice said: *Results come first. Let Kennon take the shot.*

Mishina had heard that dangerous voice before. He expected to hear it again many times throughout his life. He responded to it now as he always did. He crushed it to nothing, just as he had been trained, just as his mind had been rigorously conditioned to do. He drowned it out with a silent litany of obligation.

Think of the Chapter, he told himself. Think of the primarch, of the Emperor and Terra.

None of these were best served by indulging one’s sense of personal pride. A true Adeptus Astartes was better than that.

There was a sudden brief transmission on the comm-link’s mission channel. ‘Sergeant Werner’s force is about to light up Objective Two,’ Drakken barked. ‘Brace yourselves!’

A sudden clap of thunder shook the rooftop under Mishina's feet, and a great flash of white light, super-nova bright, lit the whole town from the direction of the south-eastern precinct. It was followed by three more in rapid succession, each shaking the entire town like the footfalls of a mighty Titan.

Mishina screwed his eyes shut and turned his head away from the direction of the blasts, anxious not to be temporarily blinded by the glare. Sergeant Werner's party had launched their attack on the water purification plant in spectacular style. Stealth protocols were no longer in effect.

When the sound of the melta explosions had dropped to a ringing in his ears, Mishina opened his eyes. From the buildings all around the comms bunker, a great cacophony of orkish grunts and roars could be heard, merging together with the revving of powerful, fume-spewing engines.

The sound of distant gunfire echoed from between the streets and alleys around the water purification plant. Mishina's supremely honed ears recognised the distinctive bark of bolters being fired from about ten kilometres away. There was an awful lot of fire being traded. He muttered a prayer to the Emperor for the safety of Sergeant Werner and his men. From the plaza in front of the comms bunker, the first of the ork bikes and buggies began to move off in the general direction of the gunfight, their engines growling and sputtering like mad animals.

That's it, you brainless muck-eaters, thought Mishina. Keep moving. Go and see what it's all about.

It was happening exactly as Captain Drakken had anticipated and, for the first time since the ork vehicles had shown up, Mishina started to feel truly confident that everything would go according to plan.

That was when he heard Kennon on the comm-link again.

'The warlord is moving, sergeant. I can't wait any longer. I'm taking the shot!'

Mishina almost forgot himself. Scouts were habitually quiet individuals. Shouting tended to give one's position away. Even so, he almost yelled over the comm-link, 'Hold your damned fire! That's a direct order. If you take that shot, upstart, I'll see you flayed alive, by Throne! Do I make myself cl—'

There was a brief burst of blue-green light from the direction of the comms bunker. Mishina felt his primary heart skip a beat. He knew instinctively what the flash meant. Kennon had taken the shot anyway. His magnified vision confirmed it when Kennon fired a second time, then a third. All of Kennon's rounds had been right on target, but they had detonated with brief, bright, harmless flashes on some kind of invisible energy shield.

Zooming in further, Mishina could see the shield-generating apparatus strapped to the monster's back. No sniper was going to fell that beast. Kennon had just given himself away for nothing.

The ork boss spun in Kennon's direction, took a great lungful of air, and bellowed out a battle cry that seemed to vibrate the foundations of the entire town.

Absently, Mishina registered that Kennon hadn't been exaggerating greatly about the creature's size. It was a formidable-looking thing, the great bulk of its blocky apparatus only adding to the effect.

A half-second after this thought ran through his mind, bright light stabbed into Mishina's eyes. The orks on the roof had turned searchlights out into the night, and the Scout-Sergeant's night vision goggles hadn't been able to adjust to the sudden brightness quickly enough. Mishina threw a hand up over his face. Stubber and heavy weapons fire began spitting out in all directions. Countless alien throats began calling out threats and challenges in what passed for their rough alien tongue.

Any chance of splitting up the greenskin force at the comms tower was now lost.

‘Shadow One to Captain Drakken,’ said Mishina urgently.

‘Don’t bother, sergeant,’ snapped Captain Drakken on the other end of the link. The ink-dark streets where the ork searchlights couldn’t penetrate now began to strobe with muzzle flashes as the battle-brothers of Third Company moved up, claiming the first of their kills early in the exchange. ‘If we live through this,’ continued a furious Drakken, ‘you can explain to the Chapter Council what in damnation just happened.’

Mishina loosed a bitter curse and promised he would see Kennon strung up for this. Then he knocked his bolt-rifle’s safety off, checked that there was a live round in the chamber, and scanned the streets below his position, sector by sector, eyes alert for anything that threatened to flank Drakken’s men as they stormed towards their objective.

Gunfire from both sides rang out for hours on end.

The dry, dust-caked streets of Krugerport soon ran red.

‘Adeptus Astartes, fall back!’ bellowed Drakken.

He wasn’t sure they could hear him, wasn’t sure the micro-vox circuitry in his gorget was sending them his voice. His helmet had been struck by some kind of greenskin plasma round that burned right through, crisping the flesh of his left cheek.

His visor had gone dead. He’d had to strip the ruined helm from his head in a hurry, enemy rounds rattling like hail on his armour while he was temporarily blinded. Now, with ork stubber-fire blazing all around him, shells ripping onto the hab walls on either side of the street, he had to shout his orders.

The enemy kept coming, spilling from everywhere, no matter how much fire he and his Fists spat back at them. They had felled scores, perhaps hundreds, of the slab-muscled aliens already, but the charges continued. They trampled their dead into the blood-soaked dirt without the slightest reverence. A foul odour came with them, an odour Drakken knew well, stale sweat and fungal stink, worse than rotting garbage.

Drawing a bead on the largest, darkest-skinned ork he could see, Drakken pulled the trigger of his bolt pistol. Nothing. Without pause for thought, he switched magazines, his armoured hands moving in a well-practiced blur. He took aim once more. The beast had covered ten more metres, lumbering forwards on legs as thick as a man's torso. He fired, and a bolt thundered into the centre of the creature's sloping forehead.

It kept running. Orks didn't go down easily. A second later the exploding bolt blew out the creature's brain, and its heavy, headless corpse hammered against the dusty street spouting thick red blood.

Drakken took a second to look down the avenue behind him and saw that his orders had gotten through. His squads were making a staggered retreat in the direction of the breach through which they'd come. Sergeant Werner's group would rendezvous with them there. Whoever reached the gap in the wall first was to hold it and wait for the others.

Across the street, in the shadow of another hab, Drakken saw one of his Adeptus Astartes, Brother Cero, laying down cover with a heavy bolter. The massive weapon chugged and chattered, throwing its lethal rounds out in great scything arcs, cutting the front ranks of the charging orks to ragged red pieces. The death toll was so great it caused the ork charge to momentarily falter, as those immediately behind the fallen tried to turn and force their way to cover.

Drakken took this brief lull to race over the open street and slide into cover beside Cero.

'Can the others hear me over the link?' he yelled in Cero's ear.

The rattle of the heavy bolter should have drowned him out completely, but the Lyman's Ear implant could filter out and separate even the slightest of noises. Cero heard his captain, and replied without turning from his targets, 'They can hear you, lord. Sergeant Werner has just sent word that his party has secured the breach. They are holding it, but their Scouts report xenos moving in from all sides.'

‘Then we have to move now. Why haven’t you fallen back as I ordered?’

‘Someone has to cover your own retreat, lord.’

‘You can’t move as fast as I can,’ said Drakken. ‘I want you to make for the corner hab to the south. Go now. I will follow once you’ve established a firing position. Move!’

Cero loosed a last brief burst of fire, then dashed out from the shadow of the hab and ran towards the end of the street where his brothers were engaging enemy forces from the east. As he ran, Drakken leaned out from the bullet-chewed edge of the sandstone wall, and began picking off the closest greenskins, his every shot taking one down, if not killing it outright.

Cero’s legs pumped hard, but the great weight of the heavy bolter and its back-mounted ammunition slowed him significantly. He didn’t see the vast silhouetted form loom up on the roof to his right. The first he knew of his attacker was when the bright beam of its lascannon – a weapon pilfered from the fallen Imperial Guard forces – sliced through both of his knees, cutting bone, flesh and ceramite armour with ease.

Cero tumbled to the surface of the street, roaring in agony, his cropped legs gushing hot blood.

Drakken turned and saw his battle-brother scrambling in the dirt, trying to recover his weapon despite the pain, desperate to return fire on the beast that had maimed him.

The beast in question had disappeared already. It was nowhere in sight. The orks to the north had witnessed the Space Marine go down. They surged forwards, driven into a frenzy by the sight of their enemy’s fresh blood and the sounds of his agony.

‘Get some suppressing fire over here,’ Drakken demanded over the link.

Had he been able to hear the voices of his fellow Adeptus Astartes, he would have realised they were already being heavily suppressed themselves. The orks swarmed through the streets, their vehicles careening

down the broader thoroughfares, pintle-mounted weapons spewing lead in all directions.

Drakken picked off three more of the closest threats. Ammunition was running out. He ripped a fragmentation grenade from his belt, priming it in the same movement, and hurled it at the enemy. Then he ran from cover, straight towards Cero where he lay in the middle of the street.

Behind him, there was a sharp boom, and a chorus of alien howls.

He slid to a halt at Cero's side.

'Leave the weapon, brother. Grab my arm. Quickly!'

'Run, my lord,' said Cero. 'I can still cover your escape.'

From a dark alley to the left, a massive green brute surged out with twin cleavers raised for a killing stroke. Drakken saw it too late. He didn't have time to swing his weapon around. The ork opened its razor-toothed maw and screamed its war cry as it made range.

Suddenly, its head snapped backwards, a neat hole punched in its right temple. It fell to its knees. A moment later, its head burst in a shower of red gore and chips of bone.

Drakken looked up, automatically triangulating the shot, and saw Sergeant Mishina on the corner of a rooftop nearby, the butt of his sniper rifle pressed tight to his shoulder.

'We must move, my lord,' Mishina shouted down. He fired four rounds up the street, striking targets with phenomenal precision. Four brass casings landed at his feet. Four orks dropped, their meaty carcasses tripping those closest behind them.

'Leave the weapon,' Drakken barked at Cero.

Cero released his heavy bolter and detached the ammo feed while Drakken uncoupled his bulky backpack.

'Hold on,' said Drakken, gripping Cero's wrist, 'I will drag—'

A blaze of white light cut straight through his words.

Pain erupted out of nowhere, a fire consuming his every nerve. He would have screamed, but his lungs were empty and wouldn't refill. Distantly, he heard Cero roaring in protest, his shouts accompanied by the sounds of gunfire.

Why was it all so faint, so far away?

His pain fled so quickly and completely that it was as if he had only dreamed it. Now it was replaced by a sensation of falling. He knew he had struck the ground when the sensation stopped, but felt no impact.

His inner voice spoke to him one last time, quieter than he had ever known it.

'So this is death,' it said. 'It is warmer than I expected.'

Scout-Sergeant Mishina turned just an instant too late to open fire on the captain's killer. He wouldn't have been able to save Ashor Drakken anyway. He only caught the briefest glimpse of the ork as it charged off down another street, looking for its next prey, but it was enough to recognise it.

Urzog Mag Kull. The hulking warlord on which Kennon had opened fire, precipitating this whole damned mess.

Mishina's rounds would have bounced off the monster's force-field just as Kennon's had done. He would have fired on it anyway, given half the chance.

Brother Cero was still alive down there, his lower legs shorn off at the knee, unable to escape without aid. He cradled the armoured body of his dead captain in his left arm. In his right hand, he gripped the captain's bolt pistol.

Mishina could hear him repeating one word – *No!* – over and over again, desperately denying the captain's death, or perhaps what he perceived as his role in it.

The orks were closing in unopposed now, less than two hundred metres away from Cero, slowed only by the fact that many shoved and wrestled

among themselves to get to the front where all the killing was to be done.

‘This is Shadow One!’ yelled Mishina over the mission channel.

‘Captain Drakken is down! I say again, Captain Drakken is down!’

He chambered another round and dropped to a crouch, determined to hold this position where he could at least try to protect Cero and hold the orks back from defiling what was left of the captain’s body.

Sergeant Werner responded, fighting to keep his voice level, not wanting to believe what he had just heard. But he had to believe it. The brothers of the Crimson Fists were not prone to lie.

‘Your position, Shadow One?’

Mishina spoke as he resumed firing. There were so many targets in range now that it was impossible to miss.

‘Two kilometres north-east of you,’ he answered. ‘Hurry! I can’t hold them off alone.’

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement to the west. He felt the hab beneath his feet shuddering, saw a great cloud of dust kicked up by the passage of heavy vehicles. They were travelling straight towards the breach, straight towards the rest of the Adeptus Astartes force.

By the saints, cursed Mishina.

To Werner, he said, ‘Forget about us, sergeant. I’ve just spotted a large armour column closing in on your position. Take your squads and get out of here. Someone has to report to the Chapter Council.’

‘I’m not leaving them the captain’s body, damn it!’ growled Werner. ‘Not here!’

Mishina knew better than to believe he had the words to dissuade the sergeant. Instead, he said, ‘Then, for Throne’s sake, call in the Thunderhawks right now! If we don’t get air support, none of us are going to get out of here alive!’



SIX

Arx Tyrannus, Hellblade Mountains

‘Again,’ said Kantor. ‘I wish to hear it again.’

It was fifteen days since the engagement at Krugerport. Just seven hours ago, *The Crusader* had docked at Raxa Station, the main orbital refuelling and rearming station which sat halfway between Rynn’s World and her closest moon, Dantienne. Once adequate fuel had been taken aboard, *The Crusader’s* bay doors had opened and her two surviving Thunderhawks had dropped to the planet’s surface carrying the battered remnants of the expedition force. The Chapter Master had met them on the landing pads of Arx Tyrannus with the first rays of daylight breaking over the peaks to the east. He had rarely seen any of his Crimson Fists return to their beloved sanctuary in such misery.

From a force of eighty-four Space Marines, only twenty-eight returned alive. Most of these had been wounded, but the two Apothecaries attached to the force, Arvano Ruillus and Lyrus Vayne, had worked hard to patch them up on the journey back. Adeptus Astartes bodies healed fast, but it would be up to the Chaplains of the Sacratium to patch up their wounded spirits.

The Thunderhawks had touched down three hours ago. Sensorium scans and verbal debriefings had started immediately. The first of a string of council sessions had been called. The Chapter had suffered a dire blow indeed. All the fortress-monastery's inhabitants, even down to the lowliest serf, soon heard about Third and Tenth Companies' losses. Many of the Chosen wept openly. Vigils were scheduled in the Reclusiam. Here in the Strategium, a dark, heavy air hung over the great crystal table, centred on Drakken's empty onyx chair.

Ashor Drakken dead! It was almost inconceivable. Kantor felt the loss like a gaping wound in his own flesh. Not only had he lost a trusted and respected warrior-brother but also many of the Third who Kantor had once led into battle. The Third Company captain had been a model Adeptus Astartes, stoic, brave and dedicated. Proper tribute would be paid when time allowed. For now the latest ork transmission had to take priority. Several raw, uncompressed signals had been picked up by *The Crusader's* dorsal comms array just before the ship had escaped from the Freiya system, transiting into the warp just minutes before the ork heavy cruisers could close to firing distance.

On Kantor's command, Forgemaster Adon replayed the translation again from the start. Underneath the clipped, mechanical tones of the translator unit's synthesised voice, the grunting, snorting pseudo-language of the original ork speaker could just faintly be heard.

The translation was rough and highly interpretive. The ork tongue was extremely unrefined and employed little actual grammar. Adon's algorithms could only do so much.

'Listen Snagrod, Arch Arsonist Charadon. Blue-shelled human dead. Ork alive. This fight, ork kill blue-shelled human. Ork stronger, tougher, bigger. Ork fight blue-shelled human again. Good fight. Ork attack world of blue-shelled human. No escape. No-shelled human also die. Many. Much

fighting. Much killing. Ork grow. Waaagh! grow. World of blue-shelled human burn. Human burn. Waaagh! Snagrod not stop. Comes soon.'

As the synthesised voice went silent, Kantor looked around the table. Every last Adeptus Astartes sitting there, with the exception of the metal-masked Forgemaster, was scowling furiously. Despite the rudimentary nature of the language, there was no mistaking the core of the message. The voice was Snagrod's, and his intent was all too clear.

Captain Cortez spoke before anyone else had the chance. 'We go back in with as much of the fleet as we can. We cut their ships to pieces and turn the whole planet into a ball of molten slag.' He looked over at Kantor and added, 'We should have done that in the first place.'

Drigo Alvez answered without glancing in Cortez's direction. 'And perhaps you, my invincible brother, would explain to the High Lords of Terra why a world with a breathable atmosphere and valuable raw resources was made worthless to the Imperium. I would gladly travel with you just to see their reaction.'

'I'll go anywhere you like once the killing is done,' Cortez shot back.

'Enough,' said Kantor, raising his hands to quiet both of them. 'Badlanding is no longer of strategic value as a target. The orks have had two further weeks to plunder it. They will have moved on. What I need is an assessment on the earliest this Waaagh could strike at Rynn's World, the kind of numbers we could be facing, and our current capabilities with regard to repelling a full-scale assault from space.'

'An accurate assessment is impossible at this stage, my lord,' answered Ceval Ranparre. As Master of the Fleet, such an assessment fell under his remit. 'Adon and I ran the projections you requested based on neighbouring ork populations that might have responded to the original greenskin clarion call. Given the paucity of hard data, the results are highly questionable. Still, we both believe that what we've seen so far is barely a hint of the force we are likely to face. In the time it took *The*

Crusader to return here, we lost contact with eleven occupied systems, all to the far east of our sector, all with historical records of past greenskin incursion. In the days since the Badlanding incident, there has been no word from any of them, and no sign of any Imperial vessels having escaped. No communication from the Naval auspex posts at Dagoth, Cantatis III, Helioid or Gamma Precidio, either. Our entire eastern border has gone dark. Even factoring in unpredictable warp currents, I would give us no more than ten days to prepare. Depending on which systems are the next to fall, it could be as little as six.'

'Six days,' muttered Selig Torres. '*We* might be able to mobilise in time, but the Rynnsguard and the System Defence Fleet won't be. Not for something like this.'

Ranparre met Torres's gaze and held it as he replied, 'Since the enemy has already expressed his plans to come to us, the warp will work to our advantage. The ork ships will have to translate back into real space relatively far from any significant gravity wells, just as our own ships must. That factor alone should give us between forty and fifty-five hours during which we can tag, track and analyse the ork fleet and configure our own high orbital response accordingly. As fleet commander, I will do everything in my power to see that no ork sets foot on this world.'

'I do not doubt that for a second,' said Kantor. 'But I'll want every last ground-based asset at full combat readiness just the same. In preparation for a ground defence, we will split our forces between the fortress-monastery and the capital.'

'What of the other provinces?' asked Olbyn Kadena, Captain of the Sixth, Master of the Watch.

Kantor faced him, eyes hard, and shook his head. 'We cannot risk spreading our forces too thin. I will send brothers from the Crusade Company to oversee their defensive preparations, but they will be called back before the fighting starts. We make our stand here and in the capital.'

Eight per cent of the Rynnite populace lived in New Rynn City and the surrounding environs – over sixteen million people. The second largest city on the planet was home to less than three million. Most of those who lived outside the cities were indentured workers serving in the tens of thousands of agri-communes that covered the arable land on three continents.

‘The Rynnsguard and the Civitas authorities can deal with refugees,’ Kantor continued. ‘Our sole priority will be the elimination of the xenos.’

He turned to Captain Alvez, and said, ‘Drigo, I’m putting you in command of the detachment that will defend New Rynn City. Occupy the Cassar. I shall assign a number of squads from Crusade Company to assist you.’

Alvez’s face betrayed the hint of a frown.

‘Be at ease, brother,’ said Kantor, noting the captain’s expression. ‘They will be instructed to follow your command as if it were my own. The Cassar is well stocked and there are four-hundred Chosen already stationed there, but you should prepare an additional requisitions list for my approval.’

Now Kantor returned his attention to the Master of the Fleet. ‘Brother Ranparre, how quickly can we recall *The Prosperine* and *The Hadrius* from the N’goth-Katar trade route? The firepower they wield may be much needed before this is over.’

‘Depending on the warp tides, my lord, transit would take ten weeks at best. Getting new orders to them would take half that again.’

‘Fifteen weeks in total,’ said Kantor sourly. ‘No. It’s too long. The trade routes may prove vital to us if this war becomes protracted. We shall leave those ships where they are for now. How quickly can we recall the rest of our fleet?’

‘Most of the fleet is within a few days’ warp travel. In a way, my lord, we are fortunate that this crisis comes so soon after the Day of Foundation.

Our ships have not had time to disperse all that widely. Most can be called back in time.'

'At least that's something,' growled Cortez from across the table.

'Do so,' said Kantor. 'Call them back, and coordinate with local naval forces to establish a defensive perimeter with the highest density on the system's eastern flank. The orks will attack us directly from the space they have already conquered. As always, brother, I leave command of actual fleet operations to you. I will personally supervise our surface-to-orbit defences from here. You will have the full support of every plasma and missile battery on the planet, I promise you that. If there is anything you believe can aid you in your fight, contact me directly and I will have it seen to. Yours is the first line of defence, Ceval. Emperor willing, you are the only line we shall need.'

The Master of the Fleet smiled at that, but the smile did not reach his dark eyes. 'If the greenskins dare to enter our space, I will wreak havoc on them, lord. Be assured of that. Unless you require my presence for anything else, may I take my leave? There is much to do, and I would like to get things moving.'

Kantor stood, prompting the entire council to rise. 'Go brother,' he said, 'and may Dorn watch over you, revelling in every kill you make.'

'May he watch over us all,' said Ranparre. He saluted, fist to breastplate, turned from the table and left through the Strategium's west exit.

While they were still standing, Drigo Alvez said, 'If I am to leave soon for New Rynn City, my lord, then I too request permission to be about my preparations.'

Kantor's eyes met those of the captain, almost his equal in height. 'You may go, Drigo,' he said. 'You and I shall convene later. There is much we still need to talk about. For now, though, you had best get started. You are dismissed.'

There followed another round of salutes. A moment later, with Drigo's heavy footfalls ringing through the air of the chamber, Kantor motioned to the others and said, 'Be seated, brothers.'

The council was quiet, pensive. Even Cortez seemed unusually reluctant to speak.

Finally, Torres asked, 'How do you plan to distribute the rest of us?'

'Most of you will command your companies on the walls of our home in accordance with siege defence protocols,' said Kantor. 'I will call another session at twenty-three hundred hours this evening to discuss specifics. The moment the ork ships translate from the warp, you will bring your men to full combat readiness. I believe Brother Ranparre will stop them. He has never failed before. But I would have you all ready, regardless. Not one ork must set foot on the hallowed grounds of our home. I would consider that a great and terrible sacrilege.'

'So would we all,' spat Caldimus Ortiz, Captain of the Seventh, Master of the Gates. That no enemy should ever breach Arx Tyrannus was his responsibility above all others.

Kantor noted the fire in Ortiz's eyes at the very thought of the greenskins returning to Rynn's World. Turning his gaze from face to face, he saw the same dark determination, the cold, hard violence that lay just below the surface in all of them.

This so-called Arch Arsonist has underestimated us, he thought. We will punish him severely for that.

'You each have preparations to make,' said Kantor. 'Tailor all training exercises accordingly. If there are no further issues to raise...'

'My lord,' said Eustace Mendoza. 'There *is* one more matter before we dissolve this session.'

Kantor turned towards the Chief Librarian. 'Speak on, my friend.'

'Forgive me, brothers,' said Mendoza, 'for diverging from our most pressing issue, but we have yet to decide the fate of the Scout, Janus

Kennon.'

High Chaplain Tomasi nodded grimly. 'Brother Kennon is, at least in part, clearly responsible for the dark losses our Chapter suffered at Krugerport. Does Captain Icario have anything to say for him?'

Tomasi had removed his skull-helm on entering the Strategium, as was Chapter law. Now, he turned his coal-black eyes towards the unusually quiet Tenth Company captain.

Ishmael Icario could not meet the High Chaplain's gaze. Instead, he spoke down towards the table, as if his neck was weighted by a great shame. 'Fellow sons of Dorn, I deserve no small share in Brother Kennon's culpability. In my rush to put him on the battlefield, to test the true extent of his talents, I ignored the concerns expressed by my sergeants. My own personal hopes clouded my judgement, and for that I am truly sorry. But if he is to be punished, then I too must suffer for my mistake.'

Alessio Cortez snorted and shook his head. 'If lightning strikes a tree and starts a fire, is that the fault of the forest?'

Icario looked up, surprised. 'Now *you* are quoting Traegus to *me*, brother?'

Cortez forced a grin, and Kantor saw the beaten look in Icario's eyes mellow, but only for a moment.

'No one blames you, Ishmael,' said the Chapter Master. 'How could we? I, too, had great hopes for Janus Kennon. But talent is nothing without discipline. He did not bear the tenets of the Chapter in mind. A Space Marine who disobeys orders has not fully embraced his psycho-conditioning. He cannot be called a Space Marine. If there was any failing here, it was Kennon's alone. Did you not also assign Sergeant Mishina to the mission? And did he not earn his company great honour, risking his life to retrieve Captain Drakken's body from the battlefield?'

'Aye,' rumbled High Chaplain Tomasi with a glance over at the Chapter Master. 'Ezra Mishina is a most worthy brother.'

Kantor could hardly miss the meaning behind the Chaplain's look. 'He is, indeed. It is high time he was granted the Steeping. He will join Third Company, the first of many who will be needed to bring their numbers back up over time. I hope this pleases you, Ishmael.'

Kantor threw a rare and fleeting smile at Captain Icario and, at last, saw the beginnings of a reciprocal smile break through the Scout captain's dour expression.

'Lord Hellblade honours me and all of the Tenth,' said Icario, but he paused, and the smile fell away as he added, 'Still, there is the matter of Kennon's fate.'

'How does he bear his guilt?' asked Cortez.

'Poorly, it must be said,' admitted Icario. 'Despite everything, he stands by his decision to fire, to take the shot while this warlord, Mag Kull, was in his sights.'

There was a grunt of derision from Kantor's left. Matteo Morrelis, Master of Blades, Captain of the Eighth Company, leaned forward with his forearms on the crystal surface. 'The sensorium uploads prove his culpability beyond any doubt. We have all seen them. If he cannot respect the chain of command, no matter the circumstances, he is unfit to wear our colours and call himself kin.'

Kantor was about to respond when Cortez slammed a rough hand on the table. Every head turned sharply in his direction. 'If he had slain the ork,' Cortez growled over at Morrelis, 'we would be calling him a hero.' He turned to Kantor. 'You would be promoting *Kennon* to Third Company, not Mishina.'

'This decision can hardly rest on an *if*,' barked Caldimus Ortiz, 'particularly given that he did not *slay the ork*, brother.'

Cortez glared back at Ortiz.

'High Chaplain,' said Kantor. 'Have you anything to add before I make my pronouncement?'

Tomasi sounded genuinely sorrowful as he answered. ‘The loss of a captain is always a great tragedy, not just for the Chapter, but for all mankind. Those truly fit to lead are a rare commodity. Brother Kennon has, by disregarding a direct order, played a significant role in the death of one of this Chapter’s finest. Ashor Drakken was a decorated hero with a record of achievement spanning more than two centuries. There *is* precedent for such a case as this. We have searched the archives.’ Here, he indicated Eustace Mendoza, who nodded once with eyes closed. ‘The punishment for precipitating this disaster,’ Tomasi continued, ‘must be the most severe available to us. As much as it pains us, there can be no other choice.’

Several of the captains bowed their heads at this proclamation.

Kantor did likewise. When he lifted his head a second later, he said, ‘I have made my decision. Judgement is passed. Janus Kennon shall undergo servitor conversion.’

Alessio Cortez loosed a string of quiet curses.

Mendoza nodded. ‘The Librarius will be ready to receive him once he has been informed.’ Turning to Captain Icario, he added, ‘The process of mind-ripping is painful. I shall not lie to you, my brother. But it will be mercifully short. This much, I promise.’

Ishmael Icario did not answer. He rested his shaved head in his hands, allowing his elbows to support him on the crystal tabletop.

Forgemaster Adon interjected in crisp machine monotone. ‘Kennon’s innate skills may still be utilised. They need not be lost. As a gun-servitor, he will serve the Chapter for a thousand years and, on his decommissioning, will perhaps have expunged the stain on his honour.’

‘Whether or not his guilt shall be expunged is a matter for the Emperor alone to decide,’ said Tomasi.

‘Ishmael,’ said Kantor. ‘Take Brother Kennon to the Librarium at sunrise tomorrow. Do it quietly while the rest of your men are observing the

morning combat rituals. Let them learn of it after the fact. I would have this matter seen to and put behind us as soon as possible. It must not linger to cast its shadow over the honour service for the dead.'

'Sunrise,' said Icario softly. 'I will see it done, lord.'

For a moment, silence descended over the crystal table once again. Then Kantor stood and formally ended the session, dismissing the council members. They would be back here soon enough, he knew.

He and Cortez were the last to leave.

As they walked together through the gloomy, candlelit hallways of the fortress-keep, past shadowed alcoves where the stone likenesses of past heroes stood at eternal attention, Cortez asked his old friend and master a question.

'Thinking of the glory, of the blow it would strike to the enemy, and unaware of whatever technology was shielding this Mag Kull beast, would you yourself not have taken the shot?'

The Chapter Master frowned. 'You already know my answer to that, Alessio.'

'I suppose I do,' Cortez replied heavily, 'as certainly as you know mine.'

'Indeed.'

They walked on, side-by-side, unspeaking for a few more paces, until they reached the junction in the corridor where they would part. Kantor's private chambers were high in the uppermost levels of the central keep and he had many hundreds of stairs to climb. The act of climbing them often helped to clear his mind, and he knew he needed that clarity of thought now more than he had needed it in a very long time.

Before the two friends went off in different directions, Kantor placed a hand on Cortez's shoulder and said, 'In the name of the primarch, Alessio, never put me in that position. To pass judgement over you as I just did over Brother Kennon would destroy me, brother.'

‘No,’ said Cortez. ‘It would not destroy you, Pedro. You have the right strength for such things. It is why you were chosen to lead us.’

Kantor smiled briefly at that, but it was hollow and he knew Cortez could tell. There were no secrets between them. They knew each other far too well for that.

He dropped his hand from his friend’s shoulder, turned in the direction of the great stone staircase at the end of the corridor, and walked off, hoping it would be the last they spoke of disobeying orders for a long time.



SEVEN

New Rynn Space port, Rynnland Province

The capital awoke to the deep, window-shaking roar of sixteen Crimson Fist Thunderhawks as they swept in low over the sprawling slums that had grown up around the planet's only space port. Sturdy landing gear emerged from metal hulls. Powerful turbines changed pitch, from a roar to a high, throbbing whine. The Thunderhawks settled on an airstrip that had been cleared for their arrival only twenty minutes earlier.

It wasn't that the New Rynn Space Port staff were lazy or disorganised. They simply hadn't been told until the very last moment that the Space Marines were coming. That lack of adequate warning was deliberate. Captain Alvez did not want the people of the city to know. He had no wish to drive through streets thronged with cheering civilians. They did not know what they were cheering for. He was born to wage war. Did they wish to celebrate his gift for slaughter? Did they wish to celebrate the thousands of gallons of blood he had spilled year after year? He doubted it. Most would be sickened by the things he had seen and done. If not sickened, then terrified to the point of madness.

The spaceport was about sixty kilometres south-east from the outermost of the capital city's great defensive walls, but the noise of the Thunderhawks' powerful turbines carried all the way to the city centre, a

glorious fortified island surrounded on both sides by the waters of the River Rynn. This was the *Zona Regis*, often called the Silver Citadel, home of the governor and secondary residence to all the members of the Upper Rynnhouse. The Cassar lay within its towering walls, a large keep built by the Chapter after the greenskin invasion of twelve hundred years ago so that a detachment of Crimson Fists could garrison the capital if it were ever threatened again.

It seemed that time had come.

As the Thunderhawks powered down their engines, the sun crested the horizon to the east. Most of the people who had heard the roar, adults and children alike, were already dressing for another day of labour in the fields and manufactora, their sweat and toil dedicated to an Emperor none would ever see save in ancient carvings and frescoes, or rendered as figurines for sale on the stalls of the city's *zoniae commercia*.

It was not uncommon for the citizens of the capital to hear ships coming and going, no matter the time of day. The spaceport often played host to far bigger, noisier craft than Thunderhawks. Aside from its many ground-level airstrips, the gargantuan structure boasted three vast, thick cylindrical towers, each topped with circular landing plates supported by anti-grav suspension. They could provide berths for even the largest transatmospheric craft. Most of the citizens who heard the noise of the Thunderhawks stopped what they were doing and cocked their heads to listen. There was something different about this sound. Only military aircraft ever approached together and in such numbers.

On contacting the spaceport's air traffic personnel, Captain Alvez had been adamant that his force's arrival go unannounced. He told the spaceport's chief administrator over the vox-net that, if there were any choirs or bands, fanfare of any kind, he would kill the man himself.

Alvez was naturally somewhat angry, then, when he marched down the ramp of his Thunderhawk to find himself being greeted by over a thousand

individuals in immaculate cream-coloured uniforms.

The moment they laid eyes on his broad, armoured frame, they dropped to one knee and bowed their heads. A heavy-set officer with golden shoulder-boards shouted out a command, and the kneeling troopers called out as one, ‘All hail the Crimson Fists, righteous sons of Rogal Dorn, hand of the Emperor, saviour of the people!’

‘Dorn’s blood,’ cursed Alvez quietly, eyes panning across the rows of starched soldiers. ‘This is just *perfect*.’

Behind him, his Adeptus Astartes were beginning to disembark, marching briskly down Thunderhawk ramps, heavy boots striking metal in perfect military cadence. Serfs and servitors followed in great number, hefting ammunition cases, weapons and supplies of every possible description.

Space port servitors shambled forward to assist, and the airstrip was abuzz with activity.

Alvez strode forward and called out to the Rynnsguard, ‘At ease, you men. On your feet. Get up!’

The unsolicited welcoming committee rose smartly. Every last one of them kept his eyes straight forward, not daring to meet the Space Marine captain’s icy glare. It was patently obvious they were at anything but ease.

‘Officer in charge,’ bellowed Alvez. ‘Make yourself known to me. Now!’

The deep, harsh, barking quality of his voice made some of the Rynnsguard jump. After a heartbeat’s nervous hesitation, the overweight officer with the shoulder boards strode forward, arms swinging rigidly at his sides. His chest glittered with bronze, silver and gold starbursts and, above the brim of his starched cap, there was a badge in the shape of a golden aquila.

Alvez noted the polished silver skulls on the man’s tunic collar, and said, ‘Your name, colonel.’

It was phrased as a demand. The colonel bowed at the waist, hands pressed to his chest in the standard Imperial salute. When he stood upright, he removed his cap, fixed his gaze on the centre of Alvez's gleaming breastplate, and said, 'Portius Cantrell, my lord, commanding officer of the Rynnland Second Garrisoning Regiment, Soroccan Defensive Operations Group, at your service.'

Alvez wasn't impressed.

'I am Drigo Alvez, colonel. I am the captain of the Crimson Fists Second Company, Master of the Shield, and you will do me the courtesy of looking me in the eye when you speak to me. Your reverence has been duly noted, but I would have you address my face, not my armour.'

Cantrell, who, at one hundred and seventy-eight centimetres, came up only as high as the embossed eagle on the Adeptus Astartes captain's chest, gulped and hastily lifted his eyes.

Alvez glared down at him, unsmiling. 'That is better. Now tell me what you and your men are doing here. I issued strict orders to this facility's administrator. He was warned that I would execute him for disobeying.'

Cantrell glanced down at the ferrocrete surface of the landing strip on reflex, then hurriedly returned his gaze to Alvez's face. 'Air Controller Celembra did not disobey you, my lord. He issued no request for a formal welcome. My men and I, however, were already here on a security rotation. One of my lieutenants was in the air traffic control centre when your message came through. He brought word of it to me, and I took the liberty. Forgive me, lord. I know you were most specific about fanfare, but I thought a respectful military greeting would be appropriate. I could not, in good conscience, have let your arrival pass without some show of respect.'

My orders left room enough for that, I suppose, thought Alvez.

'Though I was not advised of your coming in time to prepare properly,' continued the colonel, 'my men and I are honoured to be at your disposal.'

Anything you need, anything at all, and we will endeavour to provide it, in the name of the Emperor and of Lord Hellblade.'

At our disposal, thought Alvez darkly. You'll soon learn the real meaning of that, colonel, but not today. Look at you, so willing to have your men reduced to the level of servants. Fighting men should have more pride.

Alvez hated diffidence, hated the way most humans fawned and scraped in front of him, always so desperate to earn the favour and protection of the Adeptus Astartes. The situation would get worse, he knew, once his forces were established in the city proper. He had been through it all a hundred times and more during the course of his life. The presence of even a single Adeptus Astartes among normal people caused a range of often extreme reactions. From sickening servility to abject terror, he had seen it all.

In most cases, it was standard operating procedure to keep his forces as far from the civilian populace as possible. It didn't do for the people to get too close to their protectors. Fear and avoidance he could handle – in fact, in light of the alternatives, he welcomed them – but excesses of worship, love and attention soon became a hindrance, with hourly offerings of luxury foodstuffs, expensive silks, religious trinkets, alcohol, narcotics, even women – none of which an Adeptus Astartes had any use for in the slightest.

'I do not foresee us requiring your services at the moment, colonel,' said Alvez. 'If that is to change, rest assured I will alert you. As to the reason for our presence here, you will be fully briefed when I decide it is time. For now, you will clear your men from this airstrip and return to your security duties. We have much to unload, and there may be injuries if you get in the way.'

Just for a second, Alvez saw the colonel's expression grow rock hard at the barely veiled insult. Good, he thought. Perhaps there *is* a fighting man

underneath all that decoration. We shall find out for sure when he learns of the coming storm. By Terra, it's high time these people were reminded that the price of survival is paid in blood.

'A good day to you, then, my lord,' said the colonel, his tone slightly colder than before. Having been so bluntly dismissed, he saluted once more, turned and marched back to his men. When he had crossed half the distance towards them, Alvez relented and called out to him.

'Colonel Cantrell.'

The Rynnsguard officer stopped and turned. This time his eyes went straight to the towering captain's face and stayed there. 'My lord?'

Alvez paused, then, pitching his voice so that Cantrell's troopers could hear it clearly, he said, 'Perhaps you and your men *could* do me a service after all.'

The colonel's face visibly brightened, and the chests of the Rynnsguard troops seemed to inflate.

'Anything my lord requires. Anything at all.'

'Provide a cordon,' said Alvez. 'Keep the public and the rest of the spaceport personnel at arm's length while we prepare our ground transports. We shall be leaving for the Cassar as soon as possible. Have a direct route cleared for us. Set up barriers, do what you must. Co-opt local law enforcement if you feel it necessary, but I want nothing in our way between here and the Zona Regis.'

'You will have it, lord,' said Cantrell. 'Is there someone with whom I can coordinate?'

'Coordinate with my personal retainer,' said Alvez. 'Keep a vox-channel clear. Beta-channel, band four will suffice. His name is Merrin, and he will tell you all you need to know.'

Cantrell accepted this information with a final bow, then turned towards his men and started snapping out orders.

Alvez watched the Rynnsguard march off at double-time, then turned to supervise the unloading of his Thunderhawks.

Had the politicians heard of his arrival by now? Almost certainly. They would be scurrying to make a great occasion of it, eager for the people to see them beside the Emperor's finest. Blasted peacocks!

There was a deep rumble and a clanking of treads from his right, and he turned to see his Land Raider armoured transport approaching to take him into the city.

He walked off towards the massive machine, silently wondering just how long he had to get this city ready for the tide of foul xenos that was coming.

Somehow, he knew it would not be long enough.



EIGHT

Zona Regis, New Rynn City

Maia Cagliestra couldn't recall being shaken awake since she had been a child of ten years old, but that was exactly how she met the world today. Groggy, her eyelids feeling like they had been tacked together, she struggled to get her bearings.

‘What... what’s going on?’

When she opened her eyes, there was a moment of bright pain. Golden sunlight was already spilling into the room from the south windows. The heavy velvet drapes had been pulled back. Outside, the sky was blue and cloudless, a clear indication that the summer was on its way.

Her chief lady-in-waiting was gently gripping Maia's shoulders. She had stopped shaking them now. ‘You need to wake up, ma'am. We must get you ready at once. Secretary Mylos is already waiting for you on the grand balcony. I shall bring you breakfast there.’

‘What time is it?’ asked Maia. ‘And why are you waking me like this? You’ve never done that before, Shivara.’

Shivara took her hands away now, but her expression was steely. She was a unique and formidable woman, and Maia trusted no one, not even Mylos, as much as she trusted her. Shivara was tall and beautiful and, under her form-fitting robes of white silk, powerfully muscled, though no less

feminine in appearance for all that. Few people realised that Shivara was an off-worlder, not even Mylos. The woman was a sister of the Adepta Sororitas, trained from birth to be bodyguard and aide to those judged worthy of such protection. Planetary governors across the Imperium were protected by these deadly guardians. If something was bothering Shivara, Maia knew that she, too, had ample reason to be worried.

‘Please get up, ma’am,’ said Shivara. ‘Something unexpected has happened. The Crimson Fists have come to the city.’

Maia sat bolt upright in her bed, dark hair tumbling down over her pale shoulders, a great smile spreading across her face. ‘They have? This is wonderful. Dare I hope the Chapter Master himself is among them?’

Shivara frowned.

‘What is the matter with you?’ asked Maia, confused. ‘Their presence bothers you?’

‘Greatly, ma’am.’

Maia was getting angry now. Her smile fell away. ‘I think you had better explain yourself. The sons of the Emperor Himself are here. I cannot understand your mood.’

She threw off her sheets, swung her legs over the side for the four-poster bed, slid her feet into fine white slippers, stood and stretched her lean form.

Her eyes went automatically, as they did every morning, to the great statue in the south-west corner of the room. It was cut from the purest white marble on the planet. Aurella’s *Ædonis in Death*. A masterpiece. If the Secretary of the Treasury knew how much Maia had appropriated from the palace funds for its purchase, there would be hell to pay. But she had been unable to resist when the sculptor, Ianous Aurella, had finally offered it for sale. Blackmailing the old man had been a difficult and lengthy process, but ultimately worth it.

Shivara’s gaze followed that of her mistress.

The figure, *Ædonis*, was as big as an Adeptus Astartes, and there was something about the face, some subtle nuance of expression or bone structure, that reminded Maia daily of the Chapter Master, Pedro Kantor.

‘What bothers me, ma’am,’ said Shivara, cutting across Maia’s thoughts, ‘is their numbers. They are here in company strength at least.’ She hesitated a beat. ‘Word from the spaceport has it that they have come prepared for war.’

Maia tore her gaze from the statue’s broad sculpted shoulders. ‘For war?’ she said. ‘Don’t be preposterous. There hasn’t been a war on Rynn’s World for...’

‘One thousand two hundred and sixty-four years, ma’am,’ said Shivara heavily. ‘Meaning one is long overdue.’



NINE

New Rynn City, Rynnland Province

Sergeant Huron Grimm could tell that his superior was in a dark mood, or rather, a darker mood than usual. Captain Alvez rode in the left side cupola of the Land Raider, *Aegis Eternis*, refusing even to glance at the cheering crowds which lined either side of Carriageway 19. Grimm knew this because, as befit the captain's second-in-command, he rode in the vehicle's right cupola, a position of no small honour. He was a veteran sergeant, a long-serving squad leader who had proven himself in battle a great many times. When Brother Romnus had been killed in action three years ago, Alvez had chosen Grimm as his new right-hand man, elevating him to the Second Company's command squad, a decision generally well met by the rest of the company.

Aiding the captain directly was a duty that Grimm relished, though the relationship between the two Space Marines remained strained at best. Their personalities were anything but similar. Grimm would do whatever his commander asked, naturally, but he found the tall Alvez to be a cold, self-isolating individual. Perhaps it had not always been so. It had occurred to Grimm more than once that Alvez might simply have lost too many good friends along the way. Such a hardening of the soul was not unknown among Adeptus Astartes who outlived many of the brothers with whom they had started service.

Grimm had passed the Chapter's selection trials one hundred and three years ago. He had earned veteran status, and the honour of painting his right gauntlet red, relatively early in his career, successfully leading a squad of ten men against a push by traitor armour units on 6-Edinae. Few brothers survived to serve two whole centuries: he knew, and from these the captains were drawn. They were the truly exceptional ones: Alvez, Cortez, Kadena, Acastus and the like, not to mention the Chapter Master himself.

Unlike Alvez, who clearly found the public's adulation irritating in the extreme, Grimm accepted it. He allowed himself to feel the warmth that flowed from those smiles and tear-streaked faces. They were like children, these people; their experiences limited to shorter lives, their bodies limited by their relative fragility. Despite this, the Imperium was nothing without them. What did it stand for if not their continued survival? It was why the Emperor had made His Space Marines at all.

Young and old, the citizens of the Rynnite capital gazed up at him, waving and crying out as *Aegis Eternis* rumbled past, wide treads grinding the rockcrete surface of the wide lanes.

'Hail the Crimson Fists! Hail the protectors!'

Women on both sides of the road, weeping openly, barely held back by the cordon of struggling Rynnsguard troopers, threw great armfuls of red and blue flowers in front of the column. The sweet floral scent was strong on the air, but it quickly became mixed with the promethium fumes from the armoured vehicles' rumbling exhausts, and became altogether less pleasant.

A waste, thought Grimm, to spend hard-earned money on flowers, only to see them crushed beneath the treads of a tank. It would keep the flower-sellers in liquor for a while, he supposed.

Behind *Aegis Eternis*, the train of armoured vehicles stretched out, each painted in the blue of the Chapter, each proudly bearing the icon of a red

fist in black circle. Their thunderous passage shook ornaments from sills and mantles as far as a kilometre away. Long cracks appeared in the windows and walls of the shining, white-painted hab-stacks. The people didn't notice. They might grumble later, but a force like this hadn't visited the capital in decades. It was a spectacle no one wanted to miss. The bars and inns would be filled with stories for years to come:

I was there when they rode through the city.

I saw their captain in the flesh, I did.

Then the stories would be embellished over time:

The great captain singled me out and waved to me, I swear it.

One of them asked me my name!

Why not? thought Grimm. Why should warriors not be venerated a little now and then? The fighting men of the Imperium dedicated their lives to war in the name of the Emperor. They brought peace to others with their sacrifice. So it was with the Imperial Guard, the Navy, the clandestine but powerful forces of the Holy Inquisition. Even the Ecclesiarchy had its fighters.

Their blood was the coin by which the realm survived. War on the fringes kept the core safe. In such dark, dangerous times as these, with humanity constantly besieged by fiends on every side, people needed heroes to believe in more than ever. Grimm saw the importance of that. Could Captain Alvez not see it, too?

Of course, the Space Marines represented so much more than just a military force. They were the closest living link to the Divine Emperor that these people would see in their lifetimes. All the toil, all the worship, all the coppers they put in the collection plates; the sight of just one Adeptus Astartes made the legends more real somehow. If the Adeptus Astartes were real, then the Emperor was, too. And if the Emperor was real, humanity could still dare to hope for its eventual salvation. His

Divine Majesty would rise again and crush the myriad foe and, after so very long, there would at last be peace and security in the galaxy.

Holier men than Huron Grimm called it *faith*.

Eight decades ago, during a mission to hunt down eldar slave traders on Iaxus III, a young priest, slashed to ribbons and left to die in a burning Imperial church, had coughed out words to this effect as Grimm dragged him to safety. The priest hadn't lasted long, his wounds flowing copiously, but Grimm had never forgotten the zeal in the dying man's eyes.

He had been humbled by it. Even a Space Marine could still learn valuable lessons from ordinary men, he knew.

Looking down from the cupola, his gaze passed over a gaggle of well-dressed children practically screaming with delight as the ground beneath their feet shuddered and shook. Others waved frantically from the shoulders of their fathers, desperate to be acknowledged by the armoured giants they recognised from their storybooks and history lessons. Some, particularly the youngest, were terrified beyond words. Grimm saw a good many take refuge in the fabric of their mothers' skirts, leaving little smears of nasal mucus there.

A tiny malnourished girl, her orange rags marking her as an orphan from one of the city's many workhouses, gazed up at Grimm with wide blue eyes. She didn't scream, or shout. Neither did she smile or even cry. She simply gave him the smallest and shyest of waves. Grimm raised his own gauntleted hand just a fraction and returned the greeting.

Without taking his eyes from the road straight ahead, Captain Alvez barked, 'Don't encourage them.'

Nothing escaped his notice.

'My apologies, lord,' said Grimm.

Alvez grunted. 'I don't care if the twelve lords of Terra are down there. Acknowledge no one. We are not here to entertain these fools.'

'As you say, of course.'

‘And they *are* fools, Huron,’ Alvez went on. ‘Just look at them. So blindly, happily ignorant. Not one of them, not a single blasted one, judging by the gormless smiles on their faces, has stopped for a second to question why we are here. None have considered for even a moment that the presence of so many Space Marines must surely presage some terrible danger. Dorn alone knows what they think we are doing here.’

Grimm couldn’t argue with that.

They *will* think of it, sooner or later, he thought. And then we’ll have a panic on our hands.

Two hundred million people on this world. Two hundred million lives in the balance. He’d seen what the orks did to the helpless. He’d seen the horrors they perpetrated.

Thinking of this, he turned his eyes to look for the workhouse orphan again, but someone had shoved her to the rear and she had disappeared behind a dense forest of adult legs.

An image appeared in his mind, and his brow furrowed in furious denial. He gritted his teeth. In the image, he saw the girl looking at him again, but her blue eyes were lifeless. Her blonde hair burned as he watched. He saw her flesh crisping and realised she had been spitted. She was being cooked over an open fire. He saw a massive ork, a black-skinned warboss of prodigious size, pull the spit from the flames and sink his tusks into the meat, devouring her as if she were little more than a snack.

It was no idle daydream. Grimm had seen the evidence of such abominable crimes all too often on other ork-blighted worlds.

‘In Dorn’s name,’ he growled quietly, ‘not here. Not while I draw breath.’

Despite the roar of the Land Raider’s engine and the rattle of its wide treads, the captain had heard him.

‘You wish to say something, Huron?’

Grimm shook his head.

‘Not really, my lord,’ he replied, but, after a heartbeat, he added, ‘Only that, if the Waaagh does come to Rynn’s World, I swear I will turn the Adacian red with ork blood!’

The captain absorbed this comment without turning his eyes from the road ahead. The armoured column was approaching the Ocaro Gate now, its white stone towers rising tall and proud against the deepening blue sky of mid-morning. Beyond the gate lay Zona 6 Industria, the only manufacturing zone through which the Crimson Fist convoy would have to travel to reach the Cassar. There would be fewer people on the streets there. The industrial zones were for working in, not living. Not unless you wanted to die young, riddled with toxins and disease.

‘The Waaagh *will* come, Huron,’ said Alvez as the massive Ocaro Gate groaned open to admit them. ‘When it does, know that you and I will turn the seas red together.’



TEN

Rooftop of the Great Keep, Arx Tyrannus

Kantor gazed out over a sea of cloud through which the black peaks of the surrounding mountains rose like claws. The sky above was deep azure, just like his armour, and the sibling suns were bright, but they were not warm. Up here, on the roof of the fortress-monastery's tallest structure, it never truly got warm. The technical crews servicing the anti-air batteries at each of the rooftop's corners wore their thickest raumas-wool robes. Even so clothed, they could not work up here for long. The air was so thin that they required rebreather masks or they would pass out and eventually die.

The thin air did not bother the Chapter Master, of course. Nor did it bother the captain at his side, Selig Torres of Fifth Company. The two Adeptus Astartes could endure long periods up here with little discomfort.

Ordinator Savales had been unable to persuade Torres to await the Chapter Master below, but Kantor didn't mind. Here above the clouds, with the freezing wind buffeting you, was as good a place as any to talk about the darkness that approached this world. Torres had sought him out because he was in opposition to the way the Chapter Master was handling the threat of the Waaagh. He had made his stance clear at the last session. Now he stood in silence at Kantor's shoulder, unsure of how to begin. That

was unlike him. Kantor had known the acerbic, outspoken captain for over a century, and knew well enough when he had a point to make.

‘Best speak freely, Selig. Do not change your ways now.’

Torres stepped forward and turned, angling himself towards the Chapter Master so that he could look him in the eye. Kantor saw that he was not smiling.

‘How sure are we, my lord,’ said Torres, ‘that this will all play out as expected?’

Kantor thought about that. The council session late last night had been more heated than any other in his memory. Some of the captains, Torres foremost among them, were calling for more forces to be put into space to be used as boarding parties. What was the point of keeping the Crimson Fists on the ground, they argued, if the orks would have to fight their way past a major blockade first? Surely the best use of the Chapter’s warriors was to send them to the very front line where they could assault the ships of the ork leaders and assassinate them?

The oldest and most experienced council members had sided with Kantor. No matter how effective the blockade proved, orks *would* set foot on Rynn’s World. Even with ten times more ships available to the Chapter, the gaps in the defence grid would still measure many thousands of kilometres across. Such was the nature of war in space. The orks would get some of their ships through and, when those ships landed, they would spill out their savage cargo onto land that hadn’t seen such bloodshed in over a millennium. Kantor wasn’t about to let the Rynnsguard fight the greenskin ground forces alone.

It was critical that the true strength of the Chapter remain planetside to meet the invader wherever it landed. Any other approach was, in Kantor’s eyes at least, foolish to consider, and it bothered him that several of the captains present at the session had argued so vehemently. He could understand their desire for glory well enough. Boarding actions were some

of the most intense and dangerous operations a Space Marine would ever face and success brought great honour. But this battle was less about glory and honour than it was about protecting their home. It was about preserving everything the Crimson Fists represented, both to themselves and to their people, in the face of a threat the likes of which few other Chapters had ever known.

‘You will have to trust me, Selig,’ said Kantor. ‘You know I would not lead our brothers astray. If I tell you we must concentrate our brothers’ strengths on a ground-based war, it is because I have considered all the alternatives. The orks must not gain any solid foothold here. Their spores, if left unchecked, will spread on the winds and blight our world for decades to come. By organising our squads into rapid-response units... you heard me last night. I’ll not repeat myself.’

Torres nodded, but said, ‘It is not that I doubt you, lord. Your word is law, and I would follow you into the mouth of oblivion, as you surely know. But I cannot shake my grave reservations about this course. It assumes a certain degree of failure from the start.’

Kantor nodded. ‘I am a realist, Selig. Orks will get through. How many, we cannot say, but they will. Even if we committed every last battle-brother to boarding actions, we could not change that. So we will fight on both fronts. The decision is mine, and it has been made.’

Torres looked far from satisfied, but he knew well enough when there was no more room to manoeuvre. Changing tack, he asked, ‘Have the Thunderhawks returned from New Rynn City yet?’

‘They will be here soon.’

‘And our brothers in the Crusade Company? When do you intend to call them back from their advisory missions?’

Kantor looked out over the vista of endless white cloud as he said, ‘They will be called back as soon as we have first sign of the foe.’

He turned his eyes skywards. High above the planet's surface, he knew, the Chapter's ships, along with the System Defence Fleet – an armada of warp-incapable battleships under the auspices of the Imperial Navy – would be slowly shifting into place, forming a battle-line that measured hundreds of thousands of kilometres.

‘I still cannot believe it has come to this,’ said Torres. ‘To have already lost Ashor Drakken... And to think that the same orks would dare to strike us here, on our own world...’

Kantor winced a little. He, too, still grieved for Drakken. Sooner or later, a successor would have to be named, someone from the Crusade Company, someone worthy of leading the Third Company into battle. For now, the survivors of the Krugerport fiasco had been fused with Drigo Alvez's Second Company and were stationed with them in the capital, but the situation was far from ideal. The Third Company had an identity of its own, and a proud and glorious tradition to maintain. There just hadn't been time to nominate a new captain before the men had been deployed. It would have to wait until after the orks were beaten back.

‘Ashor is with us in spirit, Selig. A proper tribute will be commissioned for Monument Hall once there is adequate opportunity. As for the Waaagh penetrating so deep into this sector so quickly, I have been thinking on that myself. I believe Snagrod's forces are prioritising communications relays. It explains why no warning of the Waaagh has come from anywhere else but Badlanding, and yet we know they have overtaken a score of other systems already.’

Torres squinted. ‘You are suggesting, lord, that this Snagrod is employing an isolation strategy prior to launching his attacks?’

‘We've seen hints of it from ork warbands before, though never so well executed, I grant you.’

Across the Imperium, the vast Munitorum propaganda machine was relentless in presenting the orks as inferior, dull-witted, bestial foes with

only the most rudimentary understanding of what it took to win a protracted war. The filthy xenos were driven by instinct, their tiny brains incapable of tactical analysis and response. For the most part, the propaganda was close to the truth. The average ork got by on muscle, resilience and raw savagery – little else. But Snagrod was clearly anything but average. He had already proved that. Centuries of fighting the greenskins had taught Kantor not to be hasty in underestimating those that climbed to the rank of warlord. The 41st millennium had seen increasingly disturbing proof that, out there among the millions of disparate ork tribes, there were increasing numbers of individuals that represented a threat unlike anything the Imperium had faced since the dark days of the Heresy. One need only peruse recent battle-reports from Armageddon, a key Imperial hive-world located in the Segmentum Solar.

In 949.M41, an ork warlord had led an unprecedented Waaagh against Imperial forces on that world. The greenskin leader was called Ghazghkull Mag-Uruk Thraka, and such was his rare ability for strategic thinking that he failed in his conquest by only the narrowest of margins. As further testament to his unusual military intellect, he had even managed to affect a massive greenskin exodus when the tide of battle had irrevocably turned against him.

If Ghazghkull Mag-Uruk Thraka was capable of effective strategy, then the Arch Arsonist of Charadon was, too. Snagrod was employing lightning-quick surprise assaults on every deep-space communications relay he came across. Then, and only then, did he send his forces in *en masse* to slaughter and pillage the isolated worlds.

But he would not do that on Rynn's World. Kantor would not let him. Snagrod had made a great mistake in his choice of target, and another in announcing his intentions so overtly. The orks were coming in force, and their leader *wanted* the Crimson Fists to be ready. He wanted a fight he could consider worthy, a fight that would make him a legend, a fight that

would bring greenskin tribes from all over the galaxy under one banner. If the beast succeeded in that, the Waaagh would be unstoppable.

Kantor realised that Torres was staring at him, face twisted in concern.

‘I have never seen you like this, lord. Never so... dour.’

Kantor did not insult his brother’s intelligence by affecting a false demeanour. Torres deserved more than that, and deception was not Kantor’s way. Lies rarely served honour. ‘We must not under—’

A hiss of static on the comm-link cut him off mid-sentence. Kantor pressed a finger to the bead in his ear and said, ‘Monitor.’

The voice on the other end was unusually frantic.

Kantor’s eyes went wide as he listened.

‘Impossible,’ he growled. ‘Check your instruments. There must be some mistake.’

A moment later, he added, ‘Then tell him to check *his* instruments, damn it!’

As Kantor continued to listen to the Monitor speak, he locked eyes with Torres.

When the message ended, he lowered his hand from his ear and muttered, ‘Dorn’s blood!’

‘My lord?’

Kantor gripped Torres’s armoured shoulder. ‘The orks, Selig. The Waaagh! It’s here. They’re already in-system!’

Torres shook his head. ‘Impossible, lord. They can’t be. How far out are they? Forty hours? Fifty?’

‘That’s the worst of it,’ said Kantor through gritted teeth. ‘Three.’

‘Three?’ gasped Torres. ‘That would mean...’

‘It’s insane. Suicidal. Their entire force just burst from the warp only a hundred and fifty thousand kilometres from the planet. Our ships are already turning to engage. Get your company brothers to combat stations. I’m putting you in charge of the Laculum Bastion. Coordinate with the

Technicarum. I want all missile and plasma batteries at full operational status at once. And be ready when I call you to the Strategium. There will be a final emergency session while we still have time.’ He turned to the technical crews finishing up on the corner batteries. ‘You Chosen,’ he said. ‘Finish quickly. You will be needed below.’

They bowed reverentially to him, turned and attacked their work with fresh urgency.

Torres was too stunned to salute as Kantor spun away from him and began marching at speed back towards the staircase at the edge of the north side. Already, sirens could be heard wailing from towers all across the expanse of the black fortress.

Damn it, thought Kantor as his ceramite-plated boots pounded flagstones. No Imperial fleet would exit this close to a major gravity well. It would tear half the ships apart.

Dare he hope that the same might be happening to Snagrod’s ships even now? It was impossible to believe they would come through such a reckless jump unharmed. Warp exits were impossible to stabilise this close to a star.

How many would make it through intact? How many would survive to bring death and torment down on Rynn’s World?



ELEVEN

New Rynn City, Rynnland Province

Grimm had been to New Rynn City only twice in his life and the last time had been forty-two years ago. It was rare for battle-brothers to be sent there. The Arbites and the Rynnsguard were enough to keep the peace, and there was little call for the war-mastery of the Space Marines in a capital so obsessively focussed on trade and commerce.

As the Crimson Fist convoy rolled on, through district after crowded district, he reacquainted himself with the place. Few things had changed in the outer wards. The habs were still mostly squat boxes of sandstone and corrugated steel. The middle districts through which he now travelled, boasted clusters of monolithic new towers fashioned from dark stone and steel, built to house the city's burgeoning middle class. They rose high over the streets, casting them in shadow, but never rising as high as the shimmering spires and minarets at the city's centre.

Up ahead, another of the city's many interlocking curtain walls came into view, and another vast adamantium gate, its surface etched with ancient images of the city founders. This was the Peridion Gate, and beyond it lay the Residentia Ultris, the most expensive and exclusive residential zone in the city. It was in this district that the members of the Upper and Lower Houses maintained their mansion homes. On the far side

of it, at its northmost extent, the convoy would cross the Farrio Bridge, a four-lane titanium and rockcrete structure that spanned the River Rynn. Beyond the Farrio Bridge was the convoy's destination, the island on which sat the Zona Regis, also known as the Silver Citadel.

The Adeptus Astartes had made reasonable time from the spaceport, though the Rynnsguard troopers providing the corridor of passage had had their hands full with the jubilant crowds. There had been moments when the convoy had been forced to stop. In fits of zeal, a number of insane citizens, seemingly indifferent to the risk of being crushed, had leapt out from the crowd to kneel and offer praise before the rumbling chassis of *Aegis Eternis*. The local troopers had run forward and wrestled them out of the way, employing judicious violence when forced to. But no one had been killed. The Rynnsguard were not typically heavy-handed. They were well-practiced in dealing with their own people.

The Peridion Gate groaned loudly up ahead as its vast metal gears began turning. A gap appeared between the gate's massive titanium teeth, and a widening zigzag showed Grimm the road and the buildings beyond. The gates were huge, impenetrable things. They had been constructed after the last ork assault on the planet, and built with another such attack in mind. Likewise, the ancient curtain walls had been upgraded by varying degrees, all with the aim of ensuring that the capital never fell to an invasion of any kind.

Grimm wondered just how soon the walls and gates would be tested. The city's outermost defensive structures were simple stone affairs that wouldn't survive any kind of sustained artillery fire. But the closer one got to the city centre, the sturdier the walls became. He knew, for instance, that the walls of the Silver Citadel, within which lay the Cassar, the governor's palace, and the parliament buildings, employed void shields like those of Arx Tyrannus. And Arx Tyrannus could never fall. It was unassailable. Perhaps the Silver Citadel was unassailable, too. No doubt

Captain Alvez would order the Techmarines attached to the company to do a full assessment. One had to know the limits of endurance of the place one was meant to defend.

Aegis Eternis rumbled through the archway of the Peridion Gate and into the Residentia Ultris, and the contrast with the other zones they had driven through was immediate. On both sides of the highway, exit ramps rose to offer access to elegant structures of white marble, their walls and rooftops adorned with fine statuary and bas-reliefs. The gardens around each were so verdant. Grimm turned his head to either side, scanning the trees and bushes by habit, noting the profusion of brightly-coloured blossoms, many of which were not indigenous to Rynn's World and would have been imported and cultured at very great expense. Through gaps in the foliage, he saw the shadows of armed security personnel patrolling the grounds of each estate.

Captain Alvez kept his eyes forward, utterly disinterested in these statements of wealth and prominence.

Grimm wondered how the captain would deal with the members of the Upper Rynnhouse when it came time to address them. They would want to know why the Fists had come, but, when they found out about the approaching Waaagh, they would wish they'd never asked.

Still guiding the rest of the column, *Aegis Eternis* rolled over the Farrio Bridge, leaving the gleaming white estates behind her. On the far side, the last great gate, the Regis Gate South, was fully open to welcome them. Beyond it the government buildings glistened like mercury in the bright sunlight, putting the estates of the *Residentia Ultris* to shame. It was here that the business of ruling Rynn's World was conducted. Here was the Spire, a towering, many-turreted edifice dripping with the finest architectural embellishments that the greatest artisans in Rynnite history had been able to produce.

At the top of the tower, in a dome of pure synthetic diamond, sat the council chambers of the Upper Rynnhouse, where decisions were made that often affected commerce across the entire Peryton Cluster. Just west of it, shorter by half, and nowhere near as splendid, though many times as valuable for the weapons, ammunition and support systems it housed, was the Cassar, a sturdy keep maintained by the Chosen on the Chapter's behalf.

On the keep's broad octagonal rooftop, long-guns and missile batteries sat pointed towards the sky. Grimm had no doubt that they were already loaded. The Chosen would have seen to that by now.

He was distracted from the sight of the Cassar by Alvez. The captain loosed a string of curses, and Grimm turned his eyes back to the road ahead to see what had prompted it.

There on the shining road, blocking its entire width, was a gaggle of Rynnite politicians, diplomats, religious figures and high-ranking military officers. They gleamed like the buildings around them, as if every last piece of clothing and adornment was absolutely brand new, purchased only moments ago for the occasion of greeting the Crimson Fist detachment.

'I'll not pander to them,' growled Captain Alvez to himself.

The captain resented having to put up with anything that did not directly relate to his duties as a Space Marine. War was his business. He had no inclination to master the niceties of speech and manner that these fools thought so important.

He rapped a red gauntlet on the roof of the Land Raider and the driver, Brother Agorro, rolled it to a smooth stop, letting the engine idle rather than cut it off. Agorro knew Alvez well enough to be confident that the vehicles would be underway again within minutes.

Alvez turned to Grimm. 'With me, sergeant,' he said, and hauled himself out of the left cupola. He moved to the side of the vehicle and dropped to the ground, armoured boots clashing heavily on the surface of

the road. Despite their reverence for the Space Marines, Grimm saw some of the dignitaries drop their smiles. It was impossible for them not to feel intimidated. The Adeptus Astartes were so much more than human, in every way. It was not just the physiological differences, though they were, perhaps, the greater part of it. Psychological differences served to widen the gap.

Grimm doubted any human could imagine what it was like to be Adeptus Astartes, save perhaps in dreams. The oaths, the sacrifice, the relentless conditioning, inuring oneself to agony in all its most brutal forms. No, these people could never understand, and what they didn't understand, they feared, though it was often all that stood between them and the final darkness.

Grimm dismounted just as his captain had done, and strode forward to stand by his side. Together, the two hulking warriors looked down at their overdressed welcoming party.

Lady Maia Cagliestra, who was, judging by her warm, open smile, the least intimidated of the group, bowed her head before the captain and sank to one knee.

'My lord,' she said.

Drigo Alvez looked down at her, then turned his eyes to the others.

'What is this?' he demanded, his tone harsh. 'Only the governor kneels? Are the rest of you above such obeisance?'

There was a sudden rush among the nobles to drop to the ground and obey the order, but some moved quicker than others. One, a skinny, bug-eyed man, seemed particularly unwilling to do as the situation demanded. An older, chubbier individual on his right tugged at the skinny man's sleeve and hissed, 'Kneel, Eduardo, for Throne's sake!'

'I am a marquis and a cabinet minister,' this Eduardo replied churlishly, but, with everyone else kneeling, he finally relented, though his distaste was plain on his features. Despite being angered by the little fool's

insolence, Grimm hoped Captain Alvez had not registered it. But, of course, the captain had.

‘You,’ boomed Alvez, pointing a rigid finger at the man. ‘Stand and approach me.’

Eduardo suddenly looked a lot less arrogant. Paling visibly, he gulped and pointed to himself with an expression that said, ‘Who, me?’

‘Hesitate a second longer, vermin, and I will repaint my gauntlets with your blood,’ Alvez rumbled.

The other nobles kept their eyes firmly fixed on the rockcrete as Eduardo stepped forward as commanded. A dark, wet stain spread down the left leg of his trousers. His earlier self-assuredness had vanished completely now.

‘Who are you, worm?’

The man seemed genuinely surprised at the question, as if surely the captain should know who he was. Didn’t everyone?

‘I am Eduardo Corda, of House Corda, Marquis of Paletta, Vice Minister of Education.’

Captain Alvez loomed over him like a storm cloud about to unleash its thunder on all below. ‘Education, you say? Perhaps I should educate you on the fragility of your pathetic little life. Do you think your status, or the history of your house, grants you special liberties with one of the Emperor’s own Space Marines?’

Eduardo Corda now looked ready to weep.

‘Answer!’ snapped Alvez, the word cracking like a gunshot.

Grimm suspected that, if the foolish Corda had not already emptied his bladder, he would have done so right then. But perhaps he underestimated Corda, for the marquis licked his lips, took a steadying breath, and stuttered, ‘G-great are the Adeptus Astartes of the Crimson F-fists. I meant no offence to your lordship, and I apologise if any was taken. But I

am a member of the Upper House of Nobles. It is not fitting for a man of my station to take a knee. I come from an old and respected line.'

Alvez thrust his head closer. 'No,' he hissed. 'You are an idiot. Perhaps your line will end with you. In fact, that sounds best all round.' He turned to Grimm and added, 'Sergeant, pick him up.'

Grimm stepped forward immediately and gripped the man's collar with one hand, lifting him easily into the air. Corda's feet now dangled a metre above the ground. It was then that Lady Maia spoke. She was still kneeling, but she raised her head to look Alvez in the eye.

'I beg you, lord. Do not kill him. He is unworthy of your forgiveness and, in offending you, his actions bring shame on the entire Upper House, but he serves a senior member of my cabinet and will be difficult to replace.'

Alvez looked at her, silent for a moment. Then, he said, 'Do not think me so eager to kill the very people I was sent here to protect. For this transgression, he will not die. But all must bow before the Crimson Fists. There are no exceptions. I care not at all for your institutions and your notions of high status. These things are less than nothing to me. Remember that. In the coming days, you will have my protection because the Chapter Master commands it. No other reason exists. Were I commanded to kill you all, I would complete my task in a heartbeat, without a moment's remorse, and nothing in this galaxy save the word of Pedro Kantor could stop me.'

He turned back to Grimm, and said, 'The marquis has soiled himself, sergeant. He requires a bath. See to it.'

Grimm didn't need to ask what the captain meant.

'At once, lord,' said Grimm, and he began walking back towards the Farrio Bridge, holding Eduardo Corda out in front of him as if he weighed little more than a handful of trash.

When he judged he was far enough from Captain Alvez to risk murmured speech, he said to Corda, ‘You must never go near him again. Do you understand, fool? It was only the governor’s intervention that spared you today.’

Corda was stifling sobs as he answered, ‘A mistake, my lord. I swear it. I meant no harm. I... I inhaled the smoke of the ceba-leaf an hour ago. I had no idea...’

For a moment, Grimm felt the urge to strike the man. *Ceba-leaf*. It caused disease and mutation in one’s children. Why the wealthy continued to abuse it was a mystery to him. He had heard all the excuses. The universe was a dark and brutal place, they said, and it was true, but other poorer men managed fine without the self-inflicted curse of such narcotics.

‘Then you are doubly a fool, and must stay out of my way, also, lest you wish to die.’

‘I don’t,’ whined Corda. ‘I don’t wish to die, by Throne!’

‘Can you swim?’ growled Grimm.

‘I... what?’

‘Can you swim, oaf?’

‘I... yes. I mean, I swam a little as a child. I...’ Looking out beyond the bridge, it suddenly dawned on Corda what was about to happen. ‘In Terra’s holy name, please. Don’t do this. You don’t have to.’

They were approaching the wrought-iron balustrade at the side of the bridge. A few more steps and Grimm came slowly to a halt right beside it. ‘I will cast you into the shallows close to the south bank. You will only have to swim a little. Unless you are as hopeless as you look, you will survive. Show proper reverence to your betters next time. If my lord believes you have not learned your lesson, he will kill you on sight.’

Corda was opening his mouth, about to reply, when Grimm leaned back, put his considerable physical power into an overhand swing, and launched

the Vice Minister of Education out over the waters of the River Rynn.

As good as his word, he put the whining noble fairly close to the shallows by the bank, but in truth, not as close as he had planned.

The man immediately began coughing and splashing in a great panic, and Grimm could tell that it was no act.

Good, he thought. Let the Emperor decide whether you live or die.

He turned back towards the captain and saw that the nobles had been dismissed. As they backed away from Alvez with their heads bowed, they looked extremely dismayed.

Grimm met his captain halfway back to the Land Raider.

‘You told them of the Waaagh, my lord?’

‘Briefly,’ said Alvez. ‘There was no time to elaborate. Word has just come through from Arx Tyrannus, Huron. The ork ships are already here.’

‘In-system?’ asked Grimm. ‘It cannot be!’

‘It is.’

Alvez clambered up the side of the Land Raider and lowered himself down into his cupola again. Once Grimm had done the same, and the vehicle began to move off in the direction of The Cassar, Alvez raised his voice over the growl of the Land Raider’s engine.

‘Be ready, sergeant. The killing will soon begin.’



TWELVE

The Blockade, Rynn's World Local Space

‘Bring us around. Get me a forward-firing solution. I want our prow batteries locked onto that destroyer before she fires again!’

Ceval Ranparre sat atop his massive command throne, on a dais that extended to the back wall of the ship's bridge. In the work-pits below him, his subordinates were frantic, a thousand voices talking at once, half of them in Binary, the machine-language of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Another massive impact shook the ship, the third such blow in a minute, scattering charts and data modules all over the metal decking. Ranparre felt the artificial gravity flicker for the briefest instant, and knew from long experience that his battle-barge, *The Sabre of Scaurus*, must have been hit amidships, close to where the critical systems were located. The ship's shielding was heaviest there, but it couldn't take impacts like that for long. The void shields would give out soon. The Adeptus Astartes and Imperial Naval ships were outnumbered a hundred to one, and more of the ugly, scrappy ork vessels were bleeding into the system every minute the battle raged on.

We weren't ready, thought Ranparre. The line was still forming. Of all the blasted xenos in the galaxy, only orks would try a jump as psychotic

and self-destructive as this.

He had seen the worst effects of breaching real space so close to the planet already. At the beginning of the engagement, a number of neatly-severed prows had tumbled past him, bleeding breathable atmosphere and lifeless alien bodies into the freezing void. Some of them would impact on the planet with all the explosive power of a long-range, high-yield missile. There was nothing Ranparre and his crews could do about that. Blasting those wrecks to pieces would only turn one deadly mass into many. Besides, every last bit of offensive firepower at their command was needed to fight off the greater threat of the manned alien vessels that were trying to fight their way through. It was already clear to him that the blockade was pathetically inadequate. Such numbers!

Ranparre had several centuries of space battle experience behind him. Under his command, the ships of the Crimson Fists had saved over a dozen worlds without the need to drop any troops on the surface. Rebels, traitors, heretics, xenos, even warp-filth... Ranparre had beaten all kinds of enemy craft in high-orbital and deep-space combat. But he had never, in all his unnaturally long life, faced the kind of numbers that the Arch Arsonist of Charadon was throwing at the planet now.

Even in the gaping black vastness of space, there seemed no quarter that was not under assault, filled with ork craft scything inwards on angry trails of glowing plasma.

‘Order the *Aurora* and the *Verde* to close formation with us. I want the *Aurora* on our left flank, the *Verde* on our right. All forward batteries to target the command bridge of their flagship. If the beast Snagrod is aboard that vessel, we may still have a chance to end all this.’

From a row of stations sunk into the metal floor on the bridge’s right, one of the weapons coordinators called out, ‘I have your forward-firing solution, my lord. Permission to fire forward lances?’

‘Hold,’ said Ranparre. ‘We fire together with the strike cruisers. If that monstrosity has shields, we must hope to overload them at the very least.’

Seconds later, a comms-station operator on the left reported that the *Aurora* and the *Verde* had plotted their firing solutions and were awaiting Ranparre’s order to engage.

‘Give the signal,’ barked Ranparre. ‘All forward batteries... open fire!’

The central display screens in front of him crackled with blinding white energy as the massive weapons loosed their fury. Thick spears of light burned across ten thousand kilometres. A dozen small ork fighters and support craft caught between the two closing flagships were obliterated, simply wiped from existence. Then the lances stuck the ork flagship full in its gargantuan beast-like face.

‘Direct hit, all batteries,’ the weapons coordinator reported.

We could hardly miss, thought Ranparre. Just how big *is* that monster?

‘Damage assessment on enemy vessel,’ he demanded.

‘Unclear, my lord,’ replied another voice from the pit on the right. ‘Our forward auspex array has been badly damaged. Operating at forty per cent efficiency. Preliminary scans suggest enemy shielding absorbed most of the impact. Enemy still advancing with full offensive capabilities.’

‘How long till another charge builds up?’ Ranparre demanded. ‘I need our forward guns online again now!’

‘Does my lord wish to issue a call for further support?’ asked one of the comms-operators. ‘The battle-barge *Tigurius* is only twenty thousand kilometres away. Strike cruisers *Hewson* and *Maqueda* are six and nine thousand kilometres away respectively.’

Ranparre scanned the tactical displays in front of him, focusing on those that showed the situation to port and starboard. What he saw was utter chaos. The planetary blockade was fracturing in countless places as the ork vessels ploughed in amongst the Imperial ships on a hundred different assault vectors at once. Between the battle-line and the planet, space was

glittering with ship debris and bright ordnance impacts. He found the *Tigurius* quickly enough by its ident-tag. She was leaking atmosphere from her port side, listing to starboard, harried by a swarm of ork assault ships, all far smaller than she was. The ork craft buzzed around her like angry wasps, peppering her sides with explosive slugs and energy weapons. She was in no position to lend *The Sabre of Scaurus* any kind of assistance.

His eyes picked out the tags CF-166 and CF-149 – the *Hewson* and the *Maqueda*. Both were engaged in heavy fighting. Even as he watched, the *Maqueda*'s hull started to rupture. Desperate to take some of the foe down with him, her captain, Darrus Gamedo, must have ordered her brought around and onto a full forward-ramming course. Plasma streamed from her rear thrusters, and she ploughed headlong into the side of an ork heavy cruiser that had been launching relentless port broadsides at her from her two-o'clock position.

As Ranparre watched, the *Maqueda*'s sharp prow bit deep into the side of the ork ship. The hulls merged violently. There was a ripple of bright flashes, then, as one, the ships imploded, collapsing in on themselves, every last light onboard winking out.

'We've just lost the *Maqueda*,' said a voice from one of the pits.

Ranparre turned his attention to the *Hewson* and saw that she, at least, was doing better. She rolled to her right and launched a blistering broadside just as a monstrous ork craft attempted to pass by overhead. The enemy's iron belly was punctured in a hundred places, shedding thick pieces of bulkhead into space. Critical systems overloaded. An explosive chain reaction started, ripping the entire alien craft apart seconds later. As the space around the dying ship filled with spinning fragments, the captain of the *Hewson* ordered her crew to swing about for a portside volley against three ork light cruisers that had been flying in support.

For all these worthy kills, Ranparre saw too many gaps where the ork ships were getting through. The xenos were just too numerous to stop, and

the biggest of all their ships was closing on his own, second by second, kilometre by kilometre. The *Sabre of Scaurus* would not have the advantage of range and accuracy for much longer.

‘Prow batteries at maximum charge in eighty-three seconds, my lord,’ reported the senior weapons coordinator.

‘Someone get me the captain of the *Hewson*,’ barked Ranparre. ‘And get me a direct link to Chapter Master Kantor at once.’

‘As you command, lord,’ said the closest of the comms-operators.

Dorn help us, thought Ranparre as he continued to process the nightmare on his tactical screens.

Dorn help us, we are lost.



THIRTEEN

The Upper Rynnhouse, New Rynn City

‘It must be a mistake,’ Baron Etrando called out. ‘An auspex glitch, surely. Martial law? It’s... it’s unheard of. Preposterous!’

Maia could barely hear him over the din the rest of the Upper Rynnhouse was making. The Speaker had called repeatedly for order, but the place was in an uproar. There were one hundred and eighteen nobles in the Upper Rynnhouse, twenty-six of whom were members of her cabinet, and every last one seemed intent on expressing his or her horror or denial at the very same moment.

Jidan Etrando was only three seats away from Maia. Any further and his words would have merged completely with the wall of noise.

‘There is no mistake,’ she called back. ‘The lunar tracking stations on Dantienne and Syphos both confirmed it before they went dead. The entire orbital defence grid is on combat standing. They are coming. There is no doubt of that.’

‘Why here?’ asked a young minister in the row behind her. ‘Why now?’

Maia half turned and saw that it was Buló Dacera, Under-Secretary for Mining and Ore Processing.

‘They are aliens, Bulo. We are not supposed to understand them. The fleet will stop them before they can land.’

Those close enough to hear her went quiet now, and the silence spread until the noise in the plush, vaulted chamber died off to the level of a murmur.

The Speaker, whose ancient body was as much machine as man and was permanently hard-wired into the data systems that served the Upper Rynnhouse, could at last be heard properly. ‘In the name of the Emperor,’ he blustered, ‘you will remember yourselves. All matters, even such as this, must be handled with the decorum this noble establishment demands.’ He turned his sensor-studded head towards Maia.

She felt his electronic eyes lock onto her as he added, ‘If the governor wishes to take the floor, she will step to the Lectern of the aquila.’

‘I will take the floor,’ said Maia formally, and rose from her bench. Her steps were measured, presenting a confidence she did not really feel. The news of the Waaagh had rocked her. In her mother’s time, no conflict greater than a prison breakout had ever occurred. The sharp-tongued, cold-hearted female politico from whose womb Maia had sprung had taught her many, many things, most of them the hard way. But she had not prepared Maia for the possibility of an alien invasion that threatened the lives of every man, woman and child on the planet.

Maia was clinging desperately to her faith, but a voice at the back of her mind persisted in asking how the Emperor could let this happen to people who loved and honoured Him so?

She stopped behind the lectern and cleared her throat, then looked out at the nobles watching her expectantly on the benches to either side of the chamber.

They are as terrified as I am, she thought. More so, perhaps. I wonder how many believe this is punishment for their sins?

There had already been an incident with local law enforcement. Eighteen ministers had attempted to secure illegal outward passage on a fast ship. Had Captain Alvez not grounded all non-military craft already, Maia suspected she would be speaking to an empty room.

She told herself that she would not have fled. Situations like this were what the Crimson Fists trained for, what they excelled at. To turn back the enemies of man – it was the reason they existed at all. Pedro Kantor would not let her down.

For a moment, she turned her eyes heavenwards, staring up at the underside of the exquisite diamond dome. Through its panels, the sky was deep blue, the sibling suns already halfway towards the western horizon where the waters of the Medean would swallow them for the night. Painted on the inner surface of the largest and most central of the diamond panels was an image of the Emperor, looking down on the assembly with a face she had always thought stern but loving, dark locks framing His golden skin.

Lend me strength, she silently begged Him.

‘Fellow members of the house,’ she began, her voice amplified by the vox-mic concealed in the eagle’s head that decorated the lectern, ‘We face something each of us has only ever read about in the archives. No one thought the greenskins foolish enough to return here. Now they have, and I understand your fears. But I do not share them.’ This, of course, was something of a lie. ‘We are leaders,’ she continued, ‘and we must act as such. It is to us that the common man will look for his example. The Crimson Fists are here in force. Surely there is no greater source of comfort than that.’

On a bench to her left, Eduardo Corda looked as if he might disagree. His hair was still a little damp.

The other faces turned towards her were pale and beaded with cold sweat. Regardless of her words, they still seemed terrified. Only Viscount

Isopho looked composed. That shouldn't have surprised her. As a young man, he had bucked family tradition to remain in the Rynnsguard for a commission twice as long as any other noble, and had only left due to his father's passing. By all accounts, he had been a good officer, and the Rynnsguard still afforded him a certain respect they did not afford others.

I should keep Nilo close, Maia thought. His perspective might be useful if...

'The Rynnsguard, too,' she went on, 'assure me that they will protect us. Additional forces are even now being sent from Targis Fields. Once they arrive, they will help to secure the city. The people in the fringe settlements are being brought into the protection of the outer wall even as we speak. We do not expect a protracted siege, if indeed the orks get through at all. Nevertheless, emergency provisions are being shipped in by sea and road, and all goods for export have been recalled from the spaceport.'

Presented with these facts, the ministers seemed to calm a little, their minds latching onto details rather than visions of a hideous alien scourge undoing all they held dear. One woman, Countess Maragretto, whimpered from the back row on the right at mention of a siege, but she managed to stifle it quickly.

'Trust in our protectors,' Maia told them. 'They have taken an oath to defend this planet, and so they shall. Trust, too, in the Civitas enforcers and, by extension, the Adeptus Arbites that supervise them. They too have sworn a solemn oath before the Emperor and will not allow our society to descend into panic and self-destruction. A curfew is being put into effect to facilitate proper control. And trust, above all others save the Emperor Himself, the mighty Space Marines of the Crimson Fists. Therein lies our surest hope. They will end the nightmare. Already, they are about it, and my own faith in them is absolute. Let your faith be as mine, and it will be rewarded.'

She looked out at her peers, reaching for more words that would gird them, but there was nothing more to say for now. They would simply have to watch and wait while others took the fight to the foe.

‘I now offer the floor up to any member who wishes to speak.’

She stepped out from behind the lectern and, with the same measured grace, returned to her bench.

When she was seated, the Speaker rasped, ‘Raise your hand, you who wish to address this noble House.’

Immediately, a hundred arms were thrust into the air, and the chamber exploded once again into the din of voices raised in abject panic.



FOURTEEN

Arx Tyrannus, Hellblade Mountains

Kantor was striding rapidly across the inner courtyard towards the central hall of the Strategium when he saw the first signs of battle in the sky above.

The sky was darkening. From the peaks of the Hellblade Mountains, the last remnants of the day shone as little more than a soft, lambent glow beyond the horizon in the far west, but the sunset was hidden from view by the high walls all around him, not that he would have had time to stop and appreciate it anyway. Above him, the sky was dark purple, shifting towards black, and the stars were coming out.

It was there, up among the familiar constellations, that he saw it all begin. There were more stars than normal tonight, and many of them moved restlessly towards each other. Some were short lived. Every bright flash the Chapter Master saw up there represented either the blast of powerful energy weapons, or the dying moments of a sizable craft. For every one of the latter, how many lives were lost in those ever-so-brief flares? He could only hope that each marked the violent end of ork lives, not human.

Other lights, even brighter and more distinct, appeared, following fiery arcs across the sky. They glowed with the orange heat of atmospheric entry, and he knew the worst had now begun. The line had been breached.

Orks began to rain down on the planet.

So soon, he thought to himself? Can it really be?

The Imperial blockade simply hadn't had time to organise itself. Snagrod must have known this, must have guessed his best hope lay in a full-frontal surprise attack that no human commander would dare. To translate from the warp so close to the planet... No human commander would have dared.

And that is why I should have foreseen this, Kantor thought bitterly. I should not have expected the beast to think as we do. I should have considered the alien nature of the ork mind.

This was no time to stand here and berate himself. The Chapter Council waited. He entered the Strategium's outer halls, sped along the stone corridors, reached the broad double-doors a matter of seconds later, and flung them open.

A dozen faces, all lined with deep concern, turned to regard him. The Chapter Council rose to its feet. Kantor took the carpeted steps down towards the crystal table two at a time. Above the table hovered a static-ridden hololithic image of the battle in orbit.

'My brothers,' said Kantor as he reached his onyx throne. He sat down, and the throne accepted his weight. The gears under the floor began to grind, and the mechanism wheeled him forward, stopping when his breastplate was half a metre from the edge of the table and his booted feet were underneath it. 'Sit.'

There was a clatter of ceramite on stone as they obeyed.

Catching Kantor's eye, Alessio Cortez was the first to say anything. He gestured to the hololithic image above. 'Absolute slaughter,' he managed to say between jaws clenched tight with anger.

Forgemaster Adon had opened a link into the fleet communications net so that the council members could all hear what was going on as it happened. The voices they heard were filled with desperation, every word confirming the worst.

‘There was insufficient time to prepare,’ grated Forgemaster Adon.

High Chaplain Tomasi did not look up at the hololith. Instead he looked at his hands, the fingers interlocked, and said, ‘So many of the faithful have already made the ultimate sacrifice.’

‘They have,’ agreed Mateo Morrelis, ‘but they made it count. The fleet’s kill ratio must not be ignored. Our forces up there are fighting like cornered lions!’

‘And we sit here talking,’ spat Cortez. ‘Give us orders, lord. Send us out there.’

Kantor glared at him. ‘You’ll have all the fighting you want soon enough, Alessio. They are landing their drop-ships even now, and we will greet them with bolter and blade.’ He turned to Adon. ‘Forgemaster, I want every last enemy ship tracked to its landing coordinates. There will be an orbital bombardment soon. The void shields will protect us, but the moment it is over, we will send out purgation squads in our Thunderhawks. I want the entire effort coordinated through the Communicatus and the armoury. Those not selected to launch ground assaults will man our surface-to-orbit emplacements. While even one of our ships continues to fight in space, we will offer every last bit of support we can.’

‘The Technicarum is already monitoring the trajectory of each enemy vessel, my lord. There will be no mistakes.’

Kantor nodded, and there was a brief silence, broken when he said, ‘My Fists, I did not imagine that the ork warlord would risk the strength of his force in the way he has. His gamble has paid off. But, in centuries hence, when men read of this day, when analysts at war colleges across the

Imperium look to their historical texts, they must see that we endured, and, ultimately, that we turned this blow aside. We are the Crimson Fists and this is our home. We will deal with the invaders as they deserve to be dealt with.'

'We might manage to hold Sorocco,' offered Raphael Acastus, 'but what of Calliona and the *Magalan*?'

Kantor had already considered this. 'The Monitor will liaise with local Rynnsguard forces on both those continents and keep us abreast of developments. But we must secure Sorocco first. The oceans will help in confining the foe to wherever they land. Sorocco must be cleansed first.'

'If the orks create a strong blockade of their own,' said Chief Apothecary Curien Droga, 'they will be able to land additional forces wherever and whenever they like.'

Kantor faced the old Apothecary. 'I am not giving up on our fleet yet, Curien,' he said. Gesturing up at the spectral battle taking place above the surface of the table, he continued, 'Ceval Ranparre has never lost an engagement in his life. Though he is greatly outnumbered, he *will* find a way to turn this around.'

'The elimination of Snagrod,' said Cortez. 'But we cannot even be sure he is here in person.'

'The beast is here,' said Eustace Mendoza. 'I assure you.'

'Can you pinpoint him?' asked Kantor. 'If we could guide the remainder of the fleet in on him before he makes planetfall—'

Mendoza shook his shaved head. 'The warp is in turmoil all around us, torn open so close and in so many places. It will take days, perhaps even weeks before we can read its flows and eddies again with any accuracy. I can sense Snagrod's foul aura out there among all the psychic death screams, but that is all.'

'If there's any change in what you sense, tell me at once, brother.'

Something Forgemaster Adon was listening to made him look up. He turned his optic-lenses towards the Chapter Master and said, 'The Master of the Fleet has just placed an emergency request to speak to you, my lord.'

Kantor frowned. 'Let me hear him, brother.'

The rest of the council looked to Kantor, awaiting his dismissal so that he could converse with the Master of the Fleet in private, but Kantor shook his head and told them, 'Whatever Ceval Ranparre has to say must be heard by all of us. You will stay. You will listen with me.'

So they stayed and they listened, and the news was not good.

'The situation is now desperate,' crackled the voice on the link. 'I say again, put me through to the Chapter Master at once. There is no time for delay.'

'Can he hear me?' Kantor asked Adon.

'Yes, my lord.'

'Ceval, this is your Chapter Master. Report.'

Kantor had known the Master of the Fleet a very long time and, despite Ranparre's best efforts, he could easily detect the strain in his voice. It disturbed him far more than the words themselves. He had always believed Ranparre unflappable.

'My lord, we have lost more than fifty-six per cent of our force, and more ork vessels are still translating into real space. I no longer believe this conflict can be won in space. You must prepare for a ground offensive of significant proportions.'

Kantor imagined his own expression was reflected in the dour looks he could see on the faces of his fellow council members. 'Are you telling me, Ceval, that you can do no more up there?'

There was a pause. Ranparre seemed taken aback by the question. 'My lord? I'm not sure I understand the question. We will fight to the very last, naturally. Every ship we eliminate means less greenskins on the ground.'

‘That is not what I am getting at, Ceval,’ said Kantor. ‘I need to know if you feel it would be wiser for our surviving ships to disengage.’

Again, a pause.

‘I cannot see any circumstances, my lord,’ said Ranparre in tones heavy with emphasis, ‘that would cause me to consider disengaging. Every ship we have lost so far has accounted for a great many enemy craft. It would do our fallen a great disservice, and myself a great dishonour, were I to leave this fight without claiming victory in their name.’

‘There is no dishonour in a tactical withdrawal,’ replied Kantor, ‘least of all one that I order. I cannot have the entire fleet destroyed. Things are already far worse than we anticipated. Order *The Crusader* to reposition. She is to make for Segmentum Headquarters and solicit aid. I will not let pride be our undoing.’

‘She cannot possibly jump this close to a gravity well, my lord,’ said Ranparre. ‘And she will not break through the ork fleet alone.’

Kantor frowned. He knew he had no choice. ‘Then commit all remaining ships to getting her through. She will have to risk the jump. Many of Snagrod’s ships survived it. She can, too. These are my final orders to you, brother. After *The Crusader* is away, you may fight on to a worthy end. Your legend will live on forever.’

Ranparre would never know just how hard that had been for Kantor to say. He answered, ‘Thank you, lord. Fight well. May Dorn watch over you all.’

The link went to static as Ranparre broke the connection.

‘Farewell, brother,’ said Kantor solemnly, almost to himself. ‘I will see you again at the Emperor’s side.’



FIFTEEN

The Cassar, New Rynn City

Alvez did not sit. He paced back and forth at the head of the table, armoured boots heavy on the granite floor. The others watched him wordlessly.

The Cassar boasted only a small Strategium. Unlike its equivalent at Arx Tyrannus, it was square and boasted no ceiling dome. The table, too, was different – angular, fashioned from ebonwood rather than crystal, and as old as the building itself. Around it sat twelve Crimson Fists, including Huron Grimm, Epistolary Deguerro, and squad leaders from both the Crusade, Second and Third Companies.

The captain finally stopped, turned to scan the eyes of his fellows, and said, ‘Rynnsguard High Command is sending an armour and infantry column down from Targis Fields, so I want Carriageway 2 held secure at all costs. The moment that armour passes through the Umbris Gate, I want it sealed and barricaded. Orks tend to follow the lay of the land. The mountains of the Anshar Minoris protect our north-west flank, but they will also funnel the enemy down towards the northern districts. I’m expecting the Umbris Gate to come under heavy attack in the opening phases of the invasion.’ His eyes settled on one of the veteran sergeants

seated at the far end of the table, a narrow-faced Adeptus Astartes with a sharp chin. ‘Sergeant Delos, you will be responsible for that section of the wall. There are four Rynnsguard platoons already stationed there. Assume command the moment you arrive. Make sure their senior officer understands exactly who is in charge.’

Delos gave a tiny bow of his head. ‘Understood, my lord.’

At last, Alvez deigned to sit. He put one gauntleted hand on the table and leaned back in his chair. ‘We bear a great burden, my brothers, but we are more than equal to the task ahead. The Chapter Master is depending on us. Word has just come through that the blockade has fallen. The orks will pour down on us like monsoon rains. It has already begun. The city is to be placed under martial law. Those citizens who are able will be drafted into militias. All food stores and key resources will be pooled and distributed in accordance with emergency Munitorum protocols. These things are of peripheral concern to us, of course. Let the Rynnsguard and the Arbites deal with the civilians. Our role is much simpler. We are here to win a war. To succeed, we need only remain standing when the last xenos falls.’

A few of the others nodded at this. Others murmured their assent, or sat in silence, as Huron Grimm did, with dark looks on their faces.

‘The city walls are solid,’ Alvez continued. ‘They are strong, and they will hold if we allow no mistakes. The gates are even stronger, and I have already assigned our heavy armour to guard them. Any breach will be met with immediate Predator and Vindicator fire. The Techmarines are on the parapets as we speak, readying the thunderfire cannons for operation. While we have ammunition and supplies equal to the task, I have absolute confidence in our ability to resist the foe, at least on the surface. The city underworks are another matter. I have no choice but to assign all our Terminator squads, with the exception of those posted at the spaceport, to the task of holding the tunnels.’ Pre-empting a protest from the Crusade Company sergeants seated before him, he held up an armoured hand. ‘I

would not issue this order if it were not absolutely necessary, brothers. Dorn knows, I would rather place you at the city gates, but the orks *will* try to infiltrate our lines via the tunnels, and Tactical Dreadnought armour is best suited to resist them there. At least you will have your share of killing. We cannot afford to collapse the tunnels, since at least some are part of the city's anti-flooding system. Others carry power and coolant to critical defensive emplacements. They must be secured.'

'Then they shall be,' said Barrien Gallacus, the sergeant in charge of the First Vanguard Squad. 'We will choke them with greenskin dead.'

'See that you do,' said Alvez.

He leaned forward, eyeing each Adeptus Astartes in the room, a feral grin on his scarred and weathered features.

'Rejoice in the battle to come, brothers,' he added. 'This is what we live for. This is what we were born to do. We will prove our strength in the heat of combat. We will breathe victory in like air. Trust me, legends will be made here.'



SIXTEEN

Arx Tyrannus, Hellblade Mountains

They came.

In later days, this night would come to be known as the Night of the Burning Sky, and well it deserved that name. The entire length of the Hellblades, over a thousand kilometres of jagged mountain range, shook and flashed with sharp detonations. The greenskin fleet, having swept aside the hastily prepared defensive blockade, launched a planetary bombardment that would claim the lives of millions. Snagrod's ships had come prepared to carpet the towns and cities in flame. They didn't need to be accurate, not with the sheer amount of ordnance at their disposal.

Pedro Kantor clenched his jaw as he watched the deadly rain of bombs fall around him. Behind him, the brothers in his Honour Guard were restless, uneasy. In the sky above the Sercia Bastion on which they stood, alien payloads fell without cease. None struck the fortress-monastery. Those that should have done exploded harmlessly a half a kilometre above Kantor's head, unable to penetrate the powerful void shield defence system that protected Arx Tyrannus.

Every explosive impact on the shimmering shields caused the landscape below to flicker bright as day.

With the void shields at full power, the air became close and clammy, almost oppressive, and there was a constant loud hum in the air, discernible in the spaces between the thunder of the relentless barrage.

Kantor called Ordinator Savales to his side. The seneschal had been following his lord at a respectful distance, braving the greenskin storm in case Kantor should need him for anything. Now the Chapter Master wanted Savales safe. The moment the bombardment ended, the void shields would be lowered to allow return fire. Keeping the shields up was safer, but it would allow the orks to land wherever they wanted with relative impunity, challenged only by the scattered plasma defence installations operated by the Rynnsguard.

At his lord's command, Savales stepped forward and stood before Kantor with his head bowed. 'What does my lord wish of me?' he said, and looked up.

Kantor searched the man's expression for fear, and was proud to find none. Savales was as composed as ever. He should have been one of us, thought Kantor. He might have carved a fine legend for himself.

'Return to the central keep, Ramir. The shields will go down soon, and I'll not have you out in the open.'

The old seneschal held his lord's gaze. 'My place is by your side, lord, whatever the danger, to see to your needs.' There was no defiance in his tone. He simply stated this as plain, inarguable fact.

'My current need is to have my seneschal return to the keep as ordered,' said Kantor. 'The dead serve no one. Gather the youngest of the Chosen in the Refectory. They will be frightened, and you will teach them to deny their fear.'

Savales let his reluctance show, but answered, 'I will do as my lord commands, of course. Should you need anything of me, you need only call, no matter the circumstance.'

Kantor was not prone to smiling. It was not an expression that came naturally to his long, solemn features. But, he smiled now, briefly, at a memory still crystal clear. Though Savales looked far older than he, Kantor felt an almost paternal affection for the man. He remembered Savales as a dejected youth, remembered his face as he had sat in that cell so long ago, believing death the only escape from his despair at failing to become Adeptus Astartes. He remembered, too, the change in that face when the boy had been offered a new and worthy purpose.

Savales bowed deeply, excused himself, turned and strode off in the direction of the main keep, his robes billowing behind him. Explosions continued to flower and boom in the air above.

On the comm-link, Kantor heard the voice of the Monitor.

‘My lord, we have just lost contact with Scar Lake Airbase. I have tried all secondary and tertiary frequencies, but there is nothing. Nor can I communicate with the Rynnsguard forces stationed at Caltara, Sagarro, Mycea... I- I cannot explain it, lord.’

The Monitor’s agitation was well founded. Losing contact with one of the provincial capitals would have been bad enough, but the airbase at Scar Lake was heavily defended. If the orks had already knocked out the base’s communications, it would not be long until they overran the base itself. Were they even now marauding through the streets of the provincial capitals, cutting down whole families that fled before them?

‘What of New Rynn City?’ Kantor asked through the vox in his helmet.

‘The signal is weak,’ reported the Monitor. ‘Sporadic. But we are still in contact. The reports are grim. Ork landers have been spotted descending on all sides, a great many in the marshes to the south, near Vardua and Porto Kalis. The city’s entire defence grid is still engaging with surface-to-orbit munitions, but the density of targets...’

Yes, thought Kantor. And they will try to land here, soon.

‘Do all you can to maintain links with the capital,’ he told the Monitor.
‘And keep me updated.’

He turned to his Honour Guard and barked, ‘Our brothers have this bastion well in hand. We will proceed to the Protheo Bastion next. Follow.’

The five-man squad barked out a unified response and fell in behind him. As they walked, Kantor looked west over the battlements and saw, even through the bright rippling fire of detonating bombs, the entry glows of all too many xenos craft. All across Rynn’s World, ugly, filthy, noisy ork vehicles would be rolling down ramps and racing out over the hard-packed dirt in search of slaughter.

The farming communities will be devastated, thought Kantor. The orks will descend on them like locusts, and nothing will be left alive. The beasts will have a bloodlust on them. If only the damned bombardment would cease so we can start knocking them out of the sky.

His view from the Protheo Bastion only added to his concern. Where the mountains dropped to the low hills, and the hills dropped to the steppes, bright fires studded the night. The sky boiled with descending craft, their trails cutting across the black canvas of the sky in long curving arcs. Bombs continued to fall from space, cratering the mountains where the umbrella of the void shields ended.

A disaster, thought Kantor. In the history of the Chapter, my name will forever be linked with this night. I must do all I can to ensure that it is remembered with honour, not shame. I will not be the Chapter Master who faltered on his home ground.

When the bombardment began to slacken, as it did now, he noticed the change immediately. Soon, the fiery bursts above the fortress-monastery died off completely. It was a sign that the orks were coming. Soon, they would try to land nearby and launch their ground assault on Arx Tyrannus. He would teach them what a mistake that was!

On the comm-link, he opened a channel to Forgemaster Adon.

‘Yes, my lord?’ rasped the old Techmarine.

‘Drop the shields,’ Kantor commanded. ‘It is time to unleash our fury.’

‘The Sercia, Protheo and Marez batteries are ready, my lord. The Laculum batteries are powering up now.’

‘Problems, Javier?’

‘A momentary glitch, lord. System checks now report optimal status. We have targeting solutions already mapped. Tracking data for the missiles is being uploaded now. The Laculum batteries will be online within three minutes.’

‘As soon as they are ready,’ said Kantor, ‘launch everything we have. I want maximum retaliation on the greenskin fleet. We’ll honour Ranparre, by Terra! What is the risk of large-scale debris impacting post-contact?’

‘Very small, lord. The largest of the ork ships are locked in orbit so they can deploy their landers. Any heavy impact will propel debris outwards, away from the planet. The probability margin of collateral surface destruction is within the lower tenth of a percentile.’

‘Very well,’ Kantor replied. ‘You have my full confidence. Let the enemies of mankind know our wrath.’

‘In Dorn’s name,’ grated Adon.

The comm-link clicked off.

Over the command channel, Kantor addressed all his squad and company commanders. ‘The shields are going down, brothers. They will be coming. Bless your weapons and honour the Chapter with your kills.’

Another voice, Marqol Tomasi’s, added, ‘There is only the Emperor.’

Kantor’s voice joined the others in the traditional response.

‘He is our shield and our protector.’

Sirens began to wail and red warning lamps spun into life. From the top of a tower sixty metres to Kantor’s right, a great cloud of steam billowed up into the air. A circular hatch in the tower roof, one metre thick and five metres across, hinged open with a hydraulic hiss. All around the fortress-

monastery, the same was happening, hatches rising to reveal the blunted noses of surface-to-orbit ballistic missiles, each equipped with the most devastating conventional warheads available.

The sirens changed pitch now, warning of imminent launch. The Space Marines stopped checking each others' gear for a moment to turn and watch as the first flames licked up from the top of the tower-silos. The ground began to shudder, and the air filled with a rumble that drowned out all else.

Snagrod had underestimated the Crimson Fists in coming here. He was about to pay for that mistake.

The deafening roar of plasma-jet rockets intensified in pitch, and the nose of the missile nearest to Kantor slowly rose into view. Its acceleration seemed painfully slow at first. It wrestled with gravity, fighting to heave its bulk into the air.

More and more of the missile emerged from the silo, and its speed continued to increase. Gravity was losing. The missile burst clear of the silo, shooting straight up into the sky with a roar like an angry god. Its tail of flame was almost blindingly bright.

Others followed, streaking upwards on thick columns of fire and smoke.

Watching them arc towards their distant targets, Pedro Kantor never imagined, not even for an instant, that a terrible hammer was about to fall on everything he held most dear.

The Night of the Burning Sky had only just begun.

Savales stopped in the hall just outside the Refectory and immediately perceived the fear that hung in the air. The smooth stone benches within were crowded with the youngest of the Chosen, many of whom were hunched over, looking up at the vaulted ceiling from beneath rumped brows. Others had their eyes shut tight. Some hugged themselves or rocked back and forth. The youngest were a mere eight years old, the oldest closer to fourteen. None had experienced anything like this before.

Even Savales would have bet against the orks being so brash as to assault an Adeptus Astartes home world directly.

The young Chosen had been gathered here to wait out the orbital bombardment, but also to keep them from under the feet of the Adeptus Astartes and the older serfs, many of whom had duties critical to the defence of the fortress-monastery. A few adults paced between the benches, telling the boys to be strong, that the storm which was shaking the entire mountain would be over soon enough.

One of the adults, a whip-thin man named Bernis Kalisde, Master of the Refectorium, barked at some of the boys as he passed close to them, causing several to jump and one to cry out in surprise. ‘You are pathetic!’ he told them. ‘Look at you, cowering like beaten dogs. You belong to the Chapter. In your time here, have you learned nothing from your betters? Fear is useless to you. It holds you back. Let go of it, or it will have to be beaten out of you.’

Savales watched Kalisde from the shadow of the western entrance. No one had yet noticed his presence. He did not like the man. Kalisde was quick to criticise and loath to hand out praise where it was well deserved, and he had no right to beat anyone who did not serve directly under him. Some of these boys were already marked to study for roles in the Sacratium, apothecarion and Technicarum once they were old enough. If the Master of the Refectorium lifted a hand to them, he would find himself facing a very harsh penance.

‘Look at me,’ Kalisde continued. ‘Do you see me shaking? Are my eyes wet with tears like yours? No. You are weak, all of you. The bombs do not scare me at all. I’d be laughing at you all if I wasn’t so disgusted.’

Savales stepped fully into the Refectorium now, walking straight for the centre of the hall. His robes, bearing the personal heraldry of the Chapter Master on the back and breast, marked him out as the supreme authority among the Chosen. No other mortal man had the right to bear that sigil until Savales passed it on. On seeing the ordinator enter, Kalisde stopped

pacing and drew himself up straight. He eyed Savales with grudging respect as he approached.

‘Look here, you boys. Ordinator Savales fears no greenskin bombs, is that not right, ordinator?’

‘Not so long as I have void shields over my head,’ said Savales, stopping a few paces from Kalisde and smiling at the boys who looked up at him from either side. Then he fixed his eyes on the Master of the Refectory and said, ‘I will take things from here, Bernis. You and your staff are free to retire for now.’

Kalisde did not like being told what to do on territory he considered his own, but he knew the power the ordinator wielded. His jaw worked for a moment while he considered a response but, if he found one, he thought better of voicing it. He gave a curt nod and moved off to an arch in the north wall that would take him back to the kitchens. The other adults followed in silence.

Savales looked at the boys around him. He couldn’t fault Kalisde for what he had been trying to do, but there were better ways to do it than making scared children feel guilty and miserable.

‘Make room,’ he told two on his right. He stepped over their bench and sat down beside them. ‘Gather close, the rest of you,’ he called out. ‘Make sure you can all hear me.’

Wordlessly, the young serfs from other tables rose and gathered around, their fellows making room for them so that the benches became closely packed. There was a certain primal comfort in this new proximity. Huddled together like this, the shuddering of the mountain lost a little of its edge.

‘Now,’ said Savales, ‘how many of you understand what is happening outside?’

None raised a hand. They all knew that the fortress-monastery was under attack by orks, of course, but none had ever seen one. All they knew of the

greenskins was the stories the older serfs sometimes told, always third hand, and whatever they could glean from the friezes that decorated many of the Chapter corridors, ancient artwork in which Crimson Fist heroes were depicted slaying thick green figures by the hundreds.

‘You know that the aliens hoped to surprise Master Kantor, yes? They hoped to strike hard at the Chapter’s foundations and gain a quick victory. Well, try to imagine how frustrated the foolish greenskin leader must be feeling right now. He and his troops have spent years preparing, maybe even decades. His armies have crossed great stretches of cold, dark space, intent on obliterating the single greatest threat to their species in the entire sector. They risked death by the millions, exiting the warp dangerously close to a planet, losing many of their most powerful ships in the process. It’s true. And now, having finally reached their goal, they launch their payloads, only to find their weapons utterly useless. Every last bomb they drop explodes harmlessly on our shields. Afraid? Us? Throne, no! It is fine comedy.’

He saw a few faces brighten as they listened, but the walls still rumbled. The bombardment seemed endless and it was clear the youngsters needed more from him.

‘When I was your age,’ he told them, ‘I experienced the greatest fear of my life. Do you know what that was?’

‘You saw a xenos,’ said a wide-eyed boy of nine from across the table.

‘No,’ said Savales. ‘Not that.’

‘A daemon, then?’ said another of about the same age.

The others hissed at him and made warding signs, and he shrank back from them.

Savales frowned and shook his head, but he was not angry. ‘No, not that. And we do not say that word aloud, child. Remember your lessons. Well, it seems none of you will ever guess, so I will tell you. The greatest fear of my life was that my chance to serve the Chapter was lost forever. I was not

much older than you are when I discovered I would never be Adeptus Astartes. I had wanted it so much. I doubted the worth of any other kind of life. I thought my life over. I was sure I would be put to death. But I've lived a better life than I ever deserved, and so will each of you. The Chapter needs us, you know, and each of us need the Chapter. Master Kantor knows all your names. He cares for all the Chosen. In fact, he once said to me, "Ramir, the Chosen are like this mountain". "How so, my lord?" I asked him. "They are the rock on which the Chapter stands," he told me. "It is by their labours that the battle-brothers are always ready for war. I only wish the rest of the Imperium knew how much of our glory and honour rightly belongs to the ones who serve us."

'He really said that?' asked a boy on Savales's left.

'He did,' said Savales. 'Throughout your lives, the Chapter will ask much from each of you. Sometimes you will be tired, but you must go on. Sometimes you will feel pain, but you must overcome it. You must give everything you have to your duties. Lord Hellblade is depending on you. The Chapter's victories are our victories, too. Do not forget it.' He pointed upwards towards the high ceiling and raised his eyes. 'When the orks finish dropping their useless bombs, our masters will begin the real fight, and they will finish it, too. You will see. The Crimson Fists cannot be overcome. Even the accursed scythians failed in the end and fled into the Great Dark to escape the Chapter's wrath.'

The air in the Refectorium had brightened noticeably now. Most of the boys had straightened in their seats. Savales saw pride burning in bright eyes. Good, he thought.

'I hope you all know *Gordeau's Ninth Litany Against Fear*.'

The youngest looked nervous and guilty, but the others nodded.

'If you don't know it,' Savales said kindly, 'just listen and do your best. You will soon pick it up.'

So, he led them in the litany, their voices joining to fill the air and challenge the noise of the bombs. They hardly noticed when the bombs stopped falling. A short time later, when death came to take them all, that was how it found them; unafraid, with pride in their hearts.

Savales need not have worried about the worth of his life. He had lived it with great honour, and it ended in the only place he ever called home.

The orks came soon after the first of the ship-killers were launched. They came in uncountable numbers, with tanks and bikes and weapons that beggared description, spewing forth from fat transports that braved the fortress-monastery's mid- and close-range defences to land and disgorge them. They swarmed up the mountainsides, heedless of the fire that spilled out to meet them.

Alessio Cortez felt no fear. It had been so long, he no longer knew what true fear felt like. When the call went up that orks had been spotted on the slopes, he felt only the familiar, welcome heat of battle-rush. His blood surged through his veins, flooding his muscles with everything they would need for the imminent combat. He felt the cardiovascular drumbeat in his gauntleted fingers where they gripped his trusty bolt pistol.

Now they'll see, he thought. Now they'll pay for their arrogance.

He and his company had been charged with defending the Protheo Bastion from the lower ramparts and, as the alien horde charged into view, they began pouring fire down onto the snorting, roaring front lines. The orks, usually disinclined towards night attacks, when their poor eyesight was rendered even poorer, carried flaming torches that made them all too easy to target. They had little chance of breaching the western wall. The chasm helped prevent that. But they had brought heavy armour with them, great lumbering artillery pieces with unbelievably wide muzzle and, if these were brought within range, they would be able to lob their barrel-sized shells over the walls.

The Fourth Company was not about to allow that.

Bolter-fire sputtered out, splitting apart the night, bright muzzle flares strobing across the walls. Lascannons cracked like lightning, ionising the air, lancing into ugly enemy tanks and cutting them apart as soon as they came into view. Explosions once again rocked the mountainside.

‘For glory, brothers!’ shouted Cortez as he fired again and again.

Behind him he heard another voice boom out, ‘For glory, captain!’

Cortez glanced round for the briefest instant and saw a white skull. He recognised the voice, one of Tomasi’s Chaplains, Brother Rhava, with two black-robed Sacratium acolytes in tow. Each acolyte silently carried a tray of extra ammunition and charge packs.

Rhava came forward and joined Cortez at the parapet, raised a glowing plasma pistol, and began firing burst after flesh-searing burst out into the crowded greenskin ranks where they were forced to halt at the chasm’s lip. Many had already plunged over, struck by the fire of the Space Marines, or pushed to their deaths by overeager comrades.

‘How goes the defence, brother-captain?’ the Chaplain asked Cortez between rounds.

Cortez’s clip ran dry. As he slid another from his belt, he answered, ‘There is little sport in this, holy one. They can’t gain ground here. This assault is mass suicide.’

‘And yet,’ said Rhava between his own shots, ‘sport or not, you seem to be revelling in it.’

Cortez grinned beneath his helm. ‘Tell me you find this a chore.’

‘It never is,’ said Rhava. Another of his blinding plasma-bolts struck an ork full in the chest. It sank to its knees, its chest little more now than a gaping crater of burned flesh. The ends of ribs poked from the side of the wound like stubby teeth.

There was a great roaring noise just to the north, and Cortez glanced that way to see another ship-killer emerging from its silo-tower, flames and smoke billowing up around it.

‘I have heard,’ said Rhava, also noting the missile’s emergence, ‘that *The Crusader* escaped successfully.’

Cortez’s eyes followed the missile’s burning path. The power of such weapons was astounding. Part of him wished he could fly with it, to see the raw destruction it wreaked on whichever warp-damned enemy ship it struck.

‘Ranparre gave everything to make it so,’ he said. ‘We will turn this around in his honour. Now that we—’

He never finished that sentence.

Something was wrong. One of the missiles from the other side of the fortress-monastery had suddenly changed vector.

No one would ever know what caused that change. Was it a simple malfunction? Sabotage? The will of malicious gods? No answer would ever come forth, but the results would be remembered in the Imperial history books for all time.

Rhava followed Cortez’s gaze.

‘By Dorn—’

The missile corkscrewed in the air above the Arx Tyrannus for a brief moment. Time seemed to slow down for Cortez as he watched, helpless to do anything. Then the missile plunged deep into the mountainside, its powerful thrusters forcing that armour-piercing nose-cone through metre after metre of rock.

The mountain shook.

Cortez and Rhava were thrown from their feet.

Shouts of alarm replaced the stutter of gunfire on the air.

When the missile reached a depth of two-hundred metres beneath the rock on which Arx Tyrannus stood, it detonated, igniting the Chapter’s ancient underground munitions stores one after another.

There was no time to shield oneself, no time to run, nor even to curse.

White fire engulfed all, and burned to embers the hopes of an entire world.

PART TWO

'These were days so dark they had been rivalled only once in the history of the Chapter, and darker still were yet to come. But darkness is not a thing in and of itself. It has no form, no substance. It is merely the absence of light, and where light enters, darkness always recedes.'

'The smallest most ephemeral spark can grow to burn like a mighty sun.'

'It requires naught but the right kind of fuel.'

'Snagrod gave us all the fuel we needed.'

– Brother-Codicier Ruthio Terraro of the Librarius, Crimson
Fists Chapter, Adeptus Astartes



ONE

The Gorrion Wall, New Rynn City

The concept of patience was as alien to the orks as they themselves were to the race of man. They did not hesitate, did not congregate around fires to hold war councils or to assess the success of their landing. They simply swarmed, and the outer fringes of the planetary capital, those poorest of districts that fell out with the city's grand defensive walls, were engulfed in fire and raw, rampant destruction.

Alvez and Grimm had been out on the south-western ramparts of the Gorrion Wall for hours, overseeing the deployment of Crimson Fist resources to those sections of the city's outermost defences that were judged to be weakest. The rest of the city's perimeter, in particular those sections that were expected to hold longest, were assigned to companies of nervous-looking Rynnsguard. Alvez deemed this best for now, though a stout, high-ranking officer called General Saedus Mir protested as vocally as his respect for the Adeptus Astartes would allow, adamant that his men would prove the equal of any blasted aliens. The first hour of battle, Alvez knew, would separate the real fighters from the cowards. He would pay particular attention to how the Rynnsguard handled their wall sections. Only then would he have an accurate idea of just what General Mir's forces were capable of.

The night sky was criss-crossed in every direction with arcs of orange light as ork craft poured down through the atmosphere from their warp-capable cruisers and destroyers. The city's fixed defences were taxed beyond capacity, firing almost non-stop, and the concussive waves of noise from each shot shook the air all around. Alvez saw a good number of the clumsily fashioned greenskin landers fall from the sky as burning junk, but there were simply far too many of them for it to make any real difference.

Squadrons of Imperial fighters and bombers screamed in overhead to engage those that got through, but the Rynnite pilots were woefully outnumbered. Though they killed a great many with their superior flying skills and lethal weaponry, the sheer number of greenskin fighters in the sky soon overwhelmed them. They would never return to the hangars at Targis Fields, never paint those well-earned kill-signs on their fuselages.

As he watched the aerial battles turn in favour of the invaders, Alvez said a grim prayer for the souls of the doomed Rynnsguard pilots. If the infantry and tank crews were anywhere near as brave, he decided, they might yet surprise him.

'You knew it would come to this,' said Sergeant Grimm, standing at his side.

Alvez, dressed for battle in a massive suit of Tactical Dreadnought armour – better known among the Adeptus Astartes as Terminator armour – fingered the trigger of his twin-barrelled storm bolter. The weapon was large, much larger than a standard bolter, and fitted with a heavy box magazine. They made a nasty mess of organic targets and its oversized bolts could rip through the side of a tank if they had to.

'It was always going to be this way, Huron. One rarely stops a Waaagh in space. You see all these craft? They are but the beginning of the green tide. By dawn, the land beyond these walls will be seething with alien filth and their machines.'

‘I’m glad you consented to evacuating the outer boroughs, my lord. I know it was a risk with the enemy already landing, but it was... the *right* choice.’

Alvez sneered beneath his cold metal faceplate. ‘You mean it was the moral choice, Huron. Do not confuse the two. I am not a wasteful man. This siege will not be over quickly. We have lost control of local space. The enemy land in droves. Sooner or later, every man, woman, and perhaps even child, will be called upon to fight for survival. If evacuation saved the people of the outer boroughs tonight, it was only to postpone their deaths to tomorrow, or the next day. Be under no illusion. A great many sacrifices will be made here. But the Crimson Fists will remain standing.’

An ork troop transport with a metal snout crafted to look like a fang-filled maw roared in low overhead, and Rynnsguard troopers on a neighbouring section of the wall instinctively ducked. The growl of its jets was deafening, and there was a wash of heat after it passed. Neither Alvez nor Grimm moved except to track the craft with their eyes.

Two powerful defence laser towers hummed noisily as they locked onto it. Bright lances of light flashed out, ripping into the transport’s hull. The stricken craft blossomed with bright bursts of orange fire and listed to starboard, but its momentum kept it soaring through the air until, seconds later, it smashed prow-first into a huddle of stocky, flat-roofed habs. The explosion lit the surrounding streets like a flare. By its light, Alvez could see thousand of orks charging along every street and alleyway, roaring insanely with battle lust and waving all manner of killing implements above their ugly, misshaped heads.

‘Ready yourself,’ the captain said to his second. ‘They must not set foot on the ramparts, nor breach the gates.’

He ordered the rest of the Adeptus Astartes on the Gorrion Wall to ready their weapons and, all along its length, bolters were cocked, fat rounds

sliding into empty chambers. He sent a short message to General Mir, authorising the Rynnsguard to begin the first Earthshaker barrage, and was rewarded seconds later with the flash and boom of mighty long-guns as they claimed the first alien casualties of the opening battle.

Two squads of Crusade Company Terminators, Squads Zarran and Valdeus, had been tasked with holding New Rynn space port with a full regiment of Rynnsguard in support. Alvez checked in with them now, and learned that the fighting around the spaceport, sixty kilometres away, was already intense. Sergeant Zarran had local command. He reported to Alvez that the spaceport's anti-air defences had claimed a great many enemy ships, but that enemy armour and infantry were massing in great numbers. Despite this dark news, there was a distinctive tone in Zarran's voice. It was a tone Alvez knew well: that of a man in love with his work. Zarran was looking forward to the slaughter to come.

As he should, thought the Alvez. The purging of xenos is righteous work.

The green horde boiling through the streets below the ramparts were almost in bolter range now. The captain stepped forward to the very edge of the rampart, pistons hissing as they powered the movement of his massive form. He raised his right hand and aimed the barrels of his storm bolter down at the charging front ranks.

'Come, sergeant,' he said to Huron Grimm. 'You spoke of turning the Adacian red. Now that work begins.'

Grimm joined him at the wall and, together with the forces stationed all along its many kilometres of length, they opened fire on the savage invaders.

In all the flashing light and smoke and noise, neither Space Marine noticed the brief, sudden brightening of the sky far to the east.

The first they knew of any catastrophe was when frenzied voices burst over the comm-link on a dozen different channels, all relaying the same

information.

The Librarians were down. All of them.

The captain cursed.

‘In Terra’s holy name, what is going on?’



TWO

Arx Tyrannus, Hellblade Mountains

Pain woke Pedro Kantor. Something was yanking hard on his left arm, along the length of which a dozen fractures were trying to mend. His nerves sent fiery protests to his brain, demanding that he remain still while his body was about the business of healing itself. He heard a high-pitched growl of frustration, and the yanking took on a more frantic edge.

Kantor opened his eyes. There were red warning glyphs at the edges of his visor display, but he ignored them, focusing instead on the cause of the tugging sensation. A short, sinewy form squatted on his left, its wrinkled green flesh naked but for a loincloth of poorly cured animal skin. Sharp teeth jutted from a mouth above which extended a long, hooked nose. Its beady red eyes burned with frustration.

It was a gretchin, and it clearly thought Kantor dead. It was trying to take Dorn's Arrow, but the relic storm bolter was fixed tight to the back of Kantor's left gauntlet, and the ugly little xenos wasn't making any progress.

Despite the fractures, Kantor's arm moved as fast as a striking snake. He wrenched his wrist from the creature's long-fingered hands and grasped it by its scrawny throat, digging his fingers deep into its flesh.

The gretchin began to flail in panic and tried to call out to its fellows, but the vice around its throat permitted no breath in or out.

Kantor squeezed harder, piercing the skin, feeling the tendons tear beneath it. Rivulets of alien blood spilled out over his hand. The gretchin's eyes rolled up into its head and its tongue flopped out. Its flailing ceased. Kantor felt vertebrae snap under his fingers and knew the creature was dead. He threw the body aside.

Where was he? What had happened?

One moment he had been firing down from the upper ramparts of the Protheo Bastion, the next, the world had turned white. He remembered Javier Adon frantically calling to him over the comm-link, but after that...

He turned and pushed himself to his feet. His suit registered elevated background radiation and several weaknesses in his cooling systems – nothing critical, but the latter would require the attention of the Techmarines eventually.

Dawn was breaking, but it was a dawn unlike any he'd seen on Rynn's World. The sky was an angry red. Rynnstar and her sister, Eloix, were hidden from view by great veils of smoke and ash. All around him, bright cinders danced and cavorted on the updrafts. Instinct told him he was facing west with the fortress-monastery at his back. He turned to look east...

...and almost dropped to his knees.

Utter devastation.

Even through the thick veils, he could see that the destruction of his beloved home was almost total. He stood on the far side of the western chasm, close to its edge, and beheld a scene his mind desperately wished to deny. Something had wiped Arx Tyrannus from the face of the planet. Whatever had done so had presumably thrown him clear across the chasm and onto the mountain's western slope.

Gusting winds momentarily drew the veils of ash aside, and Kantor saw that the walls, the gates, the bastions, tower and keeps, all were no more. Arx Tyrannus had been reduced to jagged spurs of steel and stone, jutting from the rubble like so many broken teeth. Here and there, he spotted familiar things in unfamiliar states, the remains of glorious works reduced to wreckage. He saw a great stone block standing tall among its shattered neighbours, its surface embossed with a pattern of carved skulls. It had been part of the towering north-western archway. Now it was part of nothing. To the right of it, he saw a figure in black marble, slumped awkwardly amid tumbled iron beams, its hands and head shorn off. He recognised it by the details on its chest. It was the statue of Isseus Coredo, a Crimson Fists captain who had given his life in battle two hundred years before Kantor had been born. The statue had stood in Memorial Hall, surrounded by worthy company. Now it had none, a lonely symbol that embodied loss, a symbol, Kantor realised, of his own disgrace.

I am the Chapter Master, he thought. It was my role to prevent this. Dorn, forgive me.

Curtains of ash and smoke closed over the view, and Kantor was almost glad of it. His hearts ached, and his limbs were numb with sorrow and disbelief. What was it that had struck them so hard? Had the ork fleet held some terrible weapon in reserve, knowing that the void shields would fall when the Fists believed the orbital bombardment over?

Such questions were quickly put aside when he heard grunting and shuffling behind him. He spun to face the source of the noise, raising Dorn's Arrow as he moved. Visibility was extremely poor, the light of the suns interacting with the ash-filled air to cast little more than a dim red glow, but Kantor knew what he faced by their silhouettes alone. Three sturdy figures advanced towards him, large hands gripping heavy pistols and blades.

He didn't wait for them to see him. At a single thought impulse, Dorn's Arrow barked, and the silhouette in the centre spun and fell, bringing a yell of surprise from the throats of the other two. They had seen Kantor's muzzle flash through the smoke, and they raced forwards, weapons raised, firing rounds that buzzed past his head like furious insects.

Kantor fired again, targeting centre mass, catching the ork on the right twice in the torso. The rounds detonated and split the creature's body apart. The last of the greenskin trio put on a burst of speed, racing out of the smoke directly at Kantor, eager to engage in close combat where the prodigious strength of its race would give it the greatest advantage.

Or so it thought.

Raw strength was so much less when wielded without skill. The ork's first wild swing – a lateral stroke intended to behead the Chapter Master with its large, chipped hatchet – was easy enough to duck. The blade whistled over Kantor's head. The instant it passed, he stepped forward, activating the energy field of the power fist on his right hand, and launched a lethal uppercut that cored the xenos beast like an apple.

Its hollowed form collapsed to the rocky ground, steam rising from the gaping cavity in its chest.

How many more of them were out here on the slopes?

They had been assaulting Arx Tyrannus in great number. Had the cataclysm devastated them, too?

Had any of his brothers survived?

Kantor tried to open a comm-channel, unencrypted, desperate to reach anyone at all, but his visor display reported too much interference from the residual energies of the great explosion. He removed his helmet, considering whether or not to call out. If the orks were still here in number, they would make straight for him with murder on their minds.

Let them come, he thought.

He would take whatever temporary comfort he could in dispensing death to them.

Clipping his helmet to his belt, he took a great lungful of air and was about to call out when he heard the distinctive sound of bolter-fire just off to the north. Without hesitation, he followed it. Was one of his brothers alive, or had some greenskin marauder simply salvaged a boltgun and was firing it at random into the air?

As Kantor moved north along the lip of the chasm, he saw a great many shapes on the ground. Most were orks, their heavy bodies burned black or pulverised by large blocks of stone thrown out in the blast, but there was a far sadder sight among them. With increasing frequency, Kantor came across the still forms of Crimson Fists lying among the xenos dead. They, too, had been thrown from the fortress-monastery's ramparts to land here, their bodies broken beyond their ability to heal. He wanted to stop, to check each for signs of life, but the sound of the boltgun was closer now, and he could see muzzle flare through the smoke up ahead.

Stepping over the dead, ready to join the combat, Kantor hurried towards it.

‘More!’ yelled a familiar voice. ‘Come and meet your death, filthy scum. You’ve won nothing, do you hear me? As long as I live, your kind will have reason to fear.’

Kantor saw an ugly shape loom up on the speaker's left and, before the furious battle-brother could turn his bolt pistol on the creature, he fired, two bolts punching wounds in the monster's side.

It sank to the ground, dead and, for a moment, the area was clear of threats. The determined battle-brother turned. ‘You there!’ he barked. ‘Well met. Now name yourself, brother!’

Despite everything, Kantor grinned. Of all the voices he could have heard at that moment, here was the very one he would have wished for

most. He stepped towards the figure, presenting himself, and answered, 'You once called me Pollux reborn, brother, but you were in error then.'

The other stood stunned, then surged forward to place his hands on Kantor's shoulders.

'Pedro! By all the worlds... You're alive!'

Kantor returned his old friend's embrace. 'Unless we have died, Alessio, and our spirits wander a nightmare... yes, I am alive.'

They released each other and stepped back, each studying the other's face. Alessio Cortez was smiling, but it was impossible to miss the pain in his eyes. Kantor knew his friend felt the loss of so much every bit as keenly as he did.

'Others?' he asked.

'None that I have found so far,' answered Cortez quietly. 'I have checked a great many bodies, brother. But, no. None, yet.'

'Do you know...?'

Cortez scowled. 'One of our own missiles, Pedro. By the blasted bones of the scythians, it was one of our own damned missiles! Rhava and I saw it just before it hit. It hammered straight into the mountainside.'

Kantor shook his head. 'The Forgemaster said there were problems with the Laculum batteries, but the follow-up scans showed everything in order.'

'Adon would not have fired otherwise.'

It was true. The Chapter Master could not believe that Javier Adon had been at fault here. Had it simply been an accident? A billion-to-one quirk of ill fate? If not, had sabotage been the cause? Each of these explanations was equally difficult to swallow.

'A ship-killer couldn't have wreaked so much devastation on its own,' Cortez offered. 'It must have detonated our underground munitions stores. A massive chain reaction is the only thing that would explain such a... catastrophe.'

Kantor was about to respond when the report of a bolter sounded from the west, a little further down the mountain.

A look between them was all that was needed. The two Adeptus Astartes turned and began racing in the direction of the noise. As they ran side-by-side past the smoking ruins of ork machines and the heaped bodies of the greenskin dead, Kantor said, 'If there are answers to be had here, brother, we will have them one day but our destiny lies elsewhere. We must gather together anyone that lives and move from here. More orks will be coming.'

Following the sounds of bolter-fire, Kantor and Cortez were soon reunited with a sergeant by the name of Viejo. When they found him, he was standing over a body in black armour, cutting down a small mob of greenskin filth he had discovered trying to loot it.

Viejo's joy at seeing his two superiors was tempered by the horror of all that had happened. The body in black was that of Chaplain Rhava. Cortez knelt beside it and offered a short prayer. Around Rhava's neck there hung a thick gold and ruby pendant, its aura of power palpable. It was a rosarius, a protective amulet given to all Chaplains on full acceptance into the Sacratium. In these times, its ancient technology was only barely understood. Cortez removed it gently, muttering to the corpse, 'If you will permit me, holy brother, I will carry this until I might return it to another of your order. It belongs with them.'

He did not presume to hang the rosarius around his neck. Only another Chaplain might wear it in such a manner. Instead, Cortez fixed the pendant to his belt, noting a strange pricking sensation on his skin as he did so. Then he rose, swearing revenge.

Continuing the search, Kantor, Cortez and Viejo moved off, maintaining a ten-metre gap between them. Time and again, they turned over the bodies of their brothers to find the armour crumpled or split, and the flesh

within cold and dead. But they did not give up, and their determination soon paid off.

Half an hour later, the three had become nine. An hour after that, sixteen. Though they continued to scour the area, killing any greenskins that stumbled onto their path, their number rose no higher.

Sixteen Crimson Fists had survived from a force of over six hundred. Of most of those who had perished, there were no remains to be found. The explosion that had destroyed their ancient home had obliterated all trace of them. So it was with the thousands of Chosen who had believed themselves relatively safe within the fortress-monastery's walls.

A few of the Chapter's serfs lay here on the slopes among the Adeptus Astartes and the aliens, but not many. Their twisted, broken forms would have been hard to recognise but for the distinctive robes in which they'd died. Every last one he passed made Kantor think of his loyal ordinator. The knowledge that the old man would never again bring him spiced fruits and fresh water in his chambers, nor stay a while to share in the joys of friendly discussion, was like a knife in his side. He would miss Savales's honest, open face and his kind ways.

It soon became clear that any further searching was futile. It was time to think about setting some objectives. There was only one place to go, Kantor knew – New Rynn City. Thank the Emperor and the primarch that a good number of the Crimson Fists had been there when the missile struck.

'Weapons,' he told the somewhat battered-looking Adeptus Astartes that stood in front of him. 'We will need supplies. Grenades, ammunition, water, nutricaps, blades, anything you can find. Strap on as much as you can. We've a long and difficult path ahead of us.'

Cortez came in close, and said in an undertone, 'What of our fallen? We can't just leave them out here like carrion.'

Kantor knew exactly how the orks would treat the dead. They would strip the sacred armour from them and bastardise it to suit their own ends.

Then they would defile the corpses, hacking off heads and hands to wear as sickening trophies.

He shook his head, as much to rid himself of that image as to reject what Cortez was suggesting.

‘I wish we could honour our brothers properly, Alessio, but we have lingered here long enough. More orks will be coming, and in force. They will want to gloat over this. There is no time to bury anyone.’

‘If I may, lord,’ said a brother called Galica, a member of Fifth Company. ‘We could perhaps burn them. Some of the dead xenos were carrying crude flamers. A pyre would deny them their sacrilege.’

Kantor felt fifteen pairs of eyes on him, awaiting his pronouncement. He could read their faces. If he denied them this, he was sure, they *would* follow him, but none would be happy about leaving the dead this way. In his heart of hearts, he knew he wouldn’t be, either.

‘Very well,’ he told them. ‘Galica, Olvero and Teves will gather the xenos flamers. Look for fuel canisters, too. The orks may have been carrying extra ammunition for them. The rest of us will gather our dead. Work quickly.’

So they did, and soon there was a mound of figures in dark blue armour. Among them were other colour in lesser number – Chaplains in black, Rhava among them, Techmarines in red, Apothecaries in white.

Kantor particularly lamented the fact that none of the latter had survived. An Apothecary could have recovered priceless gene-seed from the dead. That gene-seed was needed now more than ever, a critical resource in bringing the Chapter back up to strength in the future... *if* the Chapter was to have a future.

The work of ensuring it did, Kantor knew, fell squarely on his shoulders.

He prayed to Pollux that he was equal to the task.

Brothers Galica, Teves and Olvero lit the pyre, white fire gushing and spitting from the nozzles of the alien weapons. Then, when the fuel

canisters were spent, they threw the weapons aside and joined the others in a final salute.

As the fire claimed the bodies of the dead, Kantor found himself wishing that High Chaplain Tomasi were here, for his spiritual strength as much as for his knowledge of the appropriate rites. He offered words of his own as the flames crackled and snapped, but, though his brothers appeared moved by them, he felt they were a poor substitute.

Tomasi had been ministering to the souls of his fellow Crimson Fists since long before either Kantor or Cortez were even born – almost five hundred years of unswerving loyalty and honour. And then, in an eye-blink, he had been wiped from existence. One of the largest, most forceful personalities Kantor had ever known, snuffed out in an instant with those he tended, another legend cut short without fitting glory to punctuate it. It had been Tomasi who had overseen the Rites of Succession that saw ultimate authority pass from the late Chapter Master Visidar to Kantor. Who would oversee those rites now? Who among the Chaplains in the capital was fit to take Tomasi's place?

He reached out and put a hand on Cortez's shoulder. 'Enough,' he said. 'We have done all we can here. New Rynn City is over a thousand kilometres away, and the land that separates us from our goal will be seething with the foe. Snagrod means to obliterate us entirely. He may think it a task already accomplished, but he *will* send forces to make sure. Get the others ready to leave.'

Cortez didn't move. He stood staring into the flames. 'When I lay eyes on the vile bastard, Pedro...'

There was a shout from the other side of the fire. Kantor left Cortez where he was and strode around it, already certain it would not be good news.

He was right.

Brother Alcador was staring out over the vast expanse of the Arcalan Basin to the west, eyes fixed on a point in the sky. ‘We have aircraft inbound, my lord,’ he said. ‘And they are not ours!’

Kantor followed the battle-brother’s gaze.

He saw them now, a cluster of dark shapes in the distance, far away but moving swiftly. If they didn’t change vector, they would be on top of the Fists position in a matter of minutes.

They flew in what could only loosely be called formation. The smaller craft rolled and swooped dangerously close to a knot of larger, bulkier machines.

Their recklessness was unmistakable.

‘Damn them,’ spat Kantor.

Cortez had followed him around the fire, and was now tracking the dark objects in the distance, too. ‘This is a gift, brother.’ He lifted his bolt pistol in front of his breastplate to emphasise his point. ‘We can begin our vengeance now!’

‘I will not risk the lives of the Fists I have left,’ snapped Kantor. ‘How do you propose to fight their jets without anti-air weaponry?’

The approaching ork aircraft might be carrying high-yield bombs, air-to-ground missiles and Throne-knew-what-else. To die here, bombed from the air by the filthy savages... No. Their chance for justice, for revenge, would vanish like smoke on the wind.

‘We pull out,’ said Kantor. ‘Now!’

Cortez glared at him as if he were mad.

‘Run, Pedro? You cannot mean that. Let them land. We can ambush them. If we allow ourselves to fear death now, we are not worthy to survive. Surely you see that. Honour will only be served by taking the fight to them. It is the Adeptus Astartes way. It is the *only* way.’

Kantor’s eyes bored into Cortez’s. ‘This is not about honour or pride, damn you. This is about the survival of our Chapter. Nothing else. New

Rynn City is our only hope. We must reunite with Alvez's force. Now move these battle-brothers out, captain. We will follow the Yanna Gorge. It will give us good cover until we reach the steppes.'

Cortez cursed and spat on the ground and, just for the briefest instant, Kantor found himself furious at his insolence. They were friends, yes, and he had always afforded Cortez certain liberties because of that. But he was taking them too far now. Rank superseded all else. The captain clearly needed reminding.

Kantor's voice was dangerously quiet as he said, 'Understand me, Alessio. These are my orders. Orders, brother! You have debated them countless times before, but you have never disobeyed them. You will not do so now when I need your strength most.'

Cortez's eyes were wild. Missile malfunction or not, his soul burned with a need, a compulsion, to eviscerate those who had come to Rynn's World with the intention of doing his brothers harm. His home was gone, his proud Fourth Company obliterated with he the only member left. He struggled with himself, the effort plain on his scarred face. He was torn between doing as his master ordered and doing what his heart demanded. As Kantor watched him, he saw the psycho-conditioning win through. Cortez's face became gradually less feral, the curled upper lip sliding back down over clenched teeth.

'I will do as my lord asks,' Cortez growled at last, 'but I don't have to like it.'

Kantor let that pass. Cortez would do as ordered. Despite their words in the corridor after judgement had been passed on Janus Kennon, he could not disobey. A true Adeptus Astartes embraced his psychological augmentation utterly. Cortez's mood would remain foul until his armour was slick with the blood of the foe, but that moment would come soon enough of its own accord.

The black shapes in the sky were growing closer, visible in more detail.

Fighter-bombers and troop carriers, thought Kantor. The orks control our airspace. How easy it was for them. We were complacent. *I* was complacent, and it must never happen again.

Raucous jet engines could be heard clearly now, their noise echoing up from the plains below. Kantor stepped past Cortez, intent on getting his party moving quickly.

Wordlessly, Cortez fell in behind him.

Do you think I want to punish the xenos any less than you do, Alessio, Kantor silently raged? I would slaughter every last one of them. I would look into their red eyes as I twisted my blade, and steep both my hands in their blood. But I will wait until the time is right, and so will you. My orders *will* be followed. We are Adeptus Astartes. Space Marines. We are the shield against the darkness, yes. But without discipline, we are nothing at all.



THREE

The Cassar, New Rynn City

Dawn at the capital brought no relief. In fact, with the coming of the light, it brought more horror and despair than the night could ever have. The extent of the invasion was revealed, and many who gazed out over a horizon literally filled with hostile alien monstrosities lost all hope. In that first morning, there were over four hundred suicides on the Gorrion Wall alone. Most of these were Rynnsguard, men who should have known better, men who should have been trained to sell their lives dear, who were expected to fight, no matter what, for the sake of all that depended on them. But most had joined up never expecting to see combat. They joined for the uniform, the attention of loose women, for the money to feed families.

As they gazed out over what had once been teeming suburbs built to house the city's cheap, uneducated labour force, all they saw was death.

Death was green. Death carried strange, shoddy looking weaponry and roared around in noisy, fume-spewing junk-heaps. And death was everywhere, bellowing curses, promising slaughter, and trying to get inside the gates.

Alvez had given temporary command of the Gorrion Wall to a veteran sergeant from Third Company, Dremir Soto, while he and Grimm sought out the most senior of the Librarians. All the reports listed the same

phenomena – Librarians everywhere across the defensive line suddenly howling in pain and crashing to their knees. They had been either unable or unwilling to talk to anyone since. Alvez suspected a concentrated psychic assault of some kind, perpetrated by the ork shamans in Snagrod's army.

He was not prepared for the truth.

He and Grimm found the senior Epistolary, Delevan Deguerro, kneeling in silence before the altar in the Cassar's small but adequate Reclusiam. Images of Dorn and the Emperor gazed down impassively from the intricate stained-glass windows. Alvez could tell by the Librarian's posture that something was gravely wrong. Deguerro had always cut such a powerful, confident figure. Now he looked, not like a mighty son of the greatest primarch who had ever lived, but beaten, stricken as if by an illness that robbed him of all strength.

If Deguerro heard his two battle-brothers approach – and he could hardly have missed the floor-shuddering footfalls of the captain's Terminator armour – he showed no sign. He did not look up from the cold stone floor.

'Librarian,' said Alvez, his voice kept low out of respect for the sacred nature of the place.

Deguerro did not turn.

Alvez raised his voice further, 'Deguerro, I am talking to you!'

Again, there was no reaction. Huron Grimm stepped forward and laid a hand on the Librarian's right pauldron, with just enough pressure to turn him slightly. 'Brother,' he said. 'This is no time for silence. We must know what ails you. Our entire Librarius contingent has been struck dumb. If you cannot speak, then show us in Adeptus Astartes battle-sign.'

Deguerro's voice, when it sounded, was scratchy and low. 'This is exactly the time for silence.'

He turned to face them at last and, when Alvez looked into his eyes, his first thought was of how hollow they seemed. No light glimmered there.

‘So much glory, so much nobility, bravery, pride... So much lost,’ Deguerro murmured. ‘Lost forever, brothers.’

Alvez and Grimm exchanged looks. ‘Elaborate,’ said Alvez.

‘It was this tragedy,’ said Deguerro, ‘this that we sensed drawing near. If only the portents had been clearer...’

He turned back to the altar, apparently done with explanations, and Alvez let out a growl. Enough! How could he hope to address the problem if no one would tell him what it was? He grasped the Librarian and wrenched him back around, something few others would have dared. ‘I am in command here, Epistolary. The Chapter Master assigned you to my service, and you will respect that assignment. You will tell me in plain language what is wrong with you, or, so help me, Eustace Mendoza will hear of it.’

Deguerro struck Alvez’s hand aside. ‘Eustace Mendoza is dead, captain! Is that plain enough for you? They all are. All who stayed to defend our home have perished. Arx Tyrannus is gone!’

That made no sense. Arx Tyrannus, gone? Of course it wasn’t gone. It was impregnable, unassailable. It would be there atop its mountain seat until the planet itself melted from the heat of its dying suns fifteen billion years from now.

‘Not since the Siege of Barenthal have so many brothers fallen together,’ muttered Deguerro. His anger had melted away again, the waters of his grief rising to submerge it.

Alvez was having great difficulty processing what he had just heard. Deguerro was no fool, no deceiver. Surely, then, he was mistaken. But there was no denying the pain he was in, the sorrow carved in the flesh of his face.

‘You are confused,’ Alvez insisted. ‘A trick of the ork psykers.’

‘I wish it were, brother,’ said Deguerro without turning. ‘Last night, a catastrophe struck our home. Our brothers died in searing white flames. I

heard it, felt it. We all did, as if we, too, were dying. The psychic shockwave threatened to rip away our souls.'

'What stopped it?' asked Sergeant Grimm, his voice kinder than the captain's.

Deguerro looked up and snorted, but it was an empty sound, without real humour.

'The orks,' he said simply.

Alvez look at Grimm, face betraying his confusion.

'The orks?' he said dubiously.

'The ork psykers,' said Deguerro. 'They have been launching psychic assaults since they landed. Nothing we couldn't handle, though there are a great many of them with the Waaagh. Combined, their power is such that we cannot broadcast messages through the warp. Not while they are here in such force. Their unfocused thoughts create a choking psychic fog. Be glad you cannot perceive it, brothers. It is a smothering, suffocating thing.'

'I still do not understand,' said Grimm. 'You said the presence of the ork psykers saved you?'

'I did,' said Deguerro, nodding. 'We are surrounded by them. They are among the hordes on every side, enough of them to buffer us against the full blast of the psychic death-scream. You see, like energy in all its forms, psychic energy dissipates over distance, and much faster where it meets resistance. The ork shamans struggled to survive the blast. Had they not, we may have lost every last Librarian in this city. In that, if nothing else, we were lucky.'

Alvez stared up at the stylised glass image of Rogal Dorn, resplendent in armour of shimmering gold. 'It cannot be,' he muttered to himself. 'Arx Tyrannus? Pedro Kantor? I will not believe it until I see it with my own eyes. When we win this war, we will return to the Hellblades, and you will

see for yourself, Deguerro.’ He stared hard at the back of the Librarian’s head. ‘You will see that you are wrong.’

The Librarian made no response.

‘Report to the walls within the hour,’ the captain commanded, his voice harsh. ‘You and all your Librarius brothers. There will be no more of this. You are still a Crimson Fist, by Throne, and you will do your duty with honour, no matter the circumstances.’

So saying, he turned and thundered from the Reclusiam, his steps shaking stands of devotional candles as he went.

Grimm was left behind, looking down on a brother whose suffering he did not know how to ease. With no other choice, he turned and made his way to the doors of the small Reclusiam. Before he passed between them he turned and said, ‘I believe you, brother, though I wish I did not. Still, the captain is right. This despair, this hopelessness...’ He shook his head. ‘You know as well as I that it is not our way. We are Adeptus Astartes. Eustace Mendoza would expect you to fight.’

Then Grimm, too, left the nave, and silence returned.

A long minute later, Deguerro pushed himself to his feet. He looked up at the image of the Emperor, at His noble features cast in amber glass, and said quietly, ‘I am a Space Marine. Of course I will fight.’

Captain Alvez was already beyond the walls of the Cassar when Grimm caught up to him. In fact, he had almost crossed the bridge between the Zona Regis and the Residentia Primaris. Even in his Terminator armour, the tireless captain covered ground quickly, and there was a new urgency in his stride. Grimm could see it clearly as he closed the distance. He fell into step with the captain just as they passed beneath the arch of the ornate Ocaro Gatehouse.

‘It is true,’ said Grimm. ‘You can see it in his eyes.’

Alvez grunted something unintelligible.

‘You will have to tell the others. They know something is deeply wrong here.’

The captain didn't slow. 'And if it is true?' he boomed. 'Can we do anything about it now? Can we somehow go back in time and undo it? We don't even know what happened.'

'But you *do* believe him,' said Grimm.

'I wish I did not,' replied Alvez. 'I am fighting to keep the full implications of it at bay, but I have my orders, and even this can hardly change them. We are defending a city from a siege the likes of which I have never known. If our Chapter *has* suffered this terrible blow, we must ensure that we, at least, survive. I don't know about you, Huron, but I didn't plan on dying at the hands of some cack-eating xenos anyway, so it changes nothing.'

Grim found he had no answer for that.

'Actually,' said Alvez when they had gone a dozen more metres, 'there is one thing I can do about it. I'm initiating the Ceres Protocol.'

Grimm looked up in surprise. The Ceres Protocol hadn't been employed since it had first been put to parchment all those centuries ago in the years after the blasted scythian race had reduced the Chapter to a handful of squads. Its strictures were clear: no Crimson Fist was permitted to die in battle for any other cause than the saving of his battle-brothers. The strength of the Chapter was everything. That meant no battle-brothers lost for the sake of protecting humans or materiel of any kind.

'Are you sure that's necessary, my lord?' asked Grimm.

Alvez kept his eyes on the road ahead. 'I'm putting it in place anyway.'

Eighteen minutes later, they passed into a lower-class hab zone called the Deltoro Residentia. The streets were narrow here, and untidy, and the lop-sided habs loomed over them as if they might topple at any moment. Many of the buildings looked as if they had been built in a hurry, then added to little by little over the years, so that the stonework of the upper stories was seldom the same colour or tone as that of the lower.

The contrast with the Zona Regis and the noble estates was stark. Here, the shadowed side alleys were strewn with heaps of waste and the occasional, fly-covered remains of a dead canid or felis. The air smelled strongly of chemical compounds drifting over from the nearby manufacturing zone. To live in such surroundings, or worse, was the lot of the vast majority in cities all across the Imperium. If New Rynn City was any different, it was not evident among the people of the so-called *Poor Quarters*.

What these people lacked in material riches, they clearly made up for in faith. The sign of the Imperial aquila was everywhere, as were street-corner shrines to myriad saints and other assorted religious figures. In contrast to all else, these were immaculate. They bore no signs of damage or graffiti.

Grimm eyed them as he and Alvez continued their brisk march back to the ramparts of the Gorrion Wall. Not far off, he could hear the thump of artillery and the muffled crack and rattle of the city's huge gun-towers.

Though wailing sirens had, for the most part, cleared the streets of people, it didn't take long for Alvez and Grimm to be spotted. The locals peered out from behind wooden shutters at the sound of their boots on the cobbles.

'It is the Crimson Fists!' called one.

Grimm heard the shout being taken up all along the streets.

'Damn,' said Captain Alvez.

Doors were flung open and people poured out into the light of day to throw themselves onto the ground before the two Adeptus Astartes. The air filled with the sound of pleading voices. Shabby women elbowed their way forward, holding their screaming babies out to be blessed. The old and the sick begged to be touched on the head, believing, perhaps, that this alone might cure them of all their pains and ailments, or just bring them a little closer to the Emperor somehow. Others offered up their most prized

possessions, hoping to win favour. Here, a curved knife, badly chipped, with a small red gem – almost certainly just coloured glass – set in its tarnished hilt. There, a kynid's-tooth statue of Saint Clario of the Blazing Lance with its left hand missing, broken off many years before. None of these, nor any of a hundred others, would have fetched more than a single Imperial centim at market, but they clearly meant a great deal to their possessors. These people were desperate that their district be saved from the orks. They were used to finding themselves and their neighbourhood low on the ladder of the politicians' priorities.

Alvez and Grimm found their path utterly blocked. To push through would leave many injured, perhaps even dead.

'Fools,' cursed Alvez quietly, so quiet, in fact, that only Grimm's superior hearing could pick it up. 'Do I look like a blasted Chaplain?'

A bent-backed old woman in a moth-eaten red shawl pushed herself up from her knees and shambled towards them, cradling something precious in her tiny withered hands. Grimm saw that she was weeping. He could not identify with her emotion, nor with the emotions of the people all around them, but he had seen its like enough times to know that such a potent effect on the faithful was one of the burdens of being a Space Marine. In all likelihood, these people had never been as close to a living symbol of the Emperor's light as they were now. He could see the zeal in their eyes. It was right there alongside their joy.

The old woman limped straight towards Alvez, and, mumbling something indecipherable, raised her hands, offering her personal treasure to him.

Grimm knew instinctively that things were about to take a turn for the worst.

'In Dorn's name,' the captain snarled, 'get out of our way at once. All of you, get back to your homes. This city is under martial law. We do not have time for this.'

In anger, he batted the old woman's hands aside, and the little treasure she offered went flying from her. She collapsed to the rockcrete surface of the road, cradling her broken wrists, mewling softly. The crowd gasped and shuffled backwards, still on their knees. Some pressed their foreheads to the ground in utter submission. None spoke.

'Make way,' Alvez commanded through the vox-amp in his helmet. His voice reverberated along the street, shaking dust and grit from the sills and ledges of the buildings. 'We are at war. Do not seek blessings from any of my Adeptus Astartes again. Is that understood? We are not priests, we are warriors. Move aside, damn you!'

When the people leapt to obey, clearing the road so the Adeptus Astartes could pass easily, Grimm saw that fear had replaced the joy in their eyes. That was regrettable. Did Captain Alvez truly think so little of the people's love and respect? Sooner or later, Grimm believed, these very people would be called on to fight, to give their lives in a battle none of them had ever trained a single day for. They would die to hold back the foe just a little longer. Would they not fight that much harder *inspired* by their Adeptus Astartes betters, rather than terrified by them?

Alvez was already thundering off down the street, not deigning to glance at the rows of people bowing and begging his forgiveness from either side of the street.

Grimm turned to the old woman on the road and, gently, lifted her to a sitting position. She gazed up at him and smiled a toothless smile. Though her bones were broken and it must have caused her great pain, she lifted a limp hand to the faceplate of his helmet and brushed it with her fingertips, mumbling something Grimm could not make out.

In her eyes he saw adoration and joy, as if Captain Alvez had not struck her down at all.

He glanced up and called out to a middle-aged couple on his left, 'You there! Will you take care of this woman? She requires a medicae. Take her

to the nearest facility. I command it.'

The couple, an overweight man in bright quilted trousers and his waif-like wife, bowed excessively, and moved forward to help the old woman to her feet. Grimm lifted her into the man's arms, marvelling at how impossibly light her frail body seemed. He was glad he would never know such weakness himself. It was a cruelty that time inflicted on most living things, but, buried somewhere in the mysteries of the Adeptus Astartes gene-seed was the secret to beating it. No Space Marine would ever wither away like that.

The Emperor had spared His sons that fate.

He turned, searching for something and, after the briefest instant, his enhanced eyesight located it. He crossed to the front of a small hab, and the people in his way instantly moved aside. There beneath a filthy window, he bent over and retrieved the old woman's treasure. It was really the simplest of tokens: a small wooden aquila on a length of cord, a charm intended to be worn around the neck, though it would barely reach around an Adeptus Astartes' wrist. It had once been beautifully painted, but it was very old now, the colours cracked and flaking.

When he turned back to the old woman and tried to give it back to her, she became agitated and expressed something to the fat man carrying her. He shushed her, and his wife hissed, 'Don't be foolish, old mother. The great one has no need of it.'

'Explain,' said Grimm.

The fat man gulped, his throat bobbing, and said, 'She would like you to have it, my lord. I'm afraid she is senile. She doesn't understand...' His eyes flicked briefly to the visor in Grimm's faceplate, then returned to the ground at his feet.

Grimm looked at the little aquila, so minute in the palm of his red gauntlet. He could not accept the gift personally. On acceptance into the Chapter, the Adeptus Astartes of the Crimson Fists swore an unbreakable

vow of non-possession. It was considered weak and unworthy to covet or collect material objects. One's armour, one's weapons, even the trophies one gathered from the battlefield – all of these and more belonged, not to the individual, but to the Chapter.

The Chapter, then, could accept her simple gift.

Grimm addressed her directly, though he was unsure she would understand him. 'I thank you for your offering, old mother, not for myself – it is against our ways – but on behalf of my Chapter. May the Emperor smile on you...' and, here, he turned his gaze to the fat man and his wife, and added pointedly, '...and on all those who do you kindness.'

There was a sudden harsh bark over the comm-link. 'Sergeant, you are wasting time.'

Captain Alvez was already a hundred metres away.

With the little wooden aquila in his left hand, Grimm strode past the old woman and the couple, and made his way towards his increasingly impatient superior. On both sides of the street, the people bowed deeply.

Grimm offered the slightest of nods in return as he passed, thinking to himself that, no matter the strength of their faith in the Emperor or in the power of the Adeptus Astartes, very soon, these people would be homeless... just like him. The Deltoro Residentia would be swallowed up by the fighting. How many of these people would be dead by season's end?

He had almost caught up with Captain Alvez when a great metallic scream sounded from the sky. A broad black shadow flitted between the street and the sun. Grimm looked up and saw the underside of an ugly ork troop-transporter bleeding black smoke and flame from a rent at its rear. The craft was out of control. It was going down fast, and it would crash in one of the wards nearby.

Captain Alvez was already making for a stone stairway that led up onto a hab roof. His heavy footfalls cracked the steps, raining dust and rocky pieces down on the ground below. Grimm followed him up and, together,

they stood atop the hab and watched the ork craft cut a smoky black arc across the city.

It struck and shattered a massive stone cylinder far taller than the wall that separated the neighbouring districts, and fell from sight. Grimm knew the cylinder, or at least what it represented. It was a chimney, one of many that sprouted from the roofs of the capital's Mechanicus-controlled manufactora.

‘Zona 6 Industria,’ he said.

Alvez was already on the comm-link. ‘All squads in zone six. This is Captain Alvez. We have a breach. An ork transport just went down. I need an immediate purge. Leave sections three and four of the Gorrion Wall to the Rynnsguard. This is a priority command. I repeat, we have a breach. Eliminate all orks in the Zona 6 Industria.’

While the captain had been issuing the order, Grimm had been checking the charge in his plasma pistol and warming up the flexors of his power fist. His own squad, which he had left under the command of Brother Santanos, was one of the squads in close proximity to the crash site. If the captain allowed it, Grimm would go to them and lead them in their elimination of the greenskin intruders. How many would have been on that craft? How many would have survived impact? If the orks got a foothold there, a critical resource would be lost all too early in the conflict. The manufactora were essential for ammunition resupply. It would be a disaster.

With his orders given, Alvez checked his own weapons, one a master-crafted power sword, the other a massive storm bolter, both Chapter relics awarded to him on his ascension to the captaincy, both exquisitely decorated with fine golden scrollwork and detailed chasings. Weapon checks and a brief prayer completed, the captain turned his head towards Grimm and said, ‘We are near enough to offer assistance, sergeant. Follow me.’

Alvez did not bother with the staircase for his descent. He stepped straight off the roof and plunged to the pavement, a drop of four metres, landing so hard that his boots shattered the flagstones. Grimm followed, the impact of his own boots markedly less. Then the two Crimson Fists were off, powering down the street towards the gate that linked the residential zone to the industrial.

Grimm hoped at least a few of the greenskins had survived. If what Epistolary Deguerro had said was true, he would revel in extracting payback. His armour, he swore, would be caked in xenos gore by the end of the day.



FOUR

The Western Slopes, The Hellblade Mountains

Kantor and his fifteen battle-brothers moved at speed down a sloping defile, loose stones skittering out in front of them. The Chapter Master was confident that the ork pilots hadn't spotted them. None of the ugly, heavy-looking fighters had peeled off from the main group, not yet, but the noise of their engines was louder by the second.

Kantor hoped the site of the ruined fortress-monastery, all that body-strewn rubble, would hold the orks' attention away from Yanna Gorge. But he wasn't taking any chances. He pressed his Space Marines hard. Sergeant Segala's makeshift squad were out in front, providing forward eyes. Viejo's squad were at the rear, alert as they moved, ready to warn of ork pursuit. Cortez and his squad moved with Kantor.

Communication was brief and infrequent as they pushed on. That suited Kantor fine. There was little to say. Better that each man be left to his own private thoughts for now, each remembering the brothers that had meant most to him. He still wrestled with his own grief, of course, but, as the leader, he didn't have the luxury of letting it dominate his mind. He had to get his Fists away from here. Soon, they would reach the foothills. There would be less cover there. Trees were sparse. Only hardy dry-grasses and thorny shrubs flourished. If the ork pilots opted to sweep the region

looking for fresh targets, it would be on the foothills that Kantor and his men would be seen, out in the open with nowhere to run.

Cortez moved up beside him, fell into step, and, after a moment, said, 'No time to cover our tracks. They will follow us sooner or later.'

Cortez's helm hid his expression, but Kantor could hear his old friend's inner thoughts clear enough in his voice: *I want them to find us.*

'It cannot be helped, Alessio,' said Kantor. 'The best we can do is to hide our numbers. Keep to the tracks of our forward squad.'

Cortez looked north-west, eyes following the line of the gorge. Up ahead, Segala's squad were moving quickly, eyes scanning the land for signs of any ground-based foe. He turned back to Kantor and said, 'You have us scurrying away like mice, Pedro, when I would have us turn and fight like lions.'

Kantor frowned under his faceplate. 'The ways of the mouse suit our purpose, brother. He is a survivor. The time for battle will come, but we will reunite with our brothers in the capital before that. It is the only logical path.'

'Logic,' repeated Cortez, but he spoke it like a curse word. 'Ask the orks what they think of—'

Kantor raised a hand to hush him, his ears picking up a new sound on the air. Cortez listened, and heard it, too. Beneath the splutter and throb of the ork engines, something else was rising, faint but growing steadily stronger. It was a smoother sound, more rhythmic, more finely tuned.

'Lightnings,' said Kantor, his Lyman's Ear implant filtering and enhancing the noise. 'They're coming in from the south-west. Three of them. It must be a fighter wing out of Scar Lake.'

Cortez tilted his head. 'Closing fast. They must've seen the orks.' He looked to the rocky slope on his left, then back at Kantor.

'Go,' said Kantor. 'Report what you see.'

Around him, the other Adeptus Astartes stopped to await his command, bolters rising to the ready position by force of habit.

‘All squads, hold position,’ Kantor ordered over the link.

Cortez sprinted up the slope, his heavy boots crushing small rocks to powder beneath him and causing a miniature landslide of dirt and pebbles. Just below the ridgeline, mindful of his silhouette, he stopped, crouched, and peered over.

‘You were right, lord,’ he reported. ‘Three Lightnings vectoring in towards the mountains. The orks have seen them. Their fighters are breaking off to engage. I don’t like the look of it. Those Lightnings are outnumbered three to one.’

Ork flying machines might look clumsy, nose-heavy, and just about as aerodynamic as a Dreadnought, but therein lay the trick. Despite appearances, they were often lethally effective. No Rynnsguard air unit in active service had ever faced orks before. Imperial Lightnings, armed with autocannon and lascannon as standard, were crafted for performance, not durability. And ork pilots were as liable to ram them head-on as to fire on them.

‘They must have been sent here to investigate the explosion,’ said Kantor.

It made sense. The blast that had obliterated Arx Tyrannus would have been visible across almost the entire continent. Contact with Scar Lake Airbase had been lost hours ago, during the first ork strikes on the planet, but the appearance of the Lightnings suggested a slim possibility the airbase itself was still under Rynnsguard control. Kantor hoped so, but there was little he could do about it either way.

To Cortez, he said, ‘We cannot aid them from here, Alessio. Not with the weapons we have. Keep moving. Their arrival will buy us time to put more ground under our feet. Hurry.’

Though reluctant to turn his eyes from the imminent dogfight, Cortez left the ridge and half-skidded, half-strode back to Kantor's position.

'All squads, move out,' ordered the Chapter Master.

'Emperor be with them,' said Cortez as he fell into step.



FIVE

Three thousand metres above the Hellblade Mountains

‘Falcon One, this is Falcon Three,’ said Lieutenant Keanos over the vox. ‘I have a lock.’

‘Falcon Three, you are clear to fire,’ came the reply. ‘Falcon squadron, engage, engage!’

Keanos flipped the red toggle on his stick and thumbed the fire button. From a pylon under his right wing, white fire flashed and raced off, painting an arc of smoke that curved in towards his still-distant target.

Two seconds later, a little ball of fire bloomed in the distance. Black trails fell from it towards the ground.

‘That’s a kill,’ said the voice on the vox. ‘First blood to Falcon Three.’

Keanos felt a surge of elation. He had just destroyed an alien aircraft. In all his ten years as a Rynnsguard pilot, he had never actually imagined he would see real combat. Most of the flight time he had logged was routine patrol or war games. He couldn’t wait to tell his wife, Azela, and their son, Oric, about this. It would have to wait until after the war, of course, when they could be together again.

He would have to embellish the telling a little, mind you. It was the AF-9 Airstrike missile that had done most of the real work. He had one left,

slung under his left wing, and he hoped to gain another kill with it before the skirmish was over. The orks hadn't opened fire yet, so it looked like they didn't have missiles with the kind of range the airstrikes had. But there were still eight of them left according to his forward auspex. Even if he and the rest of Falcon squad made a kill with every missile at their disposal, there would still be three ork fighters which they would have to eliminate in gun range, and that was another kind of combat altogether.

Up ahead, the ork fighters were banking to face him now. The numbers on his auspex's rangefinder display were dropping fast, far too fast for comfort. The orks were making a beeline directly for the Imperial Fighters. A familiar alarm sounded in Keanos's cockpit. Keanos spoke over the vox. 'Falcon One, I have another lock. Alpha-Six. I repeat, I have a lock on target Alpha-Six.'

As he spoke, he saw two white trails streak out towards the orks, one from each of the Lightnings on either side of him. Keanos hoped they hadn't fired at Alpha-Six. He wanted the kill for himself.

One of the missile trails started corkscrewing a second before it plunged towards the ground. A frustrated voice announced, 'This is Falcon One. Missile malfunction. No hit. No hit. Falcon Three, cleared to fire. Light him up.'

Keanos hit the button on his stick and felt the last Airstrike drop away from below his left wing. The white trail curved off ahead and, a second later, a churning ball of red fire and black smoke started dropping from the sky.

'That's two for two, Falcon Three,' said the squadron leader.

Keanos wanted to jump up and down. Second only to Oric's birth, this was turning into one of the best days of his life. Two kills! How many more would he make by the end of the war?

With his main ordnance spent, he switched his targeting systems over to manual. Looking at his display, he saw that both his autocannon and

lascannon were primed and ready, ammo counters at max. Up ahead, the rest of the ork fighters were almost in gun-range.

Come on, you alien bastards, he thought. I'll be an ace for sure.



SIX

Zona 6 Industria, New Rynn City

The fighting in the streets around the damaged manufactory was already heavy when Alvez and Grimm arrived behind the hastily erected barricades. The moment the captain arrived, those not engaged in direct fire turned and threw him short, sharp salutes. He nodded, but did not salute back. Though he was a rigid traditionalist, he knew, too, that there was a time and a place to reinforce proper conduct and discipline, and here, under heavy fire from a large, confident warband, was not that time.

Solid slugs whined over his head as he strode across to Squad Anto where they were hunkered down behind thick sections of Aegis pre-fabricated walls.

A fellow Blackwaterite, Faradis Anto had served under Alvez for more than a century. He was relatively short for a Crimson Fist, but he had a quick mind, and was known for being decisive. Alvez had once considered Anto for Grimm's position, but Anto and the captain were too similar in many ways. Huron Grimm was a contrast, and Alvez had opted for the balance that their dynamic allowed, though he had never said so to Grimm. So far, he'd had no cause to regret that choice.

As he approached Anto, he told Grimm, 'Go, sergeant. Command your squad, but keep this channel open should I need you.'

‘My lord,’ said Grimm. He turned from Alvez, and crossed to greet his squad brothers where they sheltered behind the concrete corner of a processing mill that was being peppered by ork stubber-fire.

Anto saluted Alvez. ‘It is good to see you, lord.’

‘Status report, Faradis.’

‘The transport was large and very full. A great deal of damage was done to the manufactorum, but the superstructure remains intact. There are orks holed up inside. We estimate their number to be between sixty and eighty. Others are using the wreckage of their craft as cover. Still more are moving through the streets, killing all they find. They have attempted to flank us on this side of the district twice, but we have turned them back both times. If we are to dislodge them, we will need to storm their positions with a full frontal assault.’

Here, Anto paused, before adding, ‘It could be costly, my lord. The orks taking cover in the wreckage and the manufactorum have significant firepower. Scouts from Squad Bariax are acting as our forward eyes. They have reported signs of las and plasma analogues, and a number of xenos weapon types. The orks are highly alert, too. Sergeant Bariax and his men attempted to infiltrate the manufactorum eleven minutes ago. It was hoped he and his squad might be able to eliminate the warboss and throw the entrenched forces into confusion. I’m afraid it did not work, my lord.’

‘Losses?’ asked Alvez.

‘Two Scouts, good men I’m told.’

Not good enough, thought Alvez. We can’t afford to lose anyone, not if we are all that is left of the Chapter.

He still hadn’t made Deguerro’s dark revelation common knowledge, partly because he hoped it could still prove to be false, partly because there had been no time.

‘Do we have schematics for the area?’ he asked. ‘We need an access plan.’

There was a tremendous pounding from behind them, like a god hammering on a vast door, and Alvez and Anto turned to look for the source. They could hardly have missed it. There before them stood a gargantuan figure, his every angular surface etched with the deeds and glories of his past. On the right side of his massive armoured carapace, he bore the Chapter icon set within the stone cross of a Crux Terminatus, a symbol permitted only to those who had earned their place in the Crusade Company. Between his piston-like legs, a white tabard rippled in the breeze, decorated with an aquila embroidered in gold thread. And on his left leg, he wore a sculpted arc of silver laurel leaves surrounding a golden skull, yet another of the great honours he had gained throughout his six centuries as a member of the Crimson Fists.

He was a Dreadnought. His name was Brother Jerian and, when he spoke, his modulated voice was so deep, like the bellow of a massive bull brachiodont, that the air around him trembled. ‘You need no access plans, honoured captain.’

He raised his left arm into the air and spun his monstrous metal power fist through three hundred and sixty degrees.

‘Where you require a doorway, I shall make one.’

Now, he raised his right arm, and the air filled with a mechanical whine as he cycled the clustered barrels of his auto-cannon.

‘Where you require death, I shall dispense it.’

Alvez looked up at the ancient warrior. Inside the walking metal sarcophagus, there was a battle-brother much like himself. Or rather, he had been once. Jerian had been a hero of the Chapter before Alvez had known life. But the hero had fallen in the Battle for Emerald Sands, his body eaten away almost to nothing by the concentrated bio-acids of the despicable tyranid race. It was a slow, painful death, no death for a Space Marine. The Apothecaries had saved what they could of him, and the Techmarines had interred him in this venerable and ancient apparatus. If

death ever tried to claim him again, it would find him a hard target. Alvez was sure of that.

Every brother in the Chapter knew the tales of Jerian's victories and heroics. Clearly, the Dreadnought sought to add to that list now.

Alvez walked towards the boxy metal giant, stopping five metres in front of him and fixing his eyes on the rectangular vision slit cut high on the hulking frame.

‘Very well, Brother Jerian,’ he said. ‘You will provide our heavy support. We will push in directly and slaughter the foe where they stand. Obey my orders. This will unfold as I command it. No other way.’

Alvez felt wrong addressing such a legendary figure in this manner, but he had to be sure that all, even Jerian, recognised his authority here as absolute.

If Pedro Kantor *is* gone, he told himself, the future of the Chapter is in my hands.

The thought was sour. It gave him no pride.

‘You understand, Old One?’ he said to the Dreadnought. ‘We will do this my way.’

‘We may do this any way you please,’ rumbled Jerian, ‘so long as I get to kill orks.’



SEVEN

The Western Foothills, Hellblade Mountains

Kantor and his Fists emerged from Yanna Gorge onto a shallow slope that wound its way between the last of the foothills. The Eastern Steppes spread out before them, bright and glaring in the midday sunlight. To the west, smoke from a thousand fires rose into the air. The roiling black pillars were so large, the Adeptus Astartes could see them from a hundred kilometres away, rising just beyond the curve of the horizon. They did not know if the smoke represented crashed ork craft or burning townships. Kantor hoped it was the former.

As he ordered his Adeptus Astartes to continue north-west across the steppes, he heard explosions behind him. He turned, but his view was blocked by the bent backs of the hills. He hoped the explosion was not the death rattle of a Lightning fighter.

To the east, back the way they had come, the Hellblades rose up like a wall of jagged tusks, their sharp peaks bone white, their roots and ridges almost black. He had known these mountains almost all his life. Why did he feel that he was saying goodbye to them? Arx Tyrannus was gone, but the mountains would endure. He couldn't explain the feeling.

Cortez's squad had moved up, a kilometre ahead, to take its turn as the party's forward eyes. Sergeant Segala and his squad had fallen back to

march beside Kantor, but the men kept a respectful distance. They did not want to bother their Chapter Master, perhaps recognising the burden he now bore.

They knew he would call them to him when and if he needed them.

There was a sudden scream of rocket engines as one of the Lightnings streaked by barely a hundred metres above Kantor's head. Sixteen pairs of visored eyes whipped up to follow it. A heavy-looking ork fighter roared past just a second later, spewing a hail of lead and las-fire from a bristle of forward guns. Kantor saw the Lightning dance from right to left, trying to shake its pursuer, but the ork was stuck to its tail. The Lightning pilot tried to swerve left, following the gradient of the land downwards, but the ork must have anticipated the move. The Lightning turned directly into a stream of shells that ripped its metal body apart.

It hit the ground north of Cortez's position.

The ork fighter peeled off. In the heat of battle, its pilot failed to notice the line of Space Marines on the ground below, or so Kantor hoped.

'Pedro,' said Cortez over the comm-link. He didn't need to say anymore.

'Go, Alessio,' said the Chapter Master. 'The rest of us will follow.'

The land was strewn with shining pieces of metal. The Lightning had cut a great furrow in the ground and had come to rest with its nose half-buried.

Cortez crouched by the body of the pilot and read the name tag under the winged skull patch on his chest.

'Keanos,' he said. 'That's your name? I am Captain Cortez of the Crimson Fists. If you can hear me, Keanos, speak your first name.'

The wounded man stirred. His flight-suit was soaked with blood. The smell of it was thick on the air, mixing with the acrid stink of burnt metal. 'Galen,' he said at last. 'My name is... Galen... K-Keanos.'

Cortez lifted a canteen to the man's lips. 'Can you drink, Galen Keanos? It is water.'

Keanos managed a sip, but a second started him coughing, and the coughing was agony to him, so Cortez removed the canteen, stoppered it, and stowed it on his belt.

Heavy footsteps crunched the dirt and rock behind him, and he knew instinctively that the Chapter Master was there. Without turning, Cortez said, 'He is in a bad way, Pedro. He will not last long. Let me give him final mercy.'

Kantor lowered into a crouch beside the Rynnite pilot and gestured for Cortez to move back a little. 'We must have information first.'

'His name is Galen Keanos,' said Cortez.

'Galen,' said the Chapter Master with a nod. Then he turned his eyes to the dying man and said, 'Galen, can you hear me?'

Keanos looked up in the direction of the voice, but his eyes were unfocussed.

'I am Pedro Kantor, Lord Hellblade, Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists.'

'My... my lord,' gasped Keanos. He struggled, as if trying to rise.

'No, Galen,' said Kantor, placing his right hand gently on Keanos's shoulder. 'Lie back. You must not move. Your pain will end soon, but if you honour me, and if you honour the Emperor, you must bear it a little longer. We need information.'

'I will try to... answer, lord.'

'Did you fly from Scar Lake?'

'Yes. My... my squadron was sent to investigate a light in the mountains. We thought it was over Arx Tyrannus, but long-range comms were down. The orks hit our... our vox-masts in the first wave. We needed help, but there was no way to... My wife and child... were evacuated south. Oric. My Oric.'

'He's fading,' said Cortez.

'There will be a medical pack in the cockpit, Alessio. Get it quickly.'

Cortez shook his head. 'I checked after I pulled him out. It was shredded. The whole cockpit was shot to pieces.'

'Galen,' said Kantor, 'is Scar Lake still operational? Is it still resisting?'

Keanos coughed, and blood flecked the corners of his mouth. 'The... orks attacked the perimeter but... we... we turned them back twice. Then General Mazius was... killed.'

'What about the cities? What word from the capital? From Caltara, or Sagarro?'

They waited for Keanos's answer, but the man's face was slack now. His eyes no longer blinked.

'He is gone,' said Cortez. 'Scar Lake must have fallen by now.'

'Almost certainly,' said Kantor, still looking down at the dead man. 'Nothing Snagrod has done so far seems to be random. It's almost... systematic.'

'We can't know that yet,' protested Cortez.

Kantor locked eyes with him. 'No, Alessio? The deep-space relay station strikes, the concentrated assaults on our surface communications arrays, the immediate targeting of military installations. This one isn't waging war like an ork. He is fighting like the Imperium. This Snagrod has learned from *us*.'

Cortez narrowed his eyes, unsure whether to believe that or not. Long experience had taught him that what the orks boasted in strength, they more than lacked in brains. Their low intelligence was what really kept them in check, not the forces arrayed against them. Smart orks – the kind of smart that Kantor was suggesting – were a foe of a different order altogether, a foe that perhaps no one could hope to stop.

'We must push on,' said the Chapter Master. 'That ork pilot missed us the first time, but it might not miss us on another pass. There will be a scavenger party on its way to salvage scrap from the kill.' Anticipating his

friend's next words, he added, 'No, Alessio. We will not wait to ambush them.'

The Chapter Master turned and began to walk away, calling for the battle-brothers guarding the perimeter of the downed Lightning to fall in behind him. He was five metres from Cortez when he half-turned and said over his shoulder, 'You may rig the wreckage with some of our melta charges, brother. I'm sure the orks will appreciate the surprise.'

That, at least, made Cortez grin. Minutes later, it was done. He and his squad hurried to rejoin the rest of the group, taking their place now as rearguard.

They marched hard. The land underfoot changed, becoming greener by degrees until, hours later, they found themselves crossing lush grassy plains. They had descended thousands of metres since leaving the ruin of their home. So much closer to sea level, the land seemed to be enjoying a different season altogether from the wintry heights of the mountains. The air was warmer, its pressure and humidity higher.

As the sibling suns began to set in the west, casting everything in hues of red and gold, there came a great boom that echoed off the mountains and out over the plains.

Looking back the way he had come, Cortez squinted, and made out a column of smoke rising from the final resting place of Galen Keanos.

He resumed his march, wondering how many stinking xenos he had just killed and swearing to himself that he was just getting started.



EIGHT

Zona 6 Industria, New Rynn City

Brother Jerian was death incarnate, and there was little the orks could do against the fury of his weapons. Not at first. The roving ork units that had attempted to flank the Crimson Fists position made a third attempt just minutes after Jerian had shown up behind the barricade, and they soon found themselves faced with an enemy utterly invulnerable to their stubbers and bladed weapons. Jerian did not need cover. He *was* cover. He stomped out in full view of the roaring alien filth and began cycling his assault cannon.

When he fired, the torrent of shells was so intense, so destructive, that it cut the orks in half. Even the greenskins at the very back of the charging mass could not avoid the hail of sharp-nosed slugs as they punched through body after body until the street was awash with blood and steaming viscera.

Jerian let out a battle cry that resonated over the whole south-eastern quarter, audible even above the distant boom of Basilisk self-propelled guns and Earthshaker batteries. Few alien battle cries could have matched it.

As the sound faded, Alvez suspected some of the orks nearby would be turning to flee. The larger greenskins were not typically fearful of

anything, but they were highly superstitious, wary of the unknown, and they were not above breaking from a fight in the face of obvious defeat. It was the clearest sign of intelligence they typically showed.

‘To me!’ Jerian roared as he thundered down the street in the direction of the manufactorum and the crashed ork lander. Strong-smelling smoke wafted from the barrels of his assault cannon. The massive hydraulic pistons that powered his legs hissed and clanked as he moved, and oily black smoke poured from two large exhaust stacks on his broad metal back.

‘Squads Rectris and Gualan,’ said Alvez over the comm-link, ‘move up behind Brother Jerian. Cover his blind spots. Squads Grimm and Ulias flank left. Squads Anto and Haleos, you have the right flank. Move!’

Alvez marched with Maurillo Rectris and his squad. Greenskins rushed out from corners to intercept them, but they were cut down the moment they showed their ugly flat faces. Within minutes, Jerian had led the others close to the manufactorum, and a hail of stubber and pistol-fire began pouring out of shattered black windows high in the building’s side wall.

The Crimson Fists did not hesitate. They raised their bolters, took aim, and loosed a deadly torrent of rounds at the windows. Jerian added his own fire, the raw destructive power of it quickly making the well-aimed bursts of his battle-brothers superfluous. The manufactorum’s upper walls were being ripped apart. A rain of brass shell casings fell around his sturdy metal feet.

The orks pulled back from the windows rather than face such a lethal fusillade.

‘Jerian,’ called Alvez, but the Dreadnought either didn’t hear him, or didn’t wish to.

‘Brother Jerian,’ Alvez barked again, this time with more force. ‘Cease fire, now. Move up. Secure the north wall. We will blow our way in.’

Jerian stopped firing, and his assault cannon cycled down with a whine that sounded almost disappointed. He lurched forward as ordered. Squads Rectris and Gualan moved up quickly to take position along the north wall of the building. On the other side, the south side, the spiked hull of the ork transport still lay half-buried in tumbled brick, pouring trails of thick black smoke into the air.

Alvez opened a link to Huron Grimm. 'Are you in position, sergeant?'

'We are, my lord,' replied Grimm. 'We encountered some resistance on the south access, but we have cover with a clear view of the downed ship. Significant enemy activity to the north-west and west of us.'

'Hold for further orders,' Alvez commanded. Then, he opened a link to Sergeant Anto. 'Report your status, brother.'

'Both squads in position, my lord, awaiting your command to attack. There is no breach here, but there are four large loading bays through which we are observing the orks. They are Deathskulls.'

Alvez thought about this. The Deathskull clan were notorious looters and took their obsession with scavenging machines to murderous levels. 'If they are Deathskulls,' he told Anto, 'all the better. Their attentions will be split between us and the machines inside. As soon as Rectris and Gualan breach the north wall, I want all flanking squads to give suppressing fire. Confirm.'

'Affirmative, lord. We await the signal.'

Closing the comm-link, Alvez turned to Maurillo Rectris, who stood on his left, backpack pressed tight to the manufactorum's brick wall. 'Have your men plant the charges, sergeant. Twenty seconds should be enough.'

'My lord,' said Rectris. He stepped out from the wall, called two members of his squad to him, and began issuing orders of his own.

Just a few metres away from Alvez, Brother Jerian growled. 'You should let me rip the wall open, captain.' He flexed his power fist restlessly.

‘I need a good clean breach, brother,’ said Alvez. ‘It must be wide and instantaneous. I’m sure you could rip this entire place apart single-handed, given time, but I would prefer you focused on smashing orks, not walls. Just be ready to go in. You will be the first.’

Jerian stopped flexing his fist. ‘In that, at least, you show great wisdom.’

Alvez did not miss the barb in the comment. He felt a flash of anger, just briefly, but it soon subsided. The Chapter’s Old Ones, as the Dreadnoughts were collectively known, were widely understood to be a gruff, cantankerous lot. One did not try to change a personality forged in battle over six hundred years. Not unless one enjoyed courting failure. Besides, Jerian and his machine-entombed fellows had, by their long history of heroic endeavour, earned a level of tolerance Alvez accorded few others.

There was a hiss of static on the comm-link, followed by the voice of Sergeant Salvador Ulias. ‘Lord captain,’ he said. ‘We have orks moving around the perimeter of the building. They are heading your way. Twenty of them with heavy-stubbers and blades. They’ll be on you soon. Permission to engage?’

‘Rectris?’ said Alvez.

‘Ten seconds. Setting the last of the charges now.’

Judging by the report from Ulias, ten seconds was too long. Alvez raised his storm bolter.

‘All squads, fire at will!’

‘For Dorn and the Emperor,’ replied Anto over the comm.

The sharp crack and rattle of gunfire erupted on the other three sides of the structure, immediately answered from inside by the deep drumbeat of ork heavy weaponry.

‘Charges set,’ Rectris announced. ‘Back away!’

Squads Rectris and Gualan pressed themselves flat against the wall. Brother Jerian merely took two steps backwards and waited for the blast. Watching him, Alvez noted how fearless he was. Any normal Space

Marine would have risked serious injury, perhaps even death, standing so close to so much high explosive. Not so Jerian.

There was a deep, ear-splitting bang and a gush of dust and stone. Jerian was obscured from Alvez's vision, but the captain could hear the rain of stone chips bouncing off the Dreadnought's armour plate.

'Forward,' Jerian boomed. 'We are their death!'

The dust cloud swirled and Alvez knew that Jerian had charged inside. He heard the distinctive whine of an assault cannon as it strafed the interior.

'Kill them all,' Alvez roared over the comm-link before he, too, charged through the gaping wound in the brick surface. His battle-brothers followed him in without hesitation.

Inside the manufactory, the orks retaliated at once, pouring fire down on the Space Marines from raised gantries of metal mesh, or from behind the conveyors of the huge automated assembly lines. Gretchin skittered from shadow to shadow, terrified for their lives, turning to fire their large-bore pistols only when they found the safety of good cover. Their oversized kin fought without any such fear. Scores of them charged madly forward, their chainaxes whirring, only to be blown apart by mass-reactive explosive rounds from the boltguns of the Crimson Fists.

Brother Jerian ran out of ammunition soon after entering, but it did not slow him. He stormed forward, smashing idle machinery aside in his eagerness to spill the blood of the Chapter's foes. Then he was right in among them, an awesome sight to behold. With every whistling arc of his mighty metal fist, he smashed ork bodies aside. Moving deeper into the mass of aliens that flowed out of the shadows to surround him, his heavy feet pulped and crunched the bodies of the fallen.

Alvez heard the Dreadnought's mechanical laughter, and the sound was as far from human as it could possibly be.

Three orks dropped from an upper walkway right in front of Alvez, no more than three metres from him, close enough to lash out at once. But Alvez was fast, even in Terminator armour. His finger squeezed the trigger of his ancient gun, and the largest of the three orks reeled backwards, struck directly in the forehead before it could take its opening swing. The bolt detonated, blowing brain and skull outwards in all directions, and the creature collapsed to the floor as limp as a sack of meat.

The others did not wait to meet the same fate. The closest of the two lunged with a large, chipped blade, more cleaver than sword or knife. The blow struck Alvez's storm bolter aside, but did not knock it from his grip. The creature raised its other weapon, a spiked club of solid iron, and brought it down with blinding speed, but the blow bounced from Alvez's ceramite-plated shoulder with a clang.

'Die,' spat the captain. The power sword in his left hand was a glowing blur. It crackled and hummed as it slid through the beast's belly, cutting the ork in two.

Each half slapped wetly to the floor as Alvez turned to face the third of his attackers. But there *was* no third. Sergeant Gualan had gunned the creature down, firing into its back at point-blank range. Its chest cavity lay open to the air, blown out by a triple burst of explosive bolt rounds. Gualan, like the rest of his squad, was already moving on to other prey.

'Huron,' said Alvez over the link, 'report status.'

'Thirty-eight targets confirmed dead on the south side, my lord,' said Grimm. 'The orks taking refuge in the crashed ship are severely depleted. Suggest squads Grimm and Ulias move in and finish the job.'

Alvez could hear bolter fire over the link as the sergeant spoke, but it sounded sporadic, as if foes were getting harder to come by.

'Do it,' Alvez ordered. Then, switching channels, he said, 'Faradis, status.'

Sergeant Anto's report was likewise given against a background of lessening gunfire. He, too, reported a significant reduction in live targets in his sector and, like Grimm, requested permission to move in. It came as no surprise. What true Crimson Fist could stand to hold back when there were orks in close proximity? There would be little sport for either Grimm or Anto. The fight inside the manufactorum was well in hand, due in no small part to the unstoppable fury of Brother Jerian.

'Request denied, Faradis,' said Alvez, making a quick assessment. 'I need you and Haleos to hold the outer perimeter. There may yet be ork cells in this district. Squads Grimm and Ulias are purging the ork wreck. Rectris and Gualan have the facility under control. This is over. I am coming outside.'

And that was what he did. He handed command of the mop-up operation to Maurillo Rectris, then emerged back into the last of the fading daylight.

In the sky above, ork ships were still painting dirty black trails across the darkening blue. Pillars of dense smoke rose hundreds of metres into the air. He could see them towering above the city walls like vast ghosts slowly clawing their way towards the heavens. He did not know if they represented dead orks or dead men, but death, certainly.

He caught sight of Sergeant Anto and his squad sweeping a row of ore silos to the east and began striding towards him. He was about to hail him over the comm-link when the ground under his feet trembled. He heard the sound of a great explosion out beyond the districts defensive walls. Anto looked up at the same time. An insistent voice sounded in his ear, overriding all other channels on the emergency band. 'This is Squad Thanator to Captain Alvez,' said the voice. 'I repeat, this is Squad Thanator to Captain Alvez. Please respond.'

'Alvez, here. What is it, sergeant?'

'My lord,' said Sergeant Thanator, 'another ork ship just struck the city. The damage is severe.'

‘Where?’ Alvez demanded. ‘Can we contain them?’

‘There will be no containing this one, my lord,’ said Thanator, and Alvez could tell by the sergeant’s tone that this was more than just another crash. ‘They just took out an entire section of the Pavelis Wall!’

Dorn’s blood, cursed Alvez.

‘I need to know which section, sergeant.’

‘Zona 4 Commercia, section two, my lord. They’re pouring in like locusts. We need reinforcements. The sheer number of them...’

‘How many Adeptus Astartes did we lose?’ he demanded.

‘None, lord. Our forces were massed around the gate itself. The breach is a kilometre west of it. But the Rynnsguard losses... I can only guess they number in the high hundreds. There are over a million citizens in this district, my lord. We are doing everything we can, but we are few. This place is a charnel pit!’

Alvez had already begun striding in the direction of the industrial zone’s eastern gate. ‘Hold fast, Thanator,’ he commanded. ‘You will have your reinforcements. I swear it. I’m sending Predators and Vindicators to your position.’

Alvez’s strides became longer, faster. His footfalls shook the buildings and the streetlamps as he passed. He called to Squad Anto as he went, and they joined him, marching with bolters ready.

A dark thought had taken hold of him and it wouldn’t let go.

It was deliberate! It had to be. The orks had started using their ships as battering rams. What in Terra’s holy name had the Rynnsguard anti-air crews been doing?

Had he and his Fists held Zona 6 Industria, only to lose Zona 4 Commercia?

If the orks kept this up – and he knew they would – just how long would New Rynn City survive?



NINE

The Eastern Steppes, Hellestro Province

Few normal men ever realised just how much information was all around them. The air they breathed was filled with it, but their noses were not attuned to it in the way a canid's was, or the olfactory senses of a million other kinds of creature.

Space Marines knew. Within their bodies, each of Kantor's survivors carried an organ called the neuroglottis, or *The Devourer*, grown from the gene-seed of their fellow Adeptus Astartes and implanted during the painful process that forever physically separated them from their fellow men. The primary function of the neuroglottis was to allow instant analysis of a substance by taste. Toxins could be easily detected. Organic compounds could be tested for nutritional content. And a single scent molecule on a breeze could give away a hidden foe or tell the direction in which it had travelled.

Cortez and his squad were once again on point, ranging a kilometre ahead of the rest of the group.

The captain breathed, and smelled death on the wind.

Night had fallen three hours ago, and the Chapter Master had ordered everyone to increase their pace. He hoped to cross as much distance in the dark as possible. Too slow and the daylight would find his party in the

open with the sun glaring off their armour and weapons. Ork aircrews would be able to spot them from as far as the horizon.

They had to make the most of the darkness. Kantor was guiding them north-west to the place where the Eastern Steppes ended and the Azcalan, the Soroccan continent's massive rainforest, began.

Once the Crimson Fists were in the cover of the trees, night and day would become irrelevant. They would move without rest, and make the capital that much sooner. Right now, all Cortez could think about was the familiar smell he had detected.

Every breath he took spoke to him of spilled blood, of wet viscera exposed to the air. There were other scents, too. One of the strongest was dung, neither human, nor ork.

Cattle, he thought. Kine. That's what I'm smelling.

The planet's closest moon, Dantienne, was high and almost full. Her surface rock contained cobalt, and the dim light she threw down on the plains was distinctly blue. To Cortez and the rest of the Fists, everything had a greenish tinge. Their helmet visors were set to low-light mode, further brightening the gloom.

As he marched his squad onwards, Cortez now noticed large dark objects slumped on the grassy plains. They were shapeless black things. As he and his battle-brothers drew closer to them, the smell became stronger and stronger.

Cortez opened a link to the Chapter Master.

'Orks have been here, and recently.'

'They killed all the kine,' replied Kantor, pre-empting Cortez's next words. 'I can smell the blood.'

Cortez trod over to the nearest of the bodies. Dantienne's light glistened on the piles of looping wet entrails that had spilled from a wound in its stomach.

Why didn't they take the meat, he wondered?

If there was one thing orks were not, it was wasteful. Everything was scavenged. But not here.

Then he saw deep furrows in the dirt and had his answer.

‘War bikes,’ he told the Chapter Master over the link. ‘I have tyre tracks here. Ork riders did this.’

‘Right,’ said Kantor. ‘They wouldn’t stop to strip the carcasses. They must have ridden through here slaughtering everything in sight, leaving the bodies for a follow-up party to process.’

Cortez found other tracks now. ‘It looks like they rode off in the same direction we’re moving.’

He tested the air again with his nose. There were definite traces of the ork stink on the breeze from the north-east. It was an acrid smell. Even the foulest of unwashed, disease-ridden human beggars couldn’t hope to smell so offensive as the xenos. Cortez detected other scents, too. One was definitely promethium. Liquid fuel. He could tell it wasn’t from a local source. There was more carbon than the refined fuels the Imperium used.

The breeze changed direction then, coming to him not from the north-west, but from the north, where a gradual rise blocked his view of the land ahead.

What he smelled on it stopped him in his tracks.

‘Human blood,’ he told Kantor over the comm-link. ‘Fresh. It’s coming from the side of a ridge just north of my position.’

‘There is only one small settlement in the area. The Zar-Menenda agri-commune. Can you hear anything?’

Cortez strained his ears but the night was quiet. If there were sounds, the rise was blocking them. ‘I need to cross the ridge.’

‘Do it,’ said Kantor. ‘Reconnaissance protocols, brother. Understand? Keep me apprised. The rest of us will catch up to you once you have established an observation point.’

‘Understood,’ replied Cortez. ‘Moving out.’

Field operations with an entirely new squad were never ideal. Cortez tried not to think about the fine brothers he had lost. Was it really only weeks ago that he had looked across the nave of the Reclusiam and felt his chest swell with pride? Was Silesi really dead? Would he truly never hear Iamad's sharp laughter again? He was the last survivor of Fourth Company. Why was he always the last? It had been the same at Kalaphax and again and Gamma VI Monserrat, whole squads lost, and always Alessio Cortez returned from the battlefield alone, wounded and weary, but inexplicably alive.

Now Kantor had assigned him four new faces, new to Cortez anyway. He had seen them before, of course. They were not new in that sense. In a brotherhood of approximately one thousand warriors, there were few real strangers, and though the brothers of each company mostly kept to their own, a certain amount of cross-company interaction was inevitable and actively encouraged.

Two members of Cortez's new squad – Brothers Rapala and Benizar – had belonged to Caldimus Ortiz's Seventh Company, though they had served in different squads. Cortez remembered both of them from a winter combat exercise he and Ortiz had run about twelve years ago in the mountains north of Arx Tyrannus. Rapala and Benizar had performed solidly. Their scores had been unremarkable, but they were reliable with good skills across the board.

The other two battle-brothers assigned to Cortez's command were less well-known to him. One was Brother Fenestra, a quiet, thin-faced Blackwaterite from Selig Torres's Fifth Company. He had cold, dark eyes that never seemed to blink. Cortez had the feeling Fenestra didn't like him much, though they had never really crossed paths before the cataclysm. It hardly mattered. He didn't need people to like him, just to do as he said when he said it, and to show the right initiative when forced to act alone.

The last of the four was also the youngest. Brother Delgahn had served with the Chapter just eighteen years, only graduating from Tenth Company to Eighth Company a decade ago. Like Fenestra, he seemed wary of

Cortez, never speaking unless spoken to, holding back on the periphery unless called forward.

‘Stay low,’ Cortez told them over the comm-link as he led them up the rise. He didn’t need to whisper for the sake of stealth. His helmet’s external vox-amp was switched off and, without it, no sound leaked from beneath his ceramite faceplate, but his voice was clear and sharp on the link.

It was hard to stay low in full battleplate, almost as hard as it was to stay quiet. Even in a well oiled and treated suit of armour, ceramite plates often rasped or clanged against each other. There was the constant low buzz of the atomic power-supply, too. After spending centuries in power armour, one tended to block it out, but it was always there, always present, and it could give you away if you forgot about it entirely.

Within seconds, Cortez and his squad made the top of the rise and peered over. The night-time landscape stretched out before them, a broad patchwork of fields and pastures. In daylight, each would have been a different shade of green or yellow depending on the crops and grasses that grew there. Right now, viewed through the Adeptus Astartes’ helmet visors, they were all varying shades of muddy green. Wire fences and stone walls separated each and, from the west and the north-east, two wide dirt roads snaked towards a cluster of buildings some eight hundred metres away.

This was the Zar-Menenda farming commune and, in the middle of it, hidden from Cortez’s direct view by a row of large metal grain silos, a huge fire burned, throwing its telltale orange glow on the shell-pocked walls.

There had been fighting here, or perhaps not fighting, but slaughter. What kind of resistance could the farmers and their families have offered the brutish bloodthirsty invaders who had massacred all their cattle?

The greenskin stink was sharper and stronger now. So was the scent of human blood. Listening hard, Cortez began to catch sounds of activity from the commune, too.

His primary heart quickened.

They're still here, he told himself with a grin. Automatically, his fingers tightened on the grip of his bolt pistol.

There were thirty of them, thick-set and green, none weighing less than two hundred kilogrammes. Cortez cursed under his helm. On one hand, he was glad they hadn't posted any sentries. It had made the final approach to the agri-commune all too easy. On the other hand, their arrogance rankled. Were they so complacent because they believed they had already won this war?

He would teach them the folly of that assumption soon enough.

His squad hung back, cloaked in the shadows between two vast octagonal grain silos. The light from the massive fire the orks had lit didn't reach all the way back here. It was as good an observation point as any.

Peering out from those shadows, Cortez scanned the scene in front of him. On the very far side of the flames, a row of ugly vehicles, barely recognisable as bikes and buggies, sat with their engines switched off. Each was painted red. He could see that by the light of the fire. Each was lightly armour-plated and fitted with forward-pointing heavy stubbers. From the front armour, cruel metal spikes and blades protruded.

Cortez had seen such machines in action before, other conflicts, other worlds. He knew how much ork bikers revelled in running down their prey, shearing them to pieces by ramming them head on. Despite their appearance, the ork machines could move fast. Their hit-and-run tactics made them hard to counter with just infantry. It was imperative that these orks did not get back on their bikes before he had a chance to put them down.

Of the civilian workers who had occupied the farm, there was little sign. Cortez zoomed in on a black shape in the fire, and scowled. It was clearly a human foot. How many living souls had these orks already burned to death?

There was a scream, and Cortez turned his eyes left. It seemed the orks were not quite done with having fun yet.

The sound had come from the throat of a woman, perhaps thirty years old, lying in the dirt. She was surrounded by children, five of them, of varying ages, and she was hugging them to her hard. 'Don't look, my babies! Don't look!' she cried at them.

Now Cortez saw why. From the other side of the fire, a man emerged into view, walking backwards towards the woman and her children, his arms shaking as he tried to wield an ork blade that was obviously far too heavy for him. Reflected firelight shone on the tear tracks that marked his cheeks.

He was obviously retreating from something, and that something now appeared.

It was the ork boss, a towering, yellow-tusked giant in a long sleeveless coat fashioned from some kind of thick, scaly reptoid skin. On the beast's head there was a helmet boasting two straight horns, each over a metre in length. From its nose hung a gold ring, and from the belt at its waist hung four human skulls, seemingly tiny in contrast to its tree-thick legs.

The ork boss moved slowly forward following the terrified man around the fire. It was unarmed, but that hardly mattered. Even though the farmer bore a blade, he was outmatched in every way. This was a game to the orks, a sickening cruel game with only one possible outcome.

The other orks sat in the dirt hooting and howling with bestial laughter, watching their boss torment the last of the humans. They, like their boss, had rings through their noses. Their waistcoats were made of the same

kind of reptoid skin as their bosses. It hadn't come from any creature on Rynn's World. Cortez was sure of that.

The woman was screaming directly at the man now. 'Just run, Aldren,' she begged. 'Just leave us and run!'

If the man, Aldren, heard her, he showed no sign of it. His wide, unblinking eyes were locked on those of the monster as it closed the gap with him. He lifted the blade as high as he could, grunting with the effort. The ork boss stopped for a second and watched him, red eyes gleaming with cold, cruel amusement. Then it stepped forward.

Aldren lunged and brought the ork blade down as hard and as fast as he could, but it was a pathetically inadequate stroke. The ork boss batted the blade aside, and it flew from Aldren's hands.

'We're going in,' Cortez told his squad. 'Weapons ready.'

'I thought we were on reconnaissance protocols only, my lord,' said Brother Fenestra uncertainly.

'We were. Now I'm putting you on combat protocols. Lock out all other comm-channels except this one and encrypt it with an alpha-three key. The only voice you need to hear is mine until I tell you otherwise.'

He sensed their hesitation. They knew what he was doing. By locking out communication from the Chapter Master, Cortez was denying Pedro Kantor the chance to issue orders, orders that would most certainly have him falling back without dispensing the kind of righteous vengeance his soul demanded. Unreachable over the link, Cortez could thus avoid any charges of direct disobedience. It was a strategy he had used before, and not just a few times.

'Did you hear me?' he snapped at his squad. 'I said alpha-three. Do it now.'

His Adeptus Astartes did as they were told. He had known they would. He was still Alessio Cortez after all. Despite everything that had

happened, his legend still loomed large over the Chapter. Sometimes, his fame and reputation were useful after all.

When each of his Adeptus Astartes confirmed the comms lock, he told them what he wanted them to do and, in pairs, they moved off. Benizar and Delgahn went left. Rapala and Fenestra went right.

There was little Cortez could do until they were in position. It wouldn't take them long. The commune was small, and the deep shadows thrown out by the fire hitting the buildings and silos offered superb cover.

Cortez turned his attention back to the fate of Aldren, the woman and her children.

The ork boss had reached out its right hand, gripped Aldren by the head, and lifted him into the air. With the man dangling, his arms flailing uselessly at the ork's arm, his legs kicking and flailing, the ork boss turned towards the fire and began walking, a deep, throaty chuckle emerging from its throat as it did so.

The woman's screams took on fresh urgency now. 'Throne, no!' she wailed. 'Aldren!'

To her children, she yelled, 'Close your eyes, my babies. Close your eyes and don't listen!'

Cortez tightened his grip on his bolt pistol. The fingers of his power fist flexed and clenched hard. They could have crushed steel. 'Damn it,' he muttered. 'Hurry up.'

But he knew his Space Marines would not be in place in time to save Aldren and, if he moved prematurely, he would jeopardise the first part of his plan. There was nothing he could do.

The ork boss reached the edge of the blaze now and bellowed something to its fellows. Cortez scowled at the sound of the ork language. It was as ugly as the beasts were themselves. Whatever the creature said, a fresh round of hooting and laughing began, which seemed to satisfy the ork boss. It stretched out its arm and held Aldren out over the fire.

Yellow flames licked his legs greedily.

The air filled with the skin-crawling sound of agonised, high-pitched screams.

‘Where are you?’ Cortez demanded of his Fists, speaking through gritted teeth. ‘Why aren’t you in position?’

It was Brother Benizar that replied. ‘We’re at the vehicles my lord. We’re cutting their fuel lines now.’

‘Work faster,’ Cortez snapped back.

The flesh of Aldren’s legs was blistering. He kicked and screamed for all he was worth, but he was helpless against the strength of the ork boss. Soon, the flesh had turned black, and the flames crept higher, moving towards his torso.

The orks were still enjoying the show. The woman had turned away. She was holding the heads of her children down so they couldn’t watch the final, tortuous moments of their father’s life.

‘Done,’ reported Benizar over the link. ‘The bikes aren’t going anywhere.’

‘Get into firing positions, now!’ Cortez barked. ‘It’s time.’

So saying, he stepped out from the shadow of the silos and into full view of the enemy. He raised his bolt pistol, knocked the safety off, and braced it on the back of his power fist, almost as if he were about to take a competition shot in some tournament.

He lined his sights up on the ork boss, zeroing in on its oversized skull. The orks still hadn’t noticed him. They were too wrapped up in the torment of the human.

Cortez took a deep breath. With a single thought, he activated the vox-amp set into his helmet. His voice boomed like thunder, drowning out the last of Aldren’s screams.

‘You! Xenos scum!’

There was a moment when none of the orks moved, then, as one, thirty hideous, red-eyed faces turned to regard him.

Cortez fired a single shot.

It caught the ork boss in the throat and exploded, popping his helmeted head clean off his shoulders with a spray of blood so thick it was almost black.

The creature dropped Aldren straight into the flames. It didn't matter. Aldren was already dead. The pain had killed him before the flames had climbed above his waist.

The headless body of the boss fell to the ground like a dead tree. The moment it crashed on the dirt, the other orks leapt to their feet and swept up their weapons. Cortez angled his pistol's muzzle left towards the orks closest to the woman and her children. He put three rounds in three more snarling xenos faces. More bodies crashed to the ground.

'Space Marines!' he roared. 'Engage!'

Bolter-fire sounded from multiple directions at once. Brother Delgahn lit the river of fuel that leaked from the ork bikes and buggies, and a wall of fire leapt into the air, penning the orks in just where Cortez wanted them. He would not let a single one survive this night.

Kantor would have heard the gunfire the moment it began. He would have seen the blaze. If he was trying to raise Cortez on the comm-link, then he already knew the captain had locked him out. There would be hell to pay later, but Cortez could live with that. Right now, all he cared about was blood and fury.

Ork dead carpeted the ground. Hate had been served.

'Take your helmet off, Alessio,' said Kantor. His tone was as hard as iron and as cold as the polar seas.

He and Cortez stood off to the side, by the east wall of one of the agri-commune's raumas meat processing blocks. Dead xenos lay around them. The other Crimson Fists went among the bodies, attending to the grisly

business of ensuring that none of their fallen foes were merely wounded. The quickest way to guarantee the xenos wouldn't rise to fight again was to crush their skulls under an armoured boot, but ork skulls were incredibly dense. Even for an Adeptus Astartes in full plate, it often took a number of impacts to properly shatter the thick bone and pulp the pinkish grey tissue beneath.

Cortez lifted his right hand to the clasps and cables at his neck and did as his lord commanded. He pulled his helmet up over his head and placed it in the crook of his left arm.

Kantor's eyes burned into him.

'We spoke of this once,' said Kantor. 'After the judgement was passed on Janus Kennon, we spoke of this.'

Cortez nodded. 'And I was honest with you then. You know me better than anyone. Did you really expect me to quell my rage until we reached the capital?'

'I expected you to honour the ways of the Chapter, *captain*. I expected you to honour me. If not as your Chapter Master, then as your friend and brother.'

'Of course I—'

'Quiet, damn you! You will hear me out. I cannot have you taking liberties like this. We both know how many battle-brothers look to you for their example. Would you have them disrespect my command as you have done tonight? I am your lord and leader. You think our losses at Arx Tyrannus change anything? They change *nothing*. The Chapter is mine to lead. You are mine to command. You, me, all of us... we will live or die by the decisions *I* make, and, in Dorn's name, you will abide by them, Alessio. Remember your place. Be the Space Marine I need you to be, or so help me, things will change forever between us.'

Cortez did not want that. He had always thought their friendship a constant in an uncertain universe. How many times had each saved the

other's life? How many times during those first two centuries of service had they stood back-to-back, protecting each other as foes assailed them from all sides? Cortez missed those simpler days. Part of him envied his lower-ranking battle-brothers. Command was a great honour, but it was a burden, too, and it had changed things between them. He and Kantor were no longer equals. In fact, they hadn't been equals for more than a century, but Cortez had never felt the gap as keenly as he did now. Naturally, he felt no remorse for the killing of the greenskins, but now he would pay the price for the satisfaction of cutting them down.

‘Tonight, I put vengeance before my duty to you,’ he said. ‘I have angered you, and for that, I am sorry, brother. I will accept whatever punishment you deem fit. But I do not regret the killing of the xenos. I stand by my actions.’ He gestured at the nearest of the meaty green corpses. ‘This filth had to die. The souls of our fallen demanded it.’

Kantor glared back in silence for a moment, then said, ‘The demands of the living outweigh the demands of the dead. You led four of my Crimson Fists into a battle we could have avoided. I’m initiating the Ceres Protocol. There are not enough of us left to risk losing any more in satisfying your damned rage. You will accept a penance from the Chaplains at the capital once all this is over. Perhaps they will help you understand your error, since it seems I cannot.’

He turned away from Cortez.

The other Fists, having satisfied themselves that all the orks were dead, now began carrying the heavy alien bodies to the fire where they threw them into the crackling flames. It was standard practice to burn greenskin bodies after combat, and it had to be done quickly. Orks multiplied by shedding spores. Within hours, the air would be filled with them, tiny cellular capsules dispersing on the breeze. Most would not find suitable ground, but a percentage would land in dark, damp places and take root.

Fungal protrusions would sprout from the ground, and below, a new life, born to hack a bloody path across the galaxy, would begin to take form.

Slumped against the white plaster wall of one of the farm's hab-blocks, the woman and her five children huddled together, still weeping, still unable to break free of the terror that had gripped them, unsure of what would happen next. They did not watch the burning of the foe. They had seen more than enough of burning bodies tonight.

'Daybreak is but three hours away,' said Kantor. 'I had hoped to be much closer to the Azcalan by now. Tell the others we leave as soon as the last of the bodies is on the fire.'

With this, he left Cortez and strode towards the woman and her children. Cortez watched him go.

With the ork dead now crisping on the blaze, there was only one more matter to attend.

'The woman's name,' reported broad-faced Brother Galica as the Chapter Master stopped beside him, 'is Jilenne.'

'Jilenne,' Kantor repeated with a nod. 'Thank you, brother. Make ready to leave.'

Galica saluted, turned and strode off towards his squad who were running quick armour and weapons checks in preparation for moving out. Kantor looked down at the cowering civilians. They were huddled together in a knot. Galica had given the woman a canteen of water and she was trying to coax her still-shaking children into taking small sips.

How wretched they looked. No child should see what they had seen. No Rynnite civilian was supposed to endure this. It was the responsibility of the Crimson Fists to protect mankind. How did this woman judge him? He had failed in that task. Her husband had been burned alive not five metres in front of her. The man's own children had heard his screams. It seemed impossible to Kantor that any of this, any of it at all, was really happening. War had come to his world despite everything, despite the fact that his

very presence should have prevented it. How much had his own decisions precipitated this?

The woman looked so small and fragile, and yet she held her arms round her children as if she might somehow spare them further horrors by her own meagre power. She did not look up at him, but whether that was out of fear or respect, he could only guess. Was she as terrified of the Adeptus Astartes as she was of the orks?

He had removed his battle helm before speaking with Cortez, and had left it off deliberately so as to make the woman feel more at ease while they spoke, but he wasn't sure now that it would make any difference. With a conscious effort to soften his voice, he said to her, 'Have you or your children suffered any wounds?'

The question sounded foolish to him the moment he said it. Of course they were wounded, though perhaps not physically. In their eyes, the universe had changed forever. No night would ever again bring peaceful, restful sleep. Vision of green horrors would torment every last one of them until the day they died. The Imperial records spoke for themselves. Many who encountered alien races went mad, no longer able to believe there was any safe place in a galaxy that tolerated such abominations. Others committed suicide rather than face the grim truth.

'We will be leaving you soon,' he told her. 'My Adeptus Astartes and I have far to go. Is there anything you need before we depart?'

The woman murmured to her children, and slowly, reluctantly, they untangled their arms from around her.

Kantor watched.

When her children had drawn back, the woman crawled forward on her knees and, sobbing quietly, pressed her forehead to Kantor's right boot.

'You saved us, lord. By the Golden Throne, by the God-Emperor's light, you saved us. I beg you, in the name of Holy Terra, don't abandon us now. The beasts will come back, won't they?'

I did not save you, thought Kantor. Alessio did.

She was right about the orks. More would come. Many more. It was as inevitable as the sunrise. The ork bikers often rode at the head of a much larger contingent. When that contingent arrived, there would be no saviours a second time. The woman and her little ones would provide a brief moment of entertainment before they were butchered like the livestock they had once depended on.

But if we take responsibility for these people, Kantor thought bitterly, where does it end? Are we to save every other man, woman and child we happen across? They will slow us down when our greatest need is to move quickly.

He grappled with the most human part of himself, fighting to lock it away behind walls of resolve. He needed to crush these feelings of pity. They would do him no good now.

The Chapter must endure, he told himself, repeating it like a mantra. The Chapter must endure. Nothing else comes close. Good intentions will undo us. They will lead to our destruction. If that happens, we might as well have died with the others when the missile hit.

It was hard to do, but he stepped back and pulled his boot from under the woman's head. Only now did she look up at him, and her large brown eyes, wet with tears, sought his.

'Please, lord!' she cried out. 'What hope do we have alone?'

What hope, indeed, thought Kantor. I could say the same for my brothers and I. What hope do sixteen have against a Waaagh?

He turned from her and called out to his men to make ready for their departure, then he marched towards the fire where his three squads had finished their checks. The sound of her weeping followed him, clawing at his resolve.

He heard his inner voice say, 'Turn from those who need you, and you will lose everything that defines you.'

Master Visidar had spoken those words to him just a decade before his death.

Kantor cursed, knowing them for truth.

When he was ten metres from Jilenne, he turned and looked over his shoulder. He felt himself speak to her, heard the words in his ears as if they were someone else's. They seemed to pass from his lips automatically.

'I will not stop you from trying to follow us,' he told her. 'But you will not be able to keep up. Not for long. While you can, however, no greenskin will take you, nor any of your children.'

He turned his eyes forward again, adding, 'This is the best I can do for you.'

To Jilenne, it was enough. The timbre of her sobs changed from sorrow and fear to gratitude.

Kantor heard her urge her children to stand and follow as she fell into step behind him. He continued towards the fire, not slowing his pace, but not increasing it, either.

All the same, as he and his Crimson Fists left the farming settlement with their gaggle of refugees in tow, Kantor couldn't escape a feeling of deep foreboding. He had crossed a line. The woman would soon realise he had given her false hope. She and her children would tire quickly and the Adeptus Astartes would begin to pull ahead until they disappeared from view altogether.

What would she think of her saviours then?

And what would he think of himself?

The sky turned from blue to purple to red in the east. The Hellblade Mountains looked like black saw-teeth against the backdrop of the lambent dawn. Small puffs of pink cloud scudded overhead on a light westerly wind, but the season was changing and the clouds would be boiled off by mid-morning.

The Azcalan rainforest had been but a dark smear on the far north-western horizon when Cortez and the rest of the survivors from the fortress-monastery had set off on their journey towards the capital. Now they were closing on its south-eastern edge. The land was far greener here. There were crowns-of-gold and snap-thistles everywhere, and spiny cyclacore trees stood in groups of twos and threes, already starting to turn their blood-red plates towards the glow of the new day.

Cortez led the rearguard, following five hundred metres behind Kantor and Squad Segala, eyes alert for any sign of pursuit. Throughout the night, flaming streaks had continued to cut across the sky, a clear sign that the orks were still landing more of their number with impunity. It seemed there was nothing left to stop them. The global defence batteries were either spent or overcome. There was no further sign of Rynnsguard aircraft. Even if Scar Lake had been overtaken, surely there should have been something from the spaceport at the capital... unless that too had been overcome.

The thought of it chilled Cortez. If New Rynn space port was lost, the orks would be landing forces directly on the outskirts of the capital without challenge. He couldn't imagine Drigo Alvez allowing that, but, if the spaceport was still in friendly hands, where in blazes was their air support? Where were the reconnaissance flights? Surely Alvez would have sent someone to discover why he had lost all communication with Arx Tyrannus?

Brother Fenestra's voice broke over the link. 'They are flagging badly, captain. We should abandon them now.'

Cortez turned and looked back the way he had come. Tired figures staggered after him. The woman and her children were falling further and further behind.

Damn it, Pedro, he thought. You should have left them at the farm.

But he could hardly absolve himself. It was his actions that had denied them a quicker death in the first place. Perhaps Pedro had been mistaken in giving the woman permission to follow, but it was he, Cortez, who had drawn out her suffering in the first place. Might it not have been more merciful to let the ork warboss kill her before he had intervened? She could have followed her husband into the Emperor's light. It would have spared her the torment she was going through now.

He watched her for a moment, stumbling on weak legs while she desperately tried to carry her two youngest ones. The other three, between the ages of nine and thirteen, traipsed along in a line abreast of her, heads bowed with exhaustion, eyes fixed on the ground. None of them spoke. They had no energy for that. In the hours they had tried to keep up with the Crimson Fists, they had been forced to run for short periods to make up ground, and still they fell behind bit by bit.

Cortez was sure the woman would collapse soon. The children she carried were small, but even a small weight took its toll on a long hard march. It was a pity. He found that he respected her a great deal. Her arms and shoulders must have been burning with lactic acid, not to mention her legs and the muscles of her lower back. But she kept putting one step out in front of the other.

Then, just as he was about to turn around, he saw her left leg crumple under her and she went down, turning to protect her little ones from impact with the ground even as she fell. It looked like her foot had snagged in a clump of grass. Her other children shuffled to her side and crouched there, urging her to stand.

Fenestra had seen it, too. 'It is over, then,' he said. 'About time. We can move at speed.'

Cortez opened a link to the Chapter Master. 'Pedro, it's me. The woman has fallen. I don't think she'll be getting up. I just wanted to let you know.'

There was a moment before Kantor replied. ‘She fought hard to hang on. Impressive that she lasted as long as she did, is it not?’

‘It is,’ said Cortez after a beat. ‘But it ends here. Her burden is too great to continue.’ Again he paused. ‘I... I should not have saved her, Pedro. I merely postponed the inevitable and prolonged her torment. Perhaps I should...’

‘...grant her the final mercy?’ said Kantor, finishing Cortez’s sentence for him.

‘Yes.’

There was such a long pause this time that Cortez started to think the Chapter Master had cleared the link. Then, finally, Kantor said, ‘Hold position and wait for me, but tell the rest of your men to keep moving towards the tree line. I want our squads in cover before the suns are visible.’

Cortez was unsure what his old friend was up to, but he said, ‘As you wish,’ and, a second later, cleared the link. He relayed the Chapter Master’s orders to his men, and they pushed ahead, Fenestra striding away faster than the others. He watched them for a moment until they disappeared down a shallow decline. Close to where they vanished, the tall figure of Pedro Kantor appeared, walking back towards him.

Even though Kantor’s armour was scratched, chipped, dented and burned black in places, he still looked like a figure of legend, still everything a Chapter Master should be. His golden halo shone in the growing light.

When he was three metres from Cortez, he stopped and looked east. ‘The suns will be up very soon, Alessio. We should have been in the cover of the forest by now. We run great risk of being spotted from the air.’

Cortez nodded. He knew the habits of the orks, knew they seldom flew at night. Their eyesight was poor compared to their sense of smell, and darkness brought a kind of malaise down on them without which they might have butchered each other in the dark, so violent were their

tendencies. They only ever launched night attacks by the light of flaming torches or searchlights, which was doubly fortuitous because such lights made convenient markers for Imperial artillery fire. As soon as the suns were up, the sky would fill with noisy, ugly flying machines. Kantor was right. They had to get to the cover of the forest within the next ten minutes.

‘Come,’ said the Chapter Master, and he strode in the direction of the children where they hovered over their mother’s unmoving form.

The children heard the two massive Space Marines approaching and, with fear apparent on their faces, took a few nervous steps back, conflicted between feelings of concern for their mother and concern for their own lives. Cortez saw them eyeing his weapons, especially his power fist. He wondered what they were thinking. Did they really believe he would crush them with it? In a universe as cruel as this, perhaps they did.

Come to think of it, what exactly were Pedro’s intentions? Did he plan to put the entire brood out of its misery?

Kantor crouched at the woman’s side and removed his helmet.

Cortez tried to read his face, but it betrayed no emotion.

‘Jilenne,’ said the Chapter Master. ‘Can you hear me?’

The woman’s eyes were closed, but her lips parted. Weakly, quietly, she said, ‘They were so heavy. So heavy...’

Kantor nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but you did well to bring them this far.’

Reaching out, he lifted the two smallest children away from her and gestured to the older children to take them. They did so, and Kantor turned back to the woman.

The Emperor’s mercy, thought Cortez. You should not have to do this, Pedro. It is my fault. It is my soul that should bear the stain.

Before he could communicate this, Kantor spoke.

‘It is time,’ he said, and he reached down to the woman with his gauntleted hands. ‘Time that someone carried you now.’

As Cortez watched, the Chapter Master lifted the woman and stood to his full height, cradling her exhausted form in his arms. She looked so small and fragile against his sculpted ceramite chest, little more than a rag-doll.

Then the Chapter Master turned to Cortez and said over the link, ‘Once we are among the trees, they will have a better chance. They are charges of the Chapter now, and we cannot abandon them.’

Carrying the woman as if she weighed nothing at all, Kantor began striding for the distant tree line. Over the link, he added, ‘Help the children, Alessio. Help them get to cover quickly. The suns will be up within moments.’

Cortez looked down at the children. Their clothes were torn and stained with the dirt of their night-time trek, but, in eyes of the three eldest at least, he could see a fierce spark and recognised it as the will to live.

Very well, he thought.

His own childhood had been brutal, a daily struggle to survive in the swamps and marshes of Blackwater, where even the smallest creature represented a deadly threat, and children often killed other children over matters of hunting territory and material possessions. These children were not like him. They had been raised as farmers, not killers. At least they were healthy from working the land. They would not need to be carried. They would make the tree line in time if they moved off now.

‘Do not be afraid,’ he said as he stepped forward, bent, and scooped up the two smallest children. ‘Your mother will be fine, but we must hurry and follow her. You must be hungry, all of you. There will be fruit in the forest, and water. You can eat as much as you can find, but only if you keep pace with me. Is that clear?’

The oldest, a boy of thirteen, stammered a little and couldn’t bring himself to look up at the hard, emotionless mask of Cortez’s helmet, but he managed to say, ‘We can rest and eat there, in the forest?’

‘You can,’ said Cortez and he turned in the direction of the tree line.
‘But, as I said, you must keep up.’

He began walking at a fair clip. The two small children he carried were both crying loudly, a particularly grating sound.

Behind him, he heard the others panting hard as they jogged to keep up as well as they could. The trees loomed closer and closer, and reached out cool shadowy arms to gather them in, embracing them just as the larger of Rynn’s World’s two suns poked its head above the knife-like peaks of the Hellblades.

A new day had begun and, all across the continent, the savage hordes were stirring.



TEN

Zona Regis, New Rynn City

‘Eggs argalatto,’ said a petite servant, ‘sliced marsh-melon, and pickled valphid hearts.’ She placed three dishes on the table. With a bow, she retreated from the balcony, moved back into the shadows of the main chamber and stayed there, out of sight but close enough to swiftly answer any requests her ladyship or her two guests might make.

Shivara, the governor’s bodyguard, stood there, too.

The suns were up, and the air on the balcony was warming quickly. The sounds of heavy artillery from the city perimeter had started an hour ago, shocking and unwelcome at first, but so constant, so unrelenting, that they quickly became background noise.

No screams or battle cries could be heard at this distance. Maia was thankful for that. Despite the booming of the guns, she smiled across the table at her breakfast guests, Viscount Isopho and General Mir, and gestured at the food. ‘Please, enjoy.’

Isopho smiled back, but Mir glanced at his food without expression.

‘I’m sure it’s divine, my lady,’ he said without much conviction. Perhaps it was too rich for his tastes, Maia thought. He picked up his fork, but he didn’t take a mouthful until Maia herself had done so. Among the Rynnite

upper classes, no man ate before a lady seated at the same table took her first bite.

Maia lifted a small forkful of the eggs and swallowed, breaking the spell. The others began to eat.

‘I asked you to join me, gentlemen,’ she said, ‘because there is much to discuss, and I would do it here where the constant interruptions of the Upper Rynnhouse will not bother us. I want you to speak frankly about our situation.’

‘What do you wish to know, lady?’ said Mir, lifting a goblet of chilled water. ‘The essentials were already covered in yesterday’s final session.’

‘True,’ said Maia, ‘but you’ve had a night to reassess. I’d like to hear your current thoughts.’

‘It is as the Adeptus Astartes said it would be,’ said Mir. ‘The greenskin assaults eased off during the hours of darkness. Captain Alvez had our artillery targeting enemy light sources close to the walls. We dim our own lights, naturally. Without a visible target, the orks are unfocused and have nothing to attack. If last night was anything to go by, our forces will have ample time for rearming and recovery before each dawn. That will be crucial if we’re to hold long enough for aid to arrive. And we *will* hold, but there is no room for complacency. The Space Marine Scouts maintain a constant vigil, no matter the hour. Our own scouts do likewise, though at shorter range. I’ve heard that a subset of the greenskin horde utilise night-vision equipment and stealth tactics, but they are a tiny minority. If they seek to infiltrate the city, we will respond with lethal force.’

Maia nodded. ‘Then it is the hours of daylight we must worry about. Has our anti-air defence been strengthened in accordance with the captain’s decree?’

‘To the best of our ability, yes,’ said Mir, gulping down a mouthful of valphid heart before continuing. ‘Our Hydras and missile batteries have been repositioned to counter the greatest areas of threat, but it leaves

certain other sections of the wall at risk, mostly to the east, west and north-west. Of course, the Shield Range offers us a measure of cover on the latter. The mountains are relatively free of the foe.'

'Surely we can't afford any weak points at all?' said Isopho.

Mir turned to him. 'I'm afraid our tactical choices are rather limited, viscount. We face greatest pressure from the south and south-east. Most of the ork ships in this region landed there. Given the size of the capital, our defence has to be somewhat reactive. The Crimson Fists have organised their Land Speeders, bikes and transports into rapid response units. I've done the same with our Sentinels and Chimeras. They will move to hold any gaps the orks try to exploit. Together with our infantry and artillery regiments, the main bulk of the Space Marine force will hold the walls and gates where we face the most continuous pressure. We shall do everything we can to maintain the territory we have. I only wish we'd had time to organise a trenchworks on the outskirts of the city before the xenos landed. We might have held far more ground that way than we did.'

Maia raised her goblet in Mir's direction. 'You did exceptionally well under the circumstances, general. But it's imperative we lose no more ground. Bishop Galenda visited me personally after yesterday's session to demand extra protection for the Zona Sanctum and the churches in the other districts.'

'He shouldn't be bringing that to you, my lady,' said Isopho with a scowl.

Mir nodded. 'If the bishop wishes to discuss the defence of the Great Basilica, send him my way.'

Maia looked out from the balcony across the city. *Her* city. In the distance, where the fighting was, columns of smoke stood like dark towers against the sky.

'He plans to petition the Adeptus Astartes,' she said. 'But I doubt he will find Captain Alvez a willing ear.'

Isopho and Mir shared a look. ‘The Crimson Fists are not as people think them to be,’ said Isopho. ‘Our protectors are as cold and hard as the armour they wear. I sometimes wonder if there is a human being inside at all.’

‘They are not human,’ said Maia, returning her eyes to her plate and spearing another slice of marsh-melon. ‘They are something greater, and it makes them distant, yes, but we should love them all the more for that. Perhaps loss of humanity is the price of such strength.’

There was an unmistakeable sadness in her tone.

Isopho shifted in his seat as if suddenly uncomfortable. He had heard the rumours about the statue in Maia’s room. He had heard whispers of her infatuation with the Chapter Master. He had hoped it was just talk, but now he felt certain it was more than that.

‘I doubt we will ever understand them,’ Maia continued, somewhat wistfully, ‘but I know I’m glad they’re here.’

General Mir voiced his agreement. As they ate, the fighting continued all along the defensive line. Out there on the walls, men and Adeptus Astartes alike fought and died to hold back the xenos hordes.

It was still early, but already many had begun to pray for night to return.



ELEVEN

The Azcalan Rainforest, Rynnland Province

‘Something is wrong here, lord,’ said Sergeant Viejo to the Chapter Master.

Upon reaching the forest, the Crimson Fists had pushed inwards a few hundred metres and spread out, establishing a small perimeter, making sure that no surprises lurked in the dense shadows under the thickly clustered trees.

Now they stood in a circle, weapons held ready, eyes outward, their light-boosting visors helping to pierce the shade beneath the dense canopy.

The forest was deathly quiet, as if there were no animals of any kind. With winter over, the thin shafts of light that penetrated the canopy and dappled the forest floor should have been alive with clouds of needlewings and scallopbacks, the predators that feasted on them, and all the other forms of life that flourished here.

But there were none.

No ornithids cried out from the treetops. No brachiodonts brayed from the banks of the River Rynn that cut through the forest deeps. No kynids growled and spat from their burrow entrances among the tangled roots and vines.

Kantor drew a deep lungful of the cool air and focussed his mind on processing the molecular messages within it. Some of the scents were his own: metal, ceramite, the hot ionised air which constantly vented from the exhaust ports of his back-mounted generator.

On his armour, Kantor also smelled traces of the skin and sweat of the woman, Jilenne, whom he had set down against the bole of a thick tree once it was clear that there was no immediate danger in the area. She was resting now, sleeping with her children after consuming some of the forest fruit that Brother Alcador had found for them.

The scent of vegetation dominated, of course. Kantor could smell the thick spongy bark of the trees, the leaves overhead, the weeds and shoots underfoot. The soil was rich with nutrients and minerals.

And there was something else, faint but familiar. He had last smelled it just three hours ago.

Ork.

The other Crimson Fists detected it at almost the exact same moment Kantor did, their fingers ready on triggers as they scanned the foliage for the source. Though their faces were covered by their helmets, Kantor could read the sudden tension in these moments easily enough.

‘There is no breeze here,’ said Sergeant Segala. ‘Hard to track them by scent alone.’

Sergeant Viejo concurred. ‘Difficult to pinpoint. There’s no sign that they have passed this way. No footprints. No blade-marks on the trees.’

Orks would not have passed through here without hacking at the tree-trunks with their blades. Such mindless displays of aggression were as natural to them as breathing. Their tiny minds constantly drove them to express their violent natures.

‘West,’ said Cortez, removing his helmet to take a deeper draught of the air. ‘I cannot be sure, but it seems slightly stronger from the west.’

‘The Tecala River is that way,’ said Kantor. ‘So is the bridge we must cross.’

Brother Delgahn spoke up, the first time anyone had heard him do so since they had left the ruins of Arx Tyrannus behind.

‘My lord, permit me the honour of reconnaissance. If there are orks west of here, I will find them.’

Now another of Cortez’s squad added his voice. It was Brother Fenestra. ‘Perhaps my lord will consent to send both of us.’

What is this, thought Kantor? Do they think I hold them responsible for the battle at the farm? I displayed no anger towards them. They were merely following Alessio.

Even so, Kantor decided he would send someone else. Let them think what they would of that.

‘Denied,’ he said flatly. ‘Sergeant Viejo, pick two members of your squad. They will scout ahead. I want them to secure the bridge first, then move out from there. Have them report back to me within the hour. Captain Cortez, your squad has not rested since seeing combat. They will clean their armour and weapons, then enter a full sleep state for one hour. Sergeant Segala’s squad will patrol our perimeter. That is all.’

‘Teves, Galica,’ barked Viejo. ‘Forward eyes. The rest of you are on overwatch.’

The two battle-brothers chosen by the sergeant saluted Kantor, turned, and melted into the shadows to the west, moving a few metres apart, weapons held ready, fat muzzles sweeping left to right, each covering the angles outside the arc of the other.

Kantor watched them go, then turned and glanced at Jilenne and her children where they lay sleeping against the tree. Their muscles would be stiff and painful when they woke. That would not help their speed.

I have turned my peerless warriors into child minders, he thought bitterly. And the enemy is somewhere nearby, somewhere in this forest.

Unburdened and unchallenged, we might have made the capital within three, maybe four, days. How long will it take us now?

Looking at the sleeping family, he felt a mix of emotions. Could he leave them here? It was the smart move, he knew, the right move. There was food in the forest. Water was abundant. They could make their own way to the capital by following the waters of the River Rynn. There was a chance they would survive, so long as the orks didn't stumble across them.

He remembered words spoken to him by High Chaplain Tomasi after the Battle of Braxa Gorge; frank words, but well-meaning, spoken with a rare half smile some two hundred and forty-seven years ago.

'I applaud your unbending sense of honour, Pedro,' the High Chaplain had told him. Kantor had been a sergeant back then. He had risked his life and the lives of his squad brothers in holding the gorge open for a final convoy of refugee vehicles. Thousands had been saved. 'But sometimes honourable men must do dishonourable things. What is morally right must bow before what is tactically sound. I fear the standards you impose on yourself are impossibly high. Unless you give them up, they will be the death of you one day.'

Kantor was glad those words had come from the High Chaplain and not from the Chief Librarian. From Eustace Mendoza, he would have taken them as dark prophecy. From Tomasi, they were advice.

Advice I never learned to follow, he thought.

From the tree line, Kantor could now see what Galica and Teves had reported and then, at his request, had drawn in the dirt with their knives. There, about two hundred metres north-west of his position, was the crumpled hull of an ork transport. The craft had plunged from the sky, smashing a great hole in the forest, creating a clearing that was now filled with the greenskins that had survived the crash. The treetop canopy had been ripped wide open. The ruined ship lay belly up with the Rynnite suns blazing down on it. Smashed tree trunks lay at all angles on the ground. Some had been hacked up to fuel the fires that dotted the clearing. It was

around these fires that knots of big, powerful orks sat gorging themselves on hunks of roasted meat.

Kantor sniffed the air. At least the meat was not human. He tracked its scent north and found its source, the corpse of a bull brachiodont, its pale body ripped open, thick sections of muscle cut away, its wounds black with clouds of feasting flies.

Despite measuring over twelve metres in length, the creature hadn't stood a chance against armed orks. Neither had the people stuffed into crude cages on the south-western edge of the camp. These were no Rynnsguard soldiers. Judging by the colour of their stained and torn attire, they were simple pilgrims. Most likely they had been on the road to Ivestra's Shrine in the north-east when they had run into the ork invaders. Now they huddled together in the tight confines of their cages, whimpering and soiling themselves, each praying he or she wouldn't be the next one picked.

What happened to those that *were* picked was all too clear. From the lower branches of nearby trees, lifeless bodies hung, their flesh covered in deep red gashes, their clothes reduced to blood-soaked tatters. These wounds were not the worst of it. Each of the dead had suffered a further, greater cruelty. Their faces had been entirely removed. Not messily, not brutally, but with chilling surgical precision. The dead swayed and turned in the occasional light breeze, their rictus grins taunting those that had yet to follow.

'All squads in position,' Captain Cortez reported over the link.

'Good,' said Kantor. 'We go on my command.'

He knew he couldn't avoid this. At first, he had wished for another way, but then he had seen the slave cages, and his mind had been made up.

Besides, he rationalised, there are close to a hundred orks here. We couldn't press on simply hoping they wouldn't give chase. They would have hit us from behind the moment they picked up our trail.

Still, he was anxious about pitting all the Adeptus Astartes he had against so numerous a foe when ammunition and supplies were running dangerously low. His assault plan called for only the minimum expenditure of bolter rounds, but it would also put his Fists in close range with the orks, something he would have preferred to avoid given the choice.

He had hoped to identify the mob's leader, too, before launching the attack, but so far none of the orks in view seemed to be in charge. None were that much larger or darker than the others, and it was these two signs, above any other, that usually indicated which greenskin dominated.

Kantor's eyes flicked back to the twisted wreckage of the ork craft.

The leader must be inside, he thought, but the fighting will bring it out.

He keyed an open comm-channel and addressed the three squads at his disposal. 'Crimson Fists,' he told them. 'Give vent to your rage. Do me proud. Open fire!'

From the tree-line all around the ork camp, the bark of bolter-fire sounded in short, sharp, tightly-controlled bursts. Each of the Crimson Fists had already picked his target and lined it up before the order was given. On Kantor's command, the first lives were taken. Explosive headshots sent a dozen carcasses slumping to the ground, blood pumping out in great fountains.

The other orks, seeing their kin slaughtered in front of them, swept their weapons up and cocked them. They had seen the muzzle flashes from the inky shadows beneath the trees. Now they swung their broad stubber muzzles around to open fire.

'Smoke!' Kantor commanded over the link.

Small metal canisters glinted in the Rynnite sunlight as they arced out from the trees and in towards the densest knots of orks. Some of the orks stared at them dumbly as they landed by their feet. Others opened fire at the trees with typically poor aim. The canisters began hissing and spewing

out a thick, choking blanket of grey smoke that soon clogged the air over the entire clearing. It was impossible to see anything but the bright muzzle flashes of the ork guns as they fired madly at nothing.

‘Switch to thermal sight,’ said Kantor over the link, simultaneously sending the thought along the neuroconnectors that linked his brain to the systems of his armour. His helmet’s vision mode flickered to the appropriate filter, showing him a noisy grey image with fat white silhouettes firing wildly in all directions. ‘Move in!’ he ordered.

It went exactly as he had planned. The orks could see nothing at all, and cut down a good many of their own number with torrents of lethal, undisciplined fire, while the Adeptus Astartes pressed into the smoke-filled clearing, killing as they went. Bestial roars of frustration and anger echoed back from the tree trunks on all sides, merging with the deep rattle of so many guns.

Kantor strode forward with Dorn’s Arrow raised at shoulder height. Every bellowing xenos shape that loomed out of the smoke received two lethal storm bolter rounds in the head. Huge bodies dropped to the forest floor, their weapons clattering on rocks and fallen trees. The greenskins were blind, and the Adeptus Astartes were not, and it was more a massacre than a true fight.

Kantor lowered Dorn’s Arrow and flicked on the energy field of his power fist, feeling its lethal aura prick the skin of his arm as it crackled to life. All over the clearing, his Adeptus Astartes were doing the same in a bid to conserve rounds. Cortez, Viejo and Segala each bore power fists of their own, and they employed them to deadly effect now, punching and ripping at anything that came within range. The other Fists carried long combat blades with monomolecular edges and cruel serrations. These they wielded with the cold efficiency that many decades of daily practice had given them. They slashed and stabbed at the arteries and vital organs of enemies who still could not see them.

The cover of the smoke wouldn't last much longer. There was a slight breeze from the north-east and the veils of grey began to dissipate. How many of the orks had already fallen? Sixty? Seventy? Kantor didn't know.

The nature of the battle changed. The smoke no longer offered adequate cover. Kantor cycled his visor back to standard vision mode and saw a huge, battle-scarred beast surging straight towards him with iron axes in both meaty hands. The beast roared as it came, mad red eyes burning with bloodlust. Kantor felt his centuries-honed combat instincts take over, moving him into position without conscious thought. He slipped the ork's first whistling slash easily, stepped in, and caught the second on his left vambrace before it fell. For just an instant, he and the monster stood locked in that position, the creature's breath sour and hot and utterly foul, reaching Kantor's nose through the ducts in his faceplate. There were thick gobbets of brachiodont flesh lodged between the monster's teeth, rotting remnants of its last meal.

'Eat this instead,' growled Kantor.

He threw his weight behind a deadly right uppercut, and heard the energy field of his power fist crack like a bolt of lightning. The blow caught the ork in the sternum and blew the entire contents of its torso out of a massive exit wound in its back. Red eyes rolled back in their sockets. Cored like an apple, the suddenly limp creature fell away from its killer, collapsing to the ground in a splash of wet gore.

Kantor stepped back and looked up. Close to the centre of the clearing, his battle-brothers were working together to exterminate the last of the ork fighters, cutting them down two- or three-to-one. Movement close to the jagged rent in the hull of the crashed ship caught Kantor's eye. One squad, he saw, was about to go inside.

He didn't have to check to know who was leading that squad.

'Alessio,' he said over the link.

The figure at the front of the squad turned for a moment. ‘Let me do this,’ said Cortez.

Kantor nodded. ‘Go.’

The squad disappeared inside the downed ship, and the Chapter Master turned to survey the rest of the camp. Many of the ork fires had been kicked over in the fighting. A few still burned. Two of those snapped and popped as they consumed the flesh of orks that had fallen on top of them.

Kantor turned his eyes to the cages in which the captured pilgrims were huddled. Some of those closest to the bars, he saw, had been caught in the firefight, their bodies perforated by stray shells from the ork stubbers. He heard the sound of sobbed denials as those close to them hugged the bodies close, desperately pleading with their fallen kin or spouses to hold on to life despite their wounds.

Kantor walked over to the nearest of the cages. The people inside shrunk back in fear, despite the fact that he had saved them and they surely knew what he was.

‘Stand back,’ he told them, though he hardly needed to.

He reached forward with his power fist, grabbed a hold of the spiked and rusty iron bars, and ripped the cage open.

This done, he looked down at the people he and his Adeptus Astartes had just saved.

‘Exit the cage and gather in the centre of the clearing,’ he boomed at them. ‘I am Pedro Kantor, Lord Hellblade, Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists. Do as I say. You are safe now. I will free the others.’

The crashed ork craft was not all that large, but its corridors and chambers had been built to accommodate beings taller and broader than Alessio Cortez, and he and his squad moved easily along them, bolters up, clearing room after dimly lit room. Mostly, they found only gretchin working busily with wrenches and hammers on pieces of weird and inexplicable machinery. These they dispatched with knives or gauntleted hands, running

them through or twisting their heads from their necks before they could scramble for shelter.

They found only a few full-grown orks. Most of the larger brutes had been outside when the assault took place. Those left within were strapped to gurneys, apparently recovering from some kind of bizarre surgery. It explained why they hadn't rushed out to join the battle. One of these had a second grotesque head grafted to its left shoulder, the crude stitching clearly visible even in the low light. It appeared to be unconscious. Cortez jammed his knife between its vertebrae, severing the critical nerves, making sure it never woke up. Another of the orks, not quite unconscious but still groggy, had an extra pair of thick, muscular arms grafted onto its hips. The appearance of the Crimson Fists roused it, and it struggled against its bonds to rise and engage them. Brother Benizar stepped in and plunged his knife into its throat. Brother Rapala joined him and, together, they cut the beast to pieces.

Soon, the corridor they were following ended in a broad archway through which bright light could be seen. Cortez, out in front as usual, held up a hand, and his squad halted. 'Listen,' he told them over the link.

There was a strange sound coming from the well-lit chamber up ahead. It was a sound that didn't belong here, almost a human sound, but issuing from inhuman lips. There was something else, too – the sound of muffled crying, as if someone was sobbing through a gag. Cortez crept forward as quietly as possible and, from the cover of the archway, peered into the chamber beyond.

Cables and pipes hung from overhead in great tangles. The floor, which had been the ceiling before the craft landed on its back, was littered with broken sections of pipe, metal plates, snapped stanchions and a collection of instruments, the purpose of which Cortez couldn't begin to guess at. And there, in the centre of all this, he saw a bizarre and terrible scene.

There was a single ork in the middle of the room, and it was humming a tuneless melody to itself as it sharpened a large scalpel on a whetstone. It

wore a long tunic which had perhaps once been white, but which was now so soaked and stained with blood that it wasn't easy to be sure anymore.

The beast looked like a twisted parody of an Imperial medicae. Perhaps it had seen members of the medicae on its travels through the galaxy and had realised that their attire symbolised their profession. Had it sought to emulate them? Perhaps it had simply picked the tunic up somewhere and had donned it arbitrarily. Whatever the reason, it was clear that this monster was responsible for the two-headed ork Cortez and his squad had found earlier, not to mention the other monstrosities.

It was also clear that this beast was responsible for the faceless human corpses that hung from the branches of the trees outside. Cortez could tell this immediately from looking at the ork's face. Where an Imperial medicae would have worn a surgical mask to do his work, this creature wore the facial flesh of its last victim. The effect was horrifying. The fleshy mask was still wet with the victim's blood.

The muffled whimper sounded again, and Cortez turned his eyes to the source. Strapped tight to a table in front of the strange ork surgeon, a human male of about twenty years old struggled against his restraints. His mouth was indeed gagged, but his eyes were wide as the ork turned, scalpel in hand, and approached him.

Cortez turned from the scene and handed his bolt pistol to the battle-brother behind him. It was Fenestra. 'Hold this,' he said. 'I won't be needing it for now.'

Fenestra took the pistol and looked back at Cortez. 'What are you going to do?'

Cortez moved out from the shadow of the archway and stepped into the chamber, letting the bright electric light show him in all his lethal glory.

The ork had been about to make its first incision in the trapped human's face. But, with Cortez making his presence known, it looked up from its work and gave a snarl of fury. It abandoned the scalpel for a nasty looking

buzzsaw and moved around the operating table towards Cortez, its intentions clear.

Cortez dropped into a combat stance.

‘I’m going to rip this filth limb from limb,’ he told Fenestra.

And that was exactly what he did.

Cortez emerged from the hull of the ork transport and strode over to Kantor’s side where he stood talking to the leader of the pilgrims they had rescued from the cages.

The haggard refugees looked up at Cortez in horror. Drenched as he was in the blood of his enemies, he looked like some kind of death god fresh from the pit, and he would have terrified almost anyone.

‘The craft has been cleared,’ he reported to the Chapter Master coolly.

Kantor glanced over at his old friend, noting the state of his armour, then merely nodded.

Brother Benizar brought the man Cortez had rescued from the operating table forward, and a woman rose from the ground and raced towards him to embrace him, calling his name between great sobs of relief.

The Space Marines ignored the joyful reunion, but the grateful woman insisted on throwing herself before Benizar and kissing the back of his right gauntlet. Fenestra and Rapala, who were just behind him, laughed out loud, and Benizar pulled his hand from the woman’s grasp, saying, ‘It is the captain you should thank, woman.’

He gestured at Cortez, and the woman turned eagerly to lavish her gratitude on the one who had saved her husband. But, when she saw the gore-splashed figure to which Benizar was referring, she balked and knelt where she was, muttering her thanks over and over, not daring to lift her eyes.

Cortez paid her no heed whatsoever.

‘This,’ said Kantor, addressing him, ‘is Menaleos Dasat, the leader of this group.’ The Chapter Master gestured to a skinny old man in stained

brown robes. Despite all the man had clearly been through, there was something strong about his bearing, if not his body. 'Dasat was guiding them to the shrine of Saint Ivestra,' continued Kantor, 'following the old path on foot, when the orks ambushed them. Dasat, this is Captain Alessio Cortez, Master of the Charge, commander of the Crimson Fists Fourth Company.'

Dasat pressed his forehead to the ground, then sat back on his calves and said, 'I am unworthy even to kneel before you, my lord.'

Cortez gave only the briefest of nods by way of greeting, then turned his eyes back to Kantor. 'We should be away from here. There is still a long way to go.'

At that moment, Sergeant Viejo appeared from the clearing's eastern edge, leading Jilene with her children in tow. Prior to the assault on the camp, Kantor had ordered the woman to remain behind, sheltering beneath the roots of an ebonwood tree. He hadn't needed to tell her twice. She knew the moment she saw the Adeptus Astartes readying their weapons that there were orks in the vicinity. She and her children had waited, scarcely daring to breath until someone came back to fetch them. Viejo carried the two smallest children in his arms.

The Chapter Master turned Dasat's attention towards them and said, 'This woman and her children were also rescued from the xenos. They are not pilgrims, but you will show them the depths of your kindness. They have suffered much as you have.'

Dasat bowed again. 'All the faithful are one under the Imperial creed,' he said. 'We will embrace them as if they were our own, my lord. To think that children so young...'

He let the words hang.

'How long will it take your people to get ready, Dasat?' Kantor asked. 'We can waste no time. Other ork parties may have heard the gunfire.'

The mention of this possibility seemed to put fresh energy into the tired-looking refugees. 'We have nothing, lord,' said Dasat. 'We are ready to follow at your command. But we have not eaten since our capture, and the water they gave us was foul with their waste. We could not drink it. I'm afraid we are very weak.'

Kantor called Sergeant Segala over to his side.

'Sergeant, how long would it take you to find something these people could eat?'

Segala barely thought about it for an instant. 'There are fruiting trees nearby. Ground pears and aberloc.'

'Good,' said Kantor. 'Dasat, send some of your people with Sergeant Segala here. He will lead them to food. They must bring back enough for everyone, and extra for the journey ahead.'

To Segala he said, 'We can spare only minutes for this, sergeant. Make haste.'

Segala clashed a fist on his breastplate. 'By your command, lord.' Then he turned and began striding towards the edge of the clearing. Dasat called out several names, and figures hurried from the group to follow the massive Space Marine.

Jilenne and her children had joined the group now, and the female pilgrims were making a great fuss over them. Dasat smiled as he watched.

'I will leave you to become acquainted,' said Kantor, turning from the little man. He gestured for Cortez to walk with him.

Behind them, Dasat pressed his head to the ground again, then turned and rose to introduce himself to Jilenne.

'Did you see it?' Kantor asked Cortez. 'It is quite remarkable, yes?'

Cortez detected unexpected pain in the Chapter Master's voice. 'I'm sorry, Pedro,' he said. 'Did I see what?'

Kantor angled his head to look at him while they walked. 'The resemblance, Alessio. The resemblance. This man, this Dasat... He

reminds me so much of Ramir that I had to look twice to be sure I wasn't seeing things.'

Now Cortez understood the pain in his old friend's voice.

'I'm sorry, brother,' he said, 'but I don't see it. The ordinator was easily twice that man's size.' He paused. 'And Ramir Savales would have died fighting with his bare hands rather than let the orks take him alive.'

Kantor was taken aback at the anger he detected in that last sentence. He stopped and faced the captain.

'Do you detest them, Alessio?' he asked. 'Do you hate them because they cling to life so desperately?'

'I do not hate them,' said Cortez. 'But they are another burden on us now. I admit that the woman and the children were my doing, Pedro. I wish it were otherwise. But now we are shepherding almost thirty people, none of whom are even armed. Where will you draw the line?'

Kantor answered through lips drawn tight. 'There *was* a line, Alessio. Remember that. There was a line, and it was *you* who crossed it. Now we are responsible for these people, and you will protect them. You will honour the name Rogal Dorn, and you will honour me.'

As he turned and strode away from Cortez, he had one last thing to say.

'Get your squad ready, captain. You are on point.'

Menaleos Dasat was awed and terrified at the same time, but he dared not show the latter for fear of insulting his saviours. All his life, he had preached the Imperial creed to any who would listen. He was no ecclesiarch, just the son of a simple farmer, but his faith in the Emperor of Mankind was a powerful thing, and over the years he had drawn others about him, others who needed more in their lives, needed something to believe in, something to give their labours a grander purpose.

Dasat had grown up in a crop-harvesting settlement just north of Sagarro, on the provincial border between Inpharis and Rynnland. In his early years, he had often travelled to the towns and cities with his father. The trips were usually for the purpose of negotiating with buyers and

exporters, but his father had always made time to give praise in the Imperial temples while they were there. In those days, it seemed that images and statuary of the Crimson Fists were everywhere, and the young Dasat had marvelled at them, finding it difficult to imagine what such beings would be like in life. Now he knew.

He had never imagined, not once in all his sixty-eight years, that he would speak to the Chapter Master, Lord Hellblade himself. He hoped he had covered the tremors he had felt on addressing that grim, austere giant. Perhaps the Chapter Master had taken it as the palsied shudders of old age, rather than fear.

Such a face that one had! So hard and angular. And so deep-set, hard and cold like a mountain winter.

Dasat was unused to fear. He had always lived secure in the knowledge that the Emperor had a plan, and all men were a part of it. He had believed his part was to live and die as a farmer who, in his spare evenings, took the good word wherever it might be received. When he had been approached by a group of the faithful who wanted him to lead a pilgrimage to Ivesta's Shrine, he had been flattered and had even seen the honour as his due in a way. The group looked up to him with such respect. No man could have walked away from that. It was the greatest feeling of his life... for a time.

Then the nightmare began. Beyond the treetops, the pilgrims had glimpsed snatches of the fires in the sky. They had heard the roar from the Hellblade Mountains, and had seen night turned to day by the flash in the east. The others had turned to Dasat for answers, their fear all too plain. But he had had no answers, so he told them they should continue. Had he been wrong? No. The pilgrimage had been a worthy endeavour. He could not have lived with himself to have come so far only to turn back for causes unknown. It was shortly after that, an hour before the party was due to strike camp, that the monsters had exploded from the forest, swarming

on the group, butchering a score before anyone even realised what was going on.

Dasat had heard of orks, but his knowledge was limited to the content of the traditional cautionary tales his father had told him as a boy. Small children heard such tales and were afraid, and their parents would tell them, ‘Pray to the Emperor every night, work hard in His name, and He will protect you.’ As he had grown older, Dasat had made the mistake of taking such stories less seriously. No one he knew had ever seen a xenos of any kind. Without experience to contradict him, he had started to think man’s dominion over the galaxy absolute.

Being thrown in a cage and forced to watch members of his flock endure hideous, sickening torture had quickly divested him of that misconception. And, if even Rynn’s World was not safe, then surely nowhere was.

By a miracle alone, by the intervention of the Emperor, who had sent His warrior sons to deliver them from evil, Dasat and the rest of the party lived. But for how long?

He walked silently, deep in thought, and the other survivors followed behind him. They, too, were quiet, cowed by the figures up ahead who hacked and slashed their way through the dense forest without ever resting or talking. In fact, their silence unsettled Dasat. It seemed almost as if these blue giants communicated mind-to-mind, but more likely they were just using some kind of communication system installed in their helmets. They never took those helmets off. In fact, only the Chapter Master did so, and only when addressing Dasat and the rest of the pilgrims, as if it were important they see his human features. Then there was the woman, Jilenne, and her young. The Crimson Fists had rescued her from a farming commune somewhere to the south-east, or so she said. Dasat was pleased to see his flock fussing over her children. Even in the face of all they had seen, their humanity endured. His heart sank as he remembered the children who had set out from Vardua with his group. There had been nine

of them. All had been trampled to death in the ork attack. At least they had been spared the horrors to which the survivors had been subjected. Surely they were with the Emperor now.

Glancing again at the broad backs of the Crimson Fists up ahead, Dasat wondered that they allowed him and his party to tag along at all. Surely they would make better time by abandoning their tired charges. He knew they were pushing for New Rynn City. At first he had thought his party would never be able to keep up. He had even considered suggesting to the Chapter Master that he leave them all behind, for surely nothing was more important than for the Crimson Fists to reach their goal and begin the task of repelling the invaders. But the idea of addressing the Chapter Master, or indeed any of these massive, stony warriors, filled him with cold dread. They were not like the murals or the statues. Those images had been warm, glorious things wrought by the hands of normal men.

These beings were living breathing myths come to life. They were Angels of Death, bred to kill. He could not begin to imagine what went on in their minds, though he suspected he knew what a few of them were thinking. The body language of two of them seemed downright hostile. Had they not been wearing helmets, Dasat could imagine them spitting on the ground in disgust whenever they looked at the helpless refugees. He made a special effort to keep his followers away from those two. He did not want to give them any excuse to express their impatience. One of them had been introduced by name, the famous Captain Cortez. He did not know the name of the other.

If Dasat had imagined his people would slow the Crimson Fists down, he was wrong. The Azcalan was managing that quite well enough and, in fact, by presenting such a troublesome obstacle to their progress west, it allowed the pilgrims to keep up. The Chapter Master hadn't explained himself, and Dasat didn't expect him to, but he steered his Space Marines away from the few beaten paths that led through the forest. These paths

followed the course of the River Rynn for the most part, and Dasat wondered if the reason the Crimson Fists avoided them was because the orks might be making use of the river and the paths to move troops. It made sense.

As Dasat was thinking about this, Molbas Megra, a cattle-hand in his thirties and one of the most outspoken members of the group, hurried his pace until he was walking by Dasat's side.

'They are not as I had imagined them,' he said to Dasat in hushed tones. 'Most of the women are terrified of them, even though they saved us. They are so... different from us.'

You mean *you* are terrified, thought Dasat. And of course they are different. They are the Space Marines, the Emperor's sons.

Megra had always thought himself brave and strong, and had never been shy about telling others so, but he had wept openly when the aliens caged him. Dasat did not judge him too harshly for that. He had wept himself when the cage door had closed on them, believing a long, painful death was his imminent fate.

'There is a highway just south of here,' said Megra. 'It runs all the way to the capital. Why do they not lead us down onto the road? Surely it would be faster than this. Safer, too, I imagine. I don't think we should stay in the forest. Do you?'

Dasat resisted the urge to turn and scowl at Megra. 'You would have us all exposed to the invaders? Trust in our lords. They did not save us only to have us die on the journey toward sanctuary.'

Dasat could feel Megra's eyes on him, staring hard, a sharp retort forming on his lips. But the retort never came. From the thick greenery up ahead, a deep voice called back, 'Danger will find us sooner or later, farm-hand. Pray only that we see it before it sees you.'

Now Dasat *did* turn to look at Megra, and saw that he had gone utterly pale. The voice from the trees ahead did not sound friendly. It was the

voice of Captain Cortez.

‘H-he heard me?’ stammered Megra in disbelief.

Dasat scowled. Of course he heard you, he thought. Do the legends not tell of how their senses are far beyond our own?

No doubt they could see farther and with much greater acuity, too. What other feats were they capable of? Could they read minds after all? He had heard that some of them could. Did they realise, then, how afraid his people were, stumbling through the thick jungle in the wake of demigods dedicated to war? Megra was foolish enough to voice his thoughts, but none of the others were. They limited their sporadic talk to the comforting of Jilenne’s children.

Perhaps time will remedy our fear, thought Dasat. As they say, familiarity with a thing removes the fear of it.

It was something he had read in an old book a long time ago and he had taken it as great wisdom back then. Now the lesson seemed pathetically naïve and utterly false.

After all, he was more familiar with greenskins now.

And his fear of them had increased a hundredfold.



TWELVE

Zona 3 Commerciale, New Rynn City

Captain Alvez stood on the upper gallery and looked down at the ground floor of the Menzilon arcade. The arcade was a massive structure, a great open space, the arched glass ceiling of which rose some fifty metres above the colourful mosaic of the marble floor. Before the arrival of the alien horde, it had been an enclosed market, a place where the burgeoning Rynnite middle classes came to spend their time and spare centims. Now, it was an emergency refugee centre, serving as such since the outer districts had first been evacuated. The mosaic on the grand marble floor was bloodstained in places. Elsewhere, it was covered with dirty white sheets beneath which lay the wounded and the desperate. Not all those who sought shelter here had suffered injuries. Many simply had nowhere else to go. Their homes had been burned or blasted to rubble. Beside them, Alvez saw bags of possessions, usually not very large. These people had had only moments to grab what they could before the Rynnsguard herded them from the unprotected, unwalled outer settlements. Judging by their wretched attire, they probably hadn't owned all that much anyway. There were children among them. Those young enough to remain ignorant of the true threat chased each other around the thick stone pillars that supported the ceiling and the galleries.

Alvez could smell human blood, lots of it. His hyper-sharpened hearing could make out every moan, every plea for water, for food, for something

to dull the pain. He heard women weeping, crying out the names of their lost sons and daughters. Men wept, too, calling out to the Emperor, asking what they had done to offend Him, why He had removed His protection from His faithful servants.

Fools, thought Alvez. The Emperor helps those who help themselves. He has not forsaken anyone. He created Rogal Dorn, and the primarch created us. No ork will overcome us. Whatever the odds, the Crimson Fists will win out in the end, even if we are the only living things left standing on this planet. We will triumph, and we will reclaim this world.

He heard the sound of heavy footsteps to his right. An Adeptus Astartes was ascending the marble stairway. As Alvez watched, the laurelled helmet of a sergeant came into view. Alvez knew the chips and scrapes on that helmet well enough to recognise its wearer, though there were a few new ones, it seemed.

‘Huron,’ he said. ‘What kept you?’

‘The greenskins, naturally, my lord,’ said the sergeant. He stepped up onto the landing and crossed to Alvez’s side.

‘And your squad?’

‘Awaiting us on the Verano wall to the north, as per your orders. The trucks have arrived to evacuate these people.’

‘Good,’ said Alvez.

Grimm looked down towards the lower floor, and said, ‘A pitiful sight, this.’

‘Indeed,’ said Alvez. ‘Look to the south-east corner where no lights are lit. From there, the worst of the stench emanates. That is the dying place, for those beyond help.’

Grimm nodded. ‘Can the medicae do nothing for them?’

‘Short of euthanising them,’ said Alvez, ‘no.’

‘Then that is what they should do, and spare their attentions for those that can be saved.’

Alvez snorted. 'You know the medicae healers as well as I, Huron. Even when the obvious is right in front of them, they do not give up, not even on a single soul. Our Apothecaries are much the same.'

'I wish the Rynnsguard and the civilian militias were as stoic.'

Alvez frowned. 'The commissars will keep them in line. There were more executions this morning. Desertion rates will fall for another few days, though I doubt it will affect the suicide rate.'

'Their fear of the orks is so great that they take their own lives.' Grimm shook his head. 'It bewilders me. If they will not grit their teeth and stand strong...'

He let his sentence hang unfinished. Stepping forward, he placed his hands on the sculpted baluster, and leaned out over the edge. Beneath him, he saw minor ecclesiarchs, their beige cassocks trimmed with black and white check, moving among the displaced and the desperate, offering words of consolation from the Imperial creed and its innumerable supplementary tomes.

'Are they ready to evacuate, my lord? There is no telling how long we will have.'

'Now that the trucks are here,' said Alvez, 'the senior medicae will start the process. Those with the best chance of survival will be moved first.'

Outside, gunfire was constant. The closest section of defensive wall had fallen less than thirty minutes ago. Two regiments of Rynnsguard infantry and a company of Leman Russ tanks were punishing the orks that were pouring through the breach, but the Crimson Fist captain knew it was only a matter of time before the defenders were forced into a retreat. The orks would keep coming, a ceaseless tide that gained ground little by little, until the entire district fell. One section of the city at a time, the orks were slowly, inexorably, pressing the Imperial forces back towards the Silver Citadel. All the Crimson Fists and the Rynnsguard could do at this stage

was slow them down as much as possible. Retaking lost territory was beyond them. The cost in life and materiel would be far too high.

As movement increased on the floor down below, and the first of the wounded were taken to the north exit to board the waiting trucks, Captain Alvez found himself thinking of Ceval Ranparre, the Master of the Fleet. Had he been able to get a ship out in time? Had any of the Crimson Fists spacecraft escaped into the warp? He hoped so. Though his pride protested bitterly against such thoughts, the reality was this: without significant outside intervention, all he and his Crimson Fist brothers could hope to do was to hold the line, to last out as long as they could. Beyond that...

From somewhere outside the arcade, a battle-brother transmitted an update on the situation at the breach. Alvez listened. It was a Devastator Squad sergeant called Lician. The sergeant's squad had been charged with providing heavy fire support to the Rynnsguard 12th Infantry Regiment. Judging by Lician's tone, things were not going well.

'My lord, Colonel Cantrell has ordered his men into a staggered retreat. The wall is lost. Xenos are spilling into the streets now.' Almost as an afterthought, he added, 'These men fought hard, brother-captain. We gave them all the support we could, but I'm afraid their eventual loss was inevitable. The greenskins are pouring through like floodwaters.'

'Were the habs evacuated in time?' Alvez asked.

'Many were,' answered Lician, 'but just as many were not. The orks are torching everything in their path.' His voice took on a bitter tone. 'I have never heard such screams.'

'What is the position of your squad now, brother?'

'We are moving back with the Twelfth Regiment. Currently, we are three kilometres east of—'

Lician stopped mid-sentence. Alvez could hear him conferring with another battle-brother. Then, addressing the captain again, Lician said urgently, 'My lord. You need to get out of the arcade! There's a—'

Alvez never heard the rest. The far wall of the arcade exploded inwards in a great cloud of stone, steel and glass. Deadly debris flew in all directions, and those closest to the south wall were crushed to death. Something huge and dark rumbled in the great cloud of dust that shrouded half the arcade now.

Grimm, still standing at the stone baluster, bellowed down to the floor beneath him. ‘Get everyone out of here!’

Even though his helmet’s vox-amp was set to full volume, no one heard him over the roar and splutter of whatever had just demolished half the building.

As the cloud of dust thinned a little, the shadow within took on clearer form.

‘Move!’ barked Captain Alvez, and he shoved Grimm violently aside just in time.

There was the sound of a cannon firing, and the baluster where Grimm had been standing only a second ago exploded in fire and shrapnel.

Alvez raised his storm bolter and fired at the black behemoth now emerging from the dust, but his bolts rattled off its armour. Engines spluttered and rumbled, and the thing lurched out of the cloud, its great treads crushing wounded men and women who were unable to roll clear.

It was a massive ork battlewagon, a mishmash of looted tanks and armoured personnel carriers welded together on a vast track-mounted chassis. Twisted black spikes covered its armour, and a fat cannon swivelled from a cluster of armoured mantlets.

Those guns swung towards Alvez now and, with a stutter of thunder, launched a volley of explosive shells his way.

Had Alvez not been wearing Terminator armour, the proximity of the detonating shells would have blasted him apart, but it would take nothing less than a direct hit to fell him.

Under the cover of the smoke and debris that the exploding rounds had kicked up, Alvez retreated, ordering Grimm, who had narrowly missed being blasted apart himself, out of the arcade in front of him.

Outside, all but one of the trucks had left at speed, carrying the Rynnites who had made it out alive. No one else would emerge from the building now. In the driver's cabin of the last truck, a terrified man in Rynnsguard fatigues waved frantically at them.

'My lord,' he yelled over the sound of the arcade's destruction. 'Please, hurry. Get in the back.'

The truck was military issue, a big, tough six-wheel drive affair capable of handling three tonnes of cargo. The back was unshielded. Alvez looked at it dubiously. Grimm jumped up into the rear, and the suspension compressed with a groan. Alvez followed quickly, and the driver put the truck in gear. It struggled to accelerate at first, but soon they were roaring away from the arcade, abandoned shops and hab-blocks whipping by them.

Alvez and Grimm watched from the back as the Menzilon arcade finally collapsed in a great mushrooming cloud of dust and smoke.

'Do you think, perhaps...?' Grimm asked.

'No,' said Alvez. 'It'll take more than that to stop it.'

A new sound was intruding on his thoughts, just audible above the rumble of the truck. It was a distant angry buzzing noise, and it came from the south-east. Actually, it was several noises merging together.

'Damn it,' cursed the captain. 'We've got ork copters coming in!'

He was right. The copters swung out of the sky, guns blazing, the insane greenskin pilots laughing with delight. Stubber-fire stitched the back of the truck and rattled off the armour of the two Space Marines. Alvez targeted the lead copter and fired a quick burst from his storm bolter. The machine dipped for a moment, but stayed in the air. A second later, when the pilot's torso blew outwards, the shells inside him detonating, the

buzzing one-man craft went into a wild spin and exploded on contact with the corner of a tall hab.

There were still two copters. Grimm fired his bolter and blew out the gas tank of the second, turning the whole machine into a blinding yellow fireball that crashed onto the road behind them.

‘Keep moving,’ Alvez roared at the driver. Turning to look ahead, he could see the Verano wall looming into view. The other trucks from the arcade were already well beyond its great gates.

‘Almost there,’ said the Rynnsguard driver.

He spoke too soon, of course. The last of the ork copters dived towards them and, before either Grimm or Alvez could open fire, launched a volley of rockets right at them.

Most of the rockets went wide, but one screamed straight in under the vehicle and struck the ground. The explosion tossed the truck into the air, its back end spinning over its cabin. Grimm and Alvez were thrown out and hit the ground hard, but, saved from grievous injury by the armour, they were soon up and moving towards the Verano Gate.

The Rynnsguard driver was not so lucky. His broken body lay still, soaked in blood, half in, half out of the crumpled cabin.

Grimm was at Alvez’s side now, pacing him, slowing his own steps to match those of the far heavier Terminator suit.

‘Damn them,’ spat Alvez, looking to his left and right.

From the streets on either side, a tide of orks was boiling towards them, weapons firing, blades raised, a wall of green flesh and sharpened metal. The two Crimson Fists immediately opened fire, cutting down dozens in the front ranks.

‘Get moving,’ growled Alvez. ‘Get to the gate, Huron. You have to close it before they get through. I won’t lose another district today.’

‘And I won’t leave your side,’ Grimm argued, voice shaking with the recoil from his bolter as he fired burst after burst at the horde. His left

hand flashed to his belt and pulled a krak grenade free. He primed it with his thumb and tossed it at the closest knot of greenskins.

There was a deep boom, and the luckless orks at the front exploded in a shower of red flesh and bright bone. Grimm tossed another, killed a dozen more of the savages, and that was it. His grenades were spent.

The roar of the ork horde was joined by the sound of engines now. Buggies and bikes revved noisily, eager to get through, but there was no room for them, the streets were so thick with greenskin infantry.

‘Don’t you disobey me, sergeant,’ Alvez barked between shots. ‘Don’t you start that now. I need those gates closed before the orks push through. You can get there a lot faster than I can. Start the mechanism. I will slip through just before they shut. We’re operating under the Ceres Protocol, remember. I’m not about to die at the hands of this filth.’

He strafed the orks to his left with storm bolter fire and cut several apart, but there were so many of them, and they kept coming, stampeding over their dead.

Grimm had his orders. He didn’t have to like them, but they were orders just the same. Firing a last burst from his bolter, he turned and sprinted for the Verano Gate. As he ran, he told his captain over the link, ‘I’m not letting them close until you’re through.’

Alvez ignored that. He was busy picking his targets, walking backwards, his storm bolter keeping the orks at bay. In his left hand was a glowing power sword, a relic blade called *Riad*. Its blade, forged with technology long-forgotten, could cut through tank armour with ease. If, no, *when* the orks got within range, Alvez would cut through them like they weren’t even there.

He did not feel even the slightest fear as the horde closed on him. Glancing back, he saw that Huron Grimm was through the gate now, and he had only fifty metres to go. But the damned gate was still wide open.

‘Grimm?’ he bellowed over the link. ‘What in Dorn’s name is going on?’

‘The mechanism, my lord,’ Grimm answered. ‘It’s jammed. We’ll have to close the gates manually.’

‘Then do it,’ Alvez snapped. The orks were almost on him now. He hefted *Riad* in his hand, ready to swing. ‘And hurry up!’

Grimm could hardly believe this. He wanted someone to blame, someone to rip apart with his bare hands. The Rynnsguard troopers manning the walls were firing down into the ork horde that was closing around his captain, but their lasguns were pathetically inadequate. Only their heavy weapons – the autocannon, lascannon and heavy bolters they employed – had anything but a negligible effect on the xenos mob, and there weren’t nearly enough of those to turn the orks back.

Grimm’s squadmates were on the walls, too, and had been firing in support of him, but the moment he discovered the gate mechanism was malfunctioning, he had called them down from the walls to help him. Closing the gate manually meant pushing each of the two gate sections together. Thick metal bars stuck out from the rear of each section to make this possible, but it would have taken the Rynnsguard many men and far too much time even to budge the gate a centimetre. Instead, Grimm’s squad went to work, even while, on the other side of the gate, their brave captain cut a path of gory destruction through his enemies.

Grimm heard him on the link, breathing hard despite the capabilities of his gene-boosted body.

‘Progress report, sergeant!’

Grimm answered through gritted teeth as he pushed with all his strength against the handle in front of him, desperate to get the gate moving.

‘Doing our best, captain.’ He managed, but that was all.

‘Not good enough,’ Alvez answered. ‘Work faster!’

Grimm grunted and put everything he had into pushing the gates closed. Beside him, two of his brothers also pushed. The other two worked the

opposite section. The sound of gunfire was loud and constant from atop the wall.

‘We can’t keep them off him!’ shouted a Rynnsguard officer. ‘There’s too damned many!’

Grimm howled with rage. He wanted to be out there beside his captain. What in the blasted warp was he doing here, about to lock Drigo Alvez out there with the enemy?

Orders, said a voice in his head. You can never disobey your orders.

‘Captain,’ Grimm grunted. ‘How close to the gate are you? It’s almost shut. We’ve only three metres to go!’

It was true. The Rynnsguard would later tell of the Space Marines’ incredible strength that day. It shouldn’t have been possible. The gate’s sections weighed several tonnes each and were only ever meant to be manually closed with the aid of powerful trucks that could shunt them together.

‘Close the gates,’ ordered Alvez.

Grimm stopped pushing immediately, his squad brothers following suit.

‘My lord—’

‘I said close the damned gates, sergeant. Are you deaf? They’re all around me now. There’s far too many of them and if they get through, Dorn help me, you’ll have disobeyed a direct order. You’ll no longer be Adeptus Astartes, I promise you. I am commanding you to save that district, and you will do it. How many hundreds of thousands of people are sheltering behind those walls? Do it, Huron!’

The conscious part of Grimm’s mind railed against it, but his psycho-conditioning was incredibly deep and, through a strange numbness, he felt his body once more put all its strength into the effort of sealing the gate.

Again, his squad brothers took their cue from his example.

Before he knew it, the task was done, and he stood gasping, helmet pressed to thick metal surface.

He ordered his squad brothers back onto the ramparts to lend their Rynnsguard their firepower, but he knew it was too late. He felt the loss inside him already.

A moment later, Brother Kifa hailed him on the link, and his tone was enough to tell Grimm everything. Even Terminator armour had its limits. Against such overwhelming numbers, the captain could not have fought longer than he did.

He was gone.

Grimm allowed himself to fall to his knees. He had never felt like this in all his life. He hoped he never would again.

His left hand sought something on his belt and he tugged it free with a snap, raised his hand in front of his visor and looked at it.

It was a tiny wooden aquila, the charm that the old Rynnite woman had tried to give Captain Alvez as they marched through her street.

Grimm stared at it, the relentless noise of battle all around him dimming to mere background static. This pathetic little trinket was supposed to protect people. It was supposed to have some power, yes? The woman, filled with reverence for the Crimson Fists, had wanted the charm to protect Drigo Alvez. But it was he, Huron Grimm, that had carried it with him. And it was he who lived.

What did that mean, he wondered?

Nothing, answered a voice in Grimm's mind.

It sounded so much like the captain's.

It means nothing at all, Huron, the voice repeated. *It is just a piece of wood. Destroy it!*

Numbly, automatically, Grimm closed his armoured fist over the tiny icon, and crushed it to splinters.

Now get up, said the voice. *Get back in the fight. Honour me. Honour the Chapter as you were taught to do.*

Grimm got up as the voice commanded, slammed a fresh magazine in his bolter, climbed to the top of the ramparts, and went back to war.



THIRTEEN

The Azcalan Rainforest, Rynnland Province

Cortez's pistol clicked empty, and there wasn't time to change the magazine. Rearing up in front of him was a huge ork with skin the colour of coal. In each clawed hand, the slaving beast held a cleaver over a metre long, each blade viciously serrated like the jaws of a Medean killfish. There was a blur of motion. Cortez's reflexes shifted him a step to the left before his conscious mind even had time to register the angle of the blow, his response time the product of centuries of diligent training.

The greenskin berserker's blades bit deep into the soil where Cortez had been standing. In the half-second that the creature took to reverse its momentum and wrench its weapons up again, Cortez's power fist flashed forward in an arcing blur. It was a body shot, a thunderous strike to the monster's exposed side, and the crack of lethal energies ionised the air, giving it a sharp metallic smell. The ork howled and crumpled to its knees, a great spherical section of its torso utterly destroyed. Gore poured forth, and it sank forward, but Cortez wasn't finished. One did not leave a wounded ork breathing on the battlefield. These were hardy creatures, far hardier than any living thing had a right to be. Wounds that would have killed even a Space Marine might only cripple an ork until its incredibly

resilient algae-infused system could put it back together. He had seen it happen before.

The moment the creature's head struck the dirt, Cortez raised his booted foot and hammered it down on the beast's ugly head. Once, twice, three times. At first, the skull resisted the massive impact of the blows, but, by the third stomp, it gave way, the bone shattering at last, the brain turning to a jelly-like smear.

There was no time to glory in the victory. All around Cortez, his battle-brothers were engaged at close quarters. It was here the orks were most dangerous. It was here they excelled. Their raw animal power and savagery were incomparable among all the alien races, save perhaps the disgusting tyrannids. Individual combat would favour the Adeptus Astartes, of course. No living being trained as relentlessly, nor mastered war to the same degree. But the orks were not fighting as individuals. Their strength was in their numbers. Hundreds poured forth, as if the forest was vomiting them out, like something poisonous eaten by mistake and rejected. 'Stand fast!' Cortez bellowed, drawing his combat knife. Its blade was long and keen, sharpened to the monomolecular level, treated with a coating of synthetic diamond, as were the knives of all the Crimson Fists. They cut through the flesh of the orks, carving great hunks of bleeding meat from the densely muscled bodies.

Days had passed since the rescue of Dasat and his pilgrims from the slaver camp, and this was the third time since then that the contingent from Arx Tyrannus had run into wandering ork mobs. The two previous times, whichever squad was on point had quickly eliminated the problem. Those mobs had been relatively small. This one was far larger, and there had been no going around it. A pitched battle had been inevitable.

Cortez heard Kantor on the link ordering Squad Viejo to break north with the refugees, to get them away from the edge skirmish as quickly as

possible. Then the Chapter Master was in among the orks, a whirlwind of violence, felling all that tried to swarm on him.

Cortez would have enjoyed watching his friend's martial prowess in action, but two snarling orks, marginally smaller and lighter-skinned than the monster Cortez had just slain, lunged at him from both sides. Cortez slid backwards a single step, and the aliens' crude blades cut empty air. He did not give them time to recover. Every blow they missed was an opening he was conditioned to exploit. Lunging to the right, he rammed his combat blade deep into the belly of one, so deep he felt its point catch on the inner surface of the beast's vertebrae. Instantly, he yanked back on the knife's grip. The serrations on the back of the blade caught on the creature's innards, and ripped them out through the gaping hole in its skin. For an instant, the creature stood looking down at its own looped intestines, a look of dumb curiosity on its idiot face. Cortez had already turned to the other, kicking at its leading knee, hard enough to smash the kneecap to pieces. The ork went down on its other knee with a roar of anger and pain. Again, Cortez's power fist flashed out. There was a sharp electrical crack, and the creature's head vanished in a red mist.

The lifeless, headless body fell forward on its chest, twitching and gushing hot blood.

Cortez spun and caught the other ork, the one his knife had just gutted, on the side of its head with a backhand blow. It, too, collapsed headless to the soil, falling to rest atop its own slick viscera.

Over the comm-link, Cortez heard himself addressed. 'Alessio, try to draw them west. Crush them between your squad and Segala's.'

Easier said than done, thought Cortez as his power fist felled another green wretch.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the Chapter Master fighting only a dozen metres from his side. Fenestra and Benizar were beside him, giving their all. Cortez threw himself into the fight even harder, and became a

blur of blue motion, slaughtering the brutish foe as quickly as they could emerge from the dark green shadows.

Cortez relayed the Chapter Master's orders to his squad between blows and, together, they began moving west even as they fought. Kantor moved with them, growling over the link, 'That's it. Keep them coming. North a little. Draw them on.'

Cortez's squad let the orks come to them, giving ground metre by metre as they backed away. The foliage thinned a little, cover for the orks began to lessen. Targeting the beasts became easier, and they went down in increasing numbers, their heads detonating in bright sprays as perfectly placed bolter rounds exploded inside their skulls.

Any moment now, thought Cortez.

And the moment was right. The orks took the bait, and Kantor ordered Squad Segala to swing in from the west flank and cut them down. Caught in a deadly crossfire, the greenskins were shredded to fleshy tatters. Those that survived fled back into the undergrowth, their green backs merging with the jungle.

For the moment, at least, the Space Marines had held them off.

'North,' said Kantor. 'We'll be closing on the capital soon. From here on in, we follow the River Rynn.'

Squads Cortez and Segala followed him.

Cortez gauged his remaining ammunition as he moved. He was running extremely low now. He would have to ask the others for extra rounds.

They had better reach New Rynn City soon.

Kantor had never intended for them to come this way. He had suspected from the beginning that the orks might use the River Rynn as a quick route to the capital from wherever their ships crash-landed. He re-assessed that decision now. He and his survivors looked out over the fast, cool waters and saw no sign of ork boats or rafts. They did see human corpses drifting by, floating spread-eagle, the wounded flesh of their backs just breaking the surface of the water. They were people who had been killed up-river,

perhaps men and women from the small settlements in the foothills and mountain slopes where the river began its journey.

Of the pilgrims Kantor had wished so desperately to save, three more had been killed, though not through wounds inflicted directly, but by all they had suffered in the camp. That and the march through the jungle were just too much. Somehow, old Dasat held on, though he looked weaker by the day. Kantor guessed the pilgrim's leader still felt responsible for the safety of his people. He would see them to the capital, no matter what.

This latest battle with the orks was something Kantor had desperately wished to avoid. Every encounter cost them time, valuable ammunition, and risked alerting even greater enemy forces to their presence. But he was proud of the three makeshift squads who travelled with him. With their backs to the proverbial wall since the destruction of their home, they had fought like swamp-tigers, leaving countless dead xenos in their wake.

After an hour's march, Kantor and the two squads with him finally caught up to Squad Viejo and the refugees who had already reached the riverbank. Viejo saluted when he saw the Chapter Master and gave him a quick update. No one had been injured, but some of the pilgrims were in shock, terrified by the fighting.

Dasat waited behind Viejo until the sergeant had finished his report, then, when the sergeant moved off, he bowed deep and made the sign of the aquila on his chest. 'Praise the Emperor, my lord,' said the old man, 'that the foe didn't harm you.'

Kantor took off his helmet and looked down at the man. 'I've faced far worse,' he said. 'And I will again.'

Tears began to course down the old man's cheeks. 'You and your warriors continually risk your lives for ours. I can hardly tell you the shame I feel. I've never seen such selfless bravery, lord. Our worthless lives are not worth the burden we place on you. You have so much else to cope with.'

Sobs of sorrow and guilt shook the man's bony shoulders.

Kantor reached out a massive hand and steadied him.

‘Enough, Dasat,’ he rumbled quietly. ‘No life lived in dedication to the Emperor should be cut short by filthy, mindless xenos. Besides, we are almost at the capital. Another day will see us there, if I have it right. The bank of this river will take us to Jadeberry Hill. Be strong a while longer. A battle awaits us there. My brothers will try their best to protect you, but you will need your strength. Drink from the river. Find food. Sleep till we wake you. It is your last chance to do so. By the Emperor’s grace, this journey ends soon.’

Dasat nodded. ‘I’ll pray it ends well, lord. For all of us.’

Kantor decided that he, too, would pray, not on his knees like those who followed the Imperial creed, but in the act of caring for his armour and his weapons. He would quietly chant the holy litanies of the Chapter, litanies to keep him strong, litanies to invoke the spirits of the wargear he relied on. He thought of the Emperor. The Crimson Fists, like many Adeptus Astartes Chapters, did not revere the Master of Mankind as a god, per se, but as a father. Still, the gifted brothers of the Librarius had, since the dawn of the Chapter’s existence, always maintained that the Emperor was ever-present somehow, a shining psychic light, a beacon of hope that did indeed seem strengthened by the devotion of all those who laboured in His name.

Kantor hoped He would hear Dasat’s prayers.

He moved off towards the riverbank where Cortez and some of the others were cleaning xenos gore from their armour.

Kantor waded into the shallows beside them and scooped water into his hands with which to clean his ancient suit.

We are sixteen against a world swarming with the foe, he thought. And yet, we sixteen have survived this far. There is meaning somewhere in all this. May I live long enough to discover it.



FOURTEEN

The Cassar, New Rynn City

‘Sergeant Grimm was the captain’s second-in-command,’ said Faradis Anto. ‘I can see no reason for your objection but simple pride, brother.’

Grimm hated this. How did it serve the memory of Drigo Alvez bickering over who was to command the forces that remained? Did the brothers assembled here around the ebonwood table of the Strategium think he *wanted* this? Coveted it? If he could have given his own life, right then and there, to have the brother-captain back, he would have taken his own blade and pierced both his hearts without hesitation.

He considered telling them this.

‘You seek to offend me, Anto?’ snarled Barrien Gallacus defensively, dangerously. ‘Pride is no factor in this. Drigo Alvez was a captain and a former brother of the Crusade Company. It is the latter that is important here. There is a hierarchy that must be adhered to. A Crusade Company sergeant is the obvious choice.’

‘And that would be you?’ asked Erdys Phrenotas.

Phrenotas led the Crusade Company’s Fourth Sternguard Squad. Gallacus led the First Vanguard Squad. Grimm shook his head in despair the moment Phrenotas opened his mouth. The old rivalry between the two

elements would now dominate the debate. Any hope of a swift resolution had just vanished.

Or had it?

Gallacus was about to begin verbally sparring with Phrenotas when the doors of the Strategium swept open and three more Adeptus Astartes strode into the room.

‘What is going on here?’ demanded the figure in the centre of the trio. ‘Why are you wasting time? You should be on the walls, marshalling our forces. What is the meaning of this?’

Despite the harsh tone of the voice and a sudden dark change in the air, Grimm found himself suppressing a half-smile. Here was a swift resolution after all. The figure in the middle was Epistolary Deguerro. He was flanked by Codiciers Terraro and Corda.

‘We are in the process of selecting a temporary commander,’ explained a Vanguard Squad sergeant by the name of Hurien Thanator. He thrust his chin at Sergeant Anto, and added, ‘But our brothers in Second Company seem incapable of respecting the proper chain of command.’

Deguerro stopped beside Thanator’s chair and glared down at him. ‘Just as well, then, that I am here to simplify matters for you all.’

He looked over at Grimm, meeting his eyes, and said, ‘I will be taking temporary command of our forces. No!’ – he held up a hand towards Sergeant Gallacus, palm out – ‘Do not waste your breath attempting to debate it. There is clear precedent. You may check the archives in the Librarium downstairs. Sergeant Gallacus, I am placing you in charge of all Crusade Company assets. Sergeant Grimm, you will be responsible for Second and Third Company assets. Both of you will follow my orders to the letter. Is that clear?’

Gallacus worked the muscles in his jaw angrily, but he knew well enough that Deguerro was right. In the absence of a captain, a senior

member of the Librarius ultimately held highest rank. After a moment, he nodded.

‘Clear, brother.’

‘Sergeant Grimm?’ said Deguerro.

‘As you command, brother,’ said Grimm, and he meant it.

‘Excellent, then there is no more call for you to linger here. Your brothers need you on the walls. Gallacus, Brother-Codicier Terraro will accompany you. My liaison, if you will. Likewise, Brother-Codicier Cordo will assist Sergeant Grimm.’

The Adeptus Astartes seated around the table rose from their chairs and saluted with fist on breastplate, some begrudgingly, others with sincerity.

Deguerro saluted back. ‘Thank you, my brothers. May the primarch go with you.’

The sergeants filed out the broad ebonwood doors in silence.

Grimm was about to join them, the last to leave, when a hand on his upper arm stopped him. He turned.

‘A moment, brother-sergeant,’ said Deguerro, and Grimm noted the anxious look that had appeared in his eyes.

‘Do you wish me to leave, brother?’ asked Codicier Corda.

‘No,’ said Deguerro without taking his eyes from Grimm. ‘You already know what I wish to say to the sergeant.’

Corda nodded and stood patiently.

Grimm raised an eyebrow in silent query.

‘Huron Grimm,’ said Deguerro. ‘There are two things I must ask you to do. The first is to trust me. The second is perhaps the harder of the two. It will be dangerous, and your success or failure may well affect the lives of all who have survived thus far.’

‘Go on, brother,’ said Grimm, not bothering to cover his sudden sense of apprehension. The psyker would see through any mask.

Deguerro's eyes were intense. 'We of the Librarius have divined certain possibilities. Potentialities, if you will. We believe a number of strong... presences... are coming to New Rynn City. If they survive the final stages of their journey, their arrival may have a most significant impact on the outcome of this war.'

'You don't sound very sure,' said Grimm.

Deguerro smiled humourlessly. 'That is the way of witch-sight. It is frustratingly vague at times. We know something is about to change. We are approaching a major branching point, a juncture in time where the paths to the future diverge in very different directions. We must do everything we can to guide this reality, our reality, along the correct path.'

Grimm squinted back at the Librarian and, after a moment, shook his head. 'Matters of the empyrean are best left in your hands, brother. I need no explanations, only your orders. Tell me what you require of me, and I promise you, it will be done.'



FIFTEEN

The Azcalan Rainforest, Rynnland Province

The river curved and, following its slippery bank, Kantor and his battered fellow survivors saw Jadeberry Hill rising over the treetops in the near distance. The Hill was symbolic, representing, to Kantor's mind at least, the coming end of a journey that should never have taken place. How different would things now be had the fortress-monastery not been sundered? How hard might the Chapter have been able to strike back at the xenos? He would never know, just as he would never know exactly how a single missile from the Laculum battery had managed to wreak such raw devastation on all he held dear.

Cortez, too, noted the profile of the hill as it became visible around the curve of the river and the trees on its bank. Opening a channel to Kantor, he said, 'We are closing at last, Pedro. But I'll wager the hardest part still lies ahead of us.'

'I'm sure you're right,' replied Kantor. 'The lack of communications bothers me. At this range, we should at least be able to hear some kind of traffic, even if it is weak and fragmented.'

'Viejo reports nothing yet,' said Cortez. Squad Viejo were on point, ranging ahead of the rest by half a kilometre. 'It's as if every wide-area transmitter on the planet was taken out of commission. Either that, or the

orks are employing some kind of communications suppressor. We *have* encountered the like before.'

Kantor looked up at the sky over the wide expanse of the river. It was a mix of bright gold and dark grey. The Season of Rains would be here soon. How would the orks respond to it? Would it alter their behaviour somehow? He realised there was a gap in his knowledge. Documentation on the effects of weather patterns on the greenskin race was practically non-existent. If he lived through this, he would commission such a study by the Adeptus Mechanicus' biologis arm. Such science was their exclusive domain, and forces throughout the Imperium would surely benefit by it.

Across the grey-gold sky, ork craft still occasionally roared, leaving smoky black trails like banners proclaiming this world as theirs. The very sight of them sent waves of anger and disgust through him. The thick forest canopy of the Azcalan had, until now, kept such things from plain view.

Jadeberry Hill loomed closer by the minute, its summit topped with clusters of grey mausoleums and white marble angels. They would reach its base within the hour. Peering at it, Kantor realised that there was movement on its summit. Even at full magnification, it was not yet clear what was going on, but he knew signs of a firefight when he saw them, no matter the distance.

He opened a general channel and said, 'We must hurry, brothers. Conflict rages up ahead. Our brothers have need of us. Be ready.'

All along the muddy bank, the marching Adeptus Astartes prepared their weapons for battle once again, locking the last of their magazines into their trusty bolters and cocking them. Their pace increased, and the refugees behind them had to hurry to keep up.

Whatever lay ahead, Kantor and his battle-brothers would overcome it, or die trying.

It was the only way they knew.



SIXTEEN

Jadeberry Hill, New Rynn City

Grimm had only four squads with which to hold the Jadeberry Underpass. It was here, to the mouth of the underpass, that Epistolary Duegerro had sent him, adamant that those approaching, whoever they were, would enter the city through it, or not at all. Even through the psychic haze, the roiling clouds of alien thought that billowed out from the minds of the ork psykers, the Crimson Fists Librarians had read this much clearly in the currents of the immaterial realm. Deguerro had not said who he believed the approaching presences to be, perhaps so as not to raise anyone's hopes, but Grimm couldn't suppress his own fervent hopes. Surely it was a group of survivors from Arx Tyrannus. Some of the Crimson Fists *had* to have survived. Dare he hope that the Chapter Master was among them?

From the underpass, the base of Jadeberry Hill was only two hundred metres away, just north, a pale, stony path snaking up its dark southern flank leading to the cemetery at the top. To the north-west of the hill, the waters of the Pakomac River split from those of the River Rynn. They meandered south then south-west, feeding a network of canals within the city limits before spreading out towards the farmlands where they followed countless irrigation ditches. Finally, the Pakomac split into a thousand smaller tributaries before it met the mighty Medean Sea.

The orks had not let the rivers and canals stop them from spreading into the region in force. In fact, they thrived with such an abundance of water. They used it in the massive steam-driven machines which filled the foundries they had hastily established, taking their cue from the manufactura they had already overrun. Their position was strong. They had encircled the city as completely as they could.

As Grimm looked out from behind the barricades he and his squads had erected around this, the mouth of the last Imperial-held underpass this side of the river, he cursed at all the greenskins had accomplished so far.

They were every bit as savage and violent as they had always been, but he couldn't deny a certain brutal intelligence behind all they had achieved. Their elimination of Imperial communications at the very earliest had been a masterstroke, a strategy clearly learned over their countless clashes with the Emperor's forces. The storm trooper units of the Imperial Guard were regularly deployed early in war to achieve exactly such an objective. Adeptus Astartes strike forces executed such operations as a matter of course. Someone should have realised that, sooner or later, the orks would learn from the tactics of their enemies. Such knowledge may have taken a long time to permeate the greenskins' limited minds, but it had finally dawned on them, and here were the results.

The barricades – mostly Aegis prefab shield-walls, concrete-filled steel drums, razorwire and sandbags – were the best he and his men could manage in the time they'd had. So far, they had held against the last four attack waves, but that was as much to do with the gridwork of anti-vehicle and anti-personnel mines Grimm had ordered placed on the main access road as it was the strength of the Aegis plating.

The minefield was largely depleted now. How close would the next wave get?

If there were Adeptus Astartes coming in from the east, they would soon discover the challenge they faced entering the city. The towering columns

of black smoke and the endless drumbeat of heavy artillery would make it clear, long before they were within striking distance, that the orks controlled everything outside the walls. Everything, that is, except this last way in.

But how long do I wait, Grimm wondered?

He knew the enemy were already mustering for another run on his position. If his brothers from Arx Tyrannus *were* out there, they would have to hurry.

He turned his eyes left and up to the top of Jadeberry Hill. He had positioned a Devastator squad there, the only one he'd been assigned. It was a good spot for heavy fire support, as the last two hours had proven. The Devastators were fielding two lascannons, two missile launchers and a plasma cannon. Already, they had taken a staggering toll on the foe, ripping their vehicles to burning pieces from long range and atomising hundreds of alien infantry. But their ammunition was finite. If the attacks continued to intensify, they would soon run out.

The Ceres Protocol was still in effect. Deguerro hadn't reversed it, knowing Alvez's original decision was the right one. Grimm knew he would have to make a choice soon: risk the lives of all those under his temporary command for the sake of a mere psychic trace, or fall back when it became clear the barricades would no longer hold. He desperately wanted to hold the underpass to the last, giving whoever was out there every chance they could of making it back to the fold, but paying for it with the blood of his brothers was something he could not do.

No. Perhaps, if Deguerro had been sure, had named Pedro Kantor or one of his captains among the approaching party, it would have been an easier choice. Grimm would have stayed despite everything. The forces in New Rynn City needed a sign, needed one of their leaders, a member of the Chapter Council, to return to them. What might that do for morale?

But without a name, without certainty, could he really justify the death of any Crimson Fist? Such thoughts resolved the issue for him. If no prodigal Fists showed themselves by the end of the next attack wave, he would pull his brothers back and destroy the underpass. He could not risk the orks gaining access to the city that way. Librarians were not infallible. They were known to err from time to time, and Deguerro himself admitted that they were forced to constantly wrestle against the psychic fog that emanated from the undisciplined minds of the ork psykers.

Still looking at the summit of Jadeberry Hill, Grimm noticed sudden agitated movement there. Static crackled in his ear, broken by a voice that said, ‘Sergeant Grimm, the xenos are massing for another run on the barricades. They are behind the ruins to the south-east.’ He paused. ‘There are many of them, brother. More than before.’

Of course there are, thought Grimm sourly.

The voice belonged to Sergeant Tirius, formerly of the late Captain Drakken’s Third Company. The hard-faced Tirius and his squad had survived the debacle at Badlanding only to find themselves here, appended to the Second Company, and in a far greater mess than any had expected. Grimm was glad to have them. Tirius was strong and true, with little ego to get in his way.

‘Armour?’ Grimm asked over the link, hoping the answer would be *none*.

‘I count five tanks,’ said Tirius. ‘Looted Leman Russ. The turrets have been modified. I can’t begin to guess at their range or power now, but if they get within range of our lascannon and missile launchers, we will render them into scrap. You have my word.’

Grimm was reassured, but the mere presence of the tanks meant that the orks were escalating their efforts to take this area. It was the greenskin way. They would throw progressively heavier concentrations of forces at a problem until they overcame it by virtue of brute force. Eventually they

would overcome the Adeptus Astartes defenders. Grimm was no defeatist. He merely had to be realistic. Lives depended on it.

‘Ready your weapons, brothers,’ he called out over the comm-link. ‘Dorn watch over us all. They are no match for the sons of the Chapter. Nor shall they ever be.’

Further words came unbidden into his mind, words he had heard on a score of battlefields out there among the stars, the words so favoured by the Chaplains of the Crimson Fists.

There is only the Emperor, the Chaplains would intone before battle was joined.

He is our shield and our protector, the ranks would reply.

Grimm spoke that first line to his battle-brothers now, spoke it with feeling, and received an equally impassioned response. On his left and right, weapons were cocked and readied.

Hulking figures appeared over the mounds of rubble to the south-east, great dark shapes with horned helms and flapping banners of flayed human skin. Severed heads bobbed and swung from their belts and from the poles that supported those crudely painted banners. Some were boxy, angular figures, weighed down by thick armour, but so impossibly strong that they were still fast enough to lead the charge.

One, Grimm saw, was by far the largest. The horns that sprouted from either side of his helm curved outwards, then inwards with a twist, like those of a bull raumas, but plated in sharpened steel.

The horned warboss raised a massive growling chainaxe into the air and roared long and deep, a battle cry that was taken up by its thousands of followers.

They looked fearless standing there, all those orks, and well they might, for they faced only forty. But did they realise how much fight was left in that forty? Every Crimson Fist at the barricade was ready to fight like it was the last hour of his life.

Perhaps it would be.

The looted tanks rumbled into view now, clanking between the skeletons of fire-gutted buildings, turning their stout ugly modified turrets towards the Adeptus Astartes. One fired a shot, a great gout of fire and smoke erupted from its barrel.

The shell landed a hundred metres short, packed with so much explosive that it blew a crater in the rockcrete road two metres deep.

This was the beginning, the sign the orks were waiting for. They charged forward, filling the air with war cries. They surged around the tanks, mindful not to be crushed by the grinding treads.

‘Steady!’ Grimm ordered. ‘Make every bolt count!’

From the top of Jadeberry Hill, something streaked towards the leading tank on a trail of white and yellow fire. It struck the tank right on the gun mantlet, punching deep into the metal. The tank jerked to a stop. A second later, red fire erupted from its hatches. Burning bodies tumbled out, thrashing and screaming.

One down, thought Grimm.

The ork footsoldiers were almost in range. Grimm could see the gleam of bloodlust in the eyes of the massive warboss.

All right, you foul bastard, cursed the sergeant. You’ve got my attention. It’s time you tasted the fury of the Crimson Fists.

‘Open fire!’ he yelled over the link. The sudden rattle of bolters drowned out all else.

Battle was joined.

If you are out there, brothers, thought Grimm as he loosed shot after flesh-searing shot from his plasma pistol, then in Dorn’s name, hurry up. Because it looks like this is your very last chance.

The sight that greeted Alessio Cortez as he exited from the trees of the Azcalan rainforest was one of absolute mayhem. The city burned. He could see ork ships half-buried in the outer sections of collapsed city

walls. Artillery flashed and boomed all along the remaining ramparts, but far more answered back from the ground, shells exploding on the walls, weakening them little by little, piece by piece.

The mad beasts had even breached the city walls in places by ramming them with aircraft!

Kantor and the others joined him at the forest edge, and froze.

‘In Dorn’s name...’ gasped the Chapter Master.

‘There!’ exclaimed Brother Fenestra. ‘Look to the base of the hill.’

Cortez saw it at once. Up ahead, a great ork horde was racing straight towards a row of Imperial barricades. Azure figures leaned out from behind Aegis armour plating to fire tight bursts at the enemy swarming all around them. Five tanks lay just to the south-east of the barricaded position, each reduced to little more than a burning black husk. Even as Cortez registered all this, a bright burst of plasma streaked down from the top of Jadeberry Hill and turned a great knot of orks to so much bubbling black flesh.

‘To their aid!’ barked Kantor, and he broke into a run.

Cortez was only a second behind him. ‘Charge!’ he bellowed at his battle-brothers.

‘Our charges, my lord?’ asked Sergeant Viejo, even as he too burst from the cover of the trees.

Damn our charges, cursed Cortez. Our brothers need us.

‘Jadeberry Hill,’ Kantor snapped between breaths. ‘They’ll be safe at the top.’

Kantor was almost on the orks now, but they had yet to notice the imminent attack from their rear. Tending towards tunnel-vision in a fight, they rarely noticed anything but the foe in front of them. It was a weakness the Crimson Fists had exploited many times throughout their history of violent encounters with them.

Kantor reached striking range and plunged in amongst them, a living storm of violence and revenge. His power fist smashed his enemies aside,

pulping organs and flesh wherever it connected, shattering bone.

Pressed together by their sheer weight of numbers, the orks hardly knew what hit them. They were still reeling from the sudden attack of the Chapter Master when Cortez and the others joined the fray. Again, Cortez felt centuries of relentless training take over. Time seemed to slow down around him, as if he existed in some kind of bubble in which his synapses operated that much faster than everything else. Surprised orks turned to engage him, and were rendered headless before they could even raise their blades and guns in his direction. Others, just beyond these first, did manage to slash out at him, but the blows seemed absurdly slow to his super-charged senses, and he almost laughed aloud as he parried them on his ceramite vambraces. His pistol barked at point-blank range, killing almost as messily as his power fist.

Cortez did not turn to check on his brothers. He trusted that they fought as he did, and he was right, but none save Kantor himself could match the lethal speed and prowess of the Fourth Company captain.

Before Cortez realised what had happened, he found himself on the other side of the ork horde. The barricades were right there in front of him. He had carved an avenue of death straight through the aliens.

He raced forward and leapt over the wall of armour plate and razorwire, then turned back to face the orks and resumed firing his pistol, every shot a kill, eliminating close range targets with a speed he could never duplicate on a mere training range. It needed the energy of real battle, the flow of adrenaline that only truly life-threatening danger brought forth.

As he fired again and again, he saw Pedro Kantor whirling among the ranks of the enemy, severing arteries with his long, gold-hilted blade, spraying the air with crimson drops. Where his sword did not cut, his power fist obliterated everything it touched. Its power was incredible. It was master-crafted, as beautiful as it was deadly and, to Cortez's eyes, it

had never been as beautiful as it was at that moment, employed in the slaughter of those that had so gravely wounded his Chapter.

Cortez heard a voice over the comm-link. It was a new voice – new in that it was not one of the sixteen other Adeptus Astartes voices he had become so accustomed to over the last ten terrible days.

‘Captain Cortez!’ exclaimed the voice. ‘And the Chapter Master, by Dorn! Bless you, Deguerro.’

‘Identify yourself, brother,’ barked Cortez as he picked off a massive one-armed ork that was loping in to engage the Chapter Master from behind.

‘I am Huron Grimm,’ said the voice, ‘Sergeant of the Second Company’s First Tactical Squad. We... we have been waiting for you, captain.’

Squads Viejo and Segala fought their way through the horde now, rallying around Kantor and cutting him some room to move. Cortez wondered where the rest of his own squad were until, through a gap, he saw them guarding the Chapter Master’s rear.

Las- and plasma-fire streaked down from the top of Jadeberry Hill and ripped into the ork ranks, killing scores at a time.

‘Get behind the barricades,’ Kantor yelled, and he charged forward and leapt clean over them, landing on his feet just beside Cortez.

The moment he landed, he spun, and twin muzzle flares licked out from the barrels of Dorn’s Arrow. Massively muscled green bodies broke apart, erupting from the inside out as each mass-reactive shell detonated in quick succession.

Something was bothering Cortez even as he fought. ‘Where is Benizar?’ he demanded over the link.

‘Where are Teves, Secco and Olvero?’ asked another. It sounded like Viejo.

No, thought Cortez. Do not let it be! They did not come this far to fall now.

But they had.

More plasma-fire streaked down into the middle of the orks, killings so many, burning and maiming others, and a space cleared in the churning ranks. Through it, Cortez saw an armoured monstrosity with a great horned helm lift one of his brothers into the air, one massive, blood-slick power claw grasping the Adeptus Astartes by the neck.

It was the leader of the ork assault. Did the creature feel Cortez's eyes on him? Did it feel the captain's hate stabbing out at it through all the noise and the killing? Perhaps it did. It turned its wicked red eyes towards Cortez and a sickening alien grin split its massive, tusk-filled maw. With Cortez's eyes locked to it, the ork snapped shut the blades of its power claw.

Snikkt!

A blue-armoured body fell lifeless to the blood-soaked ground. For a moment, the Space Marine's helmet, his severed head still inside, remained balanced on the huge claw. Then the ork boss flicked it away, as if it were mere garbage.

'Bastard!' roared Cortez, and he leaped over the barricade once more, barrelling into the orks, heading straight for the murderous abomination in the middle.

'Alessio!' shouted Kantor over the link, but there was no reaching him. Instead, his fellow Fists concentrated their fire around him, helping to cut him a path.

Dimly, Cortez registered their aid. The orks on either side of him fell with great melon-sized wounds that exploded in their flesh. From somewhere high on his left, there was a great flash of light, and howls of agony burst from alien throats. He heard the distinctive shriek of a missile, and felt the ground under him shake as it struck thirty metres away. The explosion sent a fountain of blood and cooked flesh into the air to rain down a moment later.

The Crimson Fists on the hilltop, he realised, were still giving their support.

Then he was in front of the black-armoured beast with the horned helm. His target. The focus of his rage. He noticed the black and white checks on the monster's battle-scarred armour. He noticed the icon on its banner of human skin, a red skull shaped like that of a bull auroch. And he noticed the size difference between them. The ork boss towered over him. Even hunched, the beast was at least a metre taller than he.

'Keep the others off me,' snarled Cortez over the link. But he needn't have bothered. The ork boss bellowed something in what was just barely a language, and the closest orks pressed aside, making space.

'That's right,' said Cortez, a lupine grin twisting his features. 'One-on-one.' He fingered the grip of his knife, flexed the thick digits of his power fist. 'Let's have it, monster!'

The words blared from his helmet's vox-amp at maximum volume.

The ork growled back, recognising a challenge by its tone, though the words themselves were meaningless noise to its ragged ears. Its long metal claws snapped open and shut, as if its whole right arm had a mind of its own, and a beastlike appetite for raw, bloody flesh.

In the other arm, it held a chainaxe no mere man could have hefted into the air. The weapon's teeth were an angry blur, whirring too fast to see. It was this weapon the creature raised first, opening the combat with a blistering lateral swipe that Cortez avoided by millimetres, leaning back on his rear foot as the blade swept by.

For all that armour, all that bulk, the monster was fast.

But Cortez knew he was faster.

The fight was on. There was little any of the others could do save to continue taking their own deadly toll on the rest of the ork band. They knew better than to interfere directly. Honour forbade it. One-on-one, Cortez had said, and that was how it would be.

To the Fourth Company captain, the universe seemed to shrink. There was nothing else, only he and his opponent locked in a struggle of life and death, the definition of existence.

Soon, there would be only one.

Death surrounded them as their weapons clashed again and again, but they paid it no heed. They were well-matched, and the sound of blow after clashing blow resounded in the damp air. Cortez snarled as his power fist was, once again, deflected. The ork boss's great snapping claw was sheathed in a power field of its own. Every time the deadly claw met the Space Marine's huge red fist, there were arcs of lethal, crackling energy.

Against the monster's chainaxe, the captain's combat blade looked pathetically small, but it was the skill with which the knife was wielded that truly mattered. Every time the monster ripped through the air with its axe, Cortez shifted just enough to avoid the blow and, little by little, his slashing, stabbing counterattacks began to take their toll. Thick ork blood started to stream from the gaps in the beast's armour, and Cortez was sure the monster's blistering swipes were beginning to slow, just fractionally, perhaps, but enough to offer him the opening he would need for a killing stroke.

The ork boss now seemed to sense the fight was not going its way. It changed tactics, feinting with a wide claw-swipe and bull-rushing Cortez when the captain moved to parry.

It worked. Cortez found himself grappling, wrestling desperately to stay on his feet. If he went to the ground under the bulk of all that armour and green muscle, he knew he would not be getting back up. He knew it would be the end of him.

Was this the moment? Were all the stories, all the legends of his immortality, to end here? He had not thought a creature like this would claim that victory, but then again, even as he struggled, he conceded a grudging respect for the ork's raw combat prowess. The creature had

successfully executed a feint, something no other ork had ever done in combat with Cortez. There was more going on inside that thick skull than he had given the beast credit for.

Cortez fought force with force, but only for a moment. He knew he would not win this fight on those terms. He had dropped his knife in order to free his right hand for grappling. It was locked around the beast's left wrist, though it couldn't close entirely over it. That wrist was as thick as Cortez's knee. His power fist was, likewise locked around the armoured housing of the monster's great metal claw, but the energy fields were reacting, making the contact slippery, like two magnets of opposite charge repelling each other.

The ork had dropped its chainaxe to lunge forward and grab its enemy. It knew it had only to fall on Cortez for the battle to be won. It pressed all its weight forward, and tossed its head from side to side, trying to pierce Cortez's visor with its sharp steel horns.

A deep, wet laugh began in the creature's throat. It sensed victory was close. Soon, it would crush the Space Marine to the ground, sit astride him, and snip off his limbs, one after another. It knew that humans were soft beneath their shells. Their flesh parted as easily as the flesh of a fruit. The ork liked the parting of that flesh. It liked the hot sprays of red that accompanied it. It liked the noises the humans made, the high screams and agonised roars they vented in their final moments.

Now was that moment. The ork thrust forward one more time with all its strength, piston-boosted legs lending it irresistible power.

Cortez's legs started to buckle under him, but this was what he had been waiting for, the ork abomination's final forward push. This was the moment the ork was most vulnerable.

Cortez twisted hard, shifting the direction of his own energy, not forward against the creature as it expected, but backwards and to the left, moving with it, adding his own momentum to his enemy's.

It happened. The ork found its massive bulk off-balance, with no hope of recovery. It teetered forward on one tree-thick leg, desperate to regain its equilibrium.

Cortez was already behind it. He kicked out at the monster's supporting leg, his ceramite boot connecting sharply with the back of its knee.

The creature went down hard, its armour cracking the rockcrete underneath it. It flailed, its claw slashing back and forth, frantic swipes intended to sever the Space Marine's legs. But Cortez didn't stay still long enough to get caught. He stamped down on the ork's lower back with his left boot, raised his power fist over his head, and punched straight down into the metal plate, his knuckles passing through into the hot, bloody meat beneath.

The ork howled in pain.

Cortez found what he was looking for. He closed his metal digits around it and yanked hard, then raised his prize above his head and roared in triumph.

In his oversized, blood-drenched gauntlet, he held a large section of the monster's spine.

Other orks turned away from the barricades, sensing something had changed. They saw Cortez standing over their fallen leader, the strongest of their tribe. They saw the massive body beneath his boot and the gleaming white bone in his upraised hand. Of all things, orks recognised strength most of all, and here it stood before them, a strength they could not overcome. Not here. Not now.

The mob split, turning from the Imperial barricades and racing back towards the cover of the ruined buildings nearby. Bolter-fire chased them and a score more went down with wounds in their backs the size of grapefruit.

Cortez watched them go and, finally, lowered his arm.

He cast the ork vertebrae to the ground.

Someone was calling him over the link. The voice eased him out of the battle-rush, soothing him, slowing his primary heart back to a steady beat and sending his secondary heart back into its sleeping state.

It was Pedro Kantor. 'Well fought,' he said simply.

Cortez could hear tension, not pride, in the Chapter Master's voice. He was about to reply when another voice beat him to it.

'Armour!' It was Sergeant Tirius. The Devastator Squad leader was still on top of Jadeberry Hill. 'Sergeant Grimm, ork tanks are pressing towards us from the streets to the south. I see twenty. We'll not be able to hold this time. Our ammunition is almost out. Will you give my squad permission to descend?'

Grimm turned to the Chapter Master, immediately deferring to him.

'We had human refugees with us,' Kantor said to Tirius. 'They were ordered to high ground during the fight. Are they with you?'

'They are, lord,' replied Tirius. 'One died on the ascent. An old man. His heart gave out.'

Cortez winced. Surely it was Dasat. Kantor would take that hard, no doubt.

The Chapter Master paused only briefly, before ordering Squad Tirius to shepherd the refugees down the side of the hill at once. Then he addressed Sergeant Grimm. 'I cannot tell you, sergeant, what it means that you held this passage open for us. I swear to you that you will be honoured properly when there is time.'

Grimm answered without hesitation. 'Your words are honour enough for a dozen lifetimes, my lord. And seeing you alive is a reward even greater. We so hoped it would be you.'

'How did you know anyone was coming this way?'

'The Librarians, my lord. They felt it. Epistolary Deguerro ordered us to hold the underpass for as long as we could.'

Cortez was climbing over the barricades for a final time. ‘Deguerro?’ he said.

Sergeant Grimm faced him. His voice was heavy with grief as he replied, ‘Captain Alvez no longer leads us.’

‘You cannot mean...’ said the Chapter Master.

‘My lord,’ said Grimm, ‘the captain gave his life in battle two days ago. More than anything, I wish he could have lived to see you return. I don’t think he ever really believed you had perished at Arx Tyrannus.’

The link went silent. Cortez pushed a coil of razorwire aside and climbed over a cluster of concrete-filled drums before coming to a stop at Kantor’s side.

‘Drigo,’ said Kantor softly. ‘Dorn’s blood. Not him, too.’

Cortez could hear the aching sadness in his friend’s voice.

No one said another word until Squad Tirius and the refugees joined them at the mouth of the underpass a moment later.

A woman with matted blonde hair crossed to the Chapter Master and knelt at his feet.

The Space Marines looked down at her. The dirt on her face was streaked with tear tracks. ‘My lord,’ she sobbed. ‘Dasat is dead.’ She glanced fearfully in the direction of Sergeant Tirius. ‘He would not let us bring the body down from the hill.’

Tirius nodded to confirm this.

‘That is Jadeberry Hill,’ Kantor told the woman, bending to lift her to her feet. She was as fragile as a doll, her bones showing sharply beneath her malnourished flesh. ‘It has been a special place since the days Rynn himself claimed this world for the Imperium. Let Dasat lie there, at peace. When this war is over, his passing will be marked more appropriately, his and that of so many others. For now, though, we press on. Our journey is not quite over. You are not safe yet.’

Nodding obediently, stifling her sobs, the woman moved off to instruct the refugees.

Cortez detected the first sign of the approaching tanks, a tremor in the ground beneath his feet. Kantor must have felt it to, because he gestured to the cavernous mouth of the underpass and said, 'Lead the way, Sergeant Grimm. We should hurry.'

'This way, my lord,' said the sergeant, and began his descent down into the tunnel.

The others followed. Behind them, the rubble-strewn streets began to shake.



SEVENTEEN

Jadeberry Underpass, New Rynn City

Pedro Kantor was bone-weary, but, as he marched behind the men of Squad Grimm, he was determined not to let it show. He sensed they were all weary, the brothers that surrounded him, but he, more than any other, had to keep his exhaustion at bay a while longer. He was back among his own now. They would be looking to him for guidance, for answers, for a path into the future that would ensure the survival of their ancient brotherhood. It was up to him to provide all these things and more, no matter how impossible that seemed right now.

The tunnel was pitch-black. There were lights at regular intervals along the walls and ceilings, but their power came from a station outside the city limits, and it had fallen to the orks early in the conflict. The Crimson Fists moved easily enough in the dark, of course, their visors and gene-booster eyes revealing every last detail to them, but the refugees needed light if they were to keep up. Thus, Brother Galica travelled at the rear, holding a lit flare for them to follow. Now and then, when their pace became too slow, he offered words of encouragement, or reminded them of the greenskins at their backs. The latter never failed to spur them on.

The underpass was broad, perhaps forty metres across with a ceiling twelve metres above the surface of the road. Pillars supported all that rock

and earth, some of them sculpted in the likeness of hooded figures, the forty-two acolytes who had assisted the famed Imperial Reclamator, Saldano Malverro Rynn. The eerie red light from Galica's flare cast sharp black shadows along the folds of their stone robes.

Kantor's eyes picked out the boxy forms of two large trucks in the gloom up ahead. 'Might we not travel faster in those?' he asked Grimm.

'They have another purpose, lord,' Grimm replied. 'Their carriages are packed with high-explosive. Once we have passed at a safe distance, I will arm them. The first orks to reach them will trigger a detonation that will bring the ceiling, and the Pakomac River, crashing down on their heads.'

Kantor nodded. 'Let's hope the orks give chase in staggering numbers.'

Cortez gave an amused snort.

'I don't doubt they will,' said Grimm, 'but Snagrod has numbers to spare. It shames me to admit it, but we've lost so much ground to the enemy already.'

'Shame be damned,' replied Kantor. 'You have fought more bravely than anyone could have asked. Who else could have stood this long against such a Waaagh? I'll not hear you speak of shame again.'

'As my lord wishes,' Grimm replied. Turning back to the original subject, he continued, saying, 'This underpass is the last open path into Imperial-held territory. With the destruction of this tunnel, we are effectively sealing ourselves in.'

'Help will come,' said Kantor. '*The Crusader* got away.'

'That is something. I hope they bring aid soon. Captain Alvez placed our forces under the Ceres Protocol. Epistolary Deguerro also felt it wise.'

Grimm's question was implied. Would Kantor's famous sense of honour and his compassion for normal humans cause him to overturn Alvez's decree?

'The Ceres Protocol stays in place,' said Kantor. 'Drigo was right to put the survival of the Chapter first.'

He thought Cortez threw a glance his way as he said this.

‘Ironically,’ Grimm continued, ‘the captain gave his own life in violation of it. Thousands of Rynnsguard troopers and civilians would have died had he not made that final sacrifice.’

‘He surprised you,’ said Kantor perceptively.

Something in Sergeant Grimm’s tone suggested he was smiling as he answered, ‘Truly, he did.’

The Fists had come abreast of the two trucks now, and Kantor could see that they were very deliberately placed in the gaps between three thick pillars. The destruction of those pillars would undermine the integrity of the whole midsection. The weight of all that rock above would pulverise and bury even the toughest ork machine. The crashing waters that followed, the ice-cold Pakomac, would pound the xenos footsoldiers to a pulp against the walls, or drown them. Either way, they were dead.

The xenos needed oxygen just as much as humans did.

A part of Pedro Kantor wished he could see it, wished his consciousness could hover here to witness the deadly reprisal as a psyker’s might do. But it was only a small part. The powers of the witch-kin were as much a curse as a blessing. He knew all too well how Eustace Mendoza had wrestled with the daemons of the warp, the efforts he had made to deflect their malign intentions every single day of his long life. Such a thing was a burden Kantor’s broad shoulders, already weighed down with so much, did not need.

The Fists pressed on, Grimm apprising his Chapter Master and the others of all that had occurred in the days since the first alien ships made planetfall here. In turn, Kantor spoke of the tragedy at Arx Tyrannus. His psychological wounds were no better for the telling of the tale, but the brave Second Company sergeant and his men deserved to hear the truth from their leader.

The survival of the Chapter was gravely uncertain. There was so little of it left on which to rebuild.

Up ahead, the light changed. Dull daylight seeped into the darkness at a shallow angle, finally announcing the end of their journey through the underpass. It had taken almost two hours. Some of the refugees had slowed so much that Kantor had ordered the Fists in the rearguard to carry those on the verge of collapse.

He had no sooner set his left foot on the shallow ramp that led out of the tunnel than he heard a great rumbling noise behind him. Air began whooshing past, escaping upwards through the tunnel mouth.

‘They have triggered the explosives!’ called Huron Grimm over the rising noise.

The refugees began whimpering in fear.

‘Run!’ ordered Kantor. ‘Bring those people!’

The Adeptus Astartes scooped up the civilians and began pounding up the ramp towards the rectangle of daylight. The rumble behind them grew exponentially louder.

Kantor heard Alessio Cortez roaring over the comm-link at his battle-brothers.

‘Move, brothers! Dorn detests the slow!’

The noise behind them was deafening now. Any other words were lost in the cacophony. At the front of the group, Sergeant Grimm put on a great burst of speed, inspiring the others to do likewise.

They burst from the mouth of the underpass just as a great spume of water and loose rock exploded upwards from below, drenching them. The force of it knocked some of them from their feet. In seconds the momentum of the water was spent.

Kantor turned to see his Crimson Fists rising, many cradling the soaked, shivering forms of the refugees. ‘Is everyone all right?’ he asked, scanning them for signs of injury.

Only a few of the refugees were a little the worse for wear.

Kantor saw Alessio Cortez gesturing at a point beyond him, signalling for his Chapter Master to turn around.

He turned...

...and saw a squad of battle-brothers in heavy Terminator armour stomping mechanically towards him from the street up ahead.

A deep, dry voice hailed him on the comm-link.

It was Rogo Victurix.

‘Welcome to New Rynn City!’

There was no mistaking the uncharacteristic jubilation in his tone. He was almost laughing with joy as he beheld his leader here before him, alive and well despite everything.

Victurix gestured down at his bulky armour. ‘I would take a knee if I could, lord. And I see Captain Cortez continues to live up to his reputation as unkillable. Heartfelt greetings, brother.’

Cortez nodded once and clashed a fist on his chest in salute.

Beneath his faceplate, Kantor found himself grinning. Victurix and his squad were the first living members of his Crusade Company that he had seen since the cataclysm in the Hellblades. And, by Terra, what a sight they were!

‘What are you doing here, Rogo? Surely you are needed on the walls?’

Victurix halted his squad about four metres in front of the others. The refugees had never seen Terminator armour before. They had thought the Chapter Master and his three squads of survivors massive, but they were not nearly as massive as these others.

They gaped unblinking at the great blue behemoths while the other Crimson Fists, those that had carried them from the underpass, set them down on their feet. None dared move.

Sergeant Victurix cast an eye over them, then returned his gaze to the Chapter Master. His tone became a shade heavier. ‘The walls we *can* hold

are being held, my lord, but this very section will be lost to us presently, so we cannot dally here. I have four transports waiting in a square just to the west. It is only a few minutes away.

‘We,’ he said, spreading his arms, ‘are your escort.’

PART THREE

'Before such theories were labelled heresy by the Ecclesiarchy and made punishable by death, some men once believed in parallel universes, an infinity of them, physical places like our own universe where all possibilities were played out.

'Though I consider myself a pragmatic man, it is not difficult to see the attraction inherent in such beliefs. Were those parallel universes to exist, after all, in many of them, the orks would never have come to Rynn's World.

'Every day, I wish I lived in such a universe.'

– Extract: *Writings from the Ramparts: A Memoir* Colonel (ret.)
Portius Cantrell (948.M41-)



ONE

New Rynn City, Rynnland Province

Imperial libraries would, one day, come to be filled with great volumes covering the events on Rynn's World. Millions of parchment pages would record the feats of great heroism and self-sacrifice that took place. The suicidal charge of the 16th Rynnite Women's Militia against the orks that breached the Baradon Gate would come to be remembered, as would the further acts of bravery it inspired. Likewise, the brave but costly counterattack prosecuted by the Rynnsguard Third Garrison Regiment against ork armoured elements which shelled the Zona 2 Residentia to rubble.

Day by day, the last free citizens of Rynn's World clung on, proving their mettle, holding always to the desperate hope that, maybe today, a great Imperial fleet would sweep down from the skies and decimate the alien besiegers. Every hour they held out against the uncountable hordes of the Arch Arsonist, Snagrod, was testament to their strength and faith, their courage and passion. Each hour of life was earned with blood and sweat.

For all the feats that went recorded, how many more were not? No Imperial document would ever tell of the noble death of Sergeant Pacalis Filian, a middle-aged infantry squad leader born on the island of Calliona. He led a night assault against ork forces camped outside his section of the

wall, knowing they would overcome his section the following day. None of his men returned alive, but they took more than their share of the enemy down with them.

Nor would any living man or woman retell the last hours of Captain Golrid Prinas of the Ninth Rynnsguard Artillery Regiment's Second Company. Prinas and his loyal gunnery crews fought to the last man against a tide of ork abominations before finally calling in an artillery strike from another company, guiding the shells in on their own heads when it was clear they were overrun. As death rained down, Prinas uttered the words, 'My life for Rynn's World, gem of the Imperium, second only to Terra herself.'

No one who heard these words lived to record them.

These brave fighters and millions more died for their world, their loved ones, and for the honour of the Emperor. But none fought as hard, nor as tirelessly, selflessly, as the last two hundred and eighteen battle-brothers of the Crimson Fists.

Though the greenskins pushed closer and closer to the Silver Citadel and its last neighbouring districts, the Crimson Fists extracted a high and bloody price for every centimetre given. The greenskin advance slowed to a crawl. Wherever their armour appeared, defensive batteries blasted it apart. Wherever the orks attempted to rig the walls with explosives, or cut their way through the gates with high-powered las and melta analogues, they were shredded in a hail of bolt and plasma fire.

For every blow the orks sought to strike, the Crimson Fists martialled everything at their disposal and launched a counter blow. And, slowly, the siege settled into a pattern, a deadly routine where attrition looked set to decide the future of the world.

Even the cycle of seasons, unchanged since long before Rynn's World had known the footsteps of man, were not immune to the effects of the Waaagh.

Barely a week after Chapter Master Kantor arrived at the capital, Matiluvia, the Month of Hammering Rains, began in earnest, and it was unlike any such season in living memory. Both the Pakomac and the River Rynn broke their banks, flooding the surrounding lands, turning the ork-held outer districts into filthy, smelly, fly-infested mires. Ork excrement mixed with the floodwaters, coating everything. When the rains finally subsided and the hot weather came, a stinking yellow-brown haze cut visibility down to only five or six kilometres, confounding the Rynnsguard artillery spotters and those manning the forward observation posts.

Summer brought other problems for the beleaguered defenders. Though the River Rynn flowed through the centre of the city and rendered fresh drinking water a matter of little concern, the burning sun took its toll on many. Guardsmen serving high on the walls day after day were battered with relentless heat and glare. Many reported to medicae facilities with maladies caused by the intensity of the Rynnstar system's twin suns. Others simply collapsed where they stood. How many of those were shot by their commissars for sleeping on the job? How many, dizzy from exhaustion, driven to carelessness by the protests of their own bodies, fell to ork fire when they might have lived had they only been allowed adequate rest?

Only the Space Marines were immune to such things. The rains did not bother them. The blazing suns did not affect them. Rumours spread. Fresh legends grew. Some said they did not eat. Some said they did not sleep. Others said that they could not be killed, that they would fight on for a thousand years if need be, even if there were no civilians left to protect.

Maybe such talk was comforting to some, but the reality was altogether darker. Not even the Adeptus Astartes could hold indefinitely. Snagrod's Waaagh was getting stronger all the time. That each individual battle-brother was far deadlier than a typical ork, none could argue, but the

Crimson Fists themselves knew the truth. They saw that they were losing, and the knowledge burned.

Summer turned to autumn. Perhaps the orks favoured the milder seasons. Perhaps they too had been hampered by the hard heat of the Rynnite summer. Who could know? They were alien, and seeking to comprehend their ways was forbidden by Imperial edict to all those without the proper dispensation. Certainly, the autumn seemed to rouse them. They strengthened their assaults. Their numbers seemed to increase, despite their daily losses. More and more of them swarmed and flowed along the ruined streets each day, pillaging the bodies of their fallen kin for equipment and pulling the teeth from dead mouths to use as a kind of currency.

It was in late autumn that the aliens began constructing the first of their massive iron ziggurats. A yellow pall still hung in the air, and it was not easy to see their activities in detail, but it was clear they worked with purpose. The structure was quickly completed, and work began on numerous others. Fires still burned throughout the xenos-occupied territories, but those of destruction were soon outnumbered by those of industry.

Pessimists murmured that this was a sign of the coming end. The orks built their foul constructs beyond the range of the Basilisks and Earthshaker batteries, and the defenders could only watch. The sight of the greenskins' massive new fume stacks and construction blocks had an immediate demoralising effect. Suicides increased among Rynnite civilians and soldiers alike, despite the warnings and threats of the commissars. *Dare to insult the Emperor by killing yourself, the black-clad zealots warned everyone, and those you hold dearest will suffer a longer, more painful death as punishment.*

At first, this merely prompted hopeless men to slaughter their own families with merciful swiftness before turning their weapons on

themselves. It was an intolerable situation. Every last individual capable of firing a lasgun had to be drafted onto the walls.

From the ramparts, they saw their planet burn. The forces of the Arch Arsonist set light to everything within reach. Fields blazed. Forests flared and crackled. Nothing was untouched by the hungry flames. It was now, with many losing their last vestiges of hope, that Lady Maia Cagliestra made a decision. Much of the Upper Rynnhouse railed against it, but the governor would not be swayed. Together, she and a cadre of noble ladies would take to the walls themselves, bringing light and comfort, she hoped, to the tired men who defended them. Viscount Isopho made an impassioned personal protest against this. Maia planned to visit those sections of the perimeter where the fighting was heaviest, since it was these men, she judged, who needed her support most. The viscount's pleas achieved little at first, but Maia finally conceded to visit the walls only at night, since the fighting usually died off then. With the troopers at rest, she would have greater opportunity to speak with them and dispense food and water.

It became her regular routine. As twilight came each day, she and her party of ladies would make themselves as beautiful as possible – 'To give the men something to fight for,' she told the others whenever they asked – before heading out under armed escort to yet another section of the wall. Their visits soon became highly anticipated events for the Rynnsguard troopers and the militias, though more than a few men were executed by the commissars for making inappropriate comments. Maia tried to ignore that. She felt, for the first time since the war had started, that she was not hiding like a coward in the Silver Citadel, doing nothing while her people died.

Two weeks after she began her visits to the wall, Viscount Isopho announced that he was leaving his seat in the Upper Rynnhouse to rejoin the Rynnsguard as a commissioned officer. He would, he said, fight on the

walls with the men, like a true Rynnite should. If, by his words, he hoped to shame other members of the government into following his example, he was fooling himself. Maia spoke privately with General Mir and made sure that Isopho was posted to one of the safer sections of the wall, even while she praised the viscount for his courage.

Despite all the measures to combat it, the death toll among the Rynnsguard, and the lack of any sign whatsoever that aid was coming, continued to eat away at the defenders' morale. Individual Crimson Fists began patrolling sections of the wall on which they had, so far, not been seen. This was done at the suggestion of a young Adeptus Astartes Chaplain called Argo, and it worked. The sight of the glorious armoured giants, radiant and splendid despite all they had endured, still exerted a powerful effect on the ordinary people. The Adeptus Astartes inspired faith and dedication wherever they walked. They spoke encouragement to the troopers, and fought shoulder-to-shoulder with them. The number of suicides dropped. The walls held. Snagrood and his forces found themselves at a temporary impasse, but they had already begun work on the weapons that would end this war.

When winter came, the warlord and his savage lieutenants had committed even greater numbers to the construction of their forts and war factories. The human forces could only watch with mounting fear and apprehension as, slowly and inexorably, the mightiest engines of war they had ever seen began to take shape.

Most had never heard of a Gargant. Few men on Rynn's World had the kind of clearance that would grant them access to the Munitorum archives in which accounts of such near-indestructible metal monstrosities could be found. But the surviving Rynnsguard commanders knew what was coming, and so did the Crimson Fists.

They considered the viability of launching surgical strikes on the massive engines of doom before they were completed, before they could

bring their unstoppable weapons to bear on the gates and walls. Considered then rejected.

Such a strike would risk everything. Many battle-brothers would be lost. Forces critical to the continued deadlock would be fatally diminished. The orks would only begin construction again. With the rest of the planet being, to all extents and purposes, dominated by the greenskin race, their resources were near limitless.

Exchanging Adeptus Astartes lives for a little more time?

Chapter Master Kantor could not sanction it. Whichever way he looked at it, the losses outweighed the gains.

Deep winter came. Snow was a thing unheard of in the capital. New Rynn City lay close to the equator, and did not suffer winter like the mountain regions did.

When the first snows came, the emaciated children of the capital shuffled out into the streets to gaze up at the sky in wonder. Few remembered such a beautiful sight. Beautiful, yes, but deadly, too. Within days, the first casualties of the freak winter were reported. This season, in its own way, was as harsh as the brutal heat of summer had been, and took just as many lives. The weakest children died in droves, leaving grief-wracked parents who were barely capable of standing, let alone firing on the foe. Many of the elderly perished, too. Again, the commissars and ecclesiarchs went out among the grieving people, threatening or consoling them, whichever was their way.

Again, it was the presence of the Space Marines that made the greater difference. It was now, with things darkest of all, that Pedro Kantor turned his eyes from the daily casualty reports and tactical hololiths, and went out among the ordinary people.

He saw a populace beaten to nothing, both mentally and physically, and felt their grief as if it were his own. He could not help but recall the tragedy that had struck Arx Tyrannus. It had haunted him every day since.

It also gave him a keen sense of empathy with those who gathered around him, all those who had lost the things they loved most.

He stood before them, gleaming helmet under his left arm, and swore to them that the fight was far from over. He told them of *The Crusader* and of her escape the previous year. Warp travel was unpredictable, but help would come, he assured them. *The Crusader* would not fail.

They listened. They looked up from where they knelt in front of him, and he saw the hope in their eyes. They wanted to believe, and he let them. Somewhere deep down, he still believed it himself.

Spring came. The snows melted. The morning air became crisp, then eventually warm. The hope that Kantor spread was sustained as the climate became gentle again.

But, beyond the walls, things were different. A new wave of excitement whipped the orks to violent frenzy.

Soon, the Gargants would be complete.

Soon the planet would shudder under their massive feet. Gods of death and destruction would wade towards the final Imperial stronghold, crushing everything to powder beneath them.

For almost eighteen months, the defenders of New Rynn City had endured everything Snagrod's foul orks had thrown at them.

But they would not survive the march of the Gargants.



TWO

The Cassar, Zona Regis, New Rynn City

Within the void shielded walls of the Silver Citadel, the Cassar, last fortress stronghold of the Crimson Fists, stood so far unmarked by the ravages of war. Atop its roofs and towers, great gun batteries stood, whirring smoothly on their cogged mounts as they tracked left and right, scanning the sky for aerial threats. Below them, on a broad balcony facing south, Pedro Kantor stood looking out at the haze-shrouded horizon. Black smoke billowed into the air from a score of sites in ork-held land. Noxious green and brown fumes poured upwards from towering cylindrical stacks. Far out, beyond the reach of the Imperial guns and missile batteries, greenskin transports and aerial war machines buzzed and rumbled, always audible, even this far away.

Alessio Cortez grumbled something from Kantor's left where he, too, stood surveying the horizon in the light of the morning.

'Again, brother,' said Kantor. 'I'm afraid I was not paying attention.'

'I said they've even turned the blasted air against us.'

Kantor nodded. Among his reports, he had seen those of the medicae. Allergic reactions, breathing disorders, cancers, deaths by airborne toxins, all had increased since the end of winter. This had once been such a beautiful world, so green and fertile, so rich and diverse in its animal and plant life.

The orks had raped it. They had poisoned and burned and scarred its face. Even if, by some miracle, the xenos were at last fully purged, the likelihood that Rynn's World could ever be restored to its former glory was a thing beyond even his ability to hope for.

The planet's scars, like the battle scars on his own body, would always remain.

'The next session of the Upper Rynnhouse will begin in an hour,' said Cortez. 'Have you thought about what you will tell them?'

'I have considered your proposal, Alessio, but I'll not send the last of my Crimson Fists out to die. As I grow weary of telling you, the Chapter must endure, no matter what. I will not be remembered as the last master of the Crimson Fists. Our order must survive this.'

Cortez snorted derisively. 'Nothing will survive the Gargants, and we both know it. They'll march soon. Once the last few districts fall, they'll turn their guns on the Silver Citadel and, when the void shields finally fail, we will be cornered and killed.' He raised a hand. 'Please, Pedro. I know you think aid is coming, but how long are we to sit and wait? Grant me the fight I want, for the sake of all we've been through together.'

Kantor looked away to the east, but the haze was thick today. He could see the river where it flowed towards the waters of the Medean, but he could not see the ocean itself.

'You ask to overturn the Ceres Protocol so you can lead a suicide charge,' he said, his voice low and angry. 'You ask me to throw away my best fighters for the sake of a moment's glory. Did you hit your head, Alessio?'

Cortez scowled and stepped forward, gripping the stonework lip of the balcony wall. 'Do you know how many of our brothers have expressed to me their support for a last glorious charge?' he asked.

Kantor nodded. 'Almost half,' he said. 'And they are wrong, all of them. There is more to consider here than an honourable death.'

Cortez spun, his eyes blazing. ‘We are Crimson Fists! Honour is everything!’

Kantor met his friend’s harsh stare with his own.

Fire and ice, he thought. We were always so different. Fire and ice.

‘I tell you our honour is served best in protecting the people. Would you have history remember us as the Chapter that left them to die?’

‘They will die anyway,’ hissed Cortez.

Kantor flashed forward. As fast as Cortez was, the speed of the Chapter Master surprised him, and he found himself gripped tight by his upper arms.

For a moment, they stood that way, frozen, the tension crackling like static electricity between them. Kantor’s eyes held the fury of a winter blizzard, but no words came from his lips. He could not deny that his hope was fading fast. He knew only too well what the first steps of the Gargants would mean, and he knew it would start the moment the metal leviathans were complete. Snagrod would not wait. He had waited long enough for this. Perhaps he was even bored, already hungering for fresh battles on new worlds.

Perhaps he had only stayed this long at all because the Crimson Fists fought on, refusing to die.

At last, Kantor released his grip. Sorrow stole over his face. ‘Such a wedge between us, Alessio,’ he said. ‘In all our centuries, we never fought quite like this. What happened, I wonder?’

Hearing these words, Cortez’s fury cooled fast, like a glowing, fresh-forged blade suddenly thrust into cold water. ‘You are the Chapter Master,’ he replied. ‘Before the coming of the orks, we had not served together on the field of battle since I took command of Fourth Company. You gave me that honour, Pedro, and the latitude I needed to execute your will in your absence. The battles I won for you were fought my way. And I never lost. Now, I want Snagrod’s head... my way. I want vengeance for all the Fists

he has killed. If it costs me my own life, it is a small price to pay for the honour of our dead. Every brother who wishes to go with me has asked the same question of himself, and has found the same answer in his heart. His life for vengeance. We await only your blessing. Let us all go out as warriors should. Lead us out yourself. The future be damned!’

Kantor’s features darkened again. He turned to go from the balcony.

Cortez gripped him by the right vambrace, stopping him momentarily.

Kantor looked down at his old friend’s hand, then slowly turned his eyes upwards with a warning glare.

Cortez released his grip.

‘I am the Chapter,’ said Kantor coldly as he turned away again. ‘The honour of the Crimson Fists is served only by serving me.’

He passed beyond the balcony’s arched doors and into the shadowy chamber beyond. At the back of his mind was the urge to pray for guidance in the Reclusiam before the session of the Upper Rynnhouse began. And there was something else he wanted to pray for, too.

The very thought of Alessio Cortez’s death chilled him far deeper than the thought of his own. Cortez the Immortal, the Chapter’s greatest living legend. Without him, how could there be hope for any of them?

As the Chapter Master’s footsteps echoed along the torch-lit stone corridor ahead of him, he looked back on his life, and saw it defined, not by his status or martial achievements, but by the centuries-long bond of brotherhood with the Fourth Company captain. Ever since the fall of Arx Tyrannus, that bond was the rock he had clung hardest to, the only certainty he had in this never-ending storm of death and loss, and the breaking of that bond was something he knew his hearts would not be able to bear.

As he entered the quiet, sanctified space of the Cassar’s Reclusiam, he thought of the final trials ahead, and knew there were many prayers he must offer today.

Epistolary Deguerro's personal serf, Ufrien Kofax, waited anxiously outside the Reclusiam for the Chapter Master to emerge. Every second seemed like an hour, but Kofax would wait as long as he had to. He could not enter, of course. That would mean death. Instead, he turned his eyes to the portal's etched surfaces and saw images of Chapter heroes overcoming all manner of foes. Disgusting alien and daemonic forms lay in heaps at the feet of armoured giants. The giants stood with weapons aloft, holy light blazing in stylised sunbursts from the halos encircling their helmeted heads.

Heavy footsteps announced the approach of one such giant now. The Chapter Master's prayers had ended.

Kofax straightened his robes and prepared to give his message.

Minutes later, Pedro Kantor found himself seated on a great stone chair in the speaking chamber of the Librarium, listening to Deguerro and his brothers as they updated him with everything they had gleaned from the warp so far. The words were so unexpected, so uplifting, that the Chapter Master's body actually went numb.

Hope, he thought. Slim, granted, but hope nonetheless. Praise Dorn that we stood against them this long.

'A great many, my lord,' said Deguerro, a rare grin brightening his typically dour features. 'We detected the psychic bow waves of over two thousand ships.'

'Two thousand?' echoed Kantor. 'And you are certain these are Imperial ships?'

'We were not certain at first,' said a Librarius Codicier. It was Ruthio Terraro. 'At first we thought it might be another ork wave, and a big one at that, though an increasing number of their smaller long-range ships have been detected leaving the system in the last few months.'

Why this might be the case hardly needed voicing aloud. The orks believed they had won here. Snagrod would be sending advance scouts out into the warp to search for other challenges now. That he was so assured of his victory here was further insult to the Chapter and all it stood for.

‘But they are not orks,’ said Kantor. Despite the burgeoning hope in his chest, he knew he had to be absolutely sure. ‘You are sure you are not mistaken? Could they be other xenos? The eldar perhaps? Those capricious cowards have been known to observe the battles of other races from the edge of the combat zone.’

‘It is not the eldar, lord,’ said Deguerro. ‘The ships are indeed human and, in the minutes before you arrived, we received confirmation that they are loyalists. *The Crusader* is among them. Dorn and the Emperor have answered our prayers. The Imperium has come at last.’

‘How did you detect them?’ Kantor asked, craning forward. ‘I was under the impression that the ork psykers were so numerous that their presence somehow smothered your... gifts.’

‘True, my lord,’ said Deguerro. ‘They are perhaps even more numerous now than before. But there are powerful psykers aboard these Imperial ships, several dozen of them registered as alpha-class, and they are doing all they can to hold the psychic channels open. There are Space Marine Librarians with them, too, from half a dozen Chapters. They have come with their battle-brothers, all swearing oaths of succour in our time of need. Even the psychic noise of the orks cannot entirely drown out our communication with them. We have been able to engage in limited two-way communication.’

‘And what have they told you?’ Kantor asked.

Deguerro nodded to a Codicier named Thracio, whose fingers activated a series of runes set in the armrest of his own stone chair. In the air above them, a shimmering, ghostly solar system appeared. Its two suns, one large and yellow, one tiny and white, spun slowly in the centre. Kantor recognised Rynn’s World and her two moons, Dantienne and Eloix. She was the third planet out, situated perfectly in the middle of her star’s life zone, much like Holy Terra herself.

Hololithic green triangles appeared above her cloud-masked surface. These were the orks' ships at anchor in high orbit. There were still thousands of them.

Deguerro directed Kantor's attention to the orbital plane of the Rynnstar system's outermost planet, Phraecos, a barren, moonless world with a surface of frozen methane. Just within the hololithic ring of the planet's orbital path, a formation of glowing blue triangles flickered into existence, attendant streams of digital data spooling through the air beside them.

'Two thousand two hundred and sixteen warp-capable ships,' said Deguerro, 'and nothing smaller than a Dauntless-class light cruiser. There are several Space Marine battle-barges, but the main bulk of the fleet's firepower is comprised of that aboard the Imperial Navy's Emperor- and Retribution-class battleships. There are four each of these, a significant commitment from Segmentum Headquarters.'

Kantor looked again at the swarm of triangles representing the orks' fleet around Rynn's World. He thought for a moment, then said, 'This Imperial force is enough to break through and land troops, but it is not enough to eliminate the enemy fleet outright.'

'True,' said Deguerro. 'But we have been assured that further support is on the way.'

'To arrive when, exactly?' Kantor asked.

There was an uncomfortable pause before Codicier Thracio answered, 'We cannot be sure. Best estimates say two days from now, but the warp...'

Deguerro gestured again at the cluster of blue triangles above. 'This fleet is under the command of Lord Admiral Prioce Galtair the Fourth. His combat record is exemplary.'

'I know of him,' said Kantor, lifting a hand in interruption. 'What I *wish* to know is whether he intends to keep his fleet at anchor outside ork

striking range until the other elements arrive. Our need for support here on the ground is desperate.'

'He knows this,' said Deguerro. 'The fleet is moving in-system as we speak. Naturally, we wished to consult with you before coordinating further action.'

Kantor rose from his stone chair, and stood eyeing his psychic brothers.

He thought of Eustace Mendoza, and of how much he missed him, of how comforting the presence of the Master of the Librarius would have been in recent days. Tomasi, too, should have been here.

'I regret how short we must cut this,' said Kantor, 'but I must attend a session of the Upper Rynnhouse, and I am already late. The ministers will be overjoyed when I share your news. Spread word among our brothers. Let them know the pendulum of fate is, at last, on the verge of swinging our way once more.'

The Librarians stood as one and saluted.

'By your command, lord,' said Deguerro.

Kantor smiled briefly at him, then turned and left, his pace quick, his boots ringing on stone.



THREE

The Upper Rynnhouse, Zona Regis, New Rynn City

The chamber erupted into cheers and applause. One watching all the congratulatory backslapping, handshaking and even hugging could easily have imagined that the siege was over and the war was won.

It was far from it.

Kantor watched them behind the golden lectern. The ministers did not seem to register that the fleet would still have to fight its way through the greenskins' orbital blockade. Neither did they seem to care that it was still many hours out from the planet. He let them revel in the moment, knowing reality would come down hard on them soon enough. He had seen them eroded over the last eighteen months, proud nobility turned to lifeless husks convinced of their impending deaths. It was he who had ordered them to release their servants so that they might be conscripted into the militia. It was he who had ordered the nobles' personal stores and stockhouses raided, and the foodstuffs pooled with those of the rest of the city, to be rationed out in accordance with emergency Munitorum law.

Fighters eat first.

How they had railed against that! The commissars had been forced to make a few examples. Those who had most openly and vocally challenged

martial law had been publicly flogged. It was the first time any noble had received capital punishment in over six hundred years.

Kantor had not attended the flogging, but he approved. These were times of war. Those who did not adapt were destined to die.

He thought of his own efforts to adapt to all that had happened. From leading a force of over a thousand glorious warriors, he had been left with only three hundred and eighteen. Surviving the trek from the Hellblade Mountains all the way across the continent to the planetary capital, he had been reunited with much of his First and Second Companies, not to mention squads from the Ninth and Tenth Companies present in support. The whole Chapter had gone from being a lethal interstellar strike-force to a desperate remnant under constant siege. How had he adapted? Had he, in fact, changed at all?

He was sure he had, but his line of thought was abruptly broken when a voice burst through on his comm-link's emergency channel. It was Cortez.

'Damn it, Pedro,' he rasped. 'Are you there? Can you hear me?'

Kantor turned away from the jubilant politicians and pressed a finger to the vox-bead in his ear. He always wore the tiny mechanism while his helmet was removed.

'I can hear you, brother,' he said.

'I heard word of the approaching fleet,' said Cortez. His voice crackled with static, the transmission hampered by the thick walls of the chamber. 'But the universe is cruel. Aid comes too late for us, old friend.'

Kantor was about to demand an explanation when he felt a shudder travel up through the chamber floor. Then another. And another, slow and rhythmic like the groggy footsteps of a newly-awakened god.

'No,' he breathed.

'I'm afraid so,' said Cortez. 'The Gargants walk!'

'Meet me in the Strategium,' Kantor snapped, then he cut the link and strode out from behind the podium, crossing the thick red carpet of the

central aisle at speed. Some of the lords and ladies moved to intercept him, their faces still glowing with joy.

Kantor scowled at them, the snarl on his features making them recoil.

‘Move!’ he barked. ‘Get out of my way.’

He did not stop to explain himself. He left them to stare, stunned into silence, eyes following his armoured back as he passed beyond the wide gold and ebonwood doors.

Only now did the members of the Upper Rynnhouse notice the shivering and shaking of the chandeliers above them. They felt growing vibrations travel up through the floor, up through their legs.

They looked at each other, joy giving way to dark apprehension. No one remembered the Silver Citadel shaking like this. Not ever.

They streamed through the doors in a brightly coloured tide, making for the closest antechambers which boasted balconies. Deep down, they already knew what they would see, or at least they suspected, though none wanted to believe it.

Through the pall of smoke and airborne pollutants, vast figures moved in the distance, figures with great angular shoulders and arms of clustered weaponry, figures with horned heads and great skirts of impenetrable armour. Their huge round eyes glowed a baleful red, piercing the airborne murk that still veiled them. The air shook with the noise of their sputtering, fume-spewing engines.

There were six of them in all, and the whole planet seemed to tremble with every crushing step they took.

Ministers fainted, both men and women, falling to the balcony floor among the legs of their fellows. Others sank to their knees, crying out in despair. Others were too numb to react. They stood frozen, their unblinking eyes locked to the gargantuan waddling figures in the distance.

Maia Cagliestra was one of these. She saw that the end had come. The Imperial Fleet would find only ruins, if they made it through the blockade

at all. Not even her beloved Crimson Fists, in whom she had never lost faith, could do anything to change that now.

She stood with the others looking out at their doom, weeping silently, nothing left to hold on to.



FOUR

The Cassar, Zona Regis, New Rynn City

Kantor entered the Cassar only minutes after leaving the Upper Rynnhouse chambers, but he did not go straight to the Strategium. First, he made a detour to the Librarius and ordered them to put him in contact with Lord Admiral Galtairé's fleet at once.

Some minutes later, a fragile psychic link was established and updates were given in both directions. Kantor reported the movement of the Gargants, impressing the increased desperation of their situation on the lord admiral. If the fleet didn't get here soon, there would be no one left alive to assist. Brother Deguerro, locked into a trance, features twisted painfully with the effort, transmitted the Chapter Master's words while the other Librarians lent their own power to maintaining and securing the connection. There could be no doubt that the orks, too, had detected the Imperial fleet. The enemy ships were already moving to intercept. If the Imperial fleet could outflank them, could just get around them somehow, they might still be able to make a difference.

Lord Admiral Galtairé, speaking through his most powerful astropath, expressed grave reservations, but he was not about to let a Chapter like the Crimson Fists become extinct while his pride and joy, the flagship

Septimus Astra, was so close. He swore an oath, then and there, that he would succeed or die trying.

It wouldn't be as simple as slipping around the ork blockade, of course. Galtaire needed those already on the ground to do something for him, and Kantor's blood ran cold as he heard what it was.

The Crimson Fists would need to retake New Rynn space port.

Securing that facility was the only chance they had. It was large enough on which to land heavy craft, including carrier-shuttles belonging to the Legio Titanicus, close enough to facilitate the immediate launch of Marauder bombers which would fly to the aid of the Silver Citadel, and armed with a defence grid capable of protecting the reinforcements as they flew in... if the orks hadn't dismantled it already.

After almost eighteen months of protecting the city walls, of guarding the gates to an ever-dwindling stronghold, Kantor and his Crimson Fists would have to go out and face the horde after all. They would have to cross ork territory filled with impossible numbers of enemy troops and all the weaponry at their disposal.

They would have to infiltrate and secure the spaceport.

The odds of success were laughable, but, if they didn't try, they were dead already.

Of that, there was no doubt in Pedro Kantor's mind.

The atmosphere inside the Strategium was charged and tense. Cortez had done as ordered. He had gathered as many senior members of the Chapter as were left within the walls that protected them. Techmarines, Apothecaries, Librarians, Chaplains, Crusade Company veterans, all were represented. Kantor laid the situation out before them.

Cortez felt his blood surge in his veins as he listened.

At last, he thought. The moment has come. Blade against blade, fist against fist, armour splashed with the blood of our enemies – if we're to die, by Dorn, let it be a worthy one. I've waited for this. I've wanted this

since the day we got here. Static defence be damned. Finally, it is time to do what we do best.

With supporting information and tactical hololiths provided by Brother Anais, the most senior Techmarine present, Kantor briefed them on exactly what was needed of them.

‘It must be done as quickly as we can manage it,’ he said. ‘The first objective, naturally, will be to cover the ground between here and the spaceport limits. It is well that the city underworks were never collapsed, because they are our only hope of getting to the spaceport alive. Our Terminator squads have held them for months, choking them with ork dead that sought to sneak under our guard. We will need flamer and melta units up front to clear the tunnels of the xenos dead. Almost sixty kilometres of tunnel between us and the spaceport... We may find ourselves engaged along the way. Again, it is our Terminator squads that are best suited to lead us through. Rogo Victurix will coordinate this phase of the operation.’

Kantor nodded to the senior Techmarine, Brother Anais, and, a second later, the air over the table flickered to show an angular network of long, glowing tubes. These were the underworks, and every Fist in the room committed them to memory while the Chapter Master looked over the ebonwood table at Rogo, whose eyes were bright with enthusiasm for the task. ‘Speed is key, my brother,’ said Kantor. ‘Push fast and push hard. The Gargants will take between four and six hours to reach the Silver Citadel, and the void shields will hold the people safe for some time after that, but we have no idea exactly how long. We have to retake the spaceport fast.’

‘Our Terminator squads know the underworks back to front, lord,’ said Victurix, his voice a gravelly rasp. ‘Trust in us.’

Kantor did.

Again he nodded to Anais, and the Techmarine’s fingers flickered over a hololith control panel. There was a burst of green static above the table, and schematics of the spaceport appeared.

It was the largest single facility on the planet, capable of accommodating three massive trans-orbital cargo lifters at a time, one on each of its specially constructed grav-suspended landing plates. Sub-orbital craft, both military and civilian, were served by several dozen airfields within the spaceport's outer walls.

It was a curious structure unlike any other building in the capital. Shrunk down to tabletop hololith size, it resembled three upturned bowls clustered together around a triad of slim spikes. These spikes housed the spaceport control towers, including the control rooms for the communication and defence systems. It was these, more than any other part of the spaceport, that Kantor and his Fists needed to secure.

'Every able-bodied battle-brother we have will be going in,' said the Chapter Master, 'with the exception of our Dreadnought brothers, who are simply too big to negotiate the tunnels. Instead, they will stay here to protect the Silver Citadel, fighting from the walls alongside the Rynnsguard and the militias. The people will draw great strength and comfort from their presence, I'm sure of it.'

There were no Dreadnoughts in the room to argue the point, and Kantor was glad of that. He would go to them himself and explain all before he left.

'Most of our squads,' Kantor continued, 'will exit the tunnels close to the inner perimeter of the spaceport grounds. They will retake the facility's defensive walls and hold them against ork retaliation from outside. The rest of us will fight to secure each of the landing towers. Captain Cortez and I will be leading a further contingent into the control towers to reactivate the defence and comms networks. Dorn willing, we will have our reinforcements shortly after that. Lord Admiral Galtair is confident in the forces he brings to our aid. There are entire companies of Adeptus Astartes from our brother Chapters waiting to join us in battle. The Adeptus Mechanicus have brought their mighty Titans to rip apart the

Gargant abominations. And the Navy has enough Marauders to bomb the xenos back to the Age of Strife.'

He eyed them all as he spoke, one by one. 'But it all depends on us.'

Serious faces nodded back at him.

'Are you ready to take our world back, brothers?' he asked them.

'For the Chapter!' they roared. Some pounded on the table, those standing clashed a clenched fist on their chests.

Kantor smiled a hard smile at them and stood.

'Then get ready to move out. Take every bit of ammunition you can carry. Have the Chaplains bless your amour and weapons. I go now to give orders to the Dreadnoughts, and to tell the governor and General Mir that we are leaving.'

His Fists saluted him as he turned and left, then they turned to each other and clapped those nearest to them on the shoulders. Rough laughter sounded from some. Others grinned. They were going back on the offensive after so long. It felt right.

And none believed that more so than Alessio Cortez.



FIVE

The Underworks, New Rynn City

The tunnel along which Kantor's assault group moved was dark and damp, the concrete walls covered with slick algae and thick ceramic pipes that had been broken open in places. Even in the glare of the lights mounted on the Terminators' armour, the tunnel floor was invisible beneath a soupy black liquid some ten centimetres deep. It was impossible to move quietly, so the Crimson Fists didn't try. They moved fast instead, or at least as fast as the Terminators on point.

It was a relatively smooth journey at first, not just for Kantor's group, but for all the assault parties he had formed for the operation. Right now, there were more than twenty detachments of Crimson Fists making for the spaceport along the tunnel networks, each with their very own Terminator out in front, clearing the way with flamer and melta when the xenos bodies were heaped too thick to pass. The orks had been held back quite far out from the Silver Citadel. Over the months of the siege, they had slowly learned that any efforts to infiltrate via underground routes led to their immediate slaughter. Victurix and the other squads from Crusade Company had not relaxed for a moment. The role may have seemed inglorious to others, but the Terminator squads knew it was critical all

along. They had never complained about spending days on end down here in the dark. They killed thousands of the foe down here.

Throughout the entire journey, the tunnels shook with the footfalls of the Gargants overhead, but it was only after two hours that this became a danger. Victurix himself, who had been charged with guiding Kantor's assault group, called back to the Chapter Master when the tunnel's shaking was at its worst.

'We must be directly underneath one of them, my lord,' he bellowed over the comm-link. 'There are cracks in the tunnel ceiling, and they are getting wider.'

Kantor judged the sergeant's words accurate. Step after massive step was knocking dust and small chunks of stone down onto his helmet and pauldrons.

'Press on as fast as you can,' he told Victurix.

Dorn forgive us if we're buried down here without even a chance to fight, he thought.

But they were not buried.

Another two hours passed. The earthshaking power of the footfalls dissipated as the Fists pushed on, further and further away from them, and soon Kantor judged that he and his brothers would soon be within the outer perimeter of the spaceport grounds.

Communication was impossible with the other assault groups while everyone was underground, but they had their orders. They had synchronised their visor-chronometers. They would do exactly as he had asked of them.

Another hour brought Kantor and his group to the final junction before they must return aboveground. Where two tunnels met, there was a little more room to move, and Kantor stepped to the fore to look ahead between the shoulders of the Terminators. There was a dark archway set into the

left of the tunnel about thirty metres from him. Cortez came up and stood by his side.

‘Through that archway,’ said Kantor, ‘is the stone stair that will take us up into the basement level of the Coronado Tower.’

‘I’m ready,’ said Cortez.

Behind him, four squads of Crimson Fists readied their weapons.

‘You want to be first in, Alessio.’

It wasn’t a question.

Beneath his helm, Cortez grinned wickedly. ‘You know I do.’

Kantor checked the chronometer display on his visor. The other assault groups would be in position within four minutes, explosives fixed to the access hatches and manhole covers they would rush from, bolters cocked and ready to rip their hated enemies apart. All across the spaceport grounds, the orks wouldn’t know what hit them.

‘Let’s get everyone onto the stairs,’ said Kantor.

His visor now told him he had thirty seconds to go before the assault began.

Behind him, his battle-brothers were coiled, ready to strike. He had brought three squads in standard Mark VII aquila-pattern power armour, one in Terminator armour, and two Techmarines – Brothers Anais and Ruzco. He knew their blood was up, all of them, knew they were anxious to be in among the foe, tearing them to pieces.

Twenty seconds... ten seconds...

He looked at Cortez and said, ‘When you go in, brother, go in hard!’

The captain barked out a laugh.

‘I always do!’

The explosive charges they had placed on the inner surface of the access hatch exploded with a bang, and stone chips and smoke blew back over the Adeptus Astartes.

They didn’t wait for the smoke to clear.

‘Charge,’ roared Cortez as he burst forward.

The assault had begun.

All across the spaceport grounds – in the lower levels of the defence towers, in basements and hangars and fuel storage buildings and more – the Crimson Fists exploded up from the tunnels with armour shimmering and weapons stuttering.

The spaceport had become a base of operations for the orks since the day they had overcome the small Crimson Fist and Rynnsguard contingent charged with defending it. Now, the tables were turned. The orks were the defenders and, in their confidence that this war was already won, they were completely unprepared.

Thousands of greenskins died as the Space Marines swarmed the inner walls and retook the defence towers. Outside those walls, the orks were unaware that anything was wrong. Most of the alien horde had their eyes locked to the Gargants and were following them as close as they dared. They did not want to miss the spectacle of their mighty metal monstrosities obliterating the final Imperial stronghold.

The groups assaulting the spaceport’s main buildings – the landing towers and control spires – had it harder, but not at first.

Cortez had burst into the basement of the Coronado tower to find scores of sickly-looking gretchin facing him, frozen in fear and confusion by the sudden explosion that had just interrupted their work. They had been hauling crates of ammunition onto elevators to be taken to the loading bays above. Now, most of that ammunition lay spilled on the ground, the shells rolling and clinking together.

Cortez started picking them off with his bolt pistol immediately. The first grisly death sent the others scurrying for cover, whimpering and shrieking as they scrambled, but a good number were too slow.

Squads Lician and Segala, two of the four squads Kantor had chosen to go with him, were right behind Cortez, and their bolters began chewing the

diminutive aliens apart.

The basement level was a single broad, high-ceilinged room littered with boxes and heaps of metal junk. The roof-space was thick with cable-bundles and pipes that snaked between steel girders. Hanging underneath the metal supports, large arc lights threw out a harsh white glare. It was clear the gretchin didn't like those lights much. They had smashed more than half of them.

Still, the shadows offered no sanctuary. More Crimson Fists poured through the access hatch now until, finally, Victurix and four of his Terminator brothers stepped through, shaking the floor underneath their booted feet.

'Clear and hold,' barked Kantor, but he was glad to see his Space Marines already about the task.

More gretchin screamed as mass-reactive bolts punched into their bodies and blew them open a heartbeat later.

If there are gretchin here, thought Cortez as he killed, then there will be an overseer nearby, too.

Gretchin were disinclined to do anything for the good of their race without a particularly sadistic and violent brute standing over them with a prod or whip.

Sure enough, alerted by the sound of gunfire, a massive leathery skinned ork with one eye burst through a metal door at the top of the stairway that led to the next floor up. Seeing the Space Marines surrounded by dead gretchin, the beast charged into the fray bellowing at the top of its voice. It hadn't gone three metres down the stairs when an Adeptus Astartes bolt detonated in its brain, spraying the metal steps dark red and causing the heavy body to tumble down them.

Brother Gaban of Squad Lician found the last of the gretchin hiding between two tall stacks of metal crates. A short burst of bright fire from

Gaban's flamer turned the creature into a blazing puppet that danced frantically on the spot as its flesh was consumed.

'Up,' shouted Kantor to the others. 'They know we're here!'

Cortez raced for the metal stair and pounded up it. Squad Daecor followed right behind him, boots ringing on the metal steps. At the top, Cortez and Sergeant Daecor took position on either side of the open door. The other four members of Daecor's squad prepared themselves to rush through it, guns held ready, safeties off.

Cortez nodded to Daecor, and the sergeant ordered his squad in.

They rushed forward through the doorway, weapons firing on every target they saw as they moved. Once through the doorway, they immediately moved to the sides, two left, two right, and lay down a steady covering fire for all those that followed.

'Go!' Kantor ordered, and Squad Lician charged through next, adding their own lethal rattle of explosive rounds.

Cortez was firing into the loading bay from his position by the frame of the door. He heard Brother Ramos's plasma cannon, its steady low hum now increased to a threatening whine. The weapon's glowing coils channelled powerful electromagnetic energies in preparation for a shot. Moments later, there was a roar like fire as a blast of superheated plasma streaked from the weapon. Cortez didn't see it, nor did he see the result of the blast, but he heard an explosion and the deep howling of full-grown orks in pain.

'Moving in,' said Daecor, 'keep to cover brothers. Oro, watch the gantry above you. Greenskins! Padilla, give him some support, damn it!'

Cortez flexed his muscles and prepared to follow Daecor in. He felt his armour respond to every twitch and stretch he made. Beneath the thick ceramite plates lay a skin of synthetic fibres that acted much like human muscle, reacting to electrical impulses, to the motor commands sent by his

brain. The response time was almost exactly that of his own body, making his armour feel like part of him, and he was part of it.

His power armour responded no less swiftly now as he surged out from the cover of the doorway with his bolt pistol kicking in his hand. Kantor was right behind him, Dorn's Arrow spewing a torrent of death towards a trio of big orks firing down on them from a metal gallery above.

'Segala and Lician, flank and eliminate,' commanded the Chapter Master. 'Anais and Ruzco stay by me. The rest of you, suppressing fire.'

This was Loading Bay Epsilon, the main loading areas serving Coronado Tower. It was here that incoming shipments of Imperial goods had once been loaded onto trucks and driven out for distribution. There were orks and gretchin all over the place. The Crimson Fists assault had caught in the middle of loading their ugly armoured trucks. Like the basement, the ceiling here was high and girdered. The huge metal shutters in the curving north wall were up, and beyond them lay a vast rockcrete expanse of road and runway. The ork trucks sat idling noisily, but even their spluttering engines couldn't compete with the noise of battle.

Cortez saw movement to his left. Four barrel-chested greenskins were arming themselves from the back of one of the trucks. Inside, Cortez could make out ammunition crates stacked one on top of the other. He turned with his bolt pistol raised and loosed a tight, three-round cluster of bolts, firing, not at the orks, but at the crates just behind them.

For half-a-second, his rounds had no effect.

Then the truck exploded in a blaze of light and flame. The orks were blasted onto their bellies, backs studded with massive shards of hot shrapnel. Secondary explosions lifted the truck into the air before it slammed back down, nose first, into rockcrete.

Cortez didn't stop to enjoy his handiwork. All around him, the Crimson Fists slaughtered anything green and animate. He continued adding his

own fire, making every shot a kill shot. This was what he trained for. He never missed.

He saw a wretched-looking ork with a mechanical hand dash towards a doorway on the metal platform twenty metres above Squad Daecor. No doubt the ugly brute was racing to raise some kind of general alarm, but the Crimson Fists could not afford to get bogged down in a heavy firefight here. Their whole plan depended on their ability to stay mobile, and on the ork inability to coordinate a proper reaction. The spaceport control tower and defence grid control room were many floors above. Terminator Squad Victurix, slower than the other lighter-armoured squads, would stay here and hold this zone. Chapter Master Kantor was counting on them to keep the orks on the ground occupied while he, Cortez and the others climbed higher towards their two main objectives.

Cortez was about to fire on the running ork when a burst of fire from his right ripped the creature to wet red pieces. Cortez glanced towards the shooter.

‘Sorry, brother,’ said Brother Talazar, one of Victurix’s Terminators. ‘My kill.’

Cortez just laughed.

Kantor was ordering Squad Lician, Daecor and Segala up onto the gantries overhead. From there, they would proceed towards the next room, where they would gain access to the upper floors.

‘Stand strong, brother,’ said Cortez to Talazar as he left his side.

‘And you,’ Talazar boomed after him.

Barely two minutes later, Kantor and the rest of his force, minus the Terminators, were running along a black metal gantry twelve metres above the floor, moving towards an archway at the far end. Squad Daecor had point, and they mustered on either side of the opening, ready to go in strong. Ferragamos Daecor had once served a term as a member of a

Deathwatch kill-team. Cortez could see it in the sergeant's movements, in the cool surety with which he guided his team.

After all this, thought Cortez, when we rebuild everything we have lost, I'll wager that one makes captain.

The fighting in the loading bay below was over for now, the rattle of the Terminators' storm bolters temporarily ended, but Cortez could hear a great commotion up ahead. The brothers of Squad Daecor gripped their weapons tight and readied themselves to surge forward.

'There should be a large elevator cage in the centre of the next room,' Kantor told everyone. 'Entry points are south and east. Make sure you cover them. Do not damage the mechanism of the elevator. We need it. Are we clear?'

Affirmative responses sounded over the comm-link.

'Good,' said Kantor, checking the bolt-feed for Dorn's Arrow, then returning his attention to the opening ahead. 'Squad Daecor, enter and clear. Lician and Segala, follow on my command. Daecor, go!'

The battle-brothers of Daecor's squad swung out from the cover of the arched entryway and sprinted forward. They slid back into the cover of a dozen metal crates just as a great hail of stubber-fire came their way. 'Heavy stubbers!' Daecor reported as shells whined past him on either side. More shells smacked into the face of the crate he was crouched behind. 'Keep to cover,' he barked at his squad. 'Suppressing fire front and centre. Brother Cassaves, you and I will flank them. Do not move until their attention is locked on the others.'

'Clear, brother-sergeant,' replied the gruff Cassaves.

Kantor turned to Cortez and said, 'You and I take cover on either side of the doorway. Supporting fire. Understood?'

Cortez nodded. Kantor dashed for the right side of the doorway, Cortez for the left. Their pauldrons hit the wall at the same time. Cortez leaned out briefly and surveyed the scene before him. It only took an instant.

The elevator cage was in the centre of the chamber, just as Kantor had said it would be. The orks beyond it were heavily armed and dressed in plate armour. Cortez did not see any powered suits among them, but the iron plate would be thick enough to stop a direct hit with a bolt. He saw Daecor and Cassaves moving around, following the line of the walls left and right while the other members of the squad kept the orks busy, but the torrent of shells the orks were pouring out presented a real problem. The greenskin heavy stubbers were spitting out spent brass like water from a fountain. The floor around them was ankle deep in shell casings already and the cover behind which the rest of Squad Daecor was sheltering was rapidly being chewed away.

Cortez knew the Fists giving Daecor and Cassaves suppressing fire needed support, some kind of respite, a break in the fighting they could use to move into fresh cover. They had to do it now, before it was too late.

Cortez pulled a krak grenade from the belt around his middle and primed it. 'Squad Daecor,' he barked over the link, 'be ready to move to better cover. Krak grenade coming in.'

Without waiting for confirmation, he leaned out from the side of the door, locked his eyes on the ork firing position, and hurled his grenade. He did not stay there with his head sticking out to see what happened. He knew the explosive would go off exactly where he wanted it to. He simply listened for the sharp boom he knew was coming.

Three...

Two...

The floor beneath his boots shook with the blast. One of the orks, wounded but not killed began roaring in agony. Cortez heard Sergeant Daecor shouting, 'Close in!'

The orks that survived the blast quickly opened fire again, but Cortez could hear the difference in the rattle of their guns. There were two less of them now. He heard the stutter of only six greenskin guns.

From the other side of the doorway, Kantor leaned out to fire a short burst from Dorn's Arrow. The weapon's fire-rate was incredibly high. Kantor had to be careful to fire in extremely short bursts, otherwise he would burn through his back-mounted store of ammunition in less than a minute, despite the vast amount of shells he carried.

Daecor's voice was on the link. 'I have their left flank. Cassaves, are you in position?'

'Almost there, brother-sergeant.'

There was a brief pause, then Cassaves spoke again.

'I have their flank. Give the word, brother.'

Cortez leaned out and fired a round from his bolt pistol. It scored a black line in the top of a crate and ricocheted, missing the hideous snarling face of one ork by scant centimetres. The ork angled the heavy barrel of its weapon towards Cortez's position and, with a growl, loosed a flood of shells his way.

Cortez both heard and felt the shells peppering the other side of the wall.

'Now,' said Daecor.

In the chamber, bolter-fire sounded from two new directions, and deep ork screams filled the air. Cortez heard heavy, armoured bodies fall to the ground with the sound of metal impacting on rockcrete. Then he heard the sound of metal clashing against metal. He leaned out and saw Brother Cassaves wrestling desperately against a black-armoured monster, trying to free his bolter from the beast's grip so that he could fire into its face at point-blank range. Daecor was on the other side of the chamber, forced to take cover again now that other surviving orks had spotted him and opened fire.

Kantor saw it, too.

'Lician and Segala, move in and support Daecor,' he snapped. Then, with a nod at Cortez, he surged into the chamber himself, Dorn's Arrow

held straight out in front of him, the folds of his crimson cloak snapping behind him as he moved.

Cortez moved, too, barely half a second behind his leader. The moment he entered the chamber, he centred his pistol's iron sights on the helmeted head of the ork wrestling with Cassaves and fired off a single bolt.

It struck the ork dead centre in the side of its head, but the creature's helmet was solid, at least two centimetres thick, and the round detonated on contact, snapping the ork's head to the side, stunning it for a moment, but failing to wound it. Of course, that had never been Cortez's intent. He knew what he was doing. He was buying Cassaves the momentary advantage he needed.

As Cortez had known he would, Cassaves seized on the distraction. The ork had instinctively closed its eyes at the moment of the blast, desperate to protect them. The moment its gaze was removed from Cassaves, the Space Marine let his bolter drop from his right hand, drew his combat blade in a flash, and thrust it straight forward into the ork's throat where the beast's helmet offered no protection.

The tip of the blade slid in, severing the critical nerve bundle at the back. Any normal creature would have dropped dead right then, but, although the ork was technically dead already, its body continued to wrestle for another eight seconds. Its grip was incredibly powerful. Even when it sank to the ground in a heap, Brother Cassaves had to pry its thick, clawed fingers off one by one.

With only one ork left, the three squads swept straight in and cleared the room. Sergeant Lician slew the ork that was keeping Daecor's head down, and soon the chamber was silent. Smoke curled from gun barrels and spent cartridges. Some of the ork bodies, each of which was easily three hundred kilogrammes in weight, twitched while their thick blood pooled around them. The air was thick with smells; cordite, blood, ionised air, the pungent stink of unwashed alien dead.

Kantor ordered his battle-brothers into the elevator cage, large enough for all three five-man squads, and stood at the control panel inside.

Cortez drew the cage's gate closed.

The elevator floor shuddered and there was a sound of powered gears grinding into motion. The elevator rose past the ceiling and into the vertical shaft above it.

Cortez watched yellow lights flicker past. They were set into the smooth steel walls at regular intervals, each marking another few metres that he moved closer to victory or death.



SIX

The Coronado Tower, New Rynn Space port

An hour and forty-seven minutes had passed since they had blasted their way out of the work tunnel beneath the spaceport. The fighting had been almost constant since then, but, as Kantor had predicted, the sheer size of the spaceport and the maze of its halls, rooms, loading bays and elevator shafts had prevented the orks from launching any kind of coordinated purge against the Crimson Fists assault force.

Contact with Squad Victurix was difficult now, the voice of the Terminator sergeant faint on the comm-link. That, too, had been expected. Kantor, Cortez and the brothers accompanying them were hundreds of metres above the point where they had entered the spaceport. Beneath them were many floors of thick metal girders and steel-reinforced rockcrete and ferrocrete. Sooner or later, contact with the Terminators holding the lower floors would be lost altogether. Victurix had already reported further contact with the enemy. He also relayed word from the other assault groups. The battle for the rest of the spaceport grounds was ongoing. At least it seemed that most of the toughest orks were out there among the hordes surrounding the Silver Citadel. They thought that was where the action was.

To some extent, they were right. Even here, in the upper levels of the spaceport some forty kilometres south of the position of the nearest marching Gargant, those thunderous, planet-trembling footfalls could still be felt, at least to senses as highly trained as those of a Space Marine.

Silently, Kantor prayed that the citadel's void shields would hold out long enough for the Legio Titanicus to land some of their Titans. The famed god-machines would make short work of their poorer ork-built rivals. But a lot had to happen before that was even a remote possibility. The spaceport had to be utterly secure.

He looked around.

Moments ago, he and his brothers had emerged from a narrow hallway filled with scrap and ork excrement, into this, a broad, semi-circular room that had once been a passenger lounge. Large windows ran the entire length of the curving outer wall, but every last one had been smashed, and a warm wind howled through them, lifting scraps of crumpled paper from the floor and tugging at the torn edges of posters still half-stuck to the walls.

Squads Daecor and Lician were covering two sets of double doors that led out of the room. Squad Segala was covering the rear, the door through which they had just come. The Techmarines, just as Kantor had commanded, were at his side. Their survival was everything. Without them, this was a lost cause.

Kantor turned his head, surveying the room. Behind him stood his old friend, weapons holstered for the moment as he, too, looked around.

'Damned mess,' said Cortez quietly.

The captain had not left Kantor's side since they had entered the underworks back in the Silver Citadel. Kantor knew full well that Cortez had sought, perhaps even expected, command of the mission. He knew Cortez had wanted this all along, a chance to throw all caution to the wind and march out to meet the foe head on. It was his way. He wasn't

interested in the bigger picture. He was focussed on the here and now, on the enemy in front of him, and he gave his all in fighting that foe. It was both his strength and his weakness.

Kantor had momentarily considered giving Cortez command, but what would he have achieved by staying back there? Against the Gargants, there was nothing he could do from the citadel walls to make a difference. Here, he could make a significant difference.

‘We’re getting closer,’ Kantor said over the link. ‘Above this lounge is another for high-ranking dignitaries. It leads out into a large atrium and, from there, we can access the landing plate itself. Once we cross it, we’ll enter the central spires. The air traffic control and defence control centres are inside.’

‘There are three landing plates,’ said Cortez. ‘What about the other two?’

‘First things first,’ replied Kantor. ‘I am not interested in the landing plates until the air defence grid has been secured. We can think about everything else once we have airspace control.’

Cortez suddenly held up a hand. ‘Listen!’

Kantor heard it now. The ceiling was thick, but, alerted by Cortez, he could now hear movement above. There was something very heavy moving above them.

Cortez sounded eager. Did he hope it was Snagrod himself?

‘That’s no gretchin,’ he said, half to himself.

‘We move,’ said Kantor. ‘Daecor has point. Beyond the doors, the atrium should have plenty of cover. If there are targets, do not let them dig in. The atrium is dominated by a staircase at its centre. The landing at the top goes east to west. I want that landing secured, Daecor on the east doors, Lician on the west. Squad Segala continues to protect the rear. Anais and Ruzco with Segala. All squads, confirm.’

‘By your command,’ said Sergeant Daecor.

‘Your will, my lord,’ said Lodric Lician, shortly followed with a similar affirmation from Segala and the Techmarines.

Kantor moved closer to the door Squad Daecor was covering, Cortez moving with him on his left, just a few metres behind. When they were in position, Kantor gave the order.

‘Go!’

Daecor kicked open the door, splintering the finely carved wood with his ceramite boot. In a flash, he was through it, leading the charge into the Coronado atrium. Immediately, stubber-fire and the bright burst of discharging energy weapons poured down on him from a gallery overhead.

Daecor and his squad sidestepped into cover on either side of the hall, taking shelter in the lee of defaced statues that had once represented Rynn and his acolytes.

‘Dorn’s blood!’ spat Daecor over the link.

Kantor barked out orders to Squad Lician, and the Devastator squad moved up to give covering fire. The gallery overhead was so packed with orks that they were almost spilling over the marble baluster. There were more on the floor of the atrium, too, half-sheltering behind the bases of the ruined statues at the far end. Others stood on the wide sweep of the marble central stair, spraying fire at the Adeptus Astartes, brass casings falling to the thick red carpet and rolling from the steps.

Brother Morai was carrying a heavy bolter. Of all the heavy weapons the Devastators had brought, it was this that had the longest lethal range. Stepping out from cover, Morai hefted the massive barrel of his gun in the direction of the orks on the gallery and tightened his grip on the firing lever. The weapon began to shudder with incredible recoil as it poured a blistering torrent of bolter-shells on the clustered knot of xenos fiends. The marble baluster was chewed apart. With nothing left to resist the push of their fellows at the back, the brutish aliens in the front rows found themselves tumbling forwards into space, falling fifteen metres to the hard

marble flagstones below. Scores of them fell, hitting hard, sustaining serious injuries. But these were orks, perhaps the most resilient species in the galaxy when it came to pain. They scrambled to their feet, discarding the dented and twisted ruins of their guns, and drew cleavers, swords, axes and hammers from the loops on their thick squiggoth-hide belts.

With a unified roar, they surged forwards towards the Adeptus Astartes.

Morai stepped forward to meet them, strafing the muzzle of his weapon left and right in a tight arc as he moved. The muzzle flare of his weapon lit everything around him in bright strobing light. A shower of brass poured from the heavy bolter's cartridge ejection port.

The orks at the front were almost cut in half as dozens of mass-reactive shells exploded inside their guts. They went down screaming, spittle flying from their razor-toothed mouths. Gore spattered the floor, the walls, the fixtures.

The ruined statues of Rynn and his fellows were dripping with blood, the deep red stark against the flawless white marble.

The orks at the back of the charge kept coming, iron-booted feet stomping on the bodies of their fallen kin, slipping occasionally on the spilled blood and intestines.

Sergeant Lician ordered Morai to fall back, to save his ammunition. His fusillade had been enough to buy Daecor and his squad a moment to prepare. They now leaned out from cover and poured bolter and plasma fire into the rest of the charging xenos, cutting them down in the middle of the hall. The orks on the stair and those behind cover at the far end of the hall continued to pour large-calibre metal slugs at the Crimson Fists. And then Kantor heard a new noise.

It was the stomping of huge armoured feet and, just before every footfall, the distinctive hiss and clank of piston-powered legs. The landing at the top of the stair shook. One of the hanging lights fixed to the underside came loose and fell to the floor, shattering into myriad pieces.

The orks on the stair stopped firing for long enough to look up, and Kantor thought he saw hints of fear on their slack-jawed faces.

A battle-roar so deep it shook the walls sounded, and lasted so long that, for a moment, the Chapter Master wondered if it would ever end.

The moment it did, the orks on the stair gave up their positions, bolting down to the bottom and dashing for the cover of the ruined statues at the far end, the same place from which their fellows were firing.

Daecor and his men did not stop to find out who or what had decided to join the battle. They kept pouring fire out at the orks, killing a dozen of them as they crossed the open hallway at a run. Then, with a temporary lessening of enemy fire, they moved out and raced to forward positions that would offer them a better line of sight on their targets. Kantor and Cortez moved a second later, leading Squad Lician into the cover that Daecor and his brothers had just abandoned.

From here, Kantor brought Dorn's Arrow to bear. He had a good arc of fire on the orks still shooting from the second-floor gallery. He raised his left hand, turned Dorn's Arrow level with the floor, and fired, ripping his targets to pieces.

The relic weapon's rate of fire was almost as great as that of Morai's heavy bolter, and it cut deep into the mob of orks, its bolts detonating messily in their bellies. Eviscerated bodies began tumbling from the edge of the gallery, smacking loudly, wetly, on the flagstones.

From the edge of his vision, Kantor saw Cortez and the men of Squad Lician giving suppressing fire to allow Squad Daecor to move from cover to cover once again. The sergeant was attempting to go around behind the great stair in the centre of the hall. He hoped to flank the enemy from the left.

Just as Daecor and his brothers had begun to move there was another deafening roar, this time from the very top of the stair. Kantor saw Daecor

dive for cover, but the other four battle-brothers in his squad were just fractionally slower.

Kantor watched in horror as they were chewed apart before his eyes. Their armour should have protected them against greenskin slugs, even large-calibre ones, but this was different. Whatever stood at the top of the stairs was spewing so much firepower in their direction that there was simply no hope. Ceramite plates cracked and shattered under the deadly hail. Great gouts of blood fountained into the air. To Kantor's eyes, it seemed to happen in slow motion. He knew this feeling. He had felt it before, many times. Why did time always grind to a halt like this when he was forced to watch good brothers die?

Four brave Crimson Fists fell to the floor like so much dead meat.

If the Chapter had a future, they would not see it now.

Then their killer, still blocked from Kantor's view by the curve of the landing above, turned its lead-spewing heavy weapon on the statue behind which Daecor was now trapped. The shells began reducing the statue to rubble with terrible speed.

'Shell-breakers,' said Sergeant Lician on the link.

Kantor knew the sergeant was right. Only armour-piercing rounds could have done damage like that. It was fortunate, in some respects, that only the highest ranking orks ever seemed to have access to them.

Kantor heard Cortez roaring in rage from just behind him. He, too, had witnessed the deaths of his brother Adeptus Astartes and it was too much.

Kantor instinctively knew what was going to happen next. He put out a hand to stop his old friend, but perhaps he should have known better. Nothing could stop Alessio Cortez when he had committed himself to a kill. Cortez raced forwards, moving with incredible speed, bolt pistol in his right hand, his other, gloved in its massive power fist, pumping the air as he sprinted.

Ork fire from three directions pocked the marble flagstones at his feet, just a fraction of a second too late to hit him. As Cortez slid into cover beside Daecor, he raised his bolt pistol in the direction of the beast that had killed his brother Adeptus Astartes... and froze.

Kantor heard his words as clear as gunshots over the comm-link.

‘I know you!’ shouted Cortez. ‘You killed Drigo Alvez!’

Footsteps shook the marble stairs now, and Kantor saw a huge armoured form come into view. As he had suspected from the noise of the piston-powered legs, the creature was covered head-to-toe in a blocky, massively-thick suit of ork power armour. One arm ended in a huge multi-barrelled stubber with twin ammunition feeds. The other arm ended in the long glittering, snapping pincers of an ork power claw sheathed in deadly energies.

Kantor realised that Cortez was right. He recognised this monster from the sensorium uploads of the Krugerport survivors. This was the beast that had ended Captain Drakken’s life. It was right here, right now, right in front of them, glaring straight at Alessio Cortez.

Urzog Mag Kull!

The beast laughed and clashed its pincers.

It had already killed one Crimson Fists captain. Now it wanted another.



SEVEN

The Upper Levels, Coronado Tower

Cortez watched Mag Kull take step after stair-shuddering step, its massive feet, encased in iron, almost too big for the broad stairs to support. The stone cracked. For a moment, it even looked like the whole stairway might collapse, but it did not.

Beside him, he heard Daecor.

‘This one is going to be a handful.’

An understatement, thought Cortez.

The beast turned and roared at its smaller kin. They were still firing in the direction of the Space Marines. When they heard the monster roar, they stopped.

To Cortez, the message couldn’t have been clearer. Like the ork in front of the Jadeberry Hill barricade, this one was laying down a personal challenge. Deciding to test his theory, he stepped slowly, carefully, out from behind the cover of the statue’s base.

A few stubber shells whined in his direction, and the massive ork roared again.

No other fire came his way.

‘What are you doing?’ hissed Daecor. ‘Have you lost your damned mind, brother?’

Maybe I have, thought Cortez, but it didn't change the course of his actions.

The ork monstrosity was at the bottom of the stairs now, and it turned to face him.

Cortez spoke to the others. 'This is between me and the beast. Do you hear? Just get yourselves up to the roof. Time is running out. Get to the damned control centres and do what needs doing.'

The others looked to Kantor for guidance, for a sign of confirmation. They knew what honour demanded, but surely not here, not now.

'You kill it, brother,' Kantor told Cortez. 'Do you understand? You kill it, and you catch up. That's an order.'

Cortez nodded once, eyes never moving from his new greenskin nemesis.

Kantor addressed the others. 'On the captain's signal,' he said, 'we break for the stair and the landing above.'

'My lord...' protested Sergeant Lician.

'By my command, brother-sergeant,' snapped Kantor. 'The captain wants this, and we need to break through.'

'Then get ready to move now,' said Cortez. 'Because I'm going to rip this one's head off!'

Whether Urzog Mag Kull understood the actual words or not, the beast recognised the aggression in Cortez's tone. It spun and splayed its arms, once again giving vent to a blood-chilling battle cry. Great gobs of spit flew from its mouth.

Cortez holstered his bolt pistol and drew his combat knife. He knew the blade wouldn't pierce the beast's bright yellow armour, but he had already identified several areas where the blade might slip in to pierce flesh or sever the suit's control cables.

Having issued its final challenge, the monster began sidestepping to the left, circling Cortez on the open floor at the base of the stair. It gnashed the

pincers of its power claw, and Cortez caught a glimmer of light. Not only was the thing crackling with an energy field, it looked like it might have been treated with synthetic diamond, much like the blade of his own knife. If so, those pincers would be able to cut through his ceramite armour like it was wet paper.

This should be interesting, Cortez told himself.

With a battle cry of his own, he charged forward, and the air rang with the clash of blades and armoured fists.

It was not easy to leave his old friend there, locked in combat with a beast twice his size, but Kantor knew he would receive no thanks for interfering. Individual combat was a sacred thing, a thing that had to be respected. It seemed even orks could agree on that. So, while blows rang out again and again in the air of the atrium, and sparks flashed from ork and Adeptus Astartes armour alike, Kantor made the best of the opening his friend's life-and-death struggle had bought him. He and the others dashed onto the stairs and up to the landing above.

Stubber-fire from the orks on the gallery chased them as they moved, and shells struck ceramite, but they were standard ork shells and didn't penetrate.

'Keep moving,' Kantor snapped as Squads Lician and Segala pounded up the marble steps behind him. Ferragamos Daecor ran at Kantor's side, the two Techmarines just behind him. Without his squadmates, all of which lay dead, he no longer held a command. Instead, he had taken Cortez's place as the Chapter Master's second, at least while Cortez was otherwise engaged.

Together, Kantor, Daecor, Anais, Ruzco, and the two five-man squads from Second Company reached the top of the landing and immediately sprinted to the right. At the end of the hall, there was a large archway and, beyond it, the slope of a ramp that would take them up to the floor above. A grunting mob of ork footsoldiers gave chase, surging out from cover and up the stairs behind the Adeptus Astartes. Squad Segala stopped, each

battle-brother dropping to one knee in a tight line, and returned fire, putting a number of well-placed rounds into the skulls of the fastest pursuers. Sergeant Segala barked out an order and the squad was up again, running to catch up with Kantor and the others.

Kantor had reached the ramp now, and was racing up it towards a rectangle of open sky. Seconds later, he and the others emerged into the open air, and found themselves standing on the vast Coronado Plate.

It was a flat disk, six hundred and forty metres in diameter, capable of berthing ships up to five hundred and fifty metres across. Like all of the landing plates at the New Rynn space port, it employed anti-gravitic suspension systems related to the grav-plates used on most space-faring vessels. Such powerful suspension allowed the plate to accept burdens of millions of tonnes without compromising the integrity of the structure below. And there was a lot of structure below. The Coronado Plate was three hundred metres tall and from its edge, the view of the surrounding lands was astounding. Kantor didn't have time to appreciate the view now, though. As he and his Adeptus Astartes emerged onto the plate, there were shouts and grunts from a dozen alien throats.

Kantor spun in the direction of the sound. To his left, in a rough line that circled around all the way behind him, he saw a score of bright red ork fighter-bombers. There were ork and gretchin ground-crews fitting fresh munitions to their under-wing pylons. In front of the ugly, blunt-nosed craft, he saw a knot of big greenskins orks in leather caps and coats, flight goggles dangling around their necks. The moment he locked eyes with them, they started forward, drawing large-bore pistols from holsters at their sides.

'Kill them!' Kantor shouted, and the air filled with the bark of bolters.

Lodric Lician spotted a trolley stacked high with bombs and missiles, and immediately ordered Brother Ramos to bring his plasma cannon to bear.

Kantor heard the roar of blazing plasma just before he blinked in the blinding flash of light. The ork munitions exploded with such force that they sent two of the fighter-bombers plummeting over the edge of the plate. Others burst into flames and, shortly after that, their exploding fuel tanks ripped them apart, showering the Space Marines with burning junk.

The ork pilots which had not yet been killed by Squad Segala turned to look at their beloved machines reduced to wrecks. Great rolls of black smoke swept across the plate. Orange fires danced and crackled. The gretchin scattered, desperately looking for any kind of cover at all, but there was nothing they could reach before the Space Marines cut them down. Daecor and the men of Squad Segala picked off the last of the ork pilots as they charged straight at the Adeptus Astartes with their pistols blazing.

The fight lasted only seconds.

‘Clear, lord,’ said Daecor.

Kantor scanned the landing plate. ‘Reload and follow me.’

He directed their attention to a tight cluster of three slim, black towers linked to the Coronado Plate by a covered bridge.

‘Both our objectives are in there,’ he told them.

Lights could be seen in the tower windows, shining out from rooms on a hundred floors that may or may not have been occupied by the greenskins. Kantor knew exactly where he and his men had to go. He hoped resistance would be minimal. Despite the extra magazines and charge-packs he and his assault force had brought with them, he knew their ammunition must be starting to run low. He checked a readout on his visor and saw that Dorn’s Arrow still had exactly four hundred and eighteen rounds left to fire before the belt feeds ran dry. After that, he would be down to his sword and power fist. Close-quarters would be the only option, and the orks were far more formidable at that range.

As he led his Fists towards the bridge that linked the Coronado Plate to the central towers, he tried not to worry about Cortez. The Fourth Company Captain hadn't joined them yet, but it had barely been two minutes. Kantor glanced back to check the access ramp. No. There was no sign of him. Either he was still locked in combat, or he had shrugged off the legend of his immortality at last.

By the Holy Throne, thought Kantor, do not let it be the latter.

Short of returning to the atrium and interfering in the fight, there was nothing he could do for his old friend. He needed the spaceport. He needed the Imperial fleet.

The air traffic control tower, he told himself. The defence grid. If you die, Alessio, I promise you, it will not be in vain.

As Kantor ran for the covered bridge at the edge of the landing plate, he looked up at the triple towers. The outer stonework of each was studded with gargoyles which held pulsating red lights, the kind of lights that all tall buildings employed to warn incoming air traffic of their presence. They pulsed in sequence, creating a kind of wave effect that travelled to the summit, then started from the bottom again.

Kantor's eyes followed the waves for a moment as he ran, and he found himself looking up at a sky filled with stars. Night had fallen fast, as it always did so near the equator. Here, three hundred metres above ground level, the air was clearer, less dominated by the haze of ork pollution and clouds of flies attracted by their open cesspits. The stars were sharp and bright.

And some of them were moving.

Kantor stopped and held out a hand.

'Wait,' he told the others. 'Look up.'

As they looked, some of the moving stars flashed brightly and disappeared. Others shot out hair-thin beams of white and blue light. Some seemed to travel in formation, others in random patterns.

‘I hope we’re winning,’ said Sergeant Daecor.

Kantor hoped so, too.

He began to lead them in a run again, and soon they reached the covered bridge.

Access to the central towers had to be fought for. No sooner had Kantor and his men reached its near edge than a stream of orks began pouring out of the doors on its far side. The bridge was narrow, only eight metres across. It forced the orks to bunch together, a fact that favoured the employment of Squad Lician’s heavy weapons once again. Brother Morai stepped forward onto the bridge, heavy bolter in hand, and began cutting the orks down six at a time with tight scything sprays of fire. Anything he missed was picked off by the brothers of Squad Segala, some of whom soon reported that they were down to their last full magazine.

Even as Morai continued to clear the way ahead, Kantor heard bestial shouts from behind him. The ork footsoldiers from the atrium began pouring up onto the surface of the landing plate via the access ramp he and his men had used. They charged, and the Crimson Fists found themselves assaulted from two sides with no cover to speak of.

For all the orks’ lack of accuracy, they managed to pepper the Adeptus Astartes armour with fat metal slugs simply by virtue of firing so many. Kantor felt his armour struck again and again, each impact sending brief sparks up around him. His armour had once been beautiful, etched, engraved and chased with gems and gold detailing like no other. Now, it was spattered with alien gore, and chipped and blackened in places by the impact of their bullets.

‘Daecor,’ shouted the Chapter Master. ‘You and I will cover the rear.’

Daecor spun and opened fire with his bolter, sending the lead ork stumbling to the ground, headless, a great red river spilling out from its neck. Kantor brought Dorn’s Arrow level with his shoulder and willed the weapon to fire, controlling it by neural command. The command flashed down through his nervous system, through the sockets in his flesh, along

the cables that made his body and armour one. Muzzle fire leapt out from the relic's twin barrels and a stream of brass casings began to pour to the ground. Kantor watched the ammunition counter on his visor fall, cursing as it reached three hundred and fifty rounds, then three hundred. Orks crumpled before him. Every time they rushed upwards from the access ramp, he angled his left fist towards them, and Dorn's Arrow, mounted on the back of it, cut them into lifeless, blood-sodden chunks.

More were still coming when he heard Sergeant Segala on the link.

'The bridge is clear, for now.'

'Segala,' said Kantor. 'Get your men across and secure the first room on the other side. Lician, have Brother Morai and Brother Ramos take position on either side of the bridge and cover Segala's men. Send Brothers Oro and Padilla to me. Do it now. Move.'

'As you command, lord,' said Lician. 'You heard him, brothers. Get moving!'

Brothers Morai and Ramos moved to the left and right respectively, and zeroed their heavy bolter and plasma cannon on the doors at the far end of the bridge. Ork bodies littered the smooth metal surface there. Slicks of blood reflected the light of the room beyond, its interior just visible through tinted armaplas windows.

Brothers Oro and Padilla, both wielding heavy multi-meltas, jogged up to Kantor's side. Oro, the taller and older of the two, said, 'You wish us to cover the rear, my lord?'

The orks, never particularly quick to learn, had finally grown cautious in their pursuit of the Crimson Fists. Rather than racing headlong from the ramp with guns blazing, they emerged slowly and carefully, poking their heads up first to find the opening surrounded by the fallen bodies of their xenos kin. Keeping to cover now, they fired their stubbers in short bursts before ducking back down. A triple-burst of shells rattled off Kantor's right pauldron as he addressed Oro and Padilla.

‘You will have to hold the plate alone, brothers,’ he said, ‘but the ramp is a bottleneck, a perfect chokepoint, well-suited to your weapons. How much power do your meltas have left?’

‘I have half a charge left on this module, my lord, and two spare,’ said Padilla.

‘And you?’ the Chapter Master said to Oro.

At his side, Sergeant Daecor’s boltgun barked. Another ork slumped dead at the top of the ramp.

‘Almost a full charge left on this one,’ said Oro, patting the power module currently fixed in place under the weapon’s thick metal frame. ‘I have no spares though.’

Kantor turned to Padilla and said, ‘Then you know what to do.’

Padilla nodded, unclipped one of the heavy modules from his belt, and handed it to Oro, who took it with a grunt of thanks.

‘With respect, my lord,’ said Oro, turning to face the Chapter Master again. ‘I can cover the ramp well enough alone. Take Brother Padilla with you.’ He thrust his chin in the direction of the winking towers on the other side of the bridge. ‘I have a feeling you will need all the firepower you can muster in there.’

Kantor hoped not, but, in fact, he had the same feeling. ‘Very well, but if they manage to break out of there, you fall back and rejoin us.’

Daecor’s bolter barked again. ‘With respect, my lord,’ said the sergeant, ‘the more time we spend here, the more time the orks in the tower have to prepare a defence. One multi-melta should indeed be enough.’

Kantor had already left Cortez to fight alone, and did not relish the idea of another of his brothers being left to do so now. There were so few left as it was. But both Oro and Daecor were right. He couldn’t spare two bodies here. Oro would hold the plate.

‘Padilla,’ he said, ‘you are with us. Brother Oro, may Dorn watch over you. If Captain Cortez survives his battle with the beast below, do not cook

him by mistake on his way up.'

Kantor had wanted to say *when*, not *if*, but, as the minutes went by, he could not deny his growing doubts. The only good sign so far was that the monstrous warboss, Mag Kull, had not yet emerged from the top of the ramp.

On the link, they heard the voice of Sergeant Segala. 'We have secured the lobby on the other side of the bridge. Access points are covered. Awaiting your orders, lord.'

Kantor saluted Brother Oro, fist to breastplate, received a sharp salute in return, and turned to lead Daecor and Padilla towards the bridge. 'Hold the room, sergeant,' he told Segala. 'Lician, start moving your men across now.'

'My lord,' said Lician.

Kantor half-turned and looked back at Oro. A group of orks waving large black cleavers tried to rush him from below. At the top of the ramp, Oro met them calmly, setting his feet shoulder-width apart and levelling the multi-melta at them. There was a crack and whoosh of ionised air as the weapon cooked the aliens' bodies, turning everything black, bone and muscle alike. The orks barely had time to scream. Their armour and weapons dropped to the ground, losing their shape, forming little heaps of hot slag. The stench of cooked flesh became strong on the air, then gusting winds tugged it away.

Kantor turned and kept moving. He had faith in all of his Adeptus Astartes. The training programmes and psycho-conditioning they had endured were second to none. Oro would hold the plate. He would hold it until Alessio emerged, bloody perhaps, but alive. He had to believe that. As his feet took him across the titanium-alloy plates of the bridge, he kept telling himself that Alessio would survive.

He was Cortez the Immortal.



EIGHT

The Central Towers, New Rynn Space port

The Chapter Master and what remained of his assault group finally gained access to the triple towers, within which their primary and secondary objectives waited. But there was bad news awaiting him, too.

Kantor had hoped that the towers would be of little real interest to the orks. There were no portable weapons inside, no vehicles to salvage or customise. In each of the rooms they carefully swept for threats, abundant signs of ork presence were everywhere. The air stank of ork filth, almost drowning out other smells. Excrement stained the walls and floors. Many corners were heaped with piles of dung, armies of flies buzzing noisily, greedily, around them. White bones protruded from the mess, some recognisably human, either the bones of people brought here as food, or those of the defending Rynnsguard troopers who had been overwhelmed early in the alien invasion.

That thought led him to another he liked even less.

Kantor considered the Crusade Company battle-brothers who had died here supporting the local militia.

Crusade Company.

His company.

Two squads, Phrenotas and Grylinus, had been charged with holding this place. What kind of fight had they put up? He had seen the signs of battle, the pockmarked walls, the telltale craters in cement and ferrocrete that told of bolter-rounds fired in anger. Even now, so many months after they had fallen, there were traces of their presence that he could not fail to see. But there were no Adeptus Astartes bodies. There was no sign of the Terminator armour with which the two Sternguard squads had been issued. Where had they fallen? Where had they made their final stand?

There were plenty of other bodies around. From the moment he had stepped onto the bridge that linked the core towers to the Coronado Plate, Kantor had been aware of the severed squig limbs and the twisted forms of murdered gretchin that littered the floor. These were not kills made by Rynnsguard soldiers or Astartes. This was the detritus of the orks. Gretchin, he knew, were often simply murdered on a whim by the larger orks. And the bulbous, brightly coloured squigs formed a major part of the greenskin diet far more often than they were used for tracking or waging war.

As he led his men closer towards the central elevators that would carry them up to the air traffic control tower, they passed rooms where machines had been ripped from the walls and their mechanical innards stripped as salvage. Silently, he prayed that the orks had not interfered with the spaceport's critical systems. He wondered, too, how Squad Victurix and the others were faring.

Up ahead of him, halfway down a narrow hall in which arc lights flickered from the ceiling, Sergeant Segala halted and raised a hand. On the link, the sergeant whispered, 'Occupied rooms on either side. The doors are closed, but I can hear greenskins inside them.'

Kantor considered their options. He could order his Adeptus Astartes to stack up outside the doors, then breach and clear, room by room. But the

sound of fighting from the first room they assaulted would almost certainly bring the others out.

Was Snagrod in one of these rooms?

It seemed unlikely the ork warlord was here. Unlike typical ork warlords, he had not shown his face, not taken his rightful place at the front line. During the eighteen months of the siege, numerous greenskin lieutenants had been identified and killed, though still more had survived to continue fighting, but Snagrod continued to broadcast his gloating messages in that foul orkish tongue. Kantor had started to suspect that the ork warlord had never even set foot on Rynn's World. Some orks, for whatever reason, felt an attachment to space and the type of combat they could enjoy there. Such orks were rare, freaks perhaps, but they existed. Was Snagrod up there with his fleet right now, engaging the Imperial ships that fought even now for the chance to land vital ground support at this very facility?

'Move quietly,' Kantor ordered. 'If we can avoid a firefight, we can get to the next elevator all the sooner. Sergeant Segala, continue on point.'

'Aye, lord,' said Segala, and the Fists began to move again, careful not to generate unnecessary noise.

It was no easy matter, Adeptus Astartes battleplate being what it was, and ork hearing was known to be acute, perhaps to compensate for their eyesight. But with great effort, Kantor and his Fists managed to pass from this hall into another without gaining unwanted attention.

The next hall ran perpendicular to the previous one. At its far end, Kantor saw broad wooden double-doors, one of which was partly smashed and lying at an angle against the wall. Beyond the double doors, there was a broad, well-lit chamber and, in the centre of that chamber, he saw the elevator he had been looking for.

'Keep moving,' he told the others. 'Straight ahead, as quietly as you can.'

Keeping quiet was hardest, of course, for the brothers of Squad Lician. Morai, Ramos and Padilla carried weaponry far heavier than anyone else. Though it did not slow them enough to be a problem, it did make their passage more difficult than that of their lighter-armed fellows.

The hall was filled with pieces of scrap and refuse, and each step had to be placed carefully. There were rooms off to either side of the hall and, as before, the sound of ork occupants could be heard through some of the doors. Kantor was grateful those doors did not boast windows.

As Brother Ramos, third from the rear, passed a waist-high jumble of twisted metal and wires, the power cabling of his plasma cannon got snagged. Before Ramos knew what was happening, there was a sudden clatter as the junk lurched with his next step, striking and dislodging other debris from a nearby heap.

Immediately, the other Fists brought their bolters to bear on the doors at either side. The ork voices within those rooms had gone quiet, as if the aliens were straining to hear further noise that might warrant the effort of investigation.

Kantor was right next to a door of slightly dented black metal. He heard clumsy footsteps on the other side of it, footsteps that sounded as if they were getting closer. He flexed the fingers of his power fist and activated its deadly energy field. Seconds later, the door was yanked hard. A massive xenos with a black eye-patch and earlobes pierced with lengths of bone stood staring out at him, its brain taking a moment to process the message sent by its one red eye.

That moment was enough for Kantor. He darted straight towards the creature and brought his power fist down in a blistering hammer blow. The energy field cracked sharply and blue arcs of light flashed. One moment, the beast had a head, the next, it was erased. Twitching, the corpse fell backwards. A pistol fell from its meaty right hand.

The moment the weapon struck the ground, a shot rang out. The fat bullet struck the ceiling. The sound of the shot seemed deafening in the silence.

‘Dorn’s blood!’ cursed Kantor.

All along the hall, doors were flung open, disgorging greenskin warriors that roared as they came. They clashed with Squad Segala first, attacking with furious force, bringing their huge axes and cleavers down again and again. Segala and his men were far faster, far better trained, and they parried or slipped the orks’ blows again and again, driving the xenos to fight even harder, fuelled by anger and frustration.

‘Lician,’ barked Kantor, ‘cover the rear. Daecor, you and I move up in support. Anais, Ruzco, stay by me.’

The Techmarines, of course, were by no means helpless. They wielded massive power axes that could cleave an ork in two. Anything that came within range of them would die, but Kantor wanted them close so he could personally protect them. He had already decided to give his life if it would buy their survival in place of his own. One way or another, they had to reach the two control centres.

Sergeant Daecor was already moving, bolt pistol high, firing in tight controlled bursts wherever his eyes found a viable target.

Kantor surged forward to join the battle and found himself next to one of Segala’s men, Brother Bacar, who faced an ork easily twice his weight. The beast had an iron grip on both Bacar’s wrists and was yanking him forwards, trying to draw him into a crushing bear-hug from which he could bite at the Space Marine’s less-protected throat.

Kantor’s hand flashed out, power fist connecting solidly with another sharp crack of energy. The far wall was sprayed red. Brother Bacar twisted out of the dead ork’s grip and kicked its body to the ground. ‘My thanks, lord,’ he gasped.

‘Do better,’ said Kantor.

He saw Segala surrounded by three orks wielding a mixture of hammers and axes. Another closed in hefting a huge spiked mace. ‘Damn it,’ cursed Kantor as he ran, already knowing he would arrive too late.

Segala was fighting hard, flowing from defence to counter-attack with all the speed and power one could rightly expect of a veteran Adeptus Astartes. But, in the close confines of the hall, and with others fighting so close behind him, he did not have the space he needed. Kantor saw the sergeant was trying to use each ork’s mass against the others, trying to angle himself so that he need only face them one at a time, but it was too late. He was surrounded. Even as Kantor lifted Dorn’s Arrow to fire in support, he heard the ork with the mace grunt something. The orks on Segala’s left and right dropped their weapons and grabbed Segala’s arms tight. The sergeant was extremely strong – all Adeptus Astartes were – but an ork was stronger, and the strength of two was impossible to resist. They bound his arms and held him in place while the mace-wielding ork hauled his weapon into the air.

Kantor fired, and a stutter of storm bolter rounds took the left-side ork in the head, killing it instantly. But its headless body maintained its grip, its powerful hands obeying the last message from its tiny simple brain.

The mace crashed down on Segala’s head with helmet-splintering force. A great splash of blood painted the sergeant’s breastplate and pauldrons.

Kantor roared with rage and fired again, taking the right-side ork in the shoulder and back, but the ork with the mace had already raised its weapon for another swing. Even as the orks on either side of the sergeant finally toppled, the spiked head of the mace made contact again, battering what was left of the helmet down to the gorget. Segala’s legs buckled and he fell to the floor, very definitely dead.

Kantor strode forward with Dorn’s Arrow blazing, shells ripping into the ork warrior’s body in a hate-filled fusillade. The mace dropped with a

heavy clang, and the broad, muscular body danced on the spot for a moment as the rounds detonating inside it ripped it apart.

Kantor growled and spun to find a new target. He was spoiled for choice. Fires of hate and anger burning within him, he waded into the melee, drawing his blade from the sheath at the base of his spine. ‘Tear them apart, my brothers,’ he yelled. ‘Blood for blood. Vengeance for the fallen. Let none survive.’

He let his emotions run through him unchecked now, drawing from them, allowing them to take control. He moved too fast, too surely, for conscious thought to play any role. His movements were the purest expression of all his training, his way of life, of all the enhancements and procedures he had endured. Here was three hundred and fifty years of martial mastery unleashed on those who had almost taken everything from him, those he now hated most in all the galaxy.

He killed without hesitation, twin hearts pumping, muscles moving in absolute unity. Anyone who had seen him then would have realised something important about him. They would have realised that Pedro Kantor was not Chapter Master by virtue of his intelligence and demeanour alone. He was one of the finest warriors the Chapter had known in ten thousand years.

Alessio Cortez would have been proud of him, but not surprised.

He had always known it to be so.

Squad Segala now became Squad Daecor. Kantor had little choice but to place Feraggamos Daecor in command. Segala’s squad-brothers accepted it. The mission was all that mattered right now. Though their hearts were torn in two at the loss of their sergeant, they would mourn him later, if they did not join him in death.

Despite their losses, what was left of the assault force managed to overcome the orks in the hall. By the time they reached the air traffic control centre, they numbered only nine, and one of those was the Chapter

Master. Sergeant Segala had fallen in the hallway. So, too, had Brothers Gaban, Ramos and Morai, their heavy weapons impairing their combat skills in the maelstrom of close-quarters combat. Brother Oro remained on the Coronado Plate, or so Kantor hoped. He could not raise Oro on the link.

And Cortez?

Well, Alessio had always said he would meet his match one day. Kantor was trying not to think about it, but the possibility that the same creature had now killed both Drigo Alvez *and* Alessio Cortez was like a fire in him. He had to fight himself not to turn back and track the murderous beast down while there was still far more critical work to do.

The air traffic control centre dominated an entire floor of the northmost of the three narrow spires. It was a wide circular room with long curving windows that ran along its entire circumference. There had been orks in the room when the elevator arrived, twenty-three in all, but it seemed they had not been expecting any kind of attack, or at least had not prepared for it. Perhaps they were too busy to pay attention to any kind of alarm or warning the others had raised.

When the elevator doors slid open, Kantor had seen them seated in high-backed chairs, massive shoulders hunched forward, each wearing a set of headphones linked by coiled cables to the machinery of their consoles. They jabbered into microphones in that harsh, guttural tongue of theirs, barely a language at all. There were gretchin, too, dashing back and forth with various tools and inscrutable gadgets. They saw the Adeptus Astartes first, and froze for a second, fear rooting them to the floor.

Kantor ordered his men to open fire, and the control centre became a bloodbath. The orks with the headphones barely had time to turn around in their chairs before Daecor and his men fired, punching wet red holes in each misshapen head.

The bodies slumped in their chairs. Some slid forward to collapse heavily on the floor.

‘Clear,’ said Daecor. Black smoke coiled upwards from the muzzle of his bolter.

Kantor crossed to the windows facing north, all smashed. The wind howled and pulled at him as if trying to drag him out into a deadly freefall. He looked down at the Coronado Plate about three hundred metres below. It was pitch-dark outside. He cycled the vision modes of his helmet. Visor-based infrared was unreliable at this range. He settled on low-light enhancement. He could make out the ruins of the ork fighter-bombers down there. The fires had burned themselves out now. Panning his vision a little to the right of them, he saw the access ramp which led to the atrium. He saw greenskin bodies lying in heaps.

There was no sign of Brother Oro.

Kantor knew what that meant. The Devastator would not have left his post.

Alessio must be dead, too.

He felt something inside him come dangerously close to breaking, something important, something that had to hold for just a little longer. Alessio’s memory would not be served by succumbing to it now. The survival of the Chapter had to be assured. There was still a chance, a slim chance, that a future remained, a future in which the Imperium could still call on the Crimson Fists as it had done so often in the past.

He looked further north, beyond the Coronado Plate, and saw the flash and flicker of artillery-fire far off beneath the horizon. There were bright pulses of green and purple energy, too. He strained his ears and thought he could just faintly detect the sounds of the battle for the citadel, but he was not sure. Sixty kilometres was a long way for those sounds to travel, and the wind howling through the shattered windows did not make it any easier for him.

How close were the Gargants to the walls? The oddly-coloured flashes of light he had glimpsed suggested they had already started to employ the great clusters of energy weapons that bristled in place of their arms. The last few districts around the citadel had almost certainly fallen by now. Kantor had left orders for them to be evacuated by all but the defenders, but there were millions of civilians to be moved, and the Silver Citadel could barely contain them all.

It was impossible to predict how long the citadel's void shields would last. That all depended on the force the orks brought to bear. Kantor had seen Gargants in action before. He had even helped to bring two down, each of those more than a century apart, by leading boarding parties that managed to destroy critical elements in their power cores. Such boarding actions hadn't been feasible this time. When it came right down to it, securing the spaceport and hoping that the reinforcements were enough was the only chance they had, and it was pathetically slim, depending in large part on factors beyond his control.

Perhaps, he thought, but the things I *can* control, I *will*.

He looked down at the console in front of him. Clearly, the orks had recognised the value of not tampering with what they had here. Some of the equipment looked as if it had been taken apart, perhaps to see what made it work, but most of it looked unaltered, if not a little filthier than it normally would have.

Brothers Anais and Ruzco didn't wait for any commands. They immediately lay down their weapons and began a critical systems assessment.

Kantor let them work without interruption. A moment later, Ruzco came to his side, lifted a black cable with a golden jack at its end, and asked if he might plug it into the Chapter Master's gorget. There was an uplink socket concealed there. Kantor conceded at once, and Ruzco pressed the golden jack home with a click. Immediately, Kantor heard static inside his

helmet. Ruzco turned a dial on the console in front of him, and began cycling through channels. There was nothing at first, and Kantor began to suspect the comms array on top of the tower had been damaged after all. But, if so, then why had the orks been sitting jabbering into their microphones?

Then he heard it, a snuffling, grunting transmission in the ork tongue. He recognised the voice. He had heard it many times since *The Crusader* had returned from Badlanding with news of Ashor Drakken's death. It was the Arch Arsonist, Snagrod, broadcasting his boasts and taunts, as always. As Kantor listened, the message ended, then began again. It was being played on a loop. The moronic warlord continued to broadcast in the orkish language, despite his messages being clearly meant for the ears of the loyalist forces. It would almost have been funny had the alien fiend not been personally responsible for the sickening pain, torture and deaths of so many.

Ruzco continued adjusting the dials comms station. He was in the higher frequency range now, and Kantor was close to losing hope, when he finally heard a human voice, or rather, the voice of a being that had once been human, that may still have been partly human.

It was the voice of a comms-servitor on one of the Imperial ships fighting above the planet. Kantor lifted a hand to halt Ruzco's adjustments, and listened, but the stream of words from the servitor was intended for the ears of other servitors. It was a constant babble of systems status reports and energy readings. He waved Ruzco on, and the Techmarine turned the dial to the right a little more. Finally, they found what they were looking for.

'I want all portside batteries on that ship,' said a cultured voice in High Gothic. 'And prime the lance batteries for when we come around. We shall want to lend assistance to the *Manzarion* and the *Virago* as soon as we're clear of their fighters. See it done!'

Kantor waited until there was a pause, then he cut in, saying, 'In the name of the Emperor, identify yourself.'

The well-spoken man spluttered. 'What the bloody hell are you doing on this frequency? Do you know the punishment for interfering with Imperial Naval communications? Who is this?'

'Standby,' said Kantor, 'broadcasting identicode now.'

There was a runeboard on the console in front of Ruzco. The Techmarine's fingers beat a rapid tattoo on the runes.

The response was immediate.

'That's... that's an Adeptus Astartes code!' stammered the Imperial commander.

'It is,' said Kantor. 'This is Pedro Kantor, Lord Hellblade, Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists Space Marines. Now identify yourself at once.'

The naval commander paused to steel himself, then said, 'My name is Arvol Dahan, Lord Commander of the Imperial Naval destroyer *Adaemus*. Forgive me, my lord, for—'

'There is nothing to forgive, commander,' said Kantor. 'But you will assist me in contacting Lord Admiral Galtair.'

'At... at once, my lord. Galtair maintains an open channel at all times, monitored by his senior commsman. Let me give you the frequency...'

Ruzco turned the dial as soon as he had the numbers. Kantor waited for him to finish, then identified himself to the commsman on the other end, adding, 'I must speak with Lord Admiral Galtair at once.'

There was the briefest pause, during which Kantor assumed his message was being relayed to the lord admiral. Seconds later, a gruff voice said, 'This is Galtair. I'm glad someone is still alive down there. Even gladder that it's you, my lord. What's your status? I can't help you worth a damn without a secure air corridor and landing zone.'

‘I am working on that, lord admiral,’ said Kantor. ‘But time is running out. The Gargants are assaulting the citadel. The void shields will hold for a while, but no one can be sure how long.’

‘Gargants,’ echoed the lord admiral. ‘We’d best get the Martian priests and their machines down to you in the first wave. I’ve got Adeptus Astartes here who are most eager to demonstrate their skills, too. I see by the header on your transmission that you’re broadcasting from inside New Rynn space port. May I assume that the facility is now firmly back under Imperial control?’

‘We have air traffic control and comms now. The spaceport defence grid is next. I’m leaving three of my Adeptus Astartes here to hold communications open and keep this place secure. Your contact is Brother Ruzco. Keep him apprised of any changes. He will relay critical updates to me directly.’

‘Very well, lord,’ said Galtair. ‘May the Emperor watch over you and keep you safe.’

‘And you,’ said Kantor brusquely. ‘We shall speak again soon.’

He plucked the golden jack from the socket in his gorget and handed it to Ruzco. Turning from the shattered windows, he marched towards the elevator. His fellow Crimson Fists eyed him anxiously, curious to know what was going on.

‘Two of you will stay with Brother Ruzco and hold this room at all costs,’ he told them. ‘Nothing, absolutely nothing, must be allowed to compromise our communications with the Imperial fleet.’

‘Are you asking for volunteers, my lord?’ said Daecor.

‘No,’ said Kantor. ‘I’m not.’ His finger stabbed towards two brothers, one of which, Brother Lucevo of Squad Segala, had been wounded in the hallway battle, his side bitten by an ork axe. The other was the Brother Padilla of Squad Lician.

‘Lucevo, Padilla,’ said Kantor, ‘make oaths to me now that you will defend this place, though your very lives may be forfeit. Swear it on your left hands and on the blood of the primarch.’

Immediately, both men dropped to their right knee and clenched their left fists over their breastplates. Lucevo sucked in a hissing breath as his wound sang.

‘For the honour of the Crimson Fists, the primarch and the Golden Throne,’ they said together.

Kantor asked Ruzco if he needed anything else, and was told that he didn’t. He then ordered the others – Anais, Daecor, Lician, Verna and Bacar – into the elevator in which they had arrived. He entered last and closed the metal gate. Lucevo and Padilla watched the Chapter Master and the others descend out of sight.

As the elevator lowered them, Kantor told his Adeptus Astartes, ‘The air defence control room is in the tower east of this one. There is a walkway linking the towers on the forty-eighth floor. We cross that gantry, take another elevator sixteen floors up, and secure that room. After that... well, all else is in the Emperor’s hands.’

‘We should destroy this elevator once we get off,’ said Daecor. ‘We should cut the cables.’

Lodric Lician turned to look at him. ‘We have three battle-brothers up there. You think we should trap them? Trust me. Brother Padilla will not let the orks retake that room.’

‘It is not a question of trust,’ said Daecor.

Orange lights flashed past them, marking the rapid progress of their descent.

‘It is a matter of practicality,’ Daecor continued. ‘Once the reinforcements arrive, there will be time to extract Ruzco, Padilla and Lucevo. But for now, all of us are best served by cutting off the orks’ only route into that room. Yes?’

Lician grunted in disapproval, but he could not argue against Daecor's logic.

'We cut the cables,' said Kantor, ending further debate. 'Our brothers will be safer, and so will our ability to communicate with the fleet.'

He looked at numbers changing on the elevator's small green data-screen, and added, 'Check your ammunition, all of you. Bless your weapons. This ride is almost over.'

They emerged into the same large circular chamber where they had gotten on the elevator for the journey up. Kantor stepped out first, cautiously, quietly. His eyes passed over the dim hallway in which Segala had fallen. He could just make out the edge of a dark blue pauldron among the xenos corpses, could just see the uppermost red knuckles of the icon of his Chapter.

Then pain exploded in his arm and the world flipped over. He found himself flying through the air and landed hard, sliding to a stop against a pillar of white stone decorated with fine gold-leaf filigree.

The chamber filled with the most deafening inhuman roar, so loud it shook dead leaves from the plants and trees that had once decorated the place, but now only testified further to its state of ruin and decay.

Kantor looked up and something hard and heavy hit him directly in the face, ringing against his helmet. It fell into his lap, and he looked down.

He knew this thing, ancient and so familiar.

It was polished red, chased with gold, inlaid with the finest gems and black pearls.

Skulls decorated its knuckles. The crest on the back was a single fist formed from rubies set between feathered wings of shining gold. Beneath it, a laurel wreath encircled a grinning skull, the brow of which was decorated with the two-headed eagle, the aquila of the Imperium of Man.

It was Alessio Cortez's personal crest, and this was his power fist.

Cortez's severed arm was still inside it, edges raw and bloody, white bone poking up through the meat, the cut almost surgically clean.

Kantor was frozen for a moment, reeling, desperately trying to rally himself, to steer his mind away from what this meant.

He looked up and saw the massive yellow-armoured warboss, Urzog Mag Kull, roaring at him in triumph, its left side absolutely drenched in blood. He saw that one of its eyes had been gouged out. A great flap of green flesh hung from its head, showing the bright bone beneath. Sparks flashed and spat from ruptured power-cables in its right leg. Cortez had punished the beast before he had succumbed to its superior strength. It roared again, raised its twin-linked heavy stubbers, pointed the barrels at Kantor and fired.

There was a loud click and the whine of cycling ammo-feeds, but no armour-piercing rounds leapt out, no deadly hail. Kantor glanced at the weapon and saw that its barrels were badly crushed and mangled. Somehow, during the fight, Cortez had put the weapon out of commission. Had he not, Pedro Kantor might have been torn apart right then.

'Xenos filth!' spat the Chapter Master, pushing his old friend's arm from his lap and rising to his feet. 'You will *pay*!'

He broke into a run, racing directly for the towering two-tonne creature, peppering its armoured bulk with torrents of fire from his storm bolter as he moved. In just over a second, he crossed the gap, and found himself mere metres from it, scowling up into that terrible fang-toothed face, power fist crackling with electrical arcs, diamond-edged combat blade held ready in his left hand.

'Let's have you, wretch!' he hissed, drawing a last howl of threat from the beast before it lunged straight at him with its blood-splashed power claw.

Despite the creature's speed, the blow was telegraphed, the ork taking a fraction of a second to shift its weight forward into the lunge. It was

enough. Kantor slid aside just as the claw slashed towards his abdominal plates. He struck at the extended arm with his power fist. Had he connected properly, he might well have sheared straight through the arm, but the ork was blisteringly fast. It did not leave its arm extended long after the blow, but recoiled it as quickly as a striking snake recoils its head.

Kantor's fist passed through thin air, putting him ever so slightly off-balance for an instant. That was when the ork whipped its battered twin stubbers at him. There was no evading the blow. Instead, Kantor raised his left arm, couched his head against his inner forearm, and tried to absorb the impact.

The force was stunning, slamming into him and hurling him from his feet despite his best efforts to resist. He landed hard on his right side and slid six metres across the floor.

He cursed as he pushed himself up and tried to shake off a momentary dizziness.

He saw Sergeant Daecor, Brother Verna and Brother Bacar try to surround the beast, Daecor taunting it from the front while the other two each took a flank. It looked like it was working. The monster hurled itself at Daecor, its massive claw hammering into the marble flooring as the sergeant leapt backwards. Verna and Bacar moved the instant the blow missed their new squad leader. Verna thrust his combat blade into the workings of the left leg and yanked back hard, ripping cables from their housings and spraying himself with oil and hydraulic fluids. Bacar tried to lever his knife up underneath the monster's armpit where mobility demanded there be a gap in its armour.

The monster's remaining eye was its right one, and it saw Bacar move in its peripheral vision. In a flash, it spun on him, striking his helmeted head with the battered barrels of its twin stubbers. With Bacar momentarily stunned, hands thrown out to stop himself from toppling, the creature

torqued the left side of its body and hacked him into three with a great diagonal slash of its power claw.

Bacar's body, power armour and all, slid into three parts. His head and left arm flopped to the floor. Great gouts of blood geysered upwards from his open torso.

That was when brothers Lician and Anais tried to enter the fray.

'No!' bellowed Kantor. 'Brother Anais, get back in the elevator. Lician, defend him with your life. We cannot lose him!' The Chapter Master raced towards the beast that had just killed another of his beloved Crimson Fists.

How many more did he have to lose before Urzog Mag Kull would die?

Daecor had Mag Kull's left flank now, but, as he lunged, the beast turned and clipped his breastplate with a savage backhand blow. The upwards angle of the blow sent the sergeant metres into the air. He crashed down on his back, bolter skittering away from him.

Verna, finding himself behind the beast, threw himself at the back of its piston-powered knees and tried to take it to the floor, but it was hopeless. Even in full Adeptus Astartes plate, he weighed a fraction of what Mag Kull did.

He managed to confuse the creature for a second, allowing Kantor to launch himself into the air, power fisted right hand held high for a deadly downwards blow.

For a moment, the Chapter Master literally flew, all his prodigious power and strength, all his athletic ability, invested into the attack.

Mag Kull managed to kick Verna away, shattering the armour of the Crimson Fist's left arm in the process and breaking the bone beneath. It turned in time to see Kantor's attack, but not quickly enough to avoid it. Instead, it could only try to minimise the damage from the blistering overhand strike.

It rolled its massive metal shoulder in front of its face at the last instant. There was a massive crack, like sharp thunder, as Kantor's fist struck the

beast's armoured plate, shearing straight through the metal and pulverising the dense bone and muscle beneath. The force of the impact launched the beast backwards and sent Kantor crashing to the ground.

The ork raged. The sparks from its malfunctioning legs ignited the oil leaking from its cables, and fire engulfed its lower body. But it was not finished with the Crimson Fists. Its right arm, the one bearing the useless heavy stubber, now hung from its shoulder by little more than a thin bundle of nerves and sinew. It slapped uselessly against the burning monster's side as it struggled forwards in Kantor's direction. Irritated, the beast raised its huge power claw across its body and, with one motion, snipped the useless arm away completely.

The severed arm fell to the ground with a clatter of metal.

Verna lay groaning, fighting to rally himself. Daecor, too, was struggling to get to his feet. Kantor rose, his whole body aching, damned if he was going to let the monster get the better of him. But the creature was unnaturally tough, tougher than any Adeptus Astartes. It was not just the armour, it was the nature of the ork race. Pain hardly slowed them, fear rarely stopped them in their tracks, they were addicted to war, addicted to slaughter, and they would never stop coming.

On burning metal legs, the creature staggered towards him, gnashing the blades of its only remaining weapon, its deadly power claw, as if they were a second set of jaws.

Kantor loosed a burst of bolt rounds at it, aiming for the beast's head, but the massive metal gorget of long tusk-like spikes protected the creature's face. The bolts detonated on the armour without penetrating, though they certainly angered the beast.

Four metres away from him now, it raised its massive claw into the air, and he readied to try to block or slip the blow. His entire awareness was focussed on that gleaming razor-edged weapon, as if it were the only thing

in the universe right now. So, at first, he did not understand what happened next. Though his eyes saw it all, he was not sure he could believe it.

A harsh voice barked out, 'We are not finished, xenos!'

An armoured figure leapt up from behind, throwing itself on the creature's back, gripping with only its blue, ceramite-plated legs. The figure's left hand, its only hand, raised a small metal object.

The monster tried to turn to face its new attacker, but, no matter how it tried to twist and turn, the blue figure was always behind it, holding fast to its back by leg power alone.

The beast bellowed in frustration and, the moment its mouth was open as wide as it could surely go, the attacker leaned forward and placed the metal object deep inside the creature's mouth.

On reflex, the ork swallowed, confused, not realising what had just happened.

It thrashed again and, finally, the blue figure released its grip and was flung backwards, crashing to the ground and skidding away.

The monster turned to pursue, but it only managed two steps. It was about to take a third then the krak grenade detonated inside it. Where its head had poked out of its armoured shell, a fountain of blood and shattered bone erupted. For a second, the armour stayed upright, apparently undamaged by the explosion in the creature's body. Then, slowly, like a falling ebonwood tree, it tumbled forwards and smashed to the floor.

Kantor realised he was breathing hard and consciously tried to relax his body. He was still not entirely sure what had just happened. Then he heard dry laughter somewhere off to his right. A figure in battered Crimson Fist armour sat up, still chuckling, covered in blood, beaten almost beyond recognition.

Almost, but not quite.

'Alessio,' breathed Kantor, numb with relief. 'Alessio.'

It was Cortez, though he was in a worse state of repair than Kantor could remember seeing him for at least a century.

‘You’re alive! By Dorn, you’re alive!’

‘I’ve a legend to live up to,’ said Cortez. He coughed, and his face betrayed a hint of his pain. ‘Damn, but that bastard was tough.’

Kantor crossed the floor to help his friend rise. Lician and Anais had emerged to help Daecor and Verna to their feet.

Reaching down and offering his hand to Cortez, the Chapter Master grimaced, noting the blood-crusted stump which was all that remained of his friend’s right arm. Cortez reached up with his left, gripped Kantor’s hand, and hauled himself to his feet. Throughout the movement, Kantor could see just how badly injured his old friend was. He grunted in pain as he moved, and his speed was gone.

‘What’s next?’ said Cortez once he was on his feet. He turned his head to look across at the others.

‘Nothing for you,’ said Kantor. ‘You’ll rest until we can get an Apothecary here.’

‘Not likely,’ protested Cortez. ‘I’m still in this. I’m fine.’

‘No,’ Kantor boomed. ‘You lost an arm, Alessio. By the mercy of the Emperor alone, you’re lucky you didn’t lose your life.’

Cortez gestured over Kantor’s shoulder. ‘I haven’t lost an arm, brother. It’s right over there.’

It was. His severed arm, still wearing the glorious power fist that bore his personal arms, was exactly where Kantor had left it, close to the pillar against which the creature had thrown him.

Kantor shook his head, bewildered that his friend could consider this a time for levity.

Daecor, Verna and the others stopped beside them. ‘Your legend grows, Fourth captain,’ said Daecor with a salute.

Cortez kept glaring at Kantor, but the Chapter Master turned to the others and said, 'Daecor, Lician, Anais... we proceed to the air defence control centre. Brother-Captain Cortez and Brother Verna will take the elevator up to the air traffic control room and wait with Lucevo, Padilla and Ruzco.'

'With respect, lord,' said Cortez angrily, 'I told you I can still fight.'

Kantor shook his head. 'Three brothers are holding the air traffic control room alone. It is critical to our success that it remains held. I am giving you an order, and you will obey it.'

I have granted you far too many liberties already, Alessio, Kantor thought, and the last was nearly the end of you. It is enough for today.

Cortez's body language managed to convey his deep dissatisfaction and resentment without the need for words, but he did as commanded. He turned and led the limping Verna to the elevator.

'I thought we were going to cut the cables,' said Daecor to the Chapter Master.

'It is just as well we did not,' replied Kantor. 'Neither of them are in any shape to fight now.'

'Incredible,' murmured Daecor. 'Incredible that Cortez survived at all.'

Just as Cortez was about to close the elevator gate behind him, Kantor shouted after him. 'What of Brother Oro? Did you see him?'

The doors had begun to close, but Cortez thrust out his hand and stopped them. He leaned out of the elevator and said, 'He came back into the atrium and tried to aid me in my fight. I told him not to interfere, but he wouldn't listen.' He paused, then added, 'For what it's worth, he died bravely.'

Silence reigned for a moment.

Cortez let the door of the elevator slide shut. Seconds later, the winches whined and it began to ascend.

‘Gather up your weapons,’ said Kantor. He looked at the remains of Bacar, nothing more than three grisly parts clustered together on the floor to his right. ‘Take his ammunition. We may need it.’

Saying this, he turned and began walking towards a grand archway on the chamber’s south-eastern side. ‘Hurry,’ he told the Fists following behind him. ‘The Gargants may even now have broken through.’



NINE

Air Defence Tower, New Rynn Space port

Nothing else they encountered was quite as deadly as the ork boss Cortez had finally killed. Though Kantor moved with so few of his battle-brothers in support, they moved fast, killing the orks they came across with cold, ruthless efficiency. Inside, the south-east tower was much like the one they had just come from. Once they had crossed the connecting walkway, and had navigated their way through a series of filthy rooms and ruined hallways, they found themselves in a large chamber dominated by a central elevator shaft. The only difference between this chamber and the other seemed to be the absence of dead foliage here.

The air defence control centre was close to the very top of the tower, almost a full kilometre above ground level. Like the air traffic control room, it was occupied by orks and gretchin. Like those in the air traffic control room, they were unprepared for a sudden and decisive assault. Moments after they emerged from the elevator, Kantor and his makeshift squad found themselves pulling ruined bodies from the tops of the consoles.

The layout of the room was similar to that of the air traffic control centre, though fewer of the windows were smashed. Despite the season, it was cold up here. Night leached the heat away. Kantor ignored the

temperature. Inside his power armour, it was well-regulated, almost constant. Some of the gretchin bodies on the floor wore raumas-wool coats and hats, spoils taken from the bodies of the Rynnite dead which must once have littered this place just as the gretchin themselves did now. Their larger ork brethren wore no such items. Their great swollen musculatures made the wearing of human clothes impossible.

Once the consoles were free of dead aliens, Brother Anais began his systems checks. Moments later, he crossed to the Chapter Master's side. 'The news is good, lord. They seem to have done little in the way of irreparable damage.'

'How long until we have full control over the surface-to-orbit batteries?'

Anais tapped runes in front of him. Figures spooled across a green screen. 'A number of weapons are out of commission. We shall need time to bring them back online. We can begin firing the others within the hour, perhaps even less.'

'And the suborbital anti-air batteries?' Kantor asked.

'Much the same, lord,' said Anais. 'Some appear to have been dismantled. Power readouts are favourable, however. The orks did not dismantle or disconnect the on-site plasma generators.'

'Get these systems up and running as soon as you can,' said Kantor. 'Then open a link to our brothers in the air traffic control centre. I want you to coordinate everything with them. The moment we are ready, I want a message sent to Lord Admiral Galtair. The sooner he starts ferrying support down to us, the better. And tell Ruzco to keep trying to raise our forces at the citadel. We need information. Those void shields had better be holding.'

Kantor had barely drawn breath after finishing his sentence when there was a deep rumble from outside, getting louder. It was the unmistakable sound of high-power turbines and they were very close.

Kantor just had time to shout ‘Down!’ at the others before something strafed the windows of the defence control centre, blasting in those that were not already shattered. Shells ripped into the room, not stubber shells, but something far heavier. Autocannon rounds. The orks must have salvaged the guns from a looted Chimera or Hydra.

Broken glass blasted inwards. Consoles and cogitator banks against the far wall disintegrated. Anais, Daecor and Lician had thrown themselves to the floor the moment Kantor had warned them, and it had saved their lives. But Kantor himself was right in the line of fire. The heavy armour-piercing shells battered at him, rattling off him, sparks showering outwards with every impact, but they did no damage.

He’d had only a fraction of a second to activate the power field device embedded in the golden halo that jutted up from the top of his back-mounted generator, but that fraction of a second had been enough. All it took was a single neural command, a thought, and the so-called iron halo, actually made of adamantium and coated with gold, shielded him in its powerful energy field, turning aside the lethal hail of shells.

The device was a last resort, but he’d had no choice. Activating the device was a huge energy drain, and the power levels of his armour dropped dramatically while it protected him. The temperature inside his suit went up. Alarm runes glowed red in his visor, but it saved his life. It was the first time he’d allowed himself to rely on the halo in half a century.

The hail of shells stopped, and Kantor flicked off the energy shield with a thought. The warning runes blinked off. Internal temperature evened out. He looked beyond the edge of the jagged window frames.

Hovering drunkenly in the air outside the defence control room, swaying back and forth on roaring jets of blue flame, an ungainly ork gunship faced him down. He saw two goggled ork pilots laughing uproariously, their hideous faces lit from below by the glowing instruments of their cockpit.

They stopped laughing when they saw Kantor standing there unharmed, glaring back at them, radiating raw hate and anger.

The Chapter Master expected them to open fire again, but instead the pilots turned the gunship ninety degrees and presented its left side.

There, standing in an open bay-door in the middle of the craft, was a massive figure with red eyes. It glared back at Kantor, and something indefinable passed between them.

Kantor knew instinctively it was Snagrod. He had never seen a larger ork. The warlord emanated an aura of incredible physical power. No wonder he had united so many disparate ork tribes under his banner. Dominance was hard-coded into his genes.

The beast roared, throwing its huge jaws wide, and pointed down towards the landing plate two hundred metres below: the Nolfear Plate.

Kantor understood. This was between the two of them, leader against leader.

He nodded, and the warlord bellowed something to the pilots.

The gunship swung away. Snagrod and Kantor kept their eyes locked to each other until the gunship moved out of sight.

Kantor turned to the others.

‘Anais,’ he said. ‘Did we lose any critical systems?’

The Techmarine was already checking. After a moment, he said, ‘Nothing critical, my lord. I can still get ninety-seven per cent of the remaining defensive systems back online.’

‘Do it,’ said Kantor, and he strode towards the elevator. ‘The moment we have the defence grid back, coordinate with Ruzco and the fleet. Start bringing the reinforcements down. Dorn only knows how the citadel is faring.’

He stepped into the elevator cage.

‘My lord,’ said Daecor, moving to join him. ‘You can’t mean to go alone.’

‘Agreed,’ said Lician. ‘Take us with you.’

In the cage, Kantor turned and faced the two sergeants.

‘This is my fight,’ he said. ‘Should it be my last, you will follow the instructions I left with the Chosen back at the Cassar.’

He closed the elevator gate and pressed the rune to descend. Daecor and Lician watched him go, reluctant, but knowing they could do nothing to stop him.



TEN

Atop the Nolfeas Terminal, New Rynn Space port

There were few ork flying machines on the Nolfeas Plate, and those there were, sitting silently a few dozen metres from the plate's edge, looked to be in bad shape. Their sides were pocked with holes, their diameter consistent with the damage Hydra rounds inflicted. These craft had been struck by the guns of the Imperial defenders, and had limped back here for repairs. A few gretchin hovered around them, but, when they saw Kantor crossing a covered walkway and stepping onto the edge of the plate, they panicked and disappeared down a small service ramp, screeching and chittering in their crude alien tongue.

Above the plate, the sky was lightening, turning from darkest, star-speckled blue to pale rose. With this colour shift, Kantor could no longer see the tiny lights that told of the battle in space. He prayed to Dorn that Lord Admiral Galtaire was as good in combat as his service record attested.

He did not like it that so much of his future, and the future of the whole Chapter, rested in the hands of others. No Adeptus Astartes could be comfortable with that. A Space Marine was used to controlling his own fate. Even in the heat of his most intense battles, he had always known

that, live or die, others would fight on. He had always known that the Chapter would go on without him.

Would the coming day see them saved or obliterated?

He crossed to the centre of the Nolfeas Plate. So far, there was no sign of the ork warlord, nor of the gunship, but Kantor was certain he had not misinterpreted the massive ork's intent.

He scanned the skies, senses hyper-alert...

...and heard the roar of jets just a second before the ork gunship surged upwards over the lip of the plate and opened fire on him, stitching the ferrocrete with shells that traced a lethal line towards him.

His dive was almost too late. Chips of ferrocrete smashed against his right side as the hail of fire ripped past him.

He rose to face the craft.

He tracked it as it swung left and loosed a burst from Dorn's Arrow, but the cockpit was heavily armoured, and the bursting bolter-shells left only smears of black on the clear armaplas bubble. One of the ork pilots yanked on the craft's controls, and the gunship swung its nose around to face him head-on again.

Kantor knew only too well the power of the weapons that bristled from under the craft's stubby wings. He saw now that they were indeed looted autocannons. There were two of them, fed by thick, heavy ammo drums that he guessed contained tens of thousands of rounds.

The guns fired again, and again he narrowly avoided being torn apart. Employing his halo again would have cost him power, slowing him down. He couldn't afford that. He had a sense that the ork pilots were toying with him. Snagrod wouldn't let them steal the glory of killing an Adeptus Astartes Chapter Master. He would want that victory for himself.

The gunship unleashed a third rippling volley, and Kantor tested a theory. He did not move.

It was a deadly gamble to take, but, sure enough, the rounds stitched a path in the surface of the Nolfear Plate that passed right by him.

The ork pilots were snarling and cursing him. One hauled on his control sticks, and the craft veered away moving to the far edge of the landing plate. Once there, it turned side-on, and again saw his huge nemesis.

The craft lowered unsteadily towards the plate on its vectored jets. When it was still six metres up, the beast called Snagro dropped from the bay door, landing so hard and heavy that Kantor imagined he felt the plate tremble. Of course, that was impossible. The Nolfear Plate used anti-gravitic suspension just like the others. Nothing short of a Naval transport could shake it.

Now that Snagro had landed on the plate, he rose to his full height, and the gunship pulled up into the air, hovering there, drifting drunkenly from left to right as the pilots tried to keep it steady.

Kantor's eyes were on the warlord. Snagro wore no suit of power armour like other warlords did. His hulking, muscle-bound torso was bare of everything save deep scars and burns, crude stitches and rippling veins as thick as a man's thumb. This lack of armour was the most overt sign of pure confidence and power Kantor had ever seen in an individual ork.

Kantor knew then that he had never faced a beast like this in mortal combat.

For weaponry, the monster wielded no power claw, but he gripped a single massive heavy stubber in the fingers of its right hand, box-fed with a cruelly serrated bayonet slung underneath the barrel. There were close combat weapons slung on the creature's back, too, but Kantor didn't have a good view of them.

The two enemies glared at each other, frozen for a moment, each silently assessing his foe. From around Snagro's thick waist, a collection of Space Marine helmets hung, swinging on short iron chains that rattled from a squiggoth-skin belt. There were four helmets, each coloured differently,

each taken from a battle-brother belonging to a different Chapter. One was decorated with the gold laurels of a veteran sergeant.

Inside his armour, Kantor flexed his muscles and felt blood rushing through them, blood and adrenaline. The latter would make him faster, inure him to pain, help him fight fatigue and make his opponent's movements seem slower than they really were. But how fast could this monster move? Unhindered by tonnes of iron plate, like that worn by Urzog Mag Kull, Snagrod was a different prospect altogether.

The moment broke suddenly, like glass, and it began.

Snagrod raised the barrel of his gun straight at Kantor and pulled hard on the trigger. Kantor raised Dorn's Arrow and opened fire a fraction of a second later. Shells hammered through the air in both directions... and struck their targets.

Kantor had flicked on the shield of his iron halo again, just in time. The ork rounds danced on the energy field, sparking and ricocheting while he fired back.

The bolts from Dorn's Arrow struck true, but Snagrod suffered no damage at all. He, too, seemed to be shielded by some kind of power field. It was another reason he didn't need a hulking mass of metal plate. The bolts exploded harmlessly, sending ripples of strange green energy out over the warlord's body.

They stood there, unleashing the full fury of their weapons at each other, both roaring in hate at rage as they did so. Then, almost simultaneously, their ranged weapons ran dry.

Kantor deactivated the halo's energy field. His armour's power levels had dropped dangerously low. They climbed again now, but never quite reached optimum. He knew he couldn't rely on the halo again. If he came too close to overloading his armour's generator, his systems would lock out to prevent an atomic explosion.

Ammo spent, Snagrod threw his heavy stubber aside in disgust and charged.

Damn, but he was fast!

His impossibly muscular legs halved the distance to Kantor in scant seconds.

Kantor loosed a battle cry and raced forwards to meet him, drawing his sword left-handed from the scabbard at his lower back and activating the power fist on his right.

Snagrod drew the close combat weapons from the slings on his broad back as he ran, two huge chainaxes decorated with roughly painted black and white checks. They growled into motion, teeth blurring.

The two enemies clashed hard, right in the middle of the Nolfeas Plate. Kantor slipped a blistering blow and struck at Snagrod's belly with his blade. Green sparks flew. The monster's energy shield was still in play. Where did it get its power? It had to come from somewhere, but Kantor's eyes couldn't find any sign of a device. It had to be somewhere on Snagrod's body, but there was no time to search in earnest for it. Another whistling swipe almost took the Chapter Master's head off. The blade of the left chainaxe missed him by a hair's breadth.

Kantor tried to stay in close. His reach was far shorter than the ork's. It wouldn't help him to pull back. If he stayed here, he stayed within his own striking range, but what good would that do him when the monster was still shielded?

Another swing of the warlord's axes gave Kantor a brief opening, and his power fist flashed forward, a devastating hook that would have killed just about any living thing. The fist's power field snapped like lightning, and Snagrod's personal shield flashed bright, but the force of the blow was spent on the shield, and the warlord barely even stumbled back a step.

Kantor's adrenaline surged even higher. He felt like a child battling this thing, powerless to hurt it.

Snagrod kicked out while Kantor was focussed on the swings of the monster's deadly blades. The kick caught him square in the stomach and launched him ten metres backwards, skidding along the surface of the landing plate.

Kantor grunted. Even through his ceramite plate, the blow had winded him.

Snagrod charged straight in while the Chapter Master was still on his back. The beast lifted both chainaxes at once and put all its formidable might into a vertical killing stroke.

Kantor rolled left, every fibre of his body committed to the motion, and the axes bit deep into the plate, lodging there hard. The motors that drove the weapons' wicked teeth whined in complaint.

Snagrod roared and yanked at them, while Kantor leapt to his feet and slipped around to the monster's side. There, at the warlord's back, attached to the squiggoth-skin belt, was a curious-looking module.

The shield must come from there, thought Kantor.

In the split second before Snagrod pulled his axes free, Kantor's sword stabbed towards the module, his movement deliberately slowed. Most shields resisted objects travelling at high speeds, but allowed slower intrusions. This was no different. The tip of Kantor's blade pierced the energy field and skewered the module.

There was a snap of ionised air and the green shield flickered off.

Snagrod felt it immediately. With a roar of rage, he swung and batted Kantor aside with the butt of his right axe.

The blow sent Kantor skidding along the plate once more, his right pauldron almost entirely shattered, chunks of ceramite spinning away from him.

But he had achieved more than he'd hoped. The warlord was vulnerable now, and all Kantor's fury and lust for vengeance bubbled up, spilling over his self-control like a torrent of boiling lava.

He was on his feet instantly, ignoring all his pain. His conscious mind retreated, giving way to raw, untempered aggression. With a battle cry that rang out across the landing plate, he launched himself at the ork warboss one last time. There was no holding back. His killer instinct took over everything. He would rip the beast apart or die.

Snagrod loosed a roar of his own and stormed forwards to meet him, axes high. The warlord had been undefeated in battle for a thousand years, slaying every last challenger to his rule. No mere human would change that.

They slammed against each other like crashing trucks, ceramite armour against flesh tougher and thicker than old leather. The axes whistled through the air, motors growling greedily again, hungry for meat to rip apart. Snagrod tried to cut Kantor in half with a scissor-like double backhand, but he cut only empty space.

Kantor slipped under in a blur and, at last, had the warlord right where he wanted him. His sword thrust deep into the monster's side and twisted. Snagrod howled in pain and anger, and tried to knock Kantor away, but the pain robbed the blow of speed and Kantor evaded it, staying inside the creature's guard. He yanked out his blade. Hot blood poured onto the landing plate. Snagrod swiped again and staggered back, his right leg drenched in slick crimson.

Kantor followed the ork's movements, pressing his attack. He launched a savage overhand blow with his power fist, aimed straight at the warlord's head, but the beast rolled with the blow, catching it on his huge shoulder.

The thick deltoid muscle exploded in a grisly spray, revealing the bone and sinew beneath. The impact staggered Snagrod, dropping him to one knee. Kantor leapt at him, kicking him down onto his back and straddling the beast's huge chest. He raised the power fist again for a killing blow, but Snagrod caught it, fingers wrapping iron tight around the wrist.

Kantor's reaction was immediate. He brought his left hand up, still gripping his sword, and stabbed down at the monster's throat.

Snagrod's left shoulder was almost obliterated, almost useless, but not quite.

Through the pain, the ork managed to bring his ruined arm up just in time. He caught the blade of Kantor's sword in his right hand, the edge biting deep into his fingers. With a roar of pain, the warlord wrenched the blade from Kantor's grip. It skittered away across the ground.

Kantor snarled and launched a barrage of punches with his gauntleted left hand instead. There was no deadly power field over that hand, just hard knuckles encased in armour. It was enough. The fury of his blows was terrible. He rained punch after savage punch on the warlord's face, smashing the beast's tusks, tearing deep red gouges in its cheeks and brow, blinding one of its eyes and breaking its massive jaw.

Snagrod scrambled to defend himself, but, from his back, one arm greatly diminished in strength, the other locked in a death grip around the Chapter Master's power fist, he could do little to resist Kantor's unrelenting fury.

'You destroyed our home!' Kantor yelled as he tore the warlord's face apart. 'You killed my brothers. Now you pay!'

The words were wasted on the warlord's tattered ears, but the meaning was not. Death was close, closer than it had ever come to the greenskin leader before.

With an infuriated roar, Snagrod bridged, thrusting his torso up from the ground with the full power of his thick legs. Kantor was flung off and scrambled back to his feet to continue the attack. Snagrod didn't wait for that. He rose and ran, his huge feet pounding the plate, straight towards the place where the gunship still hovered. Kantor gave chase, but there was a sudden stutter of autocannon fire and he had to leap back to avoid being torn apart by the shells.

Snagrod kept running, blood pouring from his wounds in red rivers, splashing a great wet trail onto the landing plate as he went. The gunship dipped towards the edge of the plate just as Snagrod arrived there, and the warlord leapt into the open bay-door in the side of the craft, causing the whole gunship to swing unsteadily for a moment.

Kantor roared in frustration as he watched the ship drift away from the edge on tongues of blue fire. The warlord was going to escape!

There was a rattle of fire from behind him, and a patter of bolts exploded on the gunship's cockpit bubble. The armaplas cracked under the hail of shells, but it didn't break. Still, the ork pilots weren't about to wait for another volley of fire. They swung the gunship around and increased its thrust to maximum.

As the ship roared off towards the south-east, Kantor's eyes tracked it.

He saw Snagrod lean out of the bay-door and look back at him.

Incredibly, it looked like the monster was laughing.

Five pairs of heavy footsteps stopped at Kantor's side.

When the ork gunship was gone from view, Kantor turned, and met the visored eyes of Terminator Squad Victurix.

It was Rogo Victurix, the squad sergeant, who spoke first.

'He got away.'

'This time,' Kantor snarled back.

'We have the spaceport secure,' said Victurix. 'Anais has the defence grid online. Ruzco is already guiding in the first of the landers. It is minutes away.'

Kantor looked out across the Nolfeas Plate. The damaged ork bombers were still there.

'We need to clear the tops of the three terminal towers,' he said.

His voice was low, rasping. He was coming down from the adrenaline surge, and even his Adeptus Astartes physiology felt weary after a battle

like that. The pain of the blows Snagrod had landed began to push through to his brain now as the adrenal high seeped away.

Victurix nodded to his fellow Terminators and said, 'I think we can take care of that.'

They would simply push the bombers over the edge of the plate. Together, the Terminators had more than enough combined strength for that. They would clear the areas below of their brother Space Marines first, of course.

'You know, my lord,' said Victurix, his tone suggesting a wry smile under that heavy ceramite faceplate, 'you look terrible.'

Kantor didn't have it in him to laugh, not right now.

The warlord lived.

The secondary sun was rising, poking up just beyond the lip of the eastern horizon.

Golden beams of light kissed Kantor's battered armour. He turned to look north, wondering how the Silver Citadel fared. What of Maia Cagliestra and her people? What of the Old Ones, the Dreadnoughts he had left to fight on the walls. The void shields had probably fallen by now, or would be close to it. In a few minutes, the first of the Naval landers would be here. The Legio Titanicus were coming, but were they too late? He and his dauntless Adeptus Astartes had done everything they could. They had seen to the things that were within their power, and at great cost. Much of the Chapter's blood had been spilled. Many brave brothers would be mourned.

What happened next lay as much in the hands of others as it did in those of the Crimson Fists.

Kantor knew this for certain: his Chapter would survive. The Crimson Fists would claw this world back, province by province, metre by metre if necessary. Everything would be put right. If he did nothing else in this life, he would see to that.

He was Lord Hellblade, twenty-ninth Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists, Scion of Dorn, born to wage war in the name of the Emperor.

Alessio Cortez would stand with him, and so would his unflinching battle-brothers, warriors like Daecor, Victurix, Grimm, Deguerro, all of them.

Dark decades still lay ahead, but he would endure.

The Chapter would endure.



EPILOGUE

Remembrance

'It is only on days like today, the anniversary of the day the tables finally turned, that I allow the memories to resurface, that I truly dwell on the totality of the destruction we faced. Despite my rank, despite my years of petitioning, I was never able to gain access to the complete truth of what happened at the spaceport. I know only this: had brave Space Marines not given their lives knowing they would never hear our thanks, not a single man, woman or child would live to remember the war.'

'The void shields of the Zona Regis were close to overload when the greenskin Gargants finally turned to engage the fresh Imperial forces suddenly attacking them from the rear. From the relative shelter of the gun towers, we saw Navy landers descend, vast armoured craft studded with guns and missile-pylons, filled to the brim with brave and hardy souls. We saw wings of fighters and Marauder bombers roar out over enemy lines, something we had never thought to see again, and watched those lines blaze yellow-white as deadly payloads hit their mark. Tired as we were, wounded, desperately hungry, we cheered as I know I will never hear men cheer again. We watched the greenskin invaders die by the thousands, then the tens of thousands, and somehow, somewhere, we found the energy to lift our guns again, and lend the last of our strength to the fight.'

'Ten years have passed. Ten years to the day. As we do every year, we gathered on Jadeberry Hill, veterans, politicians, survivors, to pay our respects to those that gave everything, men and Adeptus Astartes both.

'The governor was there. She has aged so quickly since the war. She looks haunted, and rumours abound that she will abdicate in favour of her granddaughter soon.

'Of course, we are all a little haunted.

'At midday, the skies opened. A cold rain lashed down. We took shelter in the memorial building where a string quartet played Guidollero's Vasparda et Gloris, and, together, we stood and wept in quiet gratitude for the souls of all those mighty warriors by whose determination and ultimate sacrifice we yet lived, and who, in this life, we could never hope to repay.'

Extract: *In the Shadow of Giants: A Retrospective* General
Saedus Mir (934.M41-)



FALL OF DAMNOS

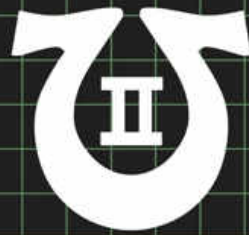
NICK KYME



DAMNOS

ULTRAMARINES

2ND COMPANY



ULTRAMARINES GROUND FORCES

Battle Group: Salvation

Led by Captain Cato Sicarius, this portion of the Ultramarines strike force was tasked with the liberation of the only surviving human city on Damnos, Kellenport.



Command Squad 'Lions of Maeragge'. Full strength honour guard of Second Company captain. When not under Sicarius's direct orders, led by second-in-command Sergeant Dacens.



Chaplain Trajan. Spiritual leader of the Damnos force and successor to the late Chaplain Orad.



Brother Agrippen. First Company Venerable Dreadnought representing the support of Captain Agemman on Damnos.



Brother Agnathio. Dreadnought who once fought at Chundradad in 141.M36, stayed behind at the defence of the Kellenport walls.



Brother Ultracius. Dreadnought who fought in the Pyra Crusades, advanced to join Sicarius once the landing zone was secure.



Tactical Squad Solinus 'The Indomitable'. Chaplain Trajan's honour guard and the most experienced of the Second Company tactical squads.



Tactical Squad Manorian 'The Shield Bearers'. Vanguard fighters who were at Captain Sicarius's right hand throughout the Damnos Campaign.



Tactical Squad Fennion 'The Immortals'. Led the human defenders in defence of the city walls and formed the conscript veterans, the 'One Hundred'.



Devastator Squad Tirian 'Gnilliman's Hammer'. Anti-infantry specialists who fought at the last stand at Arcona City.



Devastator Squad Atavian 'The Titan Slayers'. Anti-tank specialists responsible for the destruction of several key enemy targets, including necron Monoliths and heavy destroyers.

Battle Group: Heaven Strike

Led by Chief Librarian Tigurius, this portion of the Ultramarines strike force was tasked with the destruction of the necron artillery situated in the Thanatos Hills.



Tactical Squad Vorolanus 'The Thunderbolts'. Reconnaissance and scouting specialists who unlocked the assault vector into the Thanatos Hills.



Drop pods were utilised to deploy the entire Ultramarines ground force and included a number of unmanned Deathwind variants.



Tactical Squad Octavian 'Swords of Judgement'. Second Company's pre-eminent marksmen and one-shot kill specialists.



Tactical Squad Vandar 'The Victors'. Led by the youngest and least experienced tactical squad sergeant, who is also recipient of the Iron Halo.



Assault Squad Ixion 'Macragge's Avengers'. Re-tasked by Sicarius to shore up the main assault and neutralise necron destroyer squadrons.



Assault Squad Strabo 'The Heroes of Selonopolis'. Re-tasked by Sicarius to shore up the main assault and disrupt necron infantry cohorts.



Chief Librarian Tigurius

Leader of the Thanatos Hills battle group, Tigurius is also the Chief Librarian of the Chapter and Master of the Ultramarines Librarius.

DAMNOS PLANETARY MAP



Halaheim – All hands at Dagoth Station at Halaheim are massacred. A pict-cast caught by a servitor drone escapes ahead of the comm shroud but only foments greater anxiety in the surviving Imperial resistance.

Mandos Prime – Geothermic fusion stations under the purview of Mechanicus Magos Karnak suffer critical failure after increased seismic activity, heralding the xenos invasion.

Damnus Prime – Several manufactorum sites of Damnus Prime are utterly destroyed by the necron advance. Ark-Guard forces are unable to meet the threat and swiftly eradicated.

Tyrean Ocean – Upon crossing the largest water mass on Damnus, the necrons drain much of the ocean into an extra-dimensional sinkhole, turning it into a barren wasteland. All fighting vessels still operational are beached, their crews slaughtered.

Damnus Secundus, Tertius, Southern Polar Bastions, Fourth-Bloc Mining Station – Attacks break out across multiple locations. As the necron comm shroud moves southwards, military coordination between Imperial Guard regiments is rendered impossible. Resistance is quickly crushed.

Zephyr Monastery – All priests, serfs and helots, together with relics, basilica and all religious icons, are lost in a single necron energy pulse.

Areona City – Secondary Damnosian settlement is subdued, its army decimated, within hours of the necrons' arrival. Scattered damage reports indicate heavy and sustained bombardment.

Thanatos Refinery – Total destruction of refinery complex by a necron splinter force moving into the Thanatos Hills for purposes unknown. Area suffers from a total comms blackout more pervasive than experienced previously.

Kellenport – The last major city of Damnus is besieged by an immense necron force. Despite the presence of the battleship *Nobilis*, the city is swiftly overrun and Imperial forces retreat into the inner bastion walls.

Crastia Shipyards – Remaining starport is rendered 'out of commission' and overrun by subterranean necron forces. All efforts to retake ended with failure. Fate of garrison stationed at Crastia: unknown.

FALL OF DAMNOS



Nick Kyme



PROLOGUE

274973.M41

The primary generators were dead. No litanies to the Machine-God, no entreaties to the Omnissiah were about to revive them. The last tremor had been the largest – the Mandos Prime fusion stations were down.

It was the job of Gorgardis and his crew to repair them.

‘Critical failure across all facilities,’ the exofabricator muttered. His breath fogged the air with the cold from the permafrost.

‘My lord,’ a voice crackled through the vox-implant in Gorgardis’s ear. The heavy ice and some kind of latent, as of yet unspecified, radiation marred his reply with static.

‘Present,’ said the exofabricator, distracted with his scanner read-outs. The seismographic returns were incredible, more than merely tectonic plate shifts. Perhaps the planet was destabilising.

The voice’s next words made Gorgardis stop what he was doing.

‘We’ve found something.’

He licked his lips, tasting the blandness of ice crystals, and put away the scanner. Artak’s position in the facility came up on the retinal display of his optic implant. It was flashing, and a small binaric code indicated the other exofabricator was a further eighty-six point two metres down.

Gorgardis paused to think, the logic engines supplementing his organic brain functions making swift correlations. ‘I’ll be right down,’ he said, and made for the nearest rail-lifter.

Much of the hard ice around the structure had melted, but it was buried so deep and seemingly without end that it was impossible to tell just how big the thing was.

There were icons upon the smooth outer wall. It looked like metal but very dark, shimmering, almost vital. Despite a wealth of experience in runic symbolism and semiotics, Gorgardis didn’t recognise any of the iconography.

‘Unknown provenance,’ he muttered, tracing his hand over the symbols but being careful not to touch them. He turned to Artak, who was waiting anxiously behind him. Gorgardis waved him on. ‘Bring up the servitors – drills and hammers, heavy-bore.’

Magos Karnak observed the pristine surface of the half-buried ruins with cold detachment.

‘Incredible...’ he breathed. It had been many years since he’d experienced awe, let alone expressed it through his organic vocal cords. Karnak was mostly machine, but he still retained the gamut of human feeling. Presently, it was being stimulated to a greater extent than he’d thought possible since his apotheosis from the flesh.

Mechadendrite scanners performed a full spectral, auditory and metallurgic analysis of the structure, feeding the results to the tech-priest’s machine-cortex for later study. An initial review made little sense.

‘And you went to every length to open it?’ he asked.

Gorgardis gestured to the half-dozen wasted servitors slumped in a pile nearby. ‘We exhausted our every resource,’ he said.

Upon witnessing the slab-sided ruins, he’d summoned the tech-priest of the facility at once. Karnak had been swift to respond, bringing in his

adepts: a horde of enginseers, transmechanics and genetors. The tech-priests were baffled.

Gorgardis went on, 'Returns from our sonar-staves reveal that this is but one structure amongst a series of many. Most are buried deep beneath the ice bed.'

'And this?' Karnak referred to a floating grav-bench on which several items of alien origin were arrayed.

Gorgardis singled out a six-legged creature with silver chitin across its back and mandibles not so dissimilar from mehadendrite tools.

'My best estimate is a repair drone of some sort. It's dead.'

'Or dormant,' Karnak countered, his gaze absorbing and cataloguing the other mechanical finds on the bench. Some were perhaps weapons; others were harder to classify. Partial degradation from exposure to ice moisture made the task difficult but not impossible. 'I'm taking all of them,' he decided, before showing Gorgardis his back and driving away on the tracked impellers he had in lieu of his legs.

'M— my lord?'

'All finds are to go to Goethe Majoris where they can be better studied.'

Gorgardis made the sign of the Cog and went about his orders.

'Seal this site,' Karnak added by way of afterthought. 'Its secrets will be revealed to us in due course, Omnissiah be praised.'

ACT ONE:
EMERGENCE



CHAPTER ONE

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The vox-transmitter was wretched with interference, so Falka hit it again.

‘Keep doing that and you’ll break it,’ said a deep and sonorous voice behind him.

When Falka turned, his smile was broad and bright enough to light up the whole mine. ‘Jynn!’

He seized the woman in a bear hug, lifting her off the ground. Even in her environment suit, she felt the steel of his girder-like arms.

‘Easy, easy!’ she warned, mock-choking.

Falka put her down, ignoring the questioning glances from the rest of the shift. Riggers, drill-engines and borer-drones advanced towards the darkness of the vast ice-shaft like an army. They were accompanied by menial servitors and heavy-set chrono-diggers. Like Falka and Jynn, the human contingent of the labour force wore bulky environment suits to stave off the cold and make the twelve-hour cycles possible.

‘Where’s your rig?’ asked the big man. He’d stripped back the thermal protection on his arms, revealing faded gang-tats and wiry grey hair. ‘I didn’t see it.’

Jynn pointed to a docking station, one of many in the massive ice cavern. Like most of the mining vehicles it was squat, decked out with plates and protective glaciis and only partially enclosed. A crew of three menials and a pair of chrono-diggers stood around it awaiting her return.

‘She’s all mine,’ she said proudly, adjusting the thermal-cutters, flare-rods and chain-pick fastened to her tool belt from when Falka’s bear hug had dislodged them.

A klaxon sounded and an array of strobe lamps filled the cavern with an intermittent amber glow. They started walking.

‘You look good,’ said Falka a moment later.

Jynn gave a wry smile. The ice concourse underfoot crunched as they moved. It was hard-packed by industrial presses to create a serviceable roadway for the mine entrance. Most of the light was artificial, though some natural light filtered down from the bore hole above them at the entrance’s threshold.

‘What I mean,’ Falka struggled to say, ‘is it’s good to see you back at the ice-face. I thought after Korge, you might—’

‘Honestly, Fal, I’m fine,’ she said, brushing a strand of errant hair behind her ears and pulling down her goggles.

Falka did the same – close to the vent a fine spray of ice chips saturated the air. Environment suits managed the worst. Get one in the eye and you’d know about it, though.

‘Just with the ’quake and all that...’

She stopped and glared at him. The other workers flowed around them to their riggers and crews. The first few cohorts had already begun descent.

‘Seriously, Falka – just drop it. Korge’s dead and that’s it.’

The big man looked distraught. ‘Sorry.’

She lightly gripped his shoulder. ‘It’s all right. I under—’

‘Rig-hand Evvers,’ a shrill, imperious voice interrupted.

Jynn had her back to the speaker and groaned inwardly before she turned. ‘Administrator Rancourt,’ she replied politely.

A hawkish man, trussed up in thermal gear and flocked by a retinue of scribes and aides, approached them. Despite the cowl drawn up around his small head and the padded mittens he wore, the administrator still shivered.

‘I had not expected to see you on shift,’ he said, fashioning a poor smile. It was meant to convey warmth but only exuded his awkwardness.

‘Nor I, you...’ she muttered.

‘I beg your pardon. I’m finding it hard to hear under all of this.’ He gestured to his cowl and thermal coat.

‘I said it’s rare to see you, administrator... at the ice-face, I mean.’

Rancourt moved in close to Jynn.

‘I’ve told you before,’ he said. ‘You may call me Zeph.’

Falka broke his stoic silence to grunt.

Rancourt’s gaze moved to the giant. ‘And Rig-hand Kolpeck. Don’t you have a shift to go to?’

‘We both do, administ... ah, *Zeph*.’ She tugged lightly on Falka’s arm, urging him to join her.

The big man looked like he’d rather stay and squeeze Rancourt’s neck, but he followed anyway.

‘Of course, of course,’ the administrator blathered, shooting a dark glance at Falka. ‘I have much work to attend to. In the Emperor’s name,’ he added, pretending to look at a data-slate proffered by one of his toadies.

‘May His glory watch over us all,’ Jynn replied.

Heading in the direction of the vent, the air suddenly felt as if it were actually getting warmer.

‘He still stalking you, then?’

‘Leave it, Fal. I can handle it. He’s harmless enough.’

Falka grunted again. He was prone to doing that. ‘Eyes and ears,’ he said, peeling off towards his rigger and crew.

‘You too,’ said Jynn, diverting to her vehicle. She’d put one boot on the boarding stirrup when the concourse trembled. She slipped, snatching a holding rail to steady herself. A second tremor shook some debris from the roof. More violent than the first, it sent men and servitors sprawling.

‘What the feg was—’ she muttered over the vox-bead.

A high-pitched keening cut her off.

She fell, the intensity of the sonic burst forcing her to press her palms to her ears. ‘Throne!’ Jynn gasped, grimacing against the auditory pain.

The keening became a hum, throbbing at the back of the skull, but at least she could stand. Around the ice cavern, the walls were shaking. Sections of the ceiling rained down on the labourers in a cascade. The cries of one man ended abruptly when a slab of permafrost crushed him.

Jynn staggered. It was just like with Korve. Memories came flooding back, but she suppressed them, focused on surviving instead. ‘Not yet, dear heart,’ she whispered, finding some resolve. ‘Not yet.’

Falka was on his feet too and rushing over to her.

‘You hurt?’ He had to shout to be heard above the ice-quake.

Jynn was about to answer when a massive cold cloud ripped through the vent in a bright white bloom. The rig-hands closest to the shaft were shredded by the host of shards within the cloud. Snow crystals fogging the air were tainted a visceral red.

A burst of hard, emerald light followed, refracted from the angular descent shaft beyond the vent. Shouting echoed from the icy dark, injured and desperate men trying to control some unseen catastrophe. The shouts became cries, and then screams. There was something else too... a sort of discharge, as of an energy beam or perhaps a heavy generator.

The winches slaved to the adamantite descent lines at the vent threshold started to retract. Someone was coming up.

‘We have to get out,’ said Jynn. Then, with greater urgency as the emerald light issuing from the vent intensified, ‘All of us – right now!’

Falka nodded.

‘No!’ she cried, seizing the big man’s arm as he made for the vent.

He looked back at her nonplussed. ‘People are down there, our people. They might need help.’

Jynn was shaking her head. ‘They’re gone, Fal. This way, come on.’

‘Wha... but...’

‘They’re *dead*! Now, come on!’ She heaved and he followed, reluctant at first but then with more conviction. Something was scurrying up the shaft. It sounded like a horde of giant, mechanical ants.

The first of the rig-hands from below made it to the ice cavern. He was dead. Men screamed, terrified, when they saw the flesh of his partly flayed corpse. Surgical, precise, horrific – it was as if the layers had been stripped anatomically.

More followed, equally gruesome.

Jynn and Falka were running, shouting at anyone who would listen to join them, yanking environment suits or shoving them bodily. *Down tools and flee*. This was not a rescue; it was a full-scale evacuation.

She found Rancourt cowering behind a rigger, getting his aides to peer around its armoured flanks and provide him with updates. Several of his entourage were dead, one from fright when the keening blast had struck; another to the sudden avalanche from the ceiling.

‘Get up!’ She seized his collar and pulled. ‘Get up! These people need guidance. The surface must be told what’s happening down here.’

‘What *is* happening?’ he shrieked, unwilling to stand at first, casting fearful glances towards the vent where the emerald glow was now spilling into the ice cavern.

Jynn looked over her shoulder, still hanging on to Rancourt’s suit.

‘Falka!’

The big man gently moved her aside and threw the administrator over his shoulder.

‘Unhand me! I am an officer of the Imperium. Release me at once!’

‘Shut up.’ Falka smacked Rancourt’s head into the rigger just hard enough to leave him dazed.

Then they were running again. The remnants of the administrator’s retinue followed without need for coercion.

The exit shaft and the rail-lifters were just a few metres ahead. The light from the surface was like a soothing balm as it touched Jynn’s sweat-slick face. She glanced back.

Several more rig-hands from below had made it to the ice cavern. Though they were far away and her view was unsteady on account of her fleeing for her life, she made out... *creatures* attached to the miners. The rig-hands were thrashing and squirming. Eventually they fell and the swarm dispersed, silver beetle-like creatures the size of Falka’s clenched fist, leaving a flensed corpse in their wake.

‘God-Emperor have mercy,’ she breathed.

Larger, bulkier shadows were reaching the end of the vent shaft. A coruscating emerald beam lanced from the darkness, throwing a spider-like creature into sharp relief. Like the beetles it was metallic, but almost the size of a rigger. The beam, fired from one of the creature’s mandibles, struck a fleeing rig-hand and atomised him. The afterimage of the man’s flayed skeleton was seared into Jynn’s retinas just before it collapsed into ash and she looked away.

‘Move, move!’

They raced into the nearest rail-lifter. About sixty rig-hands had joined them on the access plate, and Falka gunned the engine as soon as they were all aboard.

Jynn gazed to the distant surface as the heavy winches began to drone. She willed the oval of light from the ground-zero bore point closer.

Below them, the other rail-lifters started up – fifteen in total, all screaming, engines hot, towards the upper world.

One of the cables snapped, lashing wildly with the sudden slack. A beam from one of the spiders had severed it. Rig-hands screamed as they plunged to their deaths. Others, clinging on, could only watch in horror as the beetles already scaling the shaft wall sprang from their perches and landed amongst them.

Jynn saw a few of the miners let go and embrace death by falling rather than face being flayed alive.

The hard drone of a warning klaxon sounded from farther up the shaft. The oval of light was becoming a rectangular strip, narrowing by the second.

Rancourt, having recently regained consciousness, put away his command-stave. Falka saw him do it and rounded on him.

‘What are you doing? The others will never make it.’

The administrator’s pupils were dilated, his eyes wide and haunted. ‘Those th-things...’ he stammered. ‘They can’t be allowed to get out.’

‘Bastard!’ Falka punched him, a solid blow to the chin that put Rancourt back on his arse, and then ripped the command-stave from the administrator’s trappings. ‘Show me how to stop it,’ he said, bearing down on him, threatening more violence.

‘Leave him.’ Jynn wrenched the big man’s shoulder. She had a strong grip and made him turn.

‘You’re defending this worm?’

‘He’s right, Fal.’ The sides of the shaft blurred past and the displaced air snapped at Jynn’s hair.

Falka shook his head. Those men and women were his friends. ‘No!’ He was about to beat down on Rancourt again when Jynn smacked him hard in the chest with the flat of her hand. It didn’t hurt the big man but it got his attention.

‘He’s right,’ she said again, continuing in a small voice when she looked below – her mind tried to blot out the carnage and horror. ‘We can’t let them get out.’

Falka’s grimace became a snarl as he pounded at the holding spar with impotent rage. ‘Hold on,’ he growled, moving towards the engine. ‘We’re about to breach the surface.’

The rail-lifter cleared the slowly closing shaft doors and after a few more metres broke into the pale Damnosian sun. Another miner called Fuge kicked open the exit ramp and the sixty or so survivors pounded it across to the arctic tundra of the upper world.

Though the sun was shining, an icy wind brought a chill and kicked up slurries of snow and frost eddies. The barren wastes of Damnos had never looked so bleak.

There was no need for conversation. What could any of them say, anyway? So the sixty survivors made for the distant comms-bunker, marching in file, heads bowed against the wind and ice. Behind them the shutting of the shaft door was like a death knell for the hundreds still trapped within.

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There was still no word from Damnos Prime, and the Valkyrie gunships Lieutenant Sonne had deployed from Secundus to investigate were also quiet. It didn’t take a soldier’s instincts to realise that something was wrong.

‘We’re experiencing a full communications blackout in the northern regions all the way to the Tyrrean Ocean, colonel,’ he gave his report to Quintus Tarn. The commander of the Damnosian Ark Guard peered over steepled fingers into the shadows of his operations chamber. His mood was pensive. Leaning on the desk with his elbows, he hadn’t stirred the entire time Adanar Sonne had been in his presence.

Behind the colonel a planetary map showed the location of each and every manufactory, drilling-station, mining complex, refinery, labour-clave and outpost on Damnos. Unlit lume-globes represented the stations that Kellenport, the planetary capital, had lost touch with. Precious few of the globes were lit.

The wave of darkness emanating from the north reminded Adanar of a slowly creeping shroud. 'We picked up a group of refugee mine workers from one of the outposts near Damnos Prime,' he offered.

Tarn looked up at Adanar for the first time since he'd entered the room.

'How many?'

'Thirteen, sir.'

'Are they saying anything?'

'I don't know yet, colonel. They were picked up by a patrol. Apparently, they'd been trekking across the tundra for several weeks. Administrator Rancourt is amongst the survivors,' Adanar added.

'Inform the lord governor and bring them all to me as soon as they arrive at Kellenport.'

'Yes, sir. Is there anything else?'

'Do you have a wife and child, Lieutenant Sonne?' asked Tarn. The colonel was staring right into his eyes.

'Er, yes... Yes, I do.'

Though Tarn smiled, his eyes were despairing black gulfs.

As if seeing them for the first time, Adanar noticed the stubs of tabac in a silver tray to the commander's left; on the right was a vox-unit. Its message received light was flashing silently.

'Is something wrong, sir?'

'Listen,' Tarn answered simply.

He broke the steeple of his fingers and replayed the vox-message blinking insistently on the unit. The opening segment was fraught with

static, natural interference on account of the distance and the weather conditions. Slowly, a voice resolved through the auditory crackle.

‘...found something, sir...’

Adanar recognised the hard timbre of Major Tarken. He didn’t know the man personally but his reputation preceded him as one of the most lauded combat veterans amongst the Ark Guard.

Colonel Tarn tapped a rune on the vox-unit and a grainy hololith issued from a projector-node. It took a few seconds to synch to the audio. Major Tarken appeared in jagged resolution.

‘Image-servitors accompanied the platoon,’ the colonel explained unnecessarily.

Major Tarken was speaking to the picter. *‘The manufactorums at Damnos Prime were silent, but there is definitely something here.’*

The view swung downwards at the major’s request, revealing several skeletal remains.

‘Could be labour serfs or rig-hands...’

Adanar caught Tarn’s hooded gaze. ‘Was this a live feed?’

‘Up until about twenty minutes ago.’

The picter swung up again. Panning left and right, it showed Tarken’s men advancing in echelon formation. The sound kept cutting out, succumbing to crackling interference or the occasional hiss of static, but it seemed quiet. Mist from the cold exuded off the walls in a fine veil. Tarken’s kit and that of his men was wet with the moisture and crusted from it flash-freezing.

‘...moving into the main drilling area now...’ Tarken was whispering and brought up his lasgun. Somebody shouted from up ahead, a scout off-picter.

‘Where was this?’ asked Adanar, utterly enrapt on the hololith.

‘Dagoth Station, three hundred kilometres north of Secundus at Halaheim.’

A flash on the pict was too bright to be static. Someone had started firing.

‘*Contacts! Contacts!*’ Tarken was running and the whirl of the servitor’s tracked impellers could be heard as it shifted gear to keep pace with the major. Though largely stable, the additional momentum made the image blur and haze. The whine of lasguns was getting louder over the audio, too.

Adanar leaned in closer. Tarken had reached his frontline and was taking up a position behind some riggers evidently in for repair. Around thirty men adopted similar postures and hunkered down. Farther ahead, men were shouting. The scouts were discharging weapons and Tarken was trying to raise their sergeant on the vox.

Something garbled came over the vox-return, twice filtered for Adanar’s ears and totally indiscernible.

The picter was still shaking, although the servitor had stopped behind the major.

‘Can we steady it?’

Tarn didn’t answer. He was fixated on the hololith.

Something was appearing through the mist. An emerald glow coloured the fog suddenly, as if tainting it. Shots from the scouts ended with its arrival.

‘*Holy Throne...*’ Tarken was levelling his lasgun over the makeshift barricade. A beam snapped out of the dark, ugly and green, and one of the riggers was shorn in two. ‘*Holy fegging Throne! All weapons, bring them down!*’

The chamber lit up with over thirty las-bursts. Tarken’s troopers went to full automatic, draining their power packs with an abandon and urgency Adanar had never seen before in professional soldiers.

The things coming out of the fog, they were... *nightmares*. It was the only word Adanar could think of to describe them. Huge, broad-shouldered skeletoids with strange, glowing carbines attached to their arms. Energy

coursed up and down the wide tubular barrels and was expelled in bright lances of dirty emerald.

They moved like automatons, neither speaking nor slowing as a barrage of las-bolts hammered them.

‘Increase fire!’

The picter zoomed in, blurring the image at first but then focusing in on one of the metal skeletons. Its eyes blazed with a terrible fire, suggesting a crude sentience that chilled the lieutenant’s blood even removed, as he was, from the firefight and the moment.

Adanar saw the creature jerk spasmodically as it was struck by countless las-shots. It must have taken over ten well-placed bolts to down it. Chunks of metal flew off its carapace body, fused rib-plate and punctured presumably vital systems before it fell.

The picter lingered. Horrified, Adanar watched the broken components slowly reknit as las-fire raged around the creature’s prone form. Wires snaked across the ground finding other wires and, like sewn flesh, drew the shattered pieces together. Metal became as mercury, dissolving into liquid before being drawn to the torso as if magnetised. Impossibly, the skeleton rose intact and fired its terrible beam weaponry again.

‘...all back... Fall back!’

Tarken stood up to order the retreat. The vox-man next to him was spun by a glancing hit from one of the beams. Half of his face and right shoulder were missing, simply stripped down to glistening bone.

It was more rout than retreat.

Major Tarken took a hit to the chest. His carapace armour dissolved on contact, so too his uniform and under-mesh, his skin and flesh and bone. A hole opened up in his back, what remained of blood and innards cauterised before Tarken crumpled in a dead heap.

The image-servitor was the last to fall. Unarmed, Adanar assumed it presented the lowest level of threat to the creatures.

Just before the report ended, a looming skeletal face filled the screen. Balefires smouldered in its eye sockets and spoke of unfathomable hatred.

A squeal of binaric or something like it keened through the speaker. Adanar winced and recoiled. When he'd opened his eyes a split second later, the screen was dead, frozen on the skeleton's face.

The lieutenant was sweating, his heart racing in his chest. He licked his lips. They were dry and his voice croaked at first. 'What are those...?' He coughed, clearing his throat and tried again. 'What are they, colonel?'

A figure emerging out of the darkness behind Tarn had Adanar reaching for his laspistol. He only relaxed when he recognised Magos Karnak.

The tech-priest's timbre was as cold and unforgiving as Adanar imagined the skeletons to be. 'Ancient and terrible, and they are here, lieutenant.'

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

Tarn interjected, switching off the hololith and stopping the dead-air audio feed. 'It means they have come for us, for this world.'

Adanar bit back his anger – he was only reacting to his irrational fear. 'With respect, sir, that explains shit-all. What's going on?'

'The lord governor has been informed,' said Tarn, 'and is being secured in a Proteus-class command bunker with his generals as we speak. He intends to conduct operations from there.'

'Very wise, sir, but what precisely are we dealing with here?'

'The *Nobilis* has been contacted and is adopting geo-stationary orbit above the capital.'

Tarn was talking as if he'd lost it. Adanar wanted to shake him. 'Sir!'

'They are coming to Kellenport, Sonne. I sent over fifty thousand men to Damnos Prime and Secundus, and all the stations inbetween. All of them, our fleet at anchor in the Tyrrean – dead, all of them.'

Adanar nearly choked. '*What?*'

Karnak advanced into Adanar's eyeline, the whirr of his tracks drawing a scowl from the lieutenant.

'That scrambled piece of binaric was a data-burst,' the magos explained. 'There was a message encoded within it. Based on a proto-Gothic linguistic system, it was easy to discern the meaning. My xeno-linguistic savants took approximately thirteen point two-six minutes to decipher it.'

'Are you looking for praise, magos?'

'No, I am merely suggesting that the simple encoding was deliberate. They *wanted* us to hear it.'

'Hear what?' asked Adanar.

Colonel Tarn activated a different message spool on the vox-unit. After a few seconds of charged silence an unearthly voice issued from the speakers. It resonated with age and archaic menace, as if drawn from the grave or the depths of a planet-eating black hole.

We are the necrontyr. We are legion. We claim dominion of this world... Surrender and die.

'Throne of Earth,' Adanar could only rasp. He found his composure again after a few more seconds. 'Surely, it means surrender *or* die?'

Karnak uttered a sombre reply. 'No, Lieutenant Sonne, the translation is accurate.'

'In the Emperor's name, what are these things?'

'Death, lieutenant – they are death. Adanar,' said the colonel, getting to his feet at last. 'Take your family and get out of Kellenport. Go south. Do it quickly, before it's too late.'

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Aboard the Nobilis

The bridge was frantic with activity.

Captain Unser barked orders at his command crew from a gilded throne inlaid with operation-gems and picter-slates. 'Get me firing solutions on those war cells, now!'

Naval ratings scattered as Unser's flag-lieutenant cracked the whip of his tongue in relaying the captain's commands. Far below the sub-command dais, servitors slaved to control-pits worked tirelessly to manoeuvre the ship, responding to the dictates of their helmsman; others processed and relayed back firing information, making minor weapons adjustments that would be fed down to the gun-decks.

'Melta torpedoes at forty-four per cent, my lord,' said the flag-lieutenant, Ikaran.

Unser's eyes flashed in the sepulchral gloom of the bridge. The long scar he'd earned whilst posted in support of the Plovian VI Imperial Guard looked like a vertical grin on the left side of his face. 'Give 'em another dose, sir.'

Ikaran relayed the orders and the message bled down through the ship to the gun-decks.

Unser smiled, his mouth pulling at the injuries that chronicled a life that had only ever known war.

He loved this. He absolutely... *Loved. It.*

The *Nobilis* was invincible. A capital ship, the largest in the line, Dominator-class – it was an expression of Unser's undeniable will and righteous anger. Dread enemies had come to Damnos, unearthed from the very bowels of the world. Though he had not seen them up close, Unser was determined to send them back to whence they came, turning them into the corpses they already resembled.

'Torpedoes away, lord,' said Ikaran.

'Bring it up.'

The bridge picters delineating the forward arc of the command dais came online. They showed a view of realspace and the half hemisphere of southern Damnos. Bright, blazing contrails invaded the vista as the torpedo payload sped earthwards.

Unser leant forward, revelling in the power. 'And in three... two... one—'

A series of bright blooms lit the world's surface from the massive impacts. The *Nobilis* was at the cusp of the mesosphere and close enough to see the effect of the incendiaries on the ground.

Ikaran had his hand to his ear, a comms-officer on board the ship reporting back to him.

‘Hits on eighty per cent of targets, lord.’

Unser allowed himself to sit back. He gripped the arms of his command throne like a triumphant king. ‘Another barrage, if you please.’

The air was hot and sweaty on the gun-decks. Thousands of crew and hauler-servitors scurried in packs as the order came down from the bridge.

Overseer Caenen applied the lash to increase their efforts.

‘Sweat and blood, dogs,’ he drawled, bawling above the heavy drone of the engines and loading machinery. His hellish gaze followed the ammo hoppers, hoisted by teams of swarthy, soot-stained men, and glowered. ‘The cap’n wants another, we give him another!’ The lash cracked out again and the crews of torpedo tubes five through ten picked up the pace. All down the port-ventral aisle of the *Nobilis*’s gun-deck, the scene was the same. Overseers urged their crews with threats and cajoling, just like any good Navy men.

In less than three minutes the next barrage of torpedoes was prepared, the tubes locked, their deadly cargo primed for launch.

A wave of green ‘ready’ runes flickered down the hot darkness of the gun-deck. Vox communication went to the gunners who angled the tubes mechanically from their firing nests according to solutions provided by the bridge. All was in harmony, the perfect machine with the men of its crew its blood and sinew.

Caenen leapt down from his pulpit, stepping on a servitor’s bent back so he didn’t have to use the stairs. He grunted when his boots met the deck in a heavy *thunk*, berating a man for getting in his way and punching out another as he moved to a viewport.

The tiny aperture afforded a limited view of realspace, but enough to witness a torpedo barrage. Tearing open the iron hatch, Caenen wiped the grime and warp-frost from the many-layered plascrete protecting them all from the void and simply looked.

To the overseer, a bombardment was a thing of beauty. Even the many slummer-whores he had bedded, in spite of his scars and his lack of hygiene, paled. She, the *Nobilis*, was his true mistress... and the bitch had quite a slap in her.

When the launch tubes failed to vent, Caenen frowned. He wiped at his heavy breath where it had fogged the viewport, but he hadn't missed it. The tubes were still full. He was about to start shouting and bawling again, ready to apply his boot to the fegger who'd screwed him, when a dense, ultra-concentrated beam speared from the surface.

'What the shi—'

We are invulnerable.

The thought was a comfortable one and Captain Unser was enjoying this feeling of pre-eminence when the weapons failure rune on his command-slate spoiled it.

'Mister Ikaran, report!'

The flag-lieutenant had his hand to his ear again, getting information from the comms-officer. 'A jam, lord. We'll have to repack and acquire new firing—'

The massive energy spike raging across all of the pict-screens on the bridge arrested Ikaran's recommendations.

'Lord, our shields will be—'

'Impossible,' breathed Unser, sitting up so he might defy his imminent death more staunchly. 'They don't have... Up here... we're invinc—'

A bright flare of emerald light filled the bridge, blinding the crew and scorching their flesh despite the plascrete shielding on the viewports. The *Nobilis*'s shields capitulated in seconds, one after the other, and the once

mighty vessel's armour was sheared away like parchment by the necron beam. It impaled the bridge and lanced the heart of the ship. Plasma drives erupted in conflagration, sending roiling firestorms across all decks. Munitions and artillery cooked off in the blast, killing thousands. The main breach caused by the beam's hungry trajectory resulted in several more sub-breaches – crewmen, equipment, entire bulkheads and sub-decks were vented into the void, flash-frozen.

In the gun-decks, Overseer Caenen didn't even have enough time to curse before the torpedo wall was ripped away and the entire gunnery crew, all two thousand, three hundred and fifty souls, burned to death before being expelled into the cold night of space.

Lord Governor Arxis had not always been in the business of politicking. Unfortunately, it was a necessary evil when running a world of the Imperium. Such a task required a strong hand and a firm belief in the Emperor. Deviation from the creed could not be tolerated; the people lived to serve His greater glory and the glory of mankind.

Arxis had once been Imperial Guard, a general no less, and now he sat amongst his generals, the trappings of politics forgotten and the familiar mantle of soldier resting firmly upon his shoulders.

It was comforting.

The news he'd just received about the *Nobilis* was not.

'Throne, the entire ship? In one attack?'

Field-Marshal Lanspur nodded sombrely. 'Captain Unser bought us some ground, possibly even some time with the barrages the *Nobilis* was able to make, but the ship is dead, my lord – all twelve thousand, three hundred and eighty-one souls.'

'Merciful Emperor...' Arxis was staring into space, finding it hard to comprehend what the necrons had done. He looked up at his commanders. The sixteen men arrayed around the metal table in the Proteus bunker looked back with carefully neutral expressions.

‘The astropathic message?’

‘Has been sent,’ replied the governor’s choirmaster, a robed adept called Fava who was in charge of all interstellar communication to and from Damnos. ‘We got it out just before the blackout.’

Though most short-wave vox transmissions were still in effect, anything longer range, certainly off-world communication, was utterly dead. The necrons had some kind of jamming shroud fouling it.

‘Then we should pray to the Golden Throne that it reaches allies quickly. For now, we marshal what defences we can.’ Arxis was about to address his Master of Ordnance, a short, pugnacious man who was loyal like a bloodhound, when a dull scraping sound stopped the words in his throat and altered them. ‘Did you hear that?’

The scraping was getting louder, resonating against the metal inner walls of the bunker.

Several of the governor’s military staff nodded.

Sytner, his chief bodyguard, drew a pistol. ‘Sire, we have to move you. Now.’ He said it forcefully but without panic. Sytner had been a storm trooper, serving in the same regiment as Arxis back in the day. The lord governor trusted the stocky man, recognised the urgency in his tan face, and nodded.

Beneath them, the ground trembled. Sytner stepped in, pushing the lord governor behind him and tipping the table back with one hand. Like the pillars of termites that formed in Damnos’s arid zone, a column of metal-flecked earth spiralled upwards from the ground. The bunker floor was several-centimetre-thick ferrocrete, but the tunnellers bored through it anyway.

A beetle-like creature, silver-backed and dirty with earth, poked out at the apex of the pillar. Sytner shot it with his laspistol, pitching it onto its back, legs twitching.

‘By the ice-hells, what...’ Gaben-dun leaned in for a closer look. The pillar erupted in front of him and in seconds the Master of Ordnance was swarmed with the beetle-creatures. He fell writhing, the weight of the diminutive necrons bringing the big man down, and screamed.

‘Throne of Earth,’ gasped the choirmaster, seeing moist bone poking up from the chitinous mass assailing Gaben-dun. ‘They’re *eating* his flesh!’

‘Out! Out!’ shouted Sytner.

Lanspur and four of the other commanders had also drawn sidearms and put themselves between the carnivorous beetles and the lord governor.

‘Open fire!’ snapped Sytner and the crack of las filled the chamber along with the stink of fyceline.

Silver beetle-creatures split in half and spun off the corpse. A few las-bolts even pierced poor Gaben-dun, though the Master of Ordnance was little more than a sack of slowly dissolving meat by now.

When they were done with their first kill, the swarm converged on the rest.

Sytner and his fellows were soon shooting at the ceiling and the walls as the beetles scuttled towards them without impediment. A larger tremor shook the chamber and the room just as they were retreating into the bunker’s annexe.

A vox-unit switched to open frequency crackled to life, adding to the confusion. Frantic reports came over the speakers from the outside: of the walls being compromised; of the enemy inside the defences, seemingly appearing out of thin air; of high-pitched beam weapons and the screaming of their victims.

Arxis clenched his fists impotently as the floor caved in completely, taking Lanspur with it, and a much larger insectoid lumbered into view.

Men were being flayed alive outside...

One creature, its carapace glistening silver and suggestive of an arachnid construct, became three. Sytner’s las-bolt caromed ineffectually off the

hide of the first. Its mandible claw snapped out and severed the man in two. To his credit, Sytner didn't scream.

The choirmaster did, just as his face and torso were melted off by the second spider's beam-spike. It started as a death-shriek then ended in a wet gurgle of sloughed flesh and matter.

The rest of the command staff didn't last much longer. Scarabs claimed them – the lord governor could think of no better way to describe the beetle swarms – or the arachnids butchered them.

Arxis was alone, surrounded by foes, trapped by the illusory protection of his own Proteus bunker.

He had time to kneel before he died: a prayer to the Emperor on his lips and the barrel of a laspistol to his temple.

When he squeezed the trigger, the weapon groaned and failed. Exhausted during those first frantic moments, the power pack was out.

Arxis closed his eyes before the claws took him.



CHAPTER TWO

It was good fortune that placed the Ultramarines within the vicinity of Damnos. Although it would later be questioned what exactly was *good* about it. The desperate astropathic message delivered with Lord Governor Arxis's seal of verification was deciphered quickly by the sightless adepts aboard the *Valin's Revenge*.

Its captain, the dauntless Sicarius, had no compunction about ordering the vessel and his vaunted Second Company to the beleaguered world with the utmost haste.

The strike cruiser translated in-system amidst a debris field. Tracking augurs identified the stricken shell of the *Nobilis*, a vast Navy capital ship. The *Valin's Revenge* was undoubtedly smaller and lacking the same level of firepower, but it was also more manoeuvrable and boasted one of the most lethal payloads known to the galaxy.

Helmsman Lodis, long-serving of the Chapter, drew the vessel in close. In the void, the engine surges, the slight amendments to heading and bearing, might have seemed glacially slow but they were not. Whickering gauss-beams from the necron arc-obliterators on the ground, many kilometres long, tried time and again to skewer the strike cruiser. Each time Brother Lodis manoeuvred the *Valin's Revenge* out of harm's way or used the debris to ward them. Shields flickered with the glancing impacts,

several minor hits were confirmed by the damage crews but still the ship drew closer, coming in line with Sicarius's perfect assault vector.

Hunks of the *Nobilis*, floating listlessly through the void, presented a serious threat to the strike cruiser's integrity. Volleys from the vessel's laser batteries sheared the larger sections in half. The lesser pieces of debris merely rebounded off the *Valin's Revenge's* armour.

It was a feat of bravura that finally allowed the exact attack point to be reached. Ventral drop pod bays vented in seconds, like tiny arrowheads launched from an unseen bow. They sped towards Damnos in formation, bearing Angels of Death and slim hope to the populace.

Finally capitulating under the necron gauss barrage, the shields broke down and the *Valin's Revenge* sustained a critical blow. Its payload delivered, Helmsman Lodis was content to retreat into the void, beyond the range of the guns, and lick his wounds.

For now, at least, Sicarius and his brothers were on their own.

Deep percussions shuddered through the walls of the drop pod.

The gauss-streams were getting closer. Warning runes flickered across the control console, urgent and red. Despite the thickness of the ceramite arrowhead in which the Space Marines were cocooned, the internal temperature was rising, not just with the heat of re-entry but from the proximity of the necron's anti-aircraft cannonade.

Sicarius was unmoved.

'Hold to your purpose, Lions,' he addressed his command squad. Except for Veteran-Sergeant Daceus, the rest of the nine-man retinue was masked by their cobalt-blue battle helmets. 'We roar!'

The engine drone forced his shout into a bellow. The captain's retainers voiced a reverberant war cry as one. It was a sound to stir Sicarius's Talassari blood.

None would ever eclipse the Second, they were preeminent amongst the Ultramarines. Even Agemman's First were looking over their heavy-

armoured shoulders.

His wide eyes flashed like stars as he roared again. 'Victoris Ultra!'

The reply was in mid-repeat when the gauss-beam clipped them, shearing away a portion of drop pod. Part of Brother Argonan went with it, most of his right shoulder and a chunk of torso. The blood vacating his body in the high-velocity pressure release of the pod vented like red streamers through the breach.

'Apothecary,' said Sicarius, donning his helmet and nodding to the only one of the squad armoured in white.

Brother Venatio leaned over to the stricken Argonan, unclasping one of his grav restraints to do so. Situated alongside him, Veteran-Sergeant Daceus instinctively seized the Apothecary's cuirass to steady him.

Punching a hole through Brother Argonan's gorget and chestplate with his reductor drill, Venatio quickly removed the sacred progenoids within and secured them in an ampoule-chamber mag-locked to his belt.

'Remember him,' Sicarius told his warriors. The wind had built to a shriek inside the compromised drop pod. Outside, visible only through the ragged trench in the hull, the world blurred like smeared paint. 'Avenge him,' the captain concluded.

His gaze flicked to a series of read-outs on the control console. Their trajectory was still sound. The metres to planetfall clicked past on electronic tumblers at a fearsome rate.

'Twenty-eight seconds and counting, High Suzerain,' Veteran-Sergeant Daceus announced, using one of Sicarius's many honorifics.

The physical testament to his many deeds was plain for all to see in the medals and laurels that bedecked his armour. Sicarius was a warrior born but he was also not one to shy from ostentation.

'Bolters and blades ready, sergeant,' he growled, gripping the hilt of the sword of Talassar. Tempest Blade was its name. Even Sicarius's weapons had laudations.

‘Hot hands and ready swords!’ barked Daceus to the rest.

Snap-slides from bolters being primed filled the noisy drop pod interior. Flames were tearing off the point where the gauss-beam had glanced them and ended Argonan’s life. None aboard gave them notice. All eyes were on the embarkation hatch.

Like the thunder-smite of a storm god, the drop pod touched down and sent impact cracks webbing across the surface of Damnos. It was one wound amongst many the planet had suffered.

A pneumatic pressure hiss preceded the exit ramp slamming down. Seconds later Sicarius was bounding through it, cape flaring, Guilliman’s name on his lips.

He speared a necron warrior, half-cooked by the drop pod’s incendiary flare. Another nearby had rapidly self-repaired and was advancing with automaton-like implacability. Sicarius pummelled its torso with a blast from his plasma pistol. Breaking into a run, he got close enough to behead it. The green balefires in its eyes guttered and died.

Behind him, the hard *chank-rattle* of bolters sounded as Daceus and the others opened up. Energy beams, viperous and emerald green, streaked through the smoke before Sicarius’s retinal scanners could resolve a better view. A gauss-beam scudded over his pauldron, stripping it back to naked ceramite with the barest touch.

The necrons’ balefire eyes appeared in the gloom like dead stars. The few they’d destroyed around the drop pod were just part of the vanguard.

More were coming.

The Thanatos foothills loomed in the distance like bad omens. The drop pods had got them as close as they could.

The ground running up to the snow-crested mounds was over three kilometres of debris-choked mire. Fanged by ice shards and dotted with arctic sinkholes, it was treacherous.

Scipio Vorolanus ate up the metres eagerly, his ‘Thunderbolts’ keeping pace alongside him and in spread formation. He checked the dispersal on his retinal display. A series of ident-runes showed good separation and fire-arc discipline.

‘Move!’ he said into the comm-feed, spurring his warriors as one.

Through the smoke-fog and the dust palls from the sundered refinery complex, shapes were moving ahead of them. They strode, slow and purposeful. Whickering emerald gauss-beams preceded them.

A grunt of pain, an armoured silhouette crumpling to Scipio’s extreme right signalled a hit. Brother Largo’s rune went to amber as the tac-display in Scipio’s helmet registered a serious injury.

Just a few more metres...

A long line of silver-grey, flecked with pieces of ceramic, opposed them. The necron fire was a relentless barrage now. Another Ultramarine battle-brother fell to its fury.

+Halt!+

Scipio was stunned into obedience by the figure running just ahead of him. The word resolved in his mind rather than his comm-feed, a psychic impulsion that could only be defied by one with sufficient will.

Varro Tigurius dropped into a crouch, gauss-beams flashing against a kine-shield the Chief Librarian had raised around him.

‘Get to cover. Hunker down!’ Scipio ordered, slamming behind a shattered wall in the gutted remains of the half-destroyed refinery.

The place was a grim mortuary, littered with the bodies of Damnosian labourers and indentured Imperial Guard troopers. There’d been a battle here, a hard-fought one that had ended badly for the human natives.

Scipio barely gave them a second glance. It had not always been so. Black Reach and the many hard years that followed had changed him.

Fifty metres of spar-studded, wire-drenched courtyard stood between the Ultramarines and the necron firing line. Tigurius had brought the Space

Marines to a sudden stop behind a ragged barricade before the final charge.

Peering through the gauss-laced haze, Scipio engaged the comm-feed. ‘Specialists to point, on Vorolanus.’

Brothers Cator and Brakkius moved up, crouch-running, a few seconds later. Scipio clapped Cator on his shoulder guard. ‘Plasma and meltagun at either end, brothers.’ Both nodded as one, taking position at the edges of the wall.

Chips of rockcrete and semi-flayed plasteel slivers forced Scipio to duck.

‘What are we waiting for, brother-sergeant?’ asked Naceon.

Scipio had his eyes on the courtyard – there was more than merely war-churned earth beneath its shattered flagstones – and didn’t look back.

‘For thunder and lightning.’

Telion had taught him when to wait and when to strike; the Master Scout’s expert tutelage and influence, presently engaged in other war zones, would be missed on Damnos. Scipio gestured towards Tigurius, a couple of metres ahead of them. ‘Watch and be ready.’

A coruscation of electricity suddenly wreathed the Librarian’s ornate battle armour and he pressed one gauntleted palm to the ground. Instantly, the azure energy banding him leapt into the earth and ripples of psychic force went searching through the no-man’s-land.

Like gruesome marionettes jerking to horrific un-life, the necron ‘flayed ones’ sprang from their ambushade. They’d been buried just beneath the surface of the earth, poised to attack the Ultramarines as they charged. A minefield of sorts, but one littered with an animate and deadly enemy rather than merely explosives.

Two of the ghoulish creatures juddered and expired from Tigurius’s lightning arcs, the flayed human skin draped across them like cloaks and cowls burning off in a noisome flesh-smoke. Several more came on,

having lost the element of surprise, but slashing with razored finger-talons anyway.

Scipio roared, ‘Space Marines – unleash death!’ The flare of his bolt pistol framed the hard edges of his crimson battle-helm in jagged monochrome.

A plasma bolt took one of the flayed ones in the chest, annihilating mechanical organs and processors. The necron collapsed in a heap, quivered and then phased from existence as if it had never even been there.

Another sloughed away under the beam of Cator’s meltagun. Despite the rapid self-repair engines of the necron’s advanced mechorganics, the damage was critical and it too was teleported away.

Naceon had leapt the barricade, full-auto adding thrust to his battle cry. ‘Ultramar and the Thunderbolts!’

Impact sparks riddled the onrushing necron, jarring but not stopping it. Naceon saw the danger, bringing his bolter’s combat-bayonet low to block, but was too late. Finding the weak points of Naceon’s armour joints, the flayed one punched several fatal wounds into the Ultramarine before slicing open his gorget.

Naceon’s head rolled like a dud-grenade into the dirt.

‘Guilliman and the Temple of Hera!’ Scipio invoked a blessing as he cut into the metal clavicle of Naceon’s killer. The chainsword bit deep and jammed.

An expressionless silver rictus, stained with blood, reared towards the sergeant. A bolt pistol burst took off the necron’s left claw-hand before it could slash him. Scipio then butted it, snapping the creature’s neck so its head lolled at an unnatural angle. He thumped his chainsword’s activation stud again, muttering a quick litany to the machine-spirit within, and it churned to life. Dropping his pistol, Scipio drove the blade two-handed clean through the flayed one’s body and out the other side. As he stepped

back, ready to strike again, the two mechanical halves slid diagonally and fell in opposite directions.

Scipio had barely recovered when a second necron was advancing upon him. Without his bolt pistol, he adopted a rapid defensive stance.

The flayed one exploded before it could engage, sparks and machine-parts flying like frag.

A pair of hard eyes, glowing with power and set in an ice-carved face, regarded him.

+Take up your arms+

Scipio gave a curt nod of thanks to Tigurius, his soul ever so slightly chilled by the Librarian's gaze, and retrieved his bolt pistol.

There was little time. The flayed ones were vanquished, Brakkus and Cator were finishing the wounded at close range, but the line of gauss-flayers remained.

Scipio waved his squad forward after Tigurius. Catching the Librarian's battle-signal on his retinal display, he opened up the comm-feed again.

'Squad Strabo. Bring fire from heaven.'

Hidden behind the wreckage of a refinery tower, ten bulky figures arched into the air on plumes of fire. The roar of their ascent jets made the necrons look skywards. Half of the creatures switched their aim, but the gauss-stream was too late and not nearly enough.

Hit from the front by Tigurius and Squad Vorolanus, and from above by Assault Squad Strabo, the necron firing line disintegrated, leaving the Ultramarines the victors.

In the aftermath, Tigurius eyed the distant Thanatos foothills. The forbidding arc of necron pylons and the long noses of gauss siege cannon blighted the horizon line. Sustained particle whips and focused energy beams bombarded the city of Kellenport relentlessly.

'They will be well guarded,' counselled the Librarian, without acknowledging Scipio's presence but answering his question before he'd

even asked it.

‘We’ll need a way to breach their defences,’ Scipio replied. Behind him, his squad and that of Sergeant Strabo secured the battle-site.

‘A dagger rather than a hammer,’ said Tigurius. ‘But not one wielded by the hand of a Space Marine,’ he added cryptically, turning his attention onto the sergeant. ‘Does something trouble you, Brother Vorolanus?’

Scipio shifted uncomfortably in his armour, wishing he hadn’t removed his battle-helm.

‘No, my lord,’ he answered, truthfully. *Nothing, except your psyker’s interrogation.*

Tigurius smiled and it was, at once, a deeply incongruous and unsettling gesture.

‘Perhaps it should be,’ he said, and left Scipio to plan the next stage of the assault.

Brother Orin was at the sergeant’s shoulder before he could reply.

‘We’ve secured the battle-site, my lord.’

Scipio re-donned his helmet. ‘Retrieve Naceon’s body and replenish ammo. We advance,’ he replied, left to wonder at Tigurius’s meaning.

They saw it as a star-fall from the heavens. All who manned the Kellenport walls, their tired bodies and weary souls crying out for succour, knew it for what it was. No mere meteor shower, although celestially that was how it first appeared.

No, it was salvation. Or so they all hoped.

Adanar Sonne surveyed the dispositions of his troops on the city battlements. They’d lost much of the outer ground beyond the core. Several of the defensive walls had fallen, those ringing the heart of the city. Ferrocrete, armaplas and adamantite had been made a mockery of by the necron flayer technology. The horrors it could inflict upon flesh and blood were even worse to behold.

The necrons had some kind of device, a phasic-generator the tech-priests had postulated. It had allowed the bulk of their awakened troops to teleport directly behind the Ark Guard's defensive positions. Fortified walls, bunkers, fields of razor-wire – they were no impediment to the mechanised advance of the necrontyr. Isolated pockets of resistance in these outer zones, 'the wasteland' as it had come to be known, fought still. Their lasgun reports diminished to the same ratio that the emerald flash of gauss-flayers increased. Soon they'd be silent and the metal host would come for the survivors cowering within the city's core.

Adanar could make out the remains of the lord governor's Proteus bunker in the snow-choked battlefield. How they had managed to extract him was unknown, but he was rumoured to be alive, albeit comatose and in critical condition. The body of Tarn, the former commander of the Ark Guard, lay amongst the corpse-tide. Their icy graves were barely settled when the necrons had begun marching over them. Tarn had been a brave man, and honourable. His rearguard action had allowed Adanar to lead the bulk of the troops behind the inner walls of Kellenport, all the way back to the western gate and the Courtyard of Thor. It was only delaying the inevitable but it gave them all a few more hours to contemplate their fate.

A sea of metal horrors extended all the way to the horizon line, their balefire eyes adding to the chill colonising the hearts of the men. In the distance, arcane pyramids, newly unearthed, hove into position. Every burst of infernal light from their cores seemed to bring fresh monsters into the fray. This legion of death would not be denied, but despite his fatalism Adanar would not yield without making a fight of it.

Behind him, the dense thud of *uber*-mortars and long-cannons could be heard. Their reports, though loud and earth-shaking, had started to pale in comparison to the necron barrage. Slowly, they were being drowned out.

We are all drowning... in our fear. Death, slow and terrible, has come to my world and there is no escaping it.

Adanar flinched reflexively as another of the artillery stations was sundered. A vast cloud of smoke belched across the Ark Guard platoons waiting in the Courtyard of Thor to fill the inevitable breaches in the wall.

Lasgun fire rained from the battlements, a steady shriek of energy that the necrons waded through as if it were nothing but an insect swarm. Shielded by bunkers, hunched below plascrete bulwarks or hastily erected barricades, the Ark Guard were holding out. For now, at least.

Rotational guns – las and autocannon, heavy stubber and bolter – slaved to a rail network, spat muzzle flashes into an alien darkness. Not only had the necrontyr brought a comms shroud to blanket the regions before them, they had summoned an unnatural shadow too. Running hot on its tracks, Adanar watched a team wheel an autocannon in position only for it to be vaporised by necron heavy fire before it could shoot. Ammo buckets attached to the platform went up in a fiery cascade, shredding the crew and several more Ark Guard nearby. Below, platoon sergeants saw the hole and ordered more men into the gap.

‘Sir.’

Adanar was dimly aware of someone addressing him.

The voice became insistent. ‘Commander Sonne.’

He glared at Besseque, his aide. The man was shorter by a head than Adanar and had his cold-coat buckled all the way to his chin. His goggles were perched on his hooded head and covered in rime-frost. Shivering, Besseque saluted before going on.

‘Acting-Governor Rancourt has just been on the vox. He wants a battalion sent to the Capitolis Administratum. He says if the area outside the walls can be cleared then an extraction from the Crastia Shipyards will be possible.’

Adanar fought the urge to strike Besseque, but it wasn’t the messenger’s fault. He cursed the day that Rancourt returned from the ice wastes alive.

‘Request denied,’ he answered flatly.

The Capitolis Administratum was an isolated bastion out in the wasteland. From his vantage point on the wall Adanar could discern its troops fighting hard against necron aggressors. Somewhere inside, Zeph Rancourt had secreted himself, deep within the governmental chambers. Perhaps that was where they'd moved Arxis to, as well.

Mercifully, only the lesser necron constructs were harrying the bastion's high walls. Wave after wave of scarab creatures assailed the Ark Guard platoon and the capitolis storm troopers charged with its defence, but they were holding. The necron war cell diverting its attention in the bastion's direction suggested that situation was about to change.

'It's a suicide mission,' Adanar muttered, and brought his attention back to the broader killing-fields.

'What should I tell the acting governor, sir, he won't—'

'Tell him to feg off for all I care, Besseque! There are no more men, no spare battalions. It's ov—' Adanar caught himself before he went too far. He lowered his voice, just for the aide. 'It's over, Corporal Besseque. This world is our tomb.'

Slowly, Besseque nodded and backed away. The hollow anger in Adanar's eyes was reflected in the corporal's fearful pupils.

Adanar didn't watch him go. He returned to observe the assault. Hard to see, as a sudden snowfall shawled the more distant defensive walls, but a line of shattered tanks punctuated the outer marker of the city where they'd first tried to meet the necrons. The enemy had annihilated the armour columns with perfunctory ease and then used their swarm creatures to gut the machine innards of the Imperial tanks and convert them into more necron warrior constructs. How foolish the humans had been to think anything other than hiding behind the walls of the capital would extend their lives, albeit fractionally.

'How much of a fool,' whispered Adanar. He rubbed his finger over a locket-charm chained to his wrist. There were two pict's nestled inside,

memories of the wife and child now slumbering beneath the Damnos earth like so many others.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ghosting the air with his breath, the din of the battle all around him receding. He felt the scar on his face, the ache in his shoulder and back from when he’d tried to save them. When the hab had collapsed and... and...

Adanar shut his eyes.

Tarn, the poor dead fegger, had been wise to tell him to flee with his family. A pity Adanar had not heeded him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he echoed, talking to the phantoms in his mind. He wiped away a tear, crystallised on his cheek, and the battle rushed back. They were stretched. He needed more men. Once the phasic-generator was in range it wouldn’t matter. Not long now. He’d be with them soon enough.

Some of the Ark Guard in the courtyard were pointing at the sky.

Adanar followed their gestures and saw... *comets*. Armoured comets, cobalt-blue and streaked in flame, emblazoned with an icon he had seen depicted in tapestries and triptychs, if never in real life.

Ultramarines.

The Space Marines had come.

When ordered to join the gate-guard, a soldier surrendered all semblance of control and accepted his fate was no longer in his own hands. Even firing a weapon was pointless. Engaging the enemy was impossible. The first moment a gate-guard would know of the enemy was when that enemy was bearing down on him, breaching the very portal he had sworn to protect.

Falka accepted the duty grimly. He never trembled like the other men did when the earth shook and the gate shuddered from artillery impacts. He gripped his lascarbine, felt the reassuring weight of the ice-pick tugging at his belt loop, and waited. He thought of Jynn, lost in the ice storm. It seemed like years, but in reality it was just months. She’d got

them out of the mine and died an ignominious death for her bravery. Sometimes, the Emperor's sense of humour was a cruel one. Falka's last sight of her had been the ice bank collapsing, Jynn and a dozen or so others falling to the abysmal white of the frost-gale.

Now all he had was the gate. He had lived, she had not. It would count for something, Falka decided. He'd seen, first-hand, what had happened in the outer zones – 'the wasteland'. Ferrocrete and plasteel were no barriers to these creatures, these *necrons*. They filled the air with their threats, their promises of annihilation and domination, and there was nothing the Ark Guard could do. This was a menace that could materialise through walls or *inside* bunkers. There was no place on all of Damnos to hide. So, it was with a certain irony that Falka regarded the western gate.

When the phasic-generator, an arcane device spoken of in fearful whispers by the men, got close enough or attained enough power, they would be tooth to nail with the necrons. Flesh against metal, the humans did not stand a chance.

'You were the lucky one, Jynn,' muttered Falka, and the sadness plucked at his stomach, making him feel sick.

'Trooper Kolpeck.' It was the gate-sergeant, a hard-edged brute called Muhrne. 'Save your prayers until they're at the gate.'

'With respect, sir,' Falka replied, 'it won't matter a shard. They'll pass the western gate and be on us without warning.'

Muhrne nodded sagely. 'So, like I said: save your prayers.'

Falka laughed before his gaze was drawn to the sky and he saw the stars falling, setting the clouds aflame.

The drop pods hammered into the earth with concussive fury. Adanar watched a wave slam into position around the Capitolis Administratum, burning scarabs off the walls with the displaced heat of their re-entry. Slab sides like the edges of an arrowhead crashed open with a hiss of venting pressure and a missile barrage disgorged from within. Tiny explosions,

combining to form much larger ones, erupted throughout the necron ranks in close proximity to the bastion. Adanar had expected Space Marines; instead he got a fusillade that was punishing the enemy hard with automated precision. The defenders, pushed close to the brink of defeat, rallied at once. Redoubled las-fire spat from the walls adding to the carnage.

Adanar's vicarious exultation was short-lived as the phasic-generator came into range and so too did the necron warrior cohorts. Several war cells translated *through* the Kellenport walls and fell upon the vanguard Adanar had positioned in front of the Courtyard of Thor. A strange sensation emanated from the newly arrived enemy, something brought on by the effects of the generator's recent activation. The world spun vertiginously and Adanar was forced to cling to the battlement for support. He heard screams, echoing through the fog of sudden dislocation, and assumed several of the Ark Guard stationed on the wall had fallen.

'Sergeant,' he began, spitting out the word through gritted teeth.

Sergeant Nabor was on his knees, blubbering like an infant with his hands over his ears.

It had affected the entire garrison.

Adanar tried to move, thinking he was stepping back when in fact he went forward. He reached for his laspistol, hoping the sudden discharge might return his senses, but grabbed for the empty air on the left side of his belt, instead of the holster on his right.

'Throne of Earth,' he garbled, as an errant trickle of blood wept from his nostril and touched his lip. The copper tang was intense, almost acidic.

Below, through his tunnelling, kaleidoscopic vision, the vanguard was being slaughtered.

A voice, inhuman and metallic, resolved on the breeze.

Heed my words for I am the Herald and we are the footsteps of doom. Interlopers, do we name you. Defilers of our sacred earth. We have awoken to your primitive species and will not tolerate your presence. Ours is the

way of logic, of cold hard reason; your irrationality, your human disease has no place in the necrontyr. Flesh is weak. Surrender to the machine incarnate. Surrender and die.

Adanar found his laspistol – it was as if it'd been placed in his trembling grasp – and pressed it to his forehead.

‘Surrender to the machine incarnate,’ he echoed macabrely. ‘Surrender and die.’ A thought, so small and insignificant he barely felt it, entered his brain and he paused for a few life-saving seconds. The trigger pull never came.

The comets from heaven crashed home, flooding the plaza beyond the walls with cobalt-blue angels, and the terrible sensation abated.

Weeping openly, Adanar put down his gun and praised the Emperor.

‘Thank you, my loves,’ he sobbed, rubbing at the locket-charm. ‘Thank you.’

Mustering his resolve, ignoring the fact Sergeant Nabor had forcibly evacuated much of his brainpan across the battlement, Adanar issued the order to open the western gate and empty the Courtyard of Thor.

The tide had turned.



CHAPTER THREE

Aboard the Valin's Revenge prior to drop pod assault

Scipio knelt on the assembly deck, blessing his weapons before launch. Less than fifty metres away row upon row of drop pods waited, cinched in their launch tubes.

‘As I anoint this holy bolter with these words of benediction, so too do I commit myself, body and mind, to the service of the Emperor. I swear by Guilliman’s blade and for the glory of Ultramar that Thy will be done.’ Holstering his bolt pistol, Scipio drew his chainsword from a sheath on his armour’s power generator and pressed the still blade to his forehead. ‘Make my hand into a ready sword; let my faith and certainty of purpose be my shield. For I am Adeptus Astartes, Ultramarine, pre-eminent of all Chapters. So swears Lord Guilliman.’

‘So swears Lord Guilliman,’ echoed a deep voice behind him.

Scipio smiled and turned, sheathing his weapon. ‘Didn’t think I’d see you again so soon, brother.’

Iulus Fennion had a face like a slab of carved granite and displayed about the same amount of emotion. He clasped Scipio’s proffered hand and tiny cracks sprang out from the corners of his eyes in what could have been amusement.

‘A dangerous mission into the Thanatos Hills,’ Iulus replied, all business. His square jaw and flat nose shifted like a mountain crag as he spoke, and the stubble on his chin and head reminded Scipio of grit rather than hair.

‘Is that concern I hear, brother?’ Scipio asked, releasing his grip and patting his fellow sergeant on the shoulder.

Iulus shrugged, pretending to run a final check over his wargear. ‘A statement of fact. As part of the main push to relieve Kellenport, I won’t be there to watch your back.’

‘I can think of no better to perform such a task, either,’ Scipio replied with genuine bonhomie. ‘Or perhaps it’s you that’s in need of protection.’

Iulus grunted something when the pair were interrupted by a third figure.

‘Brother-sergeants.’ Praxor’s greeting was friendly enough, but a chill entered the air at his arrival nonetheless.

The three clasped vambraces in the manner of the old way once favoured by Macraggian battle-kings.

‘A glorious campaign is in prospect,’ said Praxor Manorian. ‘Our Lord Sicarius will bring many laurels to the Second this day.’

‘Cast off your politician’s mantle, Praxor,’ growled Iulus, finding the other sergeant’s vainglory distasteful. ‘It is war, plain and simple.’

‘There is more than mere soldiery at play here. We need to be seen to be supporting our captain.’

Scipio snorted. He hadn’t seen Praxor in many weeks – he originally believed he’d been secluded in the practice cages, but later discovered he was involved in senate dealings concerning Calgar’s eventual successor. ‘Support for what? Sicarius’s elevation?’

Praxor looked nonplussed, his thin face taut like wire. Together with his silver hair, the sergeant had the haughty cast of a statue. He was certainly inflexible enough when it came to Ultramar politics. ‘Yes, what else?’

Iulus shook his head. ‘We three have debated this point at length, and I still maintain it is unfitting talk for warriors. Agemman is First, therefore he sits at Lord Calgar’s right hand. I vaunt Sicarius as much and as readily as any in the Chapter, as any in the Second, but the law of ascendancy is what it is.’ The grizzled veteran folded his arms as if that were an end to it.

‘Just because you have a uniquely simple view of matters does not mean everyone else has, Iulus,’ chided Praxor. ‘Every victory, laurel and laudation we garner for the Second brings us closer to our rightful place, at the head of Calgar’s table.’

Bored of the debate, one that had been waxing and waning for over a century, Scipio began inspecting the seals on his power armour. ‘There is no struggle, save that devised by your imaginings, Praxor,’ he said dismissively. ‘You’ve been spending too much time in temples with the legates, senators and magistrates instead of on the battlefield. I liked you better when you were a slave to the battle-cages. At least that improved your blade-craft.’

Iulus laughed, a rare concession to humour for him, but Praxor returned a serious expression. ‘It is no trivial matter, Scipio. Our Chapter’s future and who shapes it is of the utmost importance to all of us.’ He relaxed a little, realising he was being goaded. ‘And besides, the struggle is plain to see.’

Scipio frowned, bidding Praxor to clarify.

‘Or did you not see Helios in the mission briefing? Him and four others of the First – Agemman’s watchmen.’

‘You see conspiracy and spies where I see only fellow battle-brothers–’

‘They are not alone,’ interrupted Iulus, pointing further down the deck where three mighty Chapter wardens stomped into view.

The drop pods meant to convey the Dreadnoughts were slightly larger than the rest and designed to accommodate their bulk. Ultracius, Agnathio

and venerable Agrippen – veterans all, formerly battle-brothers but now warriors-eternal entombed within sarcophagi of ceramite. Their mechanised shells were festooned with honour gilding and reliquaries, purity seals and oaths of moment. Each bore the sigil of the Ultramarines proudly and was armed with a brutal array of weapons.

‘Agrippen is First, is he not?’ said Iulus, rubbing at the rough texture of his chin as he considered what it must be like to fight for the Chapter as a Dreadnought.

‘Aye,’ uttered Praxor darkly. ‘He is.’

‘You’ll turn us all into company separatists with this talk, brother,’ Scipio warned. ‘It’s not fitting.’

Praxor turned on him, flint in his eyes and ice in his voice. ‘Eventually you’ll need to find your loyalties, Scipio. The Second fight and die as one.’

Scipio smacked away his brother’s coaxing hand before it touched his shoulder. ‘No, we the *Chapter* are as one. Politics be damned.’

‘It is for the good of the Chapter that I speak!’ Praxor was clearly becoming exasperated. As if remembering where he was, he lowered his voice. ‘And by supporting our captain, we are achieving that aim. There will come a time when political schism is inevitable. You won’t be able to hide behind your indifference then, Scipio. Your hand will be counted, as will every other sergeant and captain’s.’

‘Then I hope that day is long in the coming, brother. For it holds no interest for me.’ It came out harder than Scipio had intended.

Praxor’s expression went from animated to one of resignation. ‘As you wish.’ He saluted, somewhat crisply, and stalked away to find his squad. By now the assembly deck was thronged with battle-brothers from the Second. There were elements from other companies too: specialist forces the Ultramarines would need to face the necrons. Praxor only had issue

with those warriors from the First, perceived as a threat by the paranoid brother-sergeant.

‘He craves the captain’s validation still, even after all this time,’ said Iulus. ‘Space Marines have long memories and pride, the same as any man.’

‘I would see Praxor’s pride lanced swiftly before it overtakes his reason.’

Iulus only nodded.

Scipio scowled at Praxor’s back as he departed. ‘He’s a fool.’

‘Perhaps.’

A raised eyebrow gave away Scipio’s surprise. ‘You agree with him?’

‘I am a soldier, brother. I care not for the politics of advancement. Calgar will appoint the right successor, I trust in that. But I’m not blind, either. Agemman is looking over his shoulder, and Sicarius has his gaze fixed on what’s ahead of the First Captain. Power struggles are inevitable in any organised structure – they don’t need to be a bad thing, either.’

‘You sound more like a Salamander, all tedious pragmatism and fatalistic acceptance.’

‘Better to accept what you cannot change and learn to adapt than rail against the immutable and end up wasting time and effort.’

Scipio gave the facial equivalent of a shrug, indicating his interest in the matter was at an end. ‘Battle calls, brother,’ he said. Squad Vorolanus was gathering around their drop pod, awaiting their sergeant. ‘May Guilliman guide your hand and the Emperor shield you.’ His gauntlet slapping Iulus’s pauldron made a dull ring before he turned away.

The hard-faced brother-sergeant seized Scipio’s forearm, stopping him.

‘Those heavy guns,’ he said, releasing his grip. ‘They won’t be easy to knock out, even with Lord Tigurius at your side.’

‘It is I who’ll be at *his* side, Iulus.’

Scipio hadn't seen the Master of Librarians throughout the muster but somehow felt his presence. Varro Tigurius was formidable in the psychic arts – to take to the field with him was a great honour, but also a source of trepidation for the sergeant. What misgivings might he uncover in Scipio's turbulent mind?

Iulus brought him back. 'Even still, you'll be far from the rest of us.'

Confusion creased Scipio's brow. Did Iulus doubt him for some reason?

'The necron pylons *will* be destroyed, brother.' His eye-line strayed to the distant figure of Antaro Chronus as he inspected the Ultramarines armour. 'Rest assured of that.'

The master tank commander would not be deployed with the first wave, but Thunderhawk transporters stood ready on the launch bay for when the enemy beam weapons were silenced and passage opened for the Predators, Whirlwinds and Devastators in Chronus's arsenal.

'I don't doubt it. Antaro's cannons will be a welcome friend in a sea of foes when you do.'

'What is it, then? All this evasion.' Scipio's eyes narrowed. 'It's not like you.'

'I give you counsel, that is all,' Iulus said plainly. He paused, as if deciding how and if to proceed. Good advice given at a bad time by a friend was always harder to hear; it was even harder to give. 'You are becoming like him.'

Scipio's face stiffened. It had lost much of its youthful exuberance over the last century, only the close-cropped hair remained the same. 'More allusion. Are you sure that's not Praxor Manorian under all that grim and sturm?'

Iulus didn't return Scipio's smile.

'I am my own man, Iulus.'

'I don't doubt that.' The sergeant had his hands up in a plaintive gesture. 'But these creatures are not ork, nor are they eldar or even Traitors...'

‘I know what they are, brother.’

Warning sirens were sounding, signalling the imminent drop pod assault. Further counsel from Iulus Fennion would have to wait.

Sicarius, ever the last to walk the assembly deck, ever the first out onto the battlefield, had just arrived with his Lions. The captain and his command squad strode with an imperious air about them. As they closed on their drop pod, the slab sides of the inverted arrowhead grinding open to allow them access, Sicarius spoke. ‘Glory to the Second,’ he roared, a broad grin splitting his patrician jawline. He lifted the Tempest Blade and its edge glittered in the half-light. ‘Let’s give them a taste of Guilliman’s wrath.’

The necron cannonade had begun outside the thick walls of the *Valin’s Revenge*. The rapid manoeuvres by Helmsman Lodis and the close proximity of the blasts resonated through the hull and shook the assembly deck.

Sicarius laughed it off, even as he was enjoying the bellowed affirmations of his men.

‘I am my own man,’ Scipio repeated, watching Sicarius and the Lions of Macragge climb aboard their drop pod. It was something he and Iulus should also be doing.

‘Just watch yourself, brother. Promise me that at least.’

Scipio nodded, not liking the hint of anxiety in Iulus’s eyes. They clapped pauldrons, their brief disagreement forgotten, and made for the drop pods.

It would be a long time before they saw each other again.

When the Lions were in their positions and the access hatch was closing, Sicarius’s expression changed. Swathed in shadows, with only the internal lumes of the pod interior to light it, his face took on a much darker cast.

‘These revenants are not like the greenskins,’ he warned. ‘The warriors outside this covenant are Second Company – there are none better – but

they require steel and fire, not cold hard facts. Let the tactica briefings give them the knowledge they require to do their duty. You, my Lions, are *chosen*. You, as I do, will know what we face on the Damnos soil.’ Sicarius looked to his second-in-command.

Veteran-Sergeant Daceus narrowed his eyes. He swept his gaze across the other eight Space Marines in the drop pod. A countdown timer had begun. Intermittent vox-chimes signalled the imminence of launch; the shuddering impacts felt against the hull conveyed its urgency.

‘There have been few reported sightings, let alone engagements with these creatures. We, the Second, have yet to lock blades with them but they are a foe unlike any other. Your tactica briefings are inloaded to your retinal displays – I suggest we all analyse that data during launch. Their technology, resilience and ability to self-repair are all in there.’

The vox-chimes were getting closer together as the countdown started to reach its final cycle.

‘There is no drill, no amount of training or physical honing that can prepare you for this foe,’ he went on. ‘Preparing for the unknown, adapting to face the unforeseen scenario, it is what we Space Marines excel at. We are not the Guard, mere men, who would balk and pale in the face of this enemy. We are Ultramarines, but our mettle will be tested here – yours, the valiant Lions, most of all. To be chosen means something. It is more than honour, it is responsibility. Inspire your battle-brothers, for we will need inspiration and visible courage this day.’

Each of the warriors present met Daceus’s hard eyes. Vandius, their Company Banner Bearer, wore a determined expression – his duty was to keep the standard of the Second aloft. Gaius Prabian, as Champion, was charged with keeping Sicarius alive and allowing him to lead the line – Daceus didn’t envy him, but there was steel in his eyes and aggression. Of the others, all showing grim resolve and ready violence, only Venatio remained carefully neutral. The Apothecary knew his task would be

hardest of all and it carried the most weight – in his hands was the future of the Chapter, the harvesting and safeguard of the gene-seed.

‘Trust in the Codex, and in your captain,’ Daceus concluded. ‘Through that we will triumph.’

‘You all know my mind,’ said Sicarius. ‘Know this, also: I do not want this fight. I desire to gild our banner with victory, to elevate our station, to glorify our Lord Calgar and the Chapter. But our chances of victory here, on Damnos, are almost none. We will do what is needed, because it is asked of us and as Adeptus Astartes it is our solemn calling, but we are stepping onto a dead world.’

He thrust out a clenched fist.

The move was immediately mirrored by every warrior in the drop pod, until ten spokes of ceramite formed a wheel of brotherhood around the interior.

‘Courage and honour.’

The words were returned to Sicarius, spoken with stern conviction.

The vox-chimes reached a long sustained whine. Launch engines were burning outside the drop pod. The bays opened in unison. There was a sense of weightlessness, then of gravity pulling them downwards through the atmosphere. Temperature gauges rose; so too did the sound of the necron guns.

The liberation of Damnos had begun.



CHAPTER FOUR

Iulus issued a series of orders using Ultramarines battle-sign and his squad tightened around him in a defensive cordon centred on the drop pod. Sicarius and his Lions had landed ahead of them. Somehow, impossibly, even their transport was more eager than everyone else's to close with the enemy.

Necrons were thronging the plaza. Hot beams from their gauss-flayers turned the accumulated snow to slush that detonated wetly beneath Iulus's armoured tread.

'Dense separation, suppressing fire,' he bellowed, voice grating through his vox-grille. Iulus seldom wore a battle-helm, preferring for his squad to see his face and the fury therein, but on this occasion he was glad of it. The snow-fog occluded the view. Retinal sensors built into his helmet lenses overcame that easily, the reddish blur of the unique necron heat signature readily discernible in his field of vision.

Staccato bolter fire, clipped and precise, rewarded the many training drills he'd put the 'Immortals' through during his tenure as their sergeant. Several of the automatons jerked and bucked against the bolt storm before collapsing into the snow-slush.

'Advance and execute,' he continued.

The Immortals moved on their sergeant's lead, charging up to the stricken necrons. Three battle-brothers hung back as the others went ahead of the enemy casualties. The loud *crack-bang* of single headshots and the sonorous report of a phasal shift filled the air.

Iulus had read the tactica briefings extensively. Nothing barring critical system damage would prevent a necron's ability to self-repair. He was taking no chances.

'Report,' he barked into the comm-feed.

'Eliminated, brother-sergeant.' Three identical replies came back before Iulus's squad were reunited. The dense *chud-chud* of a heavy bolter, unleashed by 'Guilliman's Hammer', Tirian's Devastators, sounded from the left. It was paired off with another weapon, the two cannons giving off intermittent barrages that overlapped at the beginning and end of their ammo cycles. The *foom* of missile tubes provided a low chorus to the percussive refrain of the bolters. Explosions, hazy through the mist, bloomed. Snow and frag spat in diagonal bursts. It was brutal, but in the distance necrons were rising from the carnage.

'Temple of Hera.' Iulus had moved ahead of the Devastators, but caught the flare of muzzle flashes and the fading contrail of expelled smoke in his peripheral vision as they advanced. There was little to no cover on the plaza, the necrons had levelled it with their cannonade, but that was why Space Marines wore power armour – ceramite battle plate was all the cover they needed.

From the right, Brother-Sergeant Atavian brought up a second squad of Devastators, the Titan Slayers. Their weapons brought swift death to the mechanoids. Even the necrons' enhanced repair ability couldn't save them from the searing beam of a lascannon or the metal-sloughing effects of a multi-melta. Iulus stayed close to Atavian, advancing in an oblique line. Engage, take ground, engage – enacted as if on the training ground.

The first few raiders had been the exploratory elements of a vanguard. The reddish heat signature blurs on Iulus's retinal display suddenly increased as the Ultramarines reached the shadow of the first of Kellenport's defensive walls. It was overrun and the sound of desperate Guardsmen fated for death resolved on the breeze like a requiem.

Spreading out, the necrons had enveloped them. Bolters tracked and fired to compensate, relying on advanced targeting sensors – the mist was so bad that the enemy were literally appearing as if from nowhere, and in numbers.

'Brother, my flank has been compromised.' It was Atavian through the comm-feed in Iulus's helmet.

'Close up battle-formation, there are more necrons than we first believed.'

An affirmation rune flashed on Iulus's retinal display. The tac-icons representing the Devastator squad started to move closer to the Immortals. Iulus noticed there were several red markers that remained static.

Squad Fennion and the two Devastators – they were the rearguard. Glory belonged to others.

'Take and hold the ground.' Those had been his orders during the mission briefing. Thirty Ultramarines to keep a simple esplanade from the enemy. It had seemed like overkill; now, Iulus Fennion wasn't so sure.

A swarm of beetle-like creatures droned out of the fog, mandibles champing.

The Immortals turned with battle-honed efficiency and cut them down. Brother Galvia cried out as one of the creatures clamped onto his forearm. Iulus stepped in and excised the mechanoid with his chainsword. A stamp of his armoured boot ceased the beetle's squirming after it was removed. A bolter salvo exploded another with mass-reactive fury before it could refashion itself and attack anew.

'They're hard to keep down,' breathed Galvia. 'I've never seen such—'

A gauss-beam skewering his shoulder and upper torso cut him off. Iulus reached for Galvia, who grunted and slumped to his knees. Blood-stained slush splattered his armour viscerally as he fell hard.

The wounding preceded a fusillade of gauss-fire as the necron vanguard force tried to pin them. Enfilading beams streaked across the trio of Space Marine squads diagonally while more of the drone beetles pressed an assault from the front. Iulus had one arm under Galvia to support him; with the other he wielded a whirring chainsword with menace. He swatted the first scarab-like creature, cracking its carapace but not disabling it; a second he carved with a heavy downward swing. A third latched to his vambrace but he was able to shake it off and crush it under his boot.

Another dug into his back, gnawing at the power generator. Emergency icons flashed up on his retinal display warning of an imminent energy drain. Iulus reached for the creature but staggered when a pair of scarabs fastened themselves to his pauldron. He cried out as one attached itself to his battle-helm. Below, Galvia screamed in agony and frustration.

‘Aristaeus!’ The comm-feed was wretched with interference. The creatures were slowly disabling it.

The low *whoosh* of pressure release and the acrid stench of promethium filled the air as Iulus and Galvia were consumed by fire. Aristaeus had kept the aperture of his flamer narrow. Both Ultramarines emerged from the conflagration blackened but otherwise unscathed. Smoking, burning scarabs writhed about on the scorched earth. Iulus crushed one underfoot before dispatching the others with a desultory burst from his bolt pistol.

He waved Aristaeus forward. ‘Bring the heat.’

The Ultramarine had lost his battle-helm in the fight and wore a scarred grimace instead. His eyes became hateful slits as he unleashed the full fury of his flamer.

The swarm died in a nucleonic storm and Iulus was readying to advance when his retinal display was overloaded by a beam hit to his eye. He cried

out, dropping his chainsword so he could rip his helmet off before it corroded through and the gauss-flayer started in on his face, but still held onto Galvia.

The battle-helm hit the ground with a dull *thud* and rolled, the right ocular lens partially dissolved, the ceramite around it bare and raw.

‘Set me down,’ Galvia mumbled. Even lying on his side, an unknown number of internal organs ruptured, he triggered his bolter. The swathe of shells found several marks and the scarabs exploded aerially like flak.

Iulus resisted the urge to touch his injured face. It hurt but pain-suppressing chemicals were already flooding his system to combat the pain and keep him fighting.

With the gauss-fire intensifying around them, forming an almost lattice-like web of emerald, any ordinary soldier would have retreated. Bolt pistol blazing as he stooped for his chainsword, Iulus’s order demonstrated that Space Marines were no ordinary soldiers.

‘Hold the line and return fire. In Guilliman’s name!’

The Ultramarines were dauntless, but so too were the implacable necrons. One side would have to break. The low booming voice, rendered through a vox-caster, decided which side that would be.

‘For the Chapter and the Lords of Ultramar!’ The assault cannon of Brother Ultracius whirled into a blur of muzzle flare. Out in the cloying snow-fog, Iulus saw necron raider constructs torn apart. Instantly, the gauss enfilade lessened.

Ponderous but redoubtable, the Dreadnought had taken a little longer to reach the hold-point than the rest of the rearguard. It had been a long few minutes before his arrival but now the veteran warrior had arrived, Iulus knew the tide was with them.

‘Defend the line; maintain it until the veterans of the Second can join you.’ It had been a sound plan and one that suited the sergeant’s intractable nature.

What was more, Ultracius was not alone.

‘I am the warrior eternal of my Chapter. Long live Macragge and the Empire of Ultramar.’ Where Ultracius was bombastic and glorifying, Brother Agnathio was unshakable and pragmatic. He moved with the slow but inexorable purpose of a glacier, his multi-melta scything the distant raider formations with impunity.

‘Spread and engage,’ bellowed Iulus, taking advantage as the necrons faltered, ‘slow and exacting.’

He nodded to Agnathio, who had pounded up alongside him.

‘Good to have you with us, venerable one.’

‘I am the avatar of my Chapter’s will. I serve eternally.’ The Dreadnought’s mind was not as lucid as it had once been. Agnathio knew not what year, what conflict he was embroiled in, only that he fought for the glory of the Ultramarines. A part of Iulus relished the simplicity of that existence as much as another part pitied it.

‘For Ultramar.’

‘Aye, for Ultramar!’ The multi-melta sang its shrieking refrain again, spearing the necron constructs that were moving to engage them at closer quarters.

Tirian’s gravelly voice came over the comm-feed. ‘They’re adopting more aggressive protocols.’

‘They react,’ said Iulus, ‘as if directed. These shells are automatons with only hate and fell technology to animate them, but a will is at work here. Engage and destroy.’

Iulus felt his grip on the esplanade tightening. Despite the change in tactics, the necrons would not prevent him making a fist and holding the ground indefinitely. It was then, as the rearguard was fanning out and punishing the necron vanguard, that two things happened almost simultaneously to change the complexion of the battle.

First, the massive gates behind the Ultramarines opened and a human Guard force poured out, lasguns flashing. Second, a larger and much more densely packed necron cohort emerged from the fog ahead. They were bigger than the raider constructs and more heavily armed. Iulus was forced to reassess the internal boast he had made. His fist had become an open palm, clinging with fingertips. The tide had shifted again. Instinctively, the Ultramarines closed ranks. Even the Dreadnoughts paused in the face of this latest threat.

‘Bring them down,’ Iulus roared as the necron elites unleashed a gauss-storm of terrifying potency. ‘Give them nothing!’

Estimating thirty of the hulking necrons and factoring in the remnants of the raider constructs that were still operational, Iulus made a quick assessment of their odds. His conclusion was muttered defiantly. ‘We need more men.’

The sky above Kellenport was wracked with incandescent thunder. The city was a distant silhouette, leavened only by the flash of explosions.

Scipio wanted to be there, alongside his brothers Iulus and Praxor, but that was not his lot in this war. Instead, he was crouched in a slowly melting mire of slush and hard earth, peering through a pair of magnoculars.

‘How does it look, brother-sergeant?’ asked Largo, flat against the escarpment on his armoured chest.

Power armour didn’t really lend itself to stealth missions, it was too bulky and better suited to more direct engagements, but without any of the Tenth to reconnoitre the Thunderbolts were being used as de facto scouts.

‘Busy,’ Scipio grumbled. He handed Largo the magnoculars for a look. He was bearing his earlier injury well, the sergeant noted. Barely a flinch when Scipio had forced him to twist and reach for the scopes.

‘Their picket lines look thick even without magnification,’ added Ortus, sighting down the barrel of his bolter. Despite the fact the Ultramarines

assault force was still several kilometres away, he could tell that the war cells protecting the pylons and gauss-obliterators were numerous. He had a good eye for that. Ortus spent most of his training allocation on the firing ranges. He could deploy his weapon like a sniper rifle, so accomplished was his aim.

‘Find the leader and you have my permission to take the shot,’ replied Scipio, before shuffling backwards down the ridge on his stomach. Part of their scouting task, as well as assessing the level of resistance, was to find the necron hierarch commanding the force. Imperial tacticians, those who were privy to the threat of the necrontyr, had postulated that rather than being unfeeling automatons the necrons actually adhered to a series of ‘protocols’ not that dissimilar from a servitor’s. Their logic-engines were far more advanced, of course, but by removing the sentient will that guided it, a war cell would resort to secondary functions. Their tactics would become less adaptable and more predictable. Such a disadvantage made them easier to defeat and increased the likelihood of a full scale ‘phasal retreat’. These were all theories, however. There wasn’t enough battle-data yet recorded that allowed any firm conclusions to be drawn concerning potential necron weaknesses.

Tigurius obviously thought the reasoning was sound – Scipio agreed – and so charged his ‘scouts’ with finding the hierarch leading the cell defending the artillery. So far, they’d had little luck in doing so.

Largo was putting the magnoculars away when he asked, ‘How will we breach it?’

‘Not this way, that’s for certain.’ As he was returned to the present, Scipio brought to mind the densely thronged access routes through the hills to the necron artillery. As well as the ubiquitous raider constructs, there were larger elites and even semi-ephemeral ghosts patrolling the enemy picket lines. They’d formed concentric rings around the mass of heavy cannons in the centre. While the ghosts phased in and out of

existence, the raiders and elites stood still and unspeaking like metallic sentinels. Scipio suspected they would wait like that until the galaxy burned and the universe itself ended, if commanded to do so. At least orks bickered, even the alien tyrannid chittered and the Traitor hordes exalted and chanted: these soulless machines just stood in abject silence. Despite Scipio's Adeptus Astartes hypno-conditioning, it was unnerving.

‘Perhaps a diversionary attack to draw out the bulk of their troops, allowing Strabo and Ixion to neutralise the guns.’

Scipio shook his head at Largo. ‘There are too many and they won't move. That's a defensive force. Whatever protocol it's operating on will keep them from coming at us.’

He'd seen enough of the necrons, their mechanistic idioms, their logic-engine style tactics, to know that they couldn't be coaxed or goaded. Only a certain and direct imperative would force the mechanoids to alter their battle-routines. Somehow, the Ultramarines attacking the Thanatos Hills had to find it. If executing the necron leader was the key to that, there was still a lot of work to be done.

His eyes narrowed when he spied a rocky promontory overlooking the artillery. ‘How does that look to you?’

Largo went back to the scopes, magnifying to enhance the view. He scowled. ‘Impenetrable.’

‘No route through the terrain?’

‘We need gunships and speeders,’ Largo replied.

‘A pity they are locked down aboard the *Valin* then,’ added Ortus.

With the necron cannonade still in operation, not only was Kellenport subject to constant bombardment but Antaro Chronus could not deploy his tanks and any aerial support was denied to the Ultramarine spearhead.

‘What are your orders, sergeant?’ asked Largo after the silence started to become uncomfortable.

Scipio's expression was foul with frustration. 'Return to camp. Then we go deeper. There has to be a way through those pickets without taking them head-on.'

Scipio found Tigurius alone, looking out onto an ice expanse. Snow flurries chased each other across the barren tundra like arctic devils, whipped into sudden frenzy by the wind.

There was a rime of frost coating the Librarian's cheeks, nose and forehead but he seemed not to notice. Though his eyes were open, he was locked in a psychic trance. It took Scipio a few seconds to realise before he fell into respectful silence and waited.

'The direct approach to the Thanatos Hills is denied to us,' Tigurius said without even turning around, 'and we have yet to locate the force leader.'

Scipio suddenly felt quite redundant in the face of the Librarian's prescience. 'Is it *that* easy to read my mind?'

Tigurius faced him, wiping at the crust of frost veneering his features. 'Your mood anyone could read.'

'Transparent too. I must attend to that upon our return to Ultramar.'

'I admire your optimism, Brother Vorolanus. You think our victory here is certain?'

Scipio tried not to balk before the Librarian's penetrating gaze. He didn't think Tigurius was interrogating him psychically but couldn't be sure. 'Far from it. These creatures are like nothing we've ever faced. I also believe our sternest challenges are to come.'

Tigurius nodded. 'Yes, I—' He collapsed before he could finish.

'Master!' Scipio sprang to the Librarian's aid. He was clutching his head and screaming in mental agony.

The air was filled with the scent of burning and Scipio noticed rivulets of arc-lightning spilling from Tigurius's eyes. His power armour was hot with psychic energy. Tendrils of smoke were coiling off every plate of

ceramite. Seizing his force staff, the Librarian tried to anchor himself and channel some of the energy away.

Even through his gauntlets, Scipio was feeling the heat. His fingers smouldered but he clung on to Tigurius in spite of the pain.

‘Master,’ he hissed through clenched teeth. Below them the Ultramarines assault force was readying to move out, unaware of the unfolding crisis.

Just as Scipio thought he could hold on no longer, the baleful energy that had gripped Tigurius slowly started to dissipate. In a few seconds it was over and the Librarian could stand unaided.

‘They know we are here,’ he gasped, a wisp of smoke escaping from his mouth into the cold air. ‘And what we intend to do.’

Scipio looked to the direction of the enemy cohorts, though they were far away. ‘How will they respond?’

Tigurius looked him in the eye. It disturbed the sergeant to see the obvious disquiet there. ‘Nothing. They will do nothing.’

Frowning, Scipio asked, ‘What?’

‘Because they believe our efforts are in vain, that there is no possible way for us to achieve victory.’ Tigurius licked his lips and for a moment Scipio thought he might stumble again when he gripped his shoulder. ‘I touched their minds. Fathomless, ancient, they think this world is their own. They want to reclaim it, to eradicate its population, to annihilate us. Damnos is doomed.’

‘You... you *spoke* to them?’

‘One of their number, part of the hierarchy, communicated with me. He called himself the Herald. But I saw something else, a fragment of the future.’ Tigurius’s respiration became elevated, and he clenched his fingers into claws as he fought for recall. ‘It’s like trying to grasp a wisp of cloud... The truth eludes me, brother. A dark pall is clouding my

prescience. Another of their kind...' The Librarian wrinkled his brow, seeking an appellation. 'The Voidbringer. He is the one we are looking for.'

'And this glimpse of the future,' Scipio asked. 'How does it bode for us?'

Tigurius's voice rang with the forbidding timbre of prophecy. 'Ill, brother. It bodes ill for all of us.'

Praxor was exultant. Fighting by his captain's side, he felt empowered. His squad, the 'Shieldbearers', had fought hard to stay within striking distance of the Lions. Praxor had never seen such purpose and fury from the Second's pre-eminent warriors and Sicarius's retinue. To be counted one amongst them, to become one of the High Suzerain's inner circle, was one of the brother-sergeant's most fervent desires.

'Guard against pride, brother,' Iulus had once counselled him. He sounded like Orad. But the Chaplain was long dead and Praxor's ambitions very much alive. It wasn't pride so much as idolisation and that fact – one the brother-sergeant was ignorant of – was precisely why the senators of Macragge, indeed the Masters of the Chapter, debated Sicarius's tenure so furiously. His apparent growing cult of personality was regarded as vulgar by some, as Invictus reborn and a return to the glorious golden age of the Ultramarines by others. Some in the Chapter, the oldest campaigners, felt the sons of Guilliman had been diluted by the breaking of the Legions. The many subsequent Founding Chapters all held allegiance to Ultramar but were autonomous otherwise.

Agemman, as captain of the First and with therefore the largest number of veterans in his company, was in the ironic position of recognising the importance of heroes like Sicarius but at the same time being wary of his popularity. He wanted the old days, just not ushered in by the Grand Duke of Talassar.

'Advance with all speed, stay with the captain!' Praxor was running and his squad ran with him. They moved in a 'V' formation, bolters blazing.

Kill-shots were few, but the objective was to burst through the packed necron vanguard and strike deeper into the mechanoid ranks like a spear.

They had bypassed the first defensive wall already. Sicarius had studiously ignored the pleas for help and deliverance from the stricken Guardsmen still battling to hold it, his face undoubtedly a mask of hard indifference, focused on his mission. To do otherwise, to give in to compassion, would be the end for all of them. At least, that was what Praxor believed.

A necron construct sprang out of the fog, seemingly materialising from the very air. It glided in tandem with three others; no, it wasn't gliding, the moves were almost serpentine, like a snake reared to attack. It was supported by a long, segmented tail that ended in a broad barb like a scythe. Its torso was equivalent to the raider constructs Praxor had already dispatched on their charge through the breach in the first defensive wall, but its arms ended in razor talons. There was something incorporeal about it, as if it were only partially in the material realm or somewhere between solidity and necron phasal shift.

Acting on instinct and too close to fire, Brother Vortigan swung at it with his bolter's bayonet. The monomolecular blade should have carved into it, but slipped through the creature as if parting vapour. Like a whip, the tail lashed around and speared Vortigan in the neck. The talons found weak points in his armour between plastron and greave. The Ultramarine spewed a film of blood into his helmet that speckled the lenses before he fell.

Praxor cried out Vortigan's name and swung at the same time. His power sword crackled, as if reacting to the creature's nature, and he clove off a limb. Then he drove the point of the blade through the wraith's gear-like intestine and it shuddered and phased out.

The other three were in amongst the Shieldbearers, whose charge had now faltered to a stop. Krixous was down, his forearm severed, but still

lived. A melta-blast from Tartaron maimed another wraith, sending it back to whatever abyss spawned it. The other two weaved in and around the slow-moving Space Marines, who swung and fired with little effect. Praxor was reminded of the gorgons of old Calth, cave-dwelling haridans that could turn men to stone with a glance. Such was the necrons' speed, it appeared as if the Shieldbearers were indeed petrified.

Praxor rallied them quickly, ordering them to corral the creatures and bring them to Tartaron's meltagun. Another died with its living metal turned to mercury, the fourth the sergeant dispatched himself with a determined thrust of his power sword.

Agony lanced Praxor's shoulder and he realised there was a fifth wraith he had not accounted for. Its barbed tail sent Tartaron sprawling before he could fire, whilst the creature jerked and twisted around the clumsy bolter shells railing at it. The troopers were of no consequence. It wanted Praxor. Only the sergeant's blood would do. He'd dropped his bolt pistol. He heard it skitter across the ice before he lost it in the mist. With a grunt Praxor shrugged off the talons and managed to half turn before the tail barb cut his legs from under him. He fell hard onto his back, a flicker in his retinal display indicating the power to his armour had been briefly compromised. It returned with a whirl of servos, and the piston-grinding swipe of his power sword was too slow for Praxor. A flick of the wraith's talons sheared his vambrace and forced his fingers to part. Like the bolt pistol before it, Praxor's blade spun away from his grasp and he was suddenly weaponless.

'Shoot it!' he growled, determined to show the mechanoid his unswerving hate before he died.

Bolter shells crashed around it, but were like exploding flares for all the damage they caused. The wraith phased through the bursts, advancing on the Ultramarines sergeant who was crawling away on his back.

'You'll have to work for it, scum.'

The necron seemed willing to oblige, darting forward on its tail with talons primed.

A shock of lightning bent its skull-head at an awkward angle. It tried to turn when the bolt hit again. Only it wasn't lightning, Praxor realised. It was a power mace. A crozius arcanum.

Trajan bludgeoned the wraith until its restorative programming kicked in and it phased out. Where the necron's face was skull-toothed metal, the Chaplain's was gimlet-eyed bone studded with platinum service bolts.

'Arise, brother,' he said with a deep, silken voice utterly unlike his predecessor's, 'for the Chapter finds you wanting.'

Praxor ignored the Chaplain's proffered hand. His power armour's systems were fully operational again. 'I can stand unaided.'

'A pity your pride didn't keep you on your feet,' Trajan snarled. He regarded the Shieldbearers. 'These creatures are fleshless abominations. They are an affront to the machine-spirit and cannot be allowed to live. Purge them all and let faith guide your holy bolters!'

Then he was gone, lost to the snow-fog as quickly as he'd arrived.

'I can see why Sicarius wanted him,' said Tartaron, his tone wry. It swiftly changed to contrition. 'I'm sorry, sergeant. My aim should have been better.'

Praxor clapped his pauldron. 'We live, don't we? Your aim was sound. Get Brother Krixous and follow on my lead. Captain Sicarius is not far ahead.'

'Are you still with us, Brother-Sergeant Manorian?' It was Daceus through the comm-feed. The veteran-sergeant was only metres in front of them with the Lions, and waving the others on.

Contrary to his initial beliefs, the point of the spearhead had been slowed to a man. Beyond the first wall, the battlefield was thronged with the necron vanguard. Praxor made out the black ceramite of Trajan nearby. The Chaplain was everywhere, it seemed, singing litanies of hate against

the alien and the abomination, as he swung his crozius. Squad Solinus, 'The Indomitable', formed an honour guard around him.

'He prefers his warriors to carry the Victorex Maxima,' said Tartaron with disdain.

Praxor's eyes hardened. 'They are the heroes of Telrendar, brother. Would that the Shieldbearers be so vaunted.'

'Apologies, brother-sergeant,' Tartaron replied, head bowed.

'Come on. We are missing the battle.' Praxor ordered them forward, but within he was burning with envy at the honours garnered by Solinus. At Damnos then, that was where they would earn their laurels and perhaps even Elianu Trajan would find the Shieldbearers worthy of his company.

In the wastes, little more than rubble and accumulated ice, Agrippen had continued his irresistible advance. Spider-like constructs the size of attack bikes had impeded him, but the great warrior had battered them aside with his power fist, swathing the remains in glowing-hot promethium from the flamer attached to his wrist. A vast ball of plasma tainted the ice storm cerulean blue as the last of the spiders was engulfed and destroyed. After it was done he came to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Sicarius, the old juxtaposed against the new.

'To the captain, for the glory of Ultramar!' The Dreadnought's augmented voice was lucid and powerful. Rare amongst the Chapter, he was one of few veterans of old that still remembered who he was and what time period he was fighting in. With Agrippen not being one of the Second, Praxor had been surprised to learn the warrior-eternal was part of the force led by Sicarius. Perhaps the captain desired to show solidarity towards the First or maybe he wanted Agemman to hear of his prowess from one of his most loyal and forthright warriors. None could doubt the word of Agrippen – it was spoken with thunder and the weight of ages.

The breaks in combat were brief, but a patch of open ground had formed at the site of the spearhead's last victory. Sicarius occupied a half-ruined promontory overlooking the wastes. A shell of some manufactorum or

perhaps a lectory – it didn't matter. The structure's blasted plateau, the burned-out remains of a second floor, was stable and expansive enough to allow the captain and all his officers the benefit of its vantage. It also offered a moment to take stock and reanalyse as the Ultramarines squads regathered for a fresh offensive.

'We should hold here, my lord,' advised Agrippen from the ground floor below. Broad and strong it might be, but even if the Dreadnought could have reached the second floor his mass would have crushed it. 'Our forces in the Kellenport plaza can reinforce us.'

Sicarius surveyed the distant battle lines, the drifting smoke and emerald flash of the necron guns. To his right, the Capitolis Administratum still stood. It was isolated but now ringed by a defensive cordon of Deathwind drop pods.

'How long will their payload last?'

'Another few minutes, captain,' Daceus replied. 'Guard forces are en route to liberate the acting governor and his staff.'

'Largely irrelevant, brother-sergeant,' said Sicarius. 'The leaders of Damnos are spent, just like their armies, but without those missiles cleansing our flank we'll become exposed and forced back.' He shook his head, looking down on Agrippen. 'Advice noted, brother, but we advance. Let the rearguard hold our lines.'

'My lord.'

'Yes.' Sicarius had removed his battle-helm to wipe the sweat from his brow. His eyes were as hard as sapphire and belatedly Praxor realised it was he who had spoken and that the captain's gaze was fixed on him.

'The mechanoids have cut off our way back.' He pointed east, to where the vanguard had flowed behind them like the living metal from which the necrons were infernally constructed. 'Our forces are split in two.'

'Then it is fortunate we do not turn back, isn't it, sergeant?'

‘I–’ Praxor was wrong-footed. Sicarius already knew, and didn’t care. Vortigan was dead, Krixous at least was being tended by Brother Venatio – his stump in place of a hand was swathed in pinkish gauze and bandage. His Larraman cells had clotted the blood quickly but there was still some residual fluid. The casualties amongst the Second were rising, though. How many more would fall in this insane gauntlet they were running?

‘Do you know what a gladius is, brother?’

‘Of course, my lord, it’s–’

Sicarius nodded. ‘Yes, and I trust that you know. I trust that you can wield bolter and blade, that you can lead your men and inspire them to greatness.’ He put his hands on Praxor’s shoulders like a father to a son. He sheathed the Tempest Blade to do so. The weapon was still humming eagerly despite the ferocious tally it and its wielder had reaped. ‘So too must you trust me.’

Praxor bowed his head. ‘I meant no offence, Lord Sicarius.’

‘Chapter Master Calgar is your lord, I am your captain. That is all the loyalty and deference you need afford me. Remember the gladius?’ He nodded as Praxor did, their eyes meeting. Sicarius let the sergeant go and mimicked a thrust with his hand. ‘*We* are that gladius, driving at the heart of our enemy.’

‘But the mechanoids have no heart, brother-captain,’ chimed Daceus, to facilitate his leader’s point.

‘And so they must be fought another way. The necrons respond to one thing, and one thing alone,’ Sicarius said. ‘Punishment. If we hurt them enough, they will yield. To do that we must bring their masters out into the open. *They* are the heart. Spear that and the machine will fail. I want these creatures to notice me. I want them to recognise my wrath as a threat to their existence. Achieve that and Damnos has a chance.’

So moved, Praxor fell to one knee, his power sword held across his body. ‘I am honoured to serve by your side, Grand Duke of Talassar.’

‘Then you had better stand, for we shall press on, find the command node and bring glory to our Chapter.’

The Lions roared with their captain. So did Praxor, but as he was getting to his feet he noticed that Agrippen stayed silent. The time for reflection was over. A large necron war cell was resolving out of the mist and heading for them.

Sicarius grinned ferally. ‘In Guilliman’s name, and for Talassar. War calls us, brothers...’

As one they replied, ‘We shall answer!’

Falka was second through the western gate after Sergeant Muhrne, running on pure adrenaline. Most of the Ark Guard behind him didn’t want to die, nor did they want to fight. If anything, it was fear and mad fatalism that drove them into the wasteland. A part of Falka hoped it was the cobalt-blue angels that had suddenly arrived in their midst compelling the men, a smaller vestige of him dared to believe that some spark of bravery and pride still burned within Damnos.

‘We shall not surrender!’ he heard Sergeant Muhrne bellow. ‘On, on, on!’ he roared.

As they closed on the battlefield, Falka was glad he would meet his death head-on and not trapped behind a gate waiting to be crushed by fallen masonry or vaporised by a faceless necron artillery barrage. At least this way he could be proud when reunited with his ancestors, he could look Jynn in the eye and say, ‘I died with honour, defending our world.’ He hoped he would see her again soon, but was determined not to waste his life. It would be worth something to these mechanised bastards.

The Ark Guard were four hundred strong when they left the Courtyard of Thor, just under two battalions. Ominously, the western gate was closed behind them. The resonant din of it being sealed broke some of the men who turned and ran back, pounding against the metal impotently with their fists. The commissars on the battlements put them out of their misery with precise pistol shots and the wailing ceased. Not that the rest of the Ark

Guard could have heard it. The shattered plaza drowned out the noise with the cacophony of war. Not just any conflict, though – this was Space Marine warfare, and it was brutal.

Falka marvelled and balked at the Angels of Death. They were as resolute and indefatigable as the necrons. When he and the rest of the Guardsmen had managed to get two hundred metres from the gate unscathed, he dared to hope that with the Space Marines' help they might yet save Damnos. Necron warriors, turning their baleful gaze upon the humans at some proximity warning within their machine brains, crushed that assumption quickly.

Muhrne was the first one Falka noticed. The pugnacious sergeant couldn't even scream as the gauss-beam flayed him. Metal and cloth became particles, skin and flesh turned to dust, organs liquefied until there was nothing left of Muhrne but a charred skeleton. Even that cracked apart when it hit the ground.

Falka ducked instinctively, though it was really just luck that spared him during that first headlong charge. Charred skeletons were exploding all around him as the necrons exposed the weakness of the human form so horrifically. He was shouting, incoherent and wordlessly, but it kept the fear down. He also realised he had yet to fire his gun, so intent was he on running the length of the plaza. Falka checked the load and hauled the trigger. His first shots went wide and too fast. He was still running and needed to conserve his ammunition. Keep going at that rate and he'd be out in a few seconds. The barrel flash, though ineffective so far, brought attention. He dived behind a rubble pile, thanking his saints as the gauss-beam careened away without killing him. Falka took a second to realign himself and was moving again. He had about twenty others with him. Judging by their shoulder patches, they were from several different squads. The gauss barrage had scattered them; the Ark Guard's discipline and coherency broken in seconds.

‘What do we do?’ one man asked.

It took Falka a few moments to realise he was talking to him. He wished Jynn was there, fighting by his side. She was a warrior; at least her natural instincts suggested it. She would have been an asset to the Ark Guard.

‘A hit, even glancing, from those flayers and we’re dead men,’ said Falka. He tried not to let the fact that so many were hanging on his words disturb him. He slapped the hard flank of the ruin they were hiding in. It wasn’t much, just the worn-down footprint of a defensive barrier. Each man was crouched low, keeping out of the gauss-beams streaking above them.

One man, Falka didn’t know his name – he was a professional soldier, not a conscript from the mines like himself – rose a fraction to wipe his brow. An emerald flash filled the ruins and the nameless man slumped down without his head, the ragged neck stump cauterised. Two of the others had to be restrained from fleeing before Falka could continue.

He looked down at the decapitated corpse grimly. *That’s the fate that awaits us all.*

‘Stick to the cover, what little there is. And make for the Angels. The Space Marines will protect us.’

‘We’ve been sent to our deaths,’ one lad sobbed. His helmet didn’t really fit him. Falka took off his and gave it to the boy. It wasn’t a much better fit but it seemed to galvanise the lad.

‘Aye, and we’ll meet it on our feet, defending our people like heroes of Damnos.’ He reached over and patted the boy on the shoulder. ‘All right, son?’

The lad nodded. The lasgun looked awkward in his hands. Falka turned away, unwilling to see his fear any longer.

Crawling to the edge of the barrier, he waited until the whine of gauss-beams diminished and then risked a look over the top. Through the mist and carnage, he saw a squad of Space Marines giving battle. They’d

abandoned the sanctuary of their landing vessel – it looked like an inverted spear-tip with its sides split open and laid flat on the ground. A black scar surrounded it, slowly obscured by falling snow.

Warriors from heaven, indeed.

Falka tried to turn that realisation into hope.

‘Come on,’ he shouted to the men. ‘With me!’



CHAPTER FIVE

It was cold in the ice cave, but it came from more than just the temperature. There was a chill that emanated from inside, a hollowing of spirit and resolve that would kill her far quicker than a drift or even being crushed beneath an avalanche of compacted snow. It pressed against her body. She felt its weight against her torso and her left shoulder. Her legs she could no longer feel. Her bored-out heart was simply numb.

I am dead, she realised. I am dead – my body simply doesn't know it yet.

It was black inside, not white at all, underneath the snow. She knew it must be a cave that she'd broken through to, because of the quiet. No screaming, no weeping or mewling. The moaning had stopped too. It had started out as belligerent anger at their situation and a refusal to accept it. Then it became doleful. In the end it just *was*. She was ashamed to admit that she missed it.

I am dead and that's why I am cold.

Then she saw a light, a tiny pinhole that turned her black world into powdery grey. Noise followed, a sort of shuffling then a scuffling. Finally, she realised it was digging. *Something* was digging her out.

She panicked, but she couldn't move. Vaguely, she remembered snapping on the distress beacon and how stupid that decision had been, even born of desperation as it was, given what stalked the drifts.

I wish I was dead. The digging sound was getting closer, it became a wet scrape and a hard rasp of metal chipping into ice as the hole widened and her world lightened with every stroke.

Why can't I will my body to accept that I am dead?

Her fingers trembled, and she realised she could move them. They seized the pick half-frozen to her belt and leg.

If I am alive, then I will fight...

The edges of the hole collapsed as they were torn away by sharp metal blades and her dark world expanded exponentially.

Then you'll be the dead one.

She tried to shout, but her larynx was dry and frozen stiff, so all that came out was a choking rasp. In her mind, her fingers freed the pick and brought it down on the creature's head, buried it in its skull. But her arm didn't respond. All she could do was grip the haft, and that wasn't nearly enough. She couldn't even fight. She could only submit, and it was this that bothered her the most. When the blades were done, the shadows of them loomed over her, blotting out her newly-risen sun. Faced with the sheer terror of it she found her voice, and screamed.

Jynn awoke.

The chamber was bathed in a sickly emerald glow. The light came from channels and conduit lines describing esoteric runes, sigils from an elder age lost to history. It limned bulky sarcophagi and weather-grained tombs, rubbed to mirror sheen by the action of the elements. They had been underground for a long time. Sleeping. They didn't know what imperative had woken them, what pre-programmed scenario had activated the resurrection protocols of the tomb spyders, but they were conscious again – the long dream was over and vermin were abroad in their dominion.

The Undying sighed, though he had no breath to expel from his mechaorgans, nor did his fleshless torso heave. It was affectation, a piece of extant learned behaviour that persisted in the cold existence of the now.

He had trouble remembering that, differentiating between what *is* and what *was*. They all did. All except the Architect.

‘Your logic-engines are functioning without imparity.’

It was a statement of machine-fact, not a question. The Undying did not question, he did not need to. He was knowledge, aeons and aeons of it. He was pre-eminent but he was also still in a pseudo-torpor. The scarabs refashioned his beautiful mechaorganic body, re-attaching his limbs and re-energising his weapons, while the tomb spyders tended to his revivification casket.

The Architect made a slight bow. The sound of shifting servos and gears within his unseen workings testified to it. ‘You are still weak, my lord. Your strength is returning, though.’

‘The others are waking too.’ The Undying’s machine-voice was deep and resonant, but not on account of the resurrection chamber. His baleful eyes narrowed to fiery slits as they regarded each of the four portals that led to the upper echelons of the tomb in turn.

‘We live,’ said the Architect. ‘Do you remember me, master?’

The Undying nodded slowly. ‘So many lives,’ he muttered.

‘We have awoken to interlopers infesting our sacred realm.’

The Undying’s reply was a bellicose rumble. ‘Excise them.’

‘I am waking the rest of the royal house. We shall be one again soon.’

‘I desire to move, to command the legions. My sky-chariot—’

‘Has long since turned to dust and memory,’ the Architect interjected. He did not touch the Undying, for that was to invite his overlord’s wrath, but his tone was conciliatory. They had all lost so very much to gain so very little.

Our flesh for metal, our veins and blood for circuits, our very being sacrificed for the machine.

Some felt it more than others, which was the real reason why the Architect was in attendance. The Undying would not fully awaken for

several hours, but other, lesser lords would.

A flash of translocation lit the grand tomb chamber. When it abated, the Architect was in a different room. Using his chronomancy, he had descended several levels in a nanosecond. The catacombs were dank and sealed. It was fear. Fear of contamination that drove the necrons to such lengths. And for good reason.

A shriek of anguish broke the silence in the catacombs but none of the insects toiling slowly and methodically gave it heed. The Architect merely looked towards the sound, his long lamellar cloak fashioned of bronze sigil-ingots clanking as he moved.

Another revivification casket had opened behind him. Now he faced it, he saw the awakened lord within. This one was ripe with putrefaction, the decaying flesh that swathed it long since turned to rot.

The Architect glared. His real name was Ankh the Herald of Dismay, a title self-appointed. He would need to cow this one. Rabid and disillusioned, he would need to direct him quickly and forcefully if he was to be of any use. Unlike the Undying and the other dynastic nobles, Ankh did not fear the flayer disease. He had many arcane items to protect him. Caution was still wise, though – he took a step back.

Ankh stretched to his full height, making the most of his cryptek's skull panoply and brandishing his rod of office like a threat. His appearance was that of a skeletal, metal-skinned sorcerer. There were devices about his person, amulets and speculums, star-compasses and fathomless orbs. A vial of liquid adamantium attached to his belt by an ornate chain contained his predecessor; the mirror of the speculum trapped another of his would-be usurpers a nanosecond out of synch with the rest of reality.

‘Do you remember who you are?’

This one gibbered, hunched as if broken, as it looked on with fervent eyes. For a second, Ankh thought the tomb spyders had revived him too

early and that the scarabs would need to deactivate him again. The doubt passed when the lord spoke.

‘My robes,’ he said, holding up the flaps of skin draped about his metal frame, ‘they are wretched. Where is my tailor?’ He paused, staring at his bone-that-was-not-bone limbs and blood-stained torso. ‘Where is my flesh! My skin!’ He wailed, then just stopped.

Ankh glared, patient. Revivification was not easy.

‘Wait,’ said the other. ‘Wait...’ A deep melancholy affected his voice, though it was still the timbre of the mechaorganic. ‘Waaaaaiiit...’ he rasped, almost like a sigh. ‘Oh, how I miss the flesh.’ He caressed the putrefied skin layering his body, pulled down the flesh-mask over his rictal countenance. Emerald orbs of hateful desire burned through the ragged human sockets.

‘You are Sahtah, the Enfleshed,’ Ankh told him.

‘Am I a butcher, a skin-surgeon?’ Sahtah asked, looking up and brandishing the razored talons that replaced his fingers. Inadvertently, he’d snipped several pieces of skin from his grisly mantle and they hit the floor of the chamber with a soft thud.

Ankh’s eyes flared brighter. They were like fire-tempests of sudden excitement.

‘Yes.’

The forbidding tones of the Undying echoed inside his skull from the mind-link to the grand tomb chamber. ‘The fourth is due. The royal hierarchy is incomplete.’ He was saying it by mechanised rote, still not fully lucid, but even in his millennia-spanning dementia, the overlord was right.

Ankh shifted back. He arrived and scrutinised another part of the chamber where the shadows were darkest.

‘He comes...’

The darkness shifted, coalescing like the formation of a black hole into something of substance. It came with a susurrus of sound like air vacating the lungs of a corpse, only much longer and louder. Flaps of parchment, pieces of old cloak materialised on an unfelt breeze. A figure stepped from the penumbra, whole and imperious. It clanged the butt of its staff against the metal floor and with each percussive blow stepped forward until a lord of metal and night-shrouds was revealed.

Where the Architect's jaw was angular, almost pointed, this one's was square. His brow was heavy and he bore an icon stamped to his forehead. Ankh could not recall its meaning. Though less than the others, he too had lost much during transition.

'Why am I summoned?' the arrival demanded. 'The fleshed are reinforced with their armoured saviours, the genebred ones.'

'Flesh cannot prevail against metal,' droned the Undying in a moment of slow-returning lucidity. 'Hearts and minds of mortals cannot endure against the machine.'

'As you can see,' said Ankh, gesturing to their overlord, 'our master is waking. So too are the other cells. The royal house must form, Tahek.'

The shrouded lord snarled. 'Address me as Voidbringer, cryptek.'

'Tahek Voidbringer, you are summoned,' said Ankh with unnecessary ceremony. He fed a crackle of power through his staff but failed to goad the other lord. 'An enemy has arrived on our world. It fills our resurrection chambers with the plebeian and thins our scarab hive.'

'They are in my midst?' asked Voidbringer.

'Plotting to eliminate our pylons and gauss-obliterators. I theorise they plan to deploy further reinforcements from the vessel we struck in orbit.'

'I will slay them, then.'

Only the voice of the Undying stopped Voidbringer from turning and merging with the darkness. 'No.'

Ankh took over again, herald in every way. ‘You will continue with your primary mission. Defend our artillery.’ His eyes narrowed, partly in pleasure at the rage emanating from Tahek, partly in anticipation of what was to come. ‘Sahtah the Enfleshed will hunt them down. He has need of a new skin.’

From a small black crystal attached to his body, Ankh projected an image of the lower catacombs where he’d been a few seconds ago.

Voidbringer glanced at Sahtah with disdain. ‘I need no help.’

Sahtah was an outcast in necron society, a noble who had become little better than a beast. Proximity to other lords was strictly forbidden, the possibility of infection real and abhorrent. None amongst the royal house wanted to be cursed as a flayer.

Ankh drew Tahek’s gaze. ‘Focus on your task,’ he said. ‘Bring the night.’

The necron’s eyes narrowed, a pair of tiny flames inside two pools of abject night. ‘I obey,’ he rasped, his voice disappearing into the shadows, as did the Voidbringer himself.

Ankh turned to Sahtah in the image-cast. ‘Your servants await you,’ he said. ‘Follow them. They will lead you to the surface.’

Sahtah looked around at the disembodied voice in the chamber. His confusion was forgotten when he saw the other flayed ones approaching.

‘So ripe,’ the Enfleshed marvelled, regarding a pair of hunchbacked necrons skulking into the wan light of the catacombs. He reached out for their capes of skin but retracted his claws – the mirror of their own – not daring to touch, shamed by his own rotten rags. ‘So fresh. A slave’s attire should not eclipse that of his lord.’

The flayed ones bowed to him.

‘So, renew your robes,’ uttered Ankh, adding resonance to the voice that Sahtah was hearing, ‘with the flesh of our enemies.’

Like a hound let slip from its master’s leash, the Enfleshed leapt from his revivification casket and scurried after the slaves as they went to hunt.

The image phased out and Ankh put the crystal away.

‘I long for proper sentience again,’ groaned the Undying.

Now he and the Architect were alone.

Ankh considered the motions of the scarabs and tomb spyders, perceived the ethereal presence of his wraiths as they patrolled the deeps of the tomb. More and more cells were awakening. With the first hierarchy at full strength, the rest of the royal house and with them the entire legion would not be long in waking.

‘Our numbers multiply. It will be soon, my lord.’

‘I long...’ the Undying moaned again, trailing off when his mind fell into oblivion again.

‘We are legion,’ said Ankh, partly to himself. With a gesture, he summoned a column-shaped node from the resurrection chamber floor. When his skeletal fingers closed on the icon inscribed at its apex a tiny coruscation of lightning fashioned a web-matrix between them and bathed Ankh in its light.

On the surface, several levels up, projection nodes churned into position; the activation runes delineating display dais lit up.

The Herald spoke and his graven image was broadcast to all who still lived on Damnos.

Adanar felt as hollow as the clanging of the western gate when it was shut. He heard the flat reports of the commissars’ pistols as they brought down the deserters. He closed his eyes when he thought of the four hundred who’d left the Courtyard of Thor. He doubted they’d last long against the necrontyr but someone had to go and get Rancourt – the administrator-turned-acting governor was the closest thing to Imperial authority left on Damnos. Not including the Space Marines, of course, but theirs was a different remit.

Adanar doubted he’d ever even meet them. What consequence was he to them? What were any of them? The Emperor’s Angels were as cold and

aloof as the necrons. The only difference was the Space Marines weren't trying to eradicate them.

The people needed a figurehead – Zeph Rancourt, loathsome as he was, had to fulfil that role and bring some sort of stability to Damnos. Kellenport was the last city on an unremarkable world, but it had to have unity if it were to survive.

Adanar recalled cheering at the sight of the azure arrowheads streaking through the heavens. People were praising the Emperor for their deliverance, for the saving of Damnos.

The Space Marines were formidable. They could do what no ordinary man could. They could turn certain defeat into victory, but these creatures... they were even a match for the Angels of Death. And all the while the emerald artillery barrage went on unabated.

‘Send four battalions down to the Courtyard of Thor to replace our losses,’ he said to the air. He'd forgotten Sergeant Nabor was dead, slumped in a pool of his own brain-ooze.

Adanar raised Corporal Besseque and gave the order down the vox. He also tasked him with getting another sergeant to help man the walls and relay instructions to the other officers.

‘And get a message to Acting Lord Governor Rancourt. A force is on its way to bring him back to Kellenport.’ Adanar had wanted to add, *and the safety of its walls*, but couldn't bring himself to lie that heinously. He was about to request a status report when a hololithic image materialised in the smoky haze over the battlefield. Adanar recognised the voice of the Herald of Dismay.

Your saviours are not angels sent to deliver you. There is no deliverance. We, the necrontyr, reclaim this world. Your saviours cannot stop us. We are not creatures of flesh and emotion, but of circuit and reason. We are the machine, and the machine will not be denied.

The hololith, rendered in grainy emerald, crackled and faded. It left a pall of despair in its wake. Adanar could almost sense the collective groan of the men under his command.

Hope, so cruelly given, was being snatched away. He could feel it.

‘What have I to be thankful for?’ he asked, remembering the premature celebrations while the artillery barrage raged all around him. He regarded the fire-blackened streets, the shattered plaza, the collapsed towers and ruptured domes of his city. ‘What have any of us?’

Smoothing the thinning hair of his greasy scalp, Rancourt paced the floor of the medi-bay for what felt like the hundredth time. He had wanted position, power and all that came with it, but not in these circumstances. He was lord governor in everything but name, a *de facto* potentate, but of what? A rock, a fegging rock soon to be extinct or declared *excommunicate xenos* by the Imperium.

‘Am I not a dutiful servant?’ he asked the recumbent form on the medi-couch next to him. The room was bare and stank of sanitation fluid. It was tiled, and besides the couch, contained a single chair that Rancourt had yet to sit in. A chrono on the wall above him no longer functioned. Wouldn’t matter if it did; he’d lost all sense of time. Ever since the mine, ever since...

He crushed the thoughts, not wishing to relive the days after that, the bitter struggle for survival in the ice wastes.

‘Oh, Throne...’ he murmured, pressing his hands hard against his forehead in an effort to push out the memories. ‘If you’d have seen what we had to do. If you’d—’ He stopped suddenly when his gaze met that of Lord Governor Arxis, laying on the medi-couch. ‘You... you bastard! Leaving me with all of this. I don’t want it, I tell you. I don’t, but I can’t give it back, can I? Can I?’ He tossed the chair and it cracked several tiles when it landed, bending a leg.

Rancourt's fists were clenched and he was about to pound on Arxis when he stopped and caught his breath. His arms, so full of nervous anger just moments ago, fell to his sides. Instead of lashing out, he leaned in and spoke softly into the lord governor's ear.

'Help me,' he pleaded. 'Tell me what I'm supposed to do.'

A knock on the door made Rancourt start and he straightened, wiping away the tears on his face. 'What is it?' he snapped, turning to face Sergeant Kador who'd just entered.

'We've just received confirmation that we're moving you to the Kellenport wall, my lord.'

Rancourt shrank back as if stung. He stopped when he touched the medicouch and could go no further. 'Is it safe?'

'Safer than the Capitolis at this time,' answered Kador a little ruefully. 'The Space Marines are here, my lord, and they are reclaiming the outer defences, including this bastion.'

'Then I should stay, shouldn't I?' Rancourt was nodding. It looked like he was trying to convince himself. 'If the Adeptus Astartes are my protectors.'

'They won't be staying. Once we have the outer walls, Commander Sonne has vowed to garrison them again so our saviours can press the assault and liberate our world.' Sergeant Kador outstretched his hand. 'You need to accompany me, my lord.'

'Very well,' Rancourt replied, not entirely sure. 'What of Lord Governor Arxis? How do you plan to move him?'

Kador frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'It's very simple, sergeant,' Rancourt replied in exasperation. 'How do we get him from the capitolis to Kellenport?'

'We don't. He's dead.'

Rancourt was about to protest when he looked around. The room was bare. All the equipment, the life-preserving machines were gone...

because they were no longer needed. The lord governor hadn't survived his injuries in the Proteus bunker.

‘Of course... Yes, I will leave now. Lead on, sergeant.’

Iulus wiped the sweat off his brow with a heavy hand. Despite his advanced physiology, the wound he'd sustained in his shoulder was slowing him. Ahead of the squad, Agnathio led the line. His armoured bulk bore the worst of the intense gauss-barrage. A fusillade of beams staggered the Dreadnought and Iulus willed the venerable one to endure it.

Slamming a fresh clip into his bolt pistol, Iulus released a tightly controlled burst. The hulking necron in his sights bucked, sparks cascaded off its armoured body, but it came on undaunted. Galvia and Urnos added their bolters to their sergeant's barrage, but to little effect.

Still firing, Iulus levelled his chainsword at the seemingly invulnerable necrons. ‘Throw up a wall, brother.’

Aristaeus opened up his flamer, bathing the front line with a wave of super-heated promethium. Implacable, the mechanoids just ploughed through it, their bodies trailing with tendrils of fire and smoke.

‘Oath of Hera,’ breathed Galvia. ‘They are unstoppable.’

Somewhere in the distance las-beams stabbed into the flames, but they were as insect stings to the monstrous automatons.

Iulus realised the Guard had engaged the enemy, but discounted the humans as an asset almost immediately. The Second were alone. He was determined they would triumph. It rested on the necron elites. Break them and the plaza was won.

Iulus grunted. ‘Tough, but not inviolable. Close the gap and intensify.’

His Immortals advanced in Agnathio's shadow, crouched low and widely dispersed, but stalled as the warrior eternal faltered. His armour, his mighty sarcophagus that had endured for centuries over countless campaigns, was slowly being eroded.

‘Venerable one. We need to move!’

Agnathio levelled his multi-melta and sent a blast into the necron elites. It cut one of the mechanoids in half and it phased out.

Iulus rallied his warriors. 'See! They are not indestructible.'

A second necron lost a limb but, incredibly, self-repaired, its living metal reflowing and its wires re-stitching before Iulus's very eyes.

'Mercy of the primarch...'

Agnathio was not to be denied and strafed the line. The wounded mechanoid was only partway through its regeneration cycle when a salvo of mass-reactive shells from the Dreadnought's storm bolter tore it open. Balefires dying in its eyes, the necron phased out.

'I serve the Chapter eternally!' Agnathio was about to advance again when a plume of fire exploded from his motive servos. Haemorrhaging smoke and machine-fluid, one of his trunk-like legs seized.

A cry was ripped from his vox-emitter as a raw, burning line jagged up his sarcophagus. Visceral matter was leaking from the wound and Agnathio's agony resonated around the plaza.

Iulus felt a tremor of disquiet. He had never seen the Dreadnought hurt before. A small part of him hadn't thought it was possible that he would ever witness such a thing.

'Brother-sergeant.' Agnathio's speech was broken and fizzed with static, in part from the damage done to his vox-emitter and in part from the pain he was enduring. He even had to fight the din of the gauss-assault to be heard. 'You must take... the gate alone, brother. I can go no further.'

The gate? Then Iulus realised. Agnathio was back at Chundrabad, where he had fallen over five millennia ago when he was a mere battle-brother.

Iulus had no time to reply. A piece of armour plate was ripped from the Dreadnought's shoulder, flung shrapnel embedding in the sergeant's pauldron. Agnathio turned in the direction of his aggressors, unleashing a salvo from his storm bolter. It was to be his last as the weapon attached to his power fist burst apart in a cloud of exploding ammo. Like a pugilist

that had taken too many beatings, Agnathio jerked and rocked as the blows rained down.

Iulus had seen enough. He pressed the comm-bead in his ear and spoke into his gorget vox-grille. He might have lost his battle-helm and with it the retinal display, but he could still command.

‘Brother-Sergeants Tirian and Atavian, bring hell and fury!’

A barrage hammered from either flank. The sharp tracers and missile contrails blended together furiously as the Devastators concentrated fire on the hulking elites.

A storm of hot frag exploded in the necrons’ midst but they came on implacably. Their numbers had thinned but they merely closed ranks and drove at the Ultramarines, laying down an emerald curtain of fire. Some of the casualties were rising, picking up their slowly reconstituting bodies and rejoining the rear echelons.

The Ultramarines had to get close, make certain of their kills. Iulus tightened the grip on his chainsword.

‘Immortals! Hand-to-hand. Engage and destroy!’ He ran headlong at the necrons, ignoring the gauss-beams glancing off his armour.

On his right shoulder, Urnos was struck in the chest and pitched off his feet. Iulus lost sight of him in the rush. ‘Low and fast.’

Nearby, a terrible thunder shook the frost-caked earth as Ultracius joined them. A spew of assault cannon shells ripped a ragged hole in the elites, interrupting their fire pattern and allowing Iulus and his squad the precious seconds they needed to close the gap.

His first swing was like striking the bulkhead on a battleship. Sparks churned into the air but the blow left little more than a scar against the necron’s torso. Up close the elites were even bigger, dwarfing even the Space Marines. Iulus ducked beneath a swing of its gauss-blaster. There was strength in the attack and even used as an unconventional bludgeon, the weapon was potent. A burst of fire raked the sergeant’s left side but it

only stripped away paint and surface armour. He rammed his bolt pistol into the creature's neck cavity and pulled the trigger.

Spitting shards of metal opened up a dozen shallow cuts on his face but the necron's head came away, leaving behind a sheared spinal column. Iulus kicked it over with an exultant roar before it phased out.

‘Taste the fury of the Immortals!’

A savage blow to his solar plexus cut his victory short. He felt his armour plastron crack and struggled to breathe before his multi-lung kicked in to take up the slack of his collapsed organ.

One of the hulking necrons regarded him curiously. ‘You are not immortal, flesh-thing. They are before you. They are your doom.’

Chainsword screaming, Iulus swung, but the mechanoid blocked with its arm and butted him.

Groggy, he shook it off.

Around him, he was acutely aware of his squad fighting hard with bolter and blade. Somewhere in the dense throng of the necron elite, Ultracius was avenging the crippling of his fellow Dreadnought. A heavy necron form was tossed into the air before landing back down into the melee and disappearing.

Ultracius was relentless. ‘Guilliman watches over us. Do not be found wanting in his hallowed sight!’ The assault cannon shrieked and a half-dozen mechanoids were ruined, their shattered bodies flung into the closing mist.

Iulus took a blow against his wounded shoulder and felt the bone crack. His guard was split in two and fell away uselessly. He brought his chainsword around for another swing, this time ramming the blade where the necron's innards should be. The creature pulled the blade away, losing skeletal fingers to the chain-teeth, and brought its gauss-blaster up one-handed. With a feral shout, Iulus severed the weapon where it was conjoined to the necron's wrist and rammed the sword in again.

Iulus rejoiced as he drew out a modulated scream from the monster, but it came on undeterred.

‘Desist. Your efforts are futile.’ Bereft of its gauss-blaster, the hulking mechanoid smashed the Ultramarine’s shoulder repeatedly with its wrist-stump. The other hand closed around Iulus’s throat with three clacking digits. Its grip was incredible and the sergeant felt his trachea being crushed immediately. Without his battle-helm, the seal between it and his gorget was compromised and his throat was exposed. The necron had analysed this weakness and exploited it.

Mag-locking his bolt pistol – its clip was spent and he had no room to insert a fresh one – Iulus took a two-handed grip on his chainsword and drove it deeper. His sight was darkening as his air supply dwindled to a trickle.

He spat a last, defiant breath. ‘Die, you soulless dog.’

Then the darkling world closed around him and Iulus felt his fingers slipping on the chainsword, losing their grip on the haft and his life.

Falka was in charge. He didn’t know how, but he was. At least fifty men, most of the paltry survivors from the four battalions, were looking to him for orders. They’d left the flattened ruins behind them and had made it to a second line of broken-toothed defences. From here he’d formed the fifty into a firing line and got them to man the still-operational heavy guns behind the barricades and in the hollowed-out pillboxes. The bunkers and walls were prefabs, set up by Commander Sonne just before the *Nobilis* was destroyed and their hopes with it. They hadn’t lasted long; the garrison behind them a few seconds longer. Now, what was left provided scant cover but it was better than nothing.

‘Keep your head down and your lasgun charged,’ Muhrne had said during basic training. Falka missed the tough old bastard already. His bones were ash by now. It didn’t seem a just fate for such an honourable man.

‘Feed the cannon,’ he shouted at a heavy stubber team down the line, ‘and watch for jams. Keep the barrel cool,’ he bellowed at another working a tripod-mounted multi-laser. ‘Don’t let it overheat. It overheats, and you’re dead.’

Throne, he even sounded like Muhrne. Maybe his spirit was alive and well, and fighting the battle through him. Falka hoped so.

He’d found a pair of magnoculars clutched in the cauterised limb of some dead officer. The rest of the soldier’s body was gone, presumably atomised by the enemy gauss-flayers. The battling Ultramarines weren’t far, but the scopes allowed Falka to get a good look without needing to be up close and personal. With the Emperor’s Angels in their midst, the necrons had stopped shooting at the Ark Guard. Falka wanted to keep it that way... at least for a while.

Through the scope’s infra-red – conventional vision was largely useless for detailed observation in the snow-fog – he saw the Space Marines had committed to close assault against a wedge of necron warriors. Even the Angels looked diminutive compared to these hulks, but they had some kind of towering war machine to even the odds. Falka caught only glimpses of the gargantuan machine, swinging fists and shredding necrons with its fearsome cannon at close range.

The other Ultramarines were not faring so well, ill-suited to hand-to-hand combat against such heavily-armoured opponents. They fought valiantly, though, and Falka felt a swell of courage fill his breast. Lowering the scopes, he eyed the open ground between the barricades and the melee. Narrowing his vision, he reckoned on thirty metres. He let his lasgun sag on the strap around his shoulder – it was almost out, anyway – and hefted his ice-pick.

Damnosian permafrost was hard. It didn’t break easily, especially in the deep caverns beneath the surface. Falka had once seen a man swing at the ice-face and miss. Instead of burying the pick-blade in the meat of his

thigh, he'd sheared his leg off completely. It was so sharp it went straight through the bone.

Across the blasted esplanade, another group kept up a constant las-barrage. Falka nodded to his vox-man. 'Tell them to give it everything.' Then he growled at the others crouched around him, his makeshift command squad. 'I'm going over into *that*,' he said, meaning the frenzied melee. 'I won't ask any of you to come with me.'

Eighteen hard-faced men, some soldiers, some conscripts, drew blades and picks grimly.

Falka smiled. 'That's what I hoped you'd say.' He shouted to the gunners. 'Keep firing but try not to shoot us.'

Then he vaulted the barricade and ran towards death.

They were in deeper than before, hunkered down in a tight defile with thick ice-shawled rocks hugging their shoulder plates. Scipio scowled as the frostbitten crags scraped his armour. He'd wanted to pare the powered suits down for better manoeuvrability, remove all but the body armour and leg greaves. Tigurius had forbidden it. The necrons were too dangerous, their technology too advanced, to go up against without full protection.

Behind Scipio a heavy *clank* echoed down the gorge as Largo slipped and cursed. The noise was carried away on the howling wind but his finger slipped into the trigger-guard of his bolt pistol anyway. The necron patrol below continued without pause. Whatever sensors or auspex-devices they possessed were being foiled by the weather and the altitude just like the Ultramarines scanning gear.

Scipio glanced over his shoulder. 'You eager for a fight, brother?'

Largo held up his hand, signalling contrition.

Ortus, who was a metre behind him maintaining the rearguard, smiled thinly. He scoured the way they'd come through his bolter sight. The falling snow was settling over their tracks nicely. After a few seconds of intense and still interrogation, he nodded to Scipio.

Crawling on their stomachs, heads low against the arctic wind riming their features with tiny spines of hoarfrost, they moved on.

After the initial recon had drawn a blank, Scipio had been forced upwards. Somewhere across the sheer-sided cliffs that bent around the necron artillery like a crooked spine was a rocky canal. He was intent on finding it. The Ultramarines needed a way to bypass the defensive cordon, something the necrons had overlooked. Being isolated from the main battle group in the mountains was risky. Pressing on beyond the outer marker Tigurius had provided could even be considered reckless, but the mission demanded Scipio locate a route through which to assault the pylons and gauss-obliterators.

Ducking into a natural alcove, he raised the other squad members on the comm-feed. ‘*Venetoires*, report.’

With Naceon’s death earlier, it left the Thunderbolts with nine. To tackle the mountain, Scipio had broken them up into combat squads of three. Unconventional as far as the Codex was concerned, but small groups would serve the Ultramarines’ purpose better.

After Black Reach, Telion had told him that the Codex was not a book of strictures, nor was it meant to be an inflexible and comprehensive tactical manual.

‘It is our primarch’s wisdom,’ he had said, ‘distilled for all of us to utilise as we see fit. Some in the Chapter are old and hidebound, but as Adeptus Astartes we must adapt. The spur that does not bend before the sudden storm will surely break, Scipio.’

So it was they reconnoitred in threes.

Cator’s voice came through the feed. ‘*Thracian*, this is *Venetoires*. Nothing so far.’

It was followed swiftly by the deep timbre of Brakkius. ‘*Retiarii* has found something. We are fifty-three metres east of *Thracian*’s position.’

Scipio opened up the feed to all three combat squads. ‘Converge on *Retiarii*. Confirm.’

A pair of affirmation chimes sounded in the sergeant’s ear. Waiting for the last of the necron column to disappear from sight, he waved the others on.

‘One of yours?’

They were standing in a shallow valley. The snow blustered overhead but they were well shielded from the wind. A necron lay dismembered in the valley basin. Attached to each of its limbs, skull and torso was a tubular device wrapped in wire. A faint veneer of snow was building on top of the body parts, slowly obscuring it. Scipio looked down at the mechanoid as he addressed his battle-brother.

Crouched next to the corpse, Cator shook his head.

Vermillion Cator was known in the Thunderbolts as an expert at fashioning booby traps. All Space Marines possessed some level of fieldcraft that allowed them to make improvised grenades and other simple snares, but Cator was often described as *gifted*.

Brakkus gave the torso an experimental kick. ‘Why hasn’t it phased out yet?’

Cator answered. ‘Because it’s still alive.’

A flurry of movement saw Ortus raise his bolter into an execution position.

Scipio waved him off. ‘Easy there, Torias Telion.’

Ortus stood down, but kept his weapon ready.

Scipio looked at Cator. ‘How?’

The other Ultramarine was prodding the tubular devices with his combat blade. ‘There’s an electrical charge running through these wires, attached to a powerful battery.’ He tapped the tube itself. ‘A strong magnet is keeping it from reforming.’

‘It foiled the self-repair system?’

Cator nodded. ‘Yes, but it’s designed as a form of torture rather than being useful on a military level.’

Scipio pressed further. ‘So it can’t phase out because it’s not sustained critical damage and it can’t self-repair on account of the opposing magnetic poles keeping its components apart?’

‘Precisely,’ Cator said, getting up.

Brakkus shook his head at the meticulousness of it all. ‘Who did this?’

‘That, my brother,’ said Scipio, ‘is the *real* question.’ He exhaled, thinking. ‘I want a deeper spread – a hundred metres.’

Cator cleared his throat. ‘Sir, this far into enemy territory – are you sure?’

‘Someone or something else is out here with us and I want it flushed out. We can cover more ground separated.’

Showing his obedience with a salute, Cator broke away east. Brakkus went west.

Scipio’s combat squad carried on north. When they were moving out, he nodded to Ortus. A single bolt shot, baffled by the wind and the valley depth, rang out a few seconds later as the Ultramarine got his wish.



CHAPTER SIX

Aboard the Valin's Revenge, forty-seven years after the Black Reach Campaign

It had been a long time since Scipio had visited the reclusiam. The chamber was dark, lit by guttering candles ensconced in the mouths of votive cyber-skulls. Flickering firelight seemed to animate their grisly features.

‘I have been your Chaplain for over a year and this is the first time I’ve seen you in the Emperor’s presence.’

Scipio finished his benedictions, stood and turned to face the speaker.

Elianu Trajan was standing opposite, framed by the reclusiam’s narthex. The arch was inscribed with holy rubrics and catechisms, and there was a stylised effigy of the primarch at its apex to bring it all together.

Scipio bowed. ‘Brother-Chaplain.’

‘Brother Vorolanus.’ Trajan, like Scipio, was dressed in a suppliant’s robes. His were black to match the hue of his battle plate and had a cowl in lieu of a helmet. His crozius mace hung from a hook attached to a thick leather belt and his Chaplain’s rosarius fell to his broad chest suspended from a gilded chain.

Aside from the tools of his office, Trajan did not favour ostentation. Devotion was another matter and his simple power armour was festooned

with purity seals and scripture parchment, oaths of moment and votive chains.

He waited in silence, not moving.

Scipio felt suddenly uncomfortable. ‘Do you wish to ask me something, Brother-Chaplain?’

Trajan’s eyes were penetrating. Embers seemed to smoulder behind the pupils.

‘Just this – *why*?’

‘Why what?’

The Chaplain’s eyes hardened, and the embers became a sharp flame conveying his annoyance.

‘I am not one of your battle-brothers, nor am I a fellow sergeant. I am your Chaplain, Brother Vorolanus, and won’t tolerate games. Answer the question.’

Scipio’s mouth became a hard line. Despite the fact he’d been with the company for over a year, Scipio had not yet found an accord with Trajan. Where Orad had been quiet and reflective, Trajan was direct and exacting. He bullied faith, rather than preached it. A supreme warrior, as fiery and zealous as any Chaplain Scipio had known, but hard to like.

‘I have observed the requisite devotions...’

‘Just not in my sight. Chaplain Orad served this Chapter with distinction. His death was a tragedy, as are the deaths of all true sons of Guilliman, but I am here now and I alone minister to the purity of this company.’

Scipio’s gaze narrowed. He tried not to make a fist.

‘What are you suggesting?’

Trajan smacked him hard across the cheek, and the shock of it felled the sergeant to one knee.

‘I don’t *suggest*. I decree and act,’ he snapped.

Scipio found the crozius pressing on his shoulder as he went to rise.

‘Stay down,’ Trajan warned. ‘I am not finished.’

The Chaplain’s face glowered behind the shadows of his cowl. ‘Your captain and I have known each other for many long years. He speaks highly of your actions on Black Reach, as does Master Telion, so I shall assume you have yet to show me the same qualities that inspired praise in them.’

‘If I displease you, I apologise.’

Trajan rapped Scipio hard on the shoulder blade, drawing a scowl from the sergeant’s mouth and blood from his body.

‘Don’t mock or pander to me, Brother Vorolanus. You are already testing my wrath.’

Scipio’s teeth were gritted. To strike a fellow son of Guilliman was heinous if done without just cause; to strike a member of the Chaplaincy under any circumstances was unconscionable. He bowed his head, allowing the anger to subside.

Trajan continued. ‘Your disaffection has been noted, as has your absence from my ministrations. I will not tolerate it. Orad’s ways are not my ways. You will learn to value them and venerate me as your spiritual leader. Are we clear on this, Scipio?’ Trajan dug the sharp edge of the crozius into Scipio’s flesh to help make his point.

Scipio maintained his position of penitence and nodded.

Trajan nodded back. ‘Being a sergeant carries certain *expectations* that you will meet. Now,’ he added, lifting the crozius. It left a bloody trail. ‘I go to the battle-cages. You should work that anger out. Meet me there once you’re done here, if you wish, but regardless, let this be the last time we exchange words.’

Then he was gone, headed to the training deck.

Scipio never joined him.

‘What do you think that is?’

Ortus was pointing at something in the distance – a series of large, pyramidal silhouettes.

‘Designation: *Monolith*.’ Largo had the scopes and was using them to get a closer look. ‘And something else.’ He handed the magnoculars to his sergeant.

Through the elliptical lens, Scipio saw the three monoliths that Largo had identified. They were moving ponderously, levitating just above the ground on an anti-gravitic energy pulse. Slab-sided, metallic and inscribed with necron runes they looked more like mobile obelisks than battle tanks. Scipio had yet to see one in combat. Given their fearsome weapons array and eldritch crystal power matrix, glowing at the pyramid’s summit, he had no wish to. A portal of light shimmered in the front arc of each monolith, emerald like the gauss-technology and rippling as if fluidic. Even without Mechanicus indoctrination, he knew this was some form of energy gate.

The other machinery Largo had pointed out was larger and of a similar design. It was some kind of *alpha*-monolith. Lightning arcs crackled between it and the other lesser pyramids, suggesting it as a sort of power node.

‘Looks like a capacitor, something to focus the firepower of the other war machines.’ He gave the magnoculars back to Largo.

Ortus’s face was grim. ‘Moving away from the artillery, too.’ His jaw hardened. ‘Bound for Kellenport.’

Scipio was already on the move again. ‘It gets us no closer to breaching the defensive cordon around the heavy guns. Tigurius can relay a message once we return to camp with better news.’

The comm-feed in his ear crackled.

‘*Thracian*, this is *Retiarii*.’

‘Go ahead, Brakkus.’

He was whispering. 'A necron static outpost. Forty-two metres north of our position.'

'Status, brother?'

'Hunkered down and undetected. We have eyes on six targets, raider-class construct.'

'Swarms?'

'Negative, sir.'

Scipio muted the link and turned to the others. They were proceeding across a narrow pass and had pressed their bodies against the cliff wall. Heavy snowfall effectively whited-out their armour, forming a natural camouflage.

'Why would the mechanoids garrison an outpost? It makes no sense.'

Largo's broad forehead creased with thought. 'Unless they are defending something.'

'But not artillery,' said Scipio.

Largo smiled and nodded. 'A way into the mountains.'

'Precisely.' He racked his bolt pistol's slide, checking the load. Enough for a skirmish.

'I'm tired of skulking in the ice and wind.' He un-muted the comm-feed, telling Brakkus to observe and wait, then he raised Cator and gave him the coordinates so the Thunderbolts could converge on the outpost's position.

Scipio gave a feral smile before they moved out. 'Brothers, we have our opening.'

Scipio clenched his fist as he listened to Cator's report over the comm-feed.

'*Veneto*res delayed. Route impassable. Doubling back.'

'How long?'

'Approximately twenty-two minutes, brother-sergeant.'

Shaking his head, Scipio eyed the necron garrison. Just as Brakkius had said: six raider constructs, no heavy guns, elites or swarms. Six of Second Company against the mechanoid foot soldier. Scipio didn't want to wait any longer. The outpost could be reinforced or they might miss their assault window.

'Ortus.' Scipio pointed to a shallow ledge behind a cluster of boulders.

The Ultramarines were below the outpost, hiding in the basin of an ice trench. Sharp crags further obscured their vantage point. The ledge was slightly off-centre of a narrow gorge that fed up to the necron bastion – a functional obelisk-like structure with a small chute at the summit, its sides like the petals of a partially open flower – and offered a clear line of sight for Ortus's deadly aim. Rivulets of frozen meltwater swathed the path up to the structure. Scipio thought he saw faces beneath the ice and wondered briefly what it must be like to have human limitations, to be at the mercy of the elements. Slain by the fickle nature of your own world – it was dishonourable.

Ortus got into his firing position immediately and was already sighting his bolter as Scipio outlined the rest of the plan.

He utilised battle-sign. *Retiarii* would attack from the road, drawing the necrons out and into Ortus's crosshairs. *Thracian* would flank, low and quick, and attack once the garrison was committed.

Telion had often extolled the virtues of 'divide and conquer' as a strategy. It enabled a smaller force to outmanoeuvre and outgun a larger or better defended one. Here, Scipio intended to split the necrons' attention by first having them focus on Brakkius's squad, then Ortus and finally his own.

Scipio reckoned on an estimated total engagement time of thirteen seconds.

He didn't consider another of Telion's maxims, however: 'Always assume the enemy knows something you don't.'



CHAPTER SEVEN

Praxor saw the Stormcaller a split second after Sicarius.

They had known one of the minor necron lords was present in the vanguard; the further the Ultramarines had forged beyond the Kellenport walls, the more that emerald lightning had cracked the sky open.

It was a harbinger, this one, and a billowing tempest preceded him.

‘Twilight falls upon Kellenport and all of Damnos,’ uttered Agrippen, his booming voice as deep as the necron thunder.

A stricken tank company, one of the Guard’s last few on Damnos, fought valiantly in the wastes but they were alone and engulfed by the eldritch storm. Searchlights mounted to their cupolas strafed the darkness, trying to lock onto targets, but this was no ordinary twilight. There was no way to penetrate it. *Creatures* writhed around in the lightning and the wind, at once solid and incorporeal. Praxor had fought the wraiths before and nearly been killed. What chance did human men have against such things?

He watched with narrowed eyes as the gale overtook the battlefield and pressed in on the Ultramarines. Even the steel plate of a Leman Russ battle tank was no proof against the ghost-like necrons who phased *through* their hulls. Praxor could only imagine the horror of the crews within as they were slain.

The cobalt giants were unmoved, both by the storm and the futile plight of the armoured company. Slowly, the rattle of pintle-mounts subsided and the flash of muzzle flares decreased. Even the churn of turrets and the booming report of their cannons became silenced.

‘They are beyond our aid, brother.’

Standing at Praxor’s side, Trajan’s face was a grim and emotionless mask of sculpted bone as he placed a conciliatory hand on the sergeant’s shoulder guard.

Praxor wanted to shrug it off. Elianu Trajan was colder than the Damnos arctic wind. He let it linger, though, using the moment to observe the battlefield.

Kellenport’s defences were based on a series of three octagonal walls. Each was punctuated by several towers and fortified bunkers. Each had three gates: south, west and north. The east side of the city – and it was a vast megalopolis – was completely sealed off, its byways filled, its roads mined and razor-wired. Between each wall was a stretch of land. They had once been districts: commercial, residential, military and religious. Now they were ruins; ash and debris flattened in the necron advance, crushed in the sprawl of war.

From his *Tactica* briefings, Praxor knew the Damnos naval asset, the *Nobilis*, had bombarded some of these outer regions with torpedoes before it was destroyed by the artillery in the Thanatos Hills. The then lord governor had balanced the collateral damage against the severity of the blow it would strike against the necrontyr. No doubt it had bought them some time, and such desperate courage was hard to ignore – without it, the Ultramarines might have landed on a world already subjugated by the soulless machines. But ultimately, it had not saved them and condemned thousands to plasma-death.

Their charred corpses paved the roads and haunted the ruins now, despite the eager snowfall that sought to blanket them with its white veil.

To reach this point, at the threshold of the third defensive wall, Sicarius had led them on a killing spree. Large sections of the necron primary awakeners, as they were designated by Imperial codifiers, had been destroyed but nothing remained as testimony to it. This fact gnawed at Praxor, making him feel the death of Vortigan more acutely.

When we are slain, we stay dead. The necrons merely disappear. How do I know I am not fighting the self same enemy over and again?

Perhaps that's why Trajan had singled him out for benediction first. It was the only reason Sicarius had attacked already – he desired the blessing of his Chaplain. Perhaps Trajan *knew* of Praxor's doubts. He had a gift for it, he of the Black, spotting the chinks in a warrior's armour of faith.

Praxor's expression was firm. 'I am resolved, Brother-Chaplain.'

The armoured company was all but obliterated from sight now. The small pockets of Guard fighting desperately around the vestiges of the city's defences were gradually being eradicated by the meticulous enemy. Once they were finished with the humans, the necrons would focus their full attention on Second Company. Sicarius had been right to strike hard and strike swiftly.

Praxor heard the captain speaking as he was anointed by Trajan.

'We stand as the lonely bastion, the last resistance of an Imperial world.' He stared into the ever-expanding void of necron-fuelled night, his helm in the crook of his arm so his charges could see his noble countenance. His gaze was unswerving like steel, his purpose violent and obvious. 'It was settled in the halcyon days of the Great Crusade, when gods walked amongst us, by our ancestors and the progenitors of our Chapter. Let us not falter in their sight, nor allow the blood they shed for Damnos to be in vain.'

He drew the Tempest Blade – a storm to match a storm – and singled out the necron lord in the midst of the lightning. Replacing his battle-helm, Sicarius growled into the comm-feed.

‘Follow me into the stygian night and let no fleshless horrors stay the fury of the Second. *Victoris Ultra!*’

The storm proper had reached them at last. It broke in waves of dense black cloud, roiling in a spectral wind. Lightning cascaded from the sky, emerald green and as unnatural as those who harnessed it. An otherworldly zephyr whipped at the captain’s cape and crest. It stirred the purity seals and oath parchments on his armour.

Sicarius charged. The Tempest Blade ignited with a fire redolent of older, greater days.

The others followed, ready to fight and die.

Praxor’s doubts, his misgivings about the indestructible foe, vanished in the face of Sicarius’s bravura and dauntless courage. Basking in the reflected light of a true hero, he cried out until his lungs burned and the air turned hot with bolter-fury.

They all did, every glorious one of them.

‘*Victoris Ultra!*’

Praxor stayed close to the captain and his Lions, using the resplendent glow of the blade as a beacon. He made to speak but the hellish wind robbed him of his voice. He tried again, bellowing to the Shieldbearers. ‘Keep to the sword.’

Upon entering the maelstrom, the comm-feed had died. It wasn’t wracked by static interference – it had simply ceased to be. A shroud had been cast over them and all within was deafening silence. Except it wasn’t, not quite. The wind whipped and billowed, so loud it shrieked. Voices, cold and mechanical, hollow and pleading, manifested on the chilling breeze. Flecks of earth and pieces of debris churned about in the night-black storm the necron lord had weaved.

A heavy flash overloaded Praxor’s retinal display as bolt-lightning forked earthwards in a jagged trajectory. One of the Lions was struck, lit up in cruciform like a human torch. He shuddered, emerald energy

wreathing his body, before he crumpled in a smoke-drooling mess and never moved again.

Brother Halnior was dead.

A second bolt arrowed through the night and ripped a ferocious line in the blackness. It cratered the ground then leapt into Etrius.

A flare, magnesium-bright, saturated the storm cloud edging it in white. At its core was Etrius. The Ultramarine was lifted off his feet, the lightning tendrils like a puppet-master's strings animating him jerkily.

A low *foom* battered Praxor's auditory canal and he was pitched into the air with the sudden shockwave. Time slowed in that terrible moment. His arm, going to shield his eyes, moved as if through gelatine. His legs, flung away from the blast, moved with all the purpose of sodden sand struggling through the neck of an hourglass. Belatedly he realised Etrius's spare ammo had exploded. It turned him into a fireball.

Hitting the ground hard jolted Praxor around and time rushed back, urgent and filled with smoke and agony. Hurrying to his feet, he tackled his battle-brother out of the inferno.

Etrius lived, but was barely able to nod as he left his ruined bolter behind. He pulled a bolt pistol from his weapons belt and nodded again to show he was ready to fight on.

But the lightning arc wasn't done. Four more times it struck the earth, tearing holes in the ice and scorching the ground. No one else was felled by the blasts, but it seared battle plate and cut blackened scars into shoulder guards. The Ultramarines' impetus had been slowed.

The wraiths detached themselves from the darkness as if it were an entity and they its cellular defences. Serpentine and sinuous, they advanced on the Ultramarines with a terrifying grace and fluidity.

'Brother-sergeant.' Krixous pointed with his mutilated stump.

Praxor followed it to where Brother Vandius valiantly upheld the company standard. The banner was stilled, heavy as if soaked with rain,

though the wind raged around it.

Buffeted by the gale that failed to lift the Second's banner but hammered everything else, Praxor urged, 'Fight on, brother. Courage and honour.'

Something as close to fear as a Space Marine could experience tainted Krixous's voice. 'How is that even possible?'

Trajan's vehement dogma tore through the storm and his doubt. 'Our glory is more than the hallowed cloth of a standard. It is blood and sinew, heritage and valour – virtues these soulless aberrations know nothing of. Wars are not won by cold machination and the calculus of metal. Victory is achieved through heart and flesh-made courage. We are Guilliman's heirs, his noble sons. Honour his legacy!'

He held the crozius aloft and it burst into azure flame, banishing the darkness around it. Three wraiths recoiled from its brilliance, revealed in the shadows. Trajan brought the power mace down upon the skull of one, crushing it and sending the vile thing back to the unholy cradle that spawned it.

Praxor drove at one of the others, swinging his power sword in a lethal arc. It was a master blade, forged by the Chapter artisans, crafted from the purest metals and imbued with an indomitable machine-spirit.

It passed right through the creature as ethereal as smoke. The wraith resolved a moment later and its long talons cut Praxor's bolt pistol in half as the Ultramarine made to fire. He cast the ruined weapon aside as his fist closed on a useless trigger and took his sword in a two-handed grip, feeding more power to its monomolecular edge.

'We are defiant!' he roared, mustering righteous anger. 'The scions of Ultramar!'

The wraith was unmoved and attacked with whipcord, preternatural speed.

An instinctive parry warded one talon strike, a frantic block fended off a lash of the wraith's whip-like tail. He had yet to strike a blow. Hard-

pressed, Praxor fell back a step.

‘Only forward, brother-sergeant.’ It was Daceus. The formidable veteran was leading the line. He bellowed to the Lions, ‘Forge a path for the captain!’

Somewhere ahead of the wraiths was the Stormcaller. Sicarius meant to meet him in combat and do what he was born to do – end lives.

Daceus seized a wraith in his power fist, but it squirmed free before he could clamp his fingers together to crush it and was lost to the storm. To his right, obscured by the mist and shadows, Honourable Gaius Prabian fought with sword and shield like the Macraggian battle-kings of old. The Company Champion moved with relentless purpose, a match for any of the serpentine wraiths. He severed necks and sundered bodies, his mind and body as one, his weapons an extension of his martial will. As Daceus and Gaius Prabian drove them, the other Lions sent salvos of fire into the night, tearing the blackness to strips.

Sicarius advanced in the killing ground they made, slaying when he had to, searching for his prey when he didn’t.

In those few frantic moments, Praxor’s world contracted into microcosm where only his Shieldbearers and the Lions existed, surrounded by the night. Silhouettes ranged in the shadows still, bellowing oaths or yielding screams, but they were indistinct and phantasmal. Somewhere in the dark were Trajan and Agrippen. The faint corona of the Chaplain’s crozius was yet visible spitting righteous fire, while the Dreadnought was a hulking nightmare limned emerald against onyx-black with each lightning strike.

Of Brother-Sergeant Solinus and the Indomitable, there was no sign.

Praxor hoped they fought on still. Without his bolt pistol, he drew his gladius and battled with two swords instead. The wraiths still lingered at the edge of his vision, distracted by the march of Sicarius and his Lions. Perhaps the Stormcaller was reacting to an imminent threat to his life, such as it was, and recalling his revenants.

Brandishing his power sword, Praxor roared a challenge. ‘Here, machine!’

Twisting its head on a strange, segmented neck, the wraith regarded him as a predator to prey. Coiling first, like a snake, it attacked.

With his gladius Praxor batted away the first talon thrust, following up with the power sword and hacking off the necron’s wrist. A burst of shells from Etrius’s bolt pistol strafed its torso and skull-face, angering it.

Tartaron impaled it with a thrown spear of rebar he’d found amongst the debris. Somewhere along the line, his meltagun had been rendered inoperative. While the creature was still squirming, Praxor removed its head. Permanent phase-out was instantaneous.

Keeping pace with Sicarius and the Lions was a feat. When a second wraith emerged from the shadows, Praxor lunged – first gladius then power sword – to gain ground. Both blows missed but Krixous hammered it with a bolter salvo, steadying his aim on his ruined stump. Praxor carved the wraith open as it staggered, before Tartaron and Etrius each rammed a gladius into its neck cavity. It jerked once, the balefires in its eyes flaring with impotent fury, before phasing out.

Krixous had his eyes on the sky. ‘Emperor’s grace...’ he breathed, ‘Look!’

All eyes went to the heavens where dozens of wraiths swirled and twisted like the denizens of some black infernal sea.

Praxor levelled his gladius in an order to fire. ‘Bolters!’ he cried, and the air was torn apart by explosive, mass-reactive death.

Some of the wraiths were drawn by the attack, swimming effortlessly in and out of phase, with only the viridian orbs of their eyes a constant.

‘Hold them off.’ Praxor knew they must give Sicarius time to find and kill their lord. ‘By Guilliman’s sword!’

The wraiths engulfed the Shieldbearers. Talon-blades and tail-barbs became a ghostly blur as the necrons swept amongst them. Their rending

tools cleaved and cut.

Brother Belthonis was dragged into the storm, the hard bangs of his bolter stolen on the air. Skewered through the torso and neck, Brother Galrion crumpled spitting blood. His vambraces shredded, Brother Hexedese screamed the primarch's name as a spear-like tail punctured his plastron and he fell.

'Form a shield around me!' Praxor urged his warriors to rally, and the Shieldbearers closed ranks like an armoured laager, firing in all directions. They were an island of cobalt in a hostile black ocean surrounded by a shoal of pitiless killers. Images flashed before Praxor in the chaos: Daceus crying hell and fury; Gaius Prabian, colder and more clinical in his kills than the machines; Venatio, stooped over the body of Galrion. Through the blood-soaked blur, one resolved brighter than all the rest.

Sicarius...

The Grand Duke of Talassar had found his prey. He angled his blade, energy bleeding off the edge in a pearlescent haze. Answering, the Stormcaller brandished his staff. Alien sigils ran along the haft and it crackled with emerald lightning. Moments later, their weapons clashed in incandescent fusion. Above, the thunder bellowed in empathy. Every emotion, every blow and counter-blow was described in the storm-wracked sky.

For a machine, the necron moved more swiftly than Praxor gave it credit for. He caught only snatches through the frenzy of his own battle, but heard the lightning crack time and again. The duellists became shadows in the harsh light of its afterglow, lit in stark monochrome.

It lasted only seconds. With a shout of triumph, Sicarius cut the Stormcaller's staff in half, sending a backwash of energy through him, and then decapitated the creature with the reverse blow. The necron lord's head didn't even have time to hit the earth before he disappeared, leaving behind the malicious resonance of his passing.

The storm went with him, evaporating as if carried on a strong wind, light replacing dark like a sudden breaking dawn. Lightning ebbed, thunder subsided. Even the wraiths melted away, returned to their master's side. In the centre of it all was Sicarius. He leant on one knee, heaving breath into his body.

The lightning had struck him more than once – the smoke coiling off his scorched armour was testament to that. In spite of the obvious pain, he rose and with straightened back and head held high lifted the Tempest Blade.

‘Victoris Ultra!’

Relief and exultation blending as one glorious emotion, the Second – Lions, Shieldbearers, Indomitable and all – gave voice that echoed their captain.

Desolation surrounded them. And more than one of Guilliman's sons had returned to their primarch's side in the Temple of Correction on Macragge.

Vandius's banner stirred again, rippling on an arctic breeze.

The necron vanguard was defeated.

Though of exultant mood, a small kernel of Praxor felt hollow at the victory. Over half his squad were dead or maimed; Sicarius's maddened rush at the enemy the reason for it. Solinus's squad had suffered too, though not nearly as badly.

As he watched Apothecary Venatio add the gene-seed of Hexedese to that of Galrion and Vortigan, Praxor could not help but question.

‘Only in death, Brother-Sergeant Manorian.’

Trajan again, the ever-vigilant shadow of Second Company. *‘Duty is all we have, brother.’*

Praxor nodded.

‘Yes, my Chaplain.’

At least Belthonis had lived, though he was badly wounded. He might walk, but fight? Given their position, he had little choice with either.

Venatio would have to patch him up and make him last for however long he could.

Agrippen met the sergeant's gaze, stoic and unreadable within the armour-eternal of his sarcophagus, and within Praxor felt an accord.

Suddenly the presence of the First on Damnos, Agemman's watchmen, seemed all too necessary.

ACT TWO: SALVATION



CHAPTER EIGHT

Macragge, two years before the Damnos Incident

Praxor was enrapt as he listened to the senators' endless debating.

Watching from a seat at the back of the auditorium, Iulus frowned and was glad of the concealing shadows cast in the wake of the late Macraggian sun.

Attired in robes of various hues and ostentation, he found the senators overfond of their own voices, prolix for the sake of it. Their arguments did not interest him. He had come for Praxor.

Helots roamed the hall, plying the officials with drink and sustenance, while lexicographical servitors dictated every spoken word on clacking scriptoria. The debate had been going on for several days. It did not appear as if any resolution were in sight.

Iulus noticed other Adeptus Astartes in the throng, company spokesmen and the aides of captains. Daceus was there. The veteran-sergeant looked strange with a stump of arm instead of his power fist. It was rare to see the Lion without his battle gear. He looked as enthralled as Iulus felt. So too was Helios from the First. His demeanour appeared keener but no less exhausted at the endless procrastination.

Politics was not Iulus's strong suit. He believed in what he could touch and fashion towards war, but the Chapter needed solidity too and so its future was given to the politicians to argue over. Not that their opinions *really* mattered. It was the illusion of diplomacy. Only one man could end the debate with any real authority and finality, and his throne in the auditorium was empty. He wasn't wasting his time listening to this.

Deciding Praxor was too involved to disturb, Iulus headed for the battle-cages alone.

He met Scipio, waiting for him in training fatigues and wielding a blunted rudius.

'I saw Praxor at the senate council again,' he said as he began stripping off his armour. A pair of serfs came to attend him, but Iulus waved them away. 'I am capable of donning my own training garb.' He glowered and sent the serfs scurrying.

Scipio was sketching test swings with his rudius. 'Why do you terrify them, brother?'

The corner of Iulus's mouth twitched as he set down his cuirass. 'Because it's enjoyable.'

Shrugging, Scipio made two arcs, switching from one hand to the other, before ending on a low thrust.

'Serious, eh?' joked Iulus. His armour was stowed and he picked up a rudius himself, gauging the weight and heft.

'I have to be when sparring with you, ox.'

Iulus snorted, mimicking the beast Scipio had likened him to.

Then he swung.

Scipio blocked expertly, moving aside and allowing the blunted blade to roll down and off his own. His riposte was a sharp jab that Iulus swatted down before he backed away and said, 'We have not spoken of it since it happened.'

Scipio leapt and swung an overhead blow that staggered Iulus at first but the sergeant got his footing quickly and rammed his shoulder against his opponent, denying him the room for a follow-up. Scipio grimaced as he tried and failed to match his friend's superior strength. 'Spoken of what?'

Iulus felt Scipio move, turning his momentum against him. He checked his stance, bracing his legs wider, and pivoted on one foot to parry the reverse swipe aimed at his shoulder blade. The rudii *clacked* loudly around the cage.

'Orad.'

A hail of blows rebounded against Iulus's blade and he was hard-pressed to defend against them. He had to back away, fending off each fresh attack, his options for a reply diminishing with every blow. It bordered on frenzied.

Like a pugilist against the ropes, he went in close, seizing Scipio's torso in a wrestling move and heaving him back to reassert some distance. Scipio came back undaunted and swinging. He carved elaborate approach swings in the air and Iulus had to use his full concentration to anticipate his opponent's strike pattern. He blocked and feinted, but could find no counter.

Scipio was relentless. And silent, until saying, 'What is there to speak about? He is dead. That is the likely fate of us all in the end.'

He aimed a punch, which Iulus deflected easily with his meaty forearm. He could sense his battle-brother tiring. Anger, when misused during battle, was as much an enemy as a friend. He asked, 'When did you become so fatalistic, Scipio?'

Their blades locked, one pressing against the other. Scipio's face was a mask of aggression.

'I am merely being realistic.'

He took a two-handed grip. It forced Iulus onto the back foot, but he then rolled on his heel and allowed Scipio to lunge forward into mid-air.

Using the flat of his blade, he smacked Scipio hard on the back of his neck.

‘I don’t think you’re angry at me, brother.’

Stung, Scipio turned with murderous eyes and flung his rudius like a throwing dagger. The move almost fooled Iulus, who was forced into a desperate block that sent the weapon spinning loose. It was a hair’s breadth from his neck and causing serious injury.

Iulus threw down his rudius a second later and punched Scipio hard in the jaw. He recoiled but didn’t retaliate. Shame supplanted anger as he realised he’d broken a sacred trust.

Iulus was breathing hard; they both were. ‘You want to fight for real, bring armour and chainblades next time, but don’t expect to walk out of this cage.’ He moved in close, his voice deep and full of menace. ‘You’ll need to be carried out.’

Scipio’s face was a hard, defiant line.

‘Bout over,’ he said, and left.

When Scipio was gone, Iulus sagged and wondered at how he had failed to see his friend’s degeneration and pain. He slammed his fist into the cage wall, stretching the metal into a perfect mould of his knuckles. Then he picked up the rudius and performed training rotas until he was sore and burning, and all the frustration had vented away.

The wise say, just before you die, that your life and all its achievements pass before you in a blur of enlightenment.

Iulus recalled the words of the ancient Macraggian philosophers he’d been forced to endure as part of his neophyte training. On his back in the dirt and bloody snow, he found issue with that belief. There was only an encroaching darkness and the dense thunder of pumping blood in his ears. There was no epiphany, no glorious moment when a golden halo beckoned or cherubim sang of his deeds in archaic verse.

It was copper-stink, it was hot fading breath and the futile knowledge that he had been found wanting in the face of his liege lords of old.

As the necron's grip tightened, Iulus railed against his fate, too obstinate to accept it. He wanted to scream his defiance but even that was denied him. He'd pushed the chainblade as deep as it would go, dragged it around organs that were not organs, but still the necron endured.

Then the pressure lifted.

First his sight returned, like a fresh dawn after a moonless night. The blood stopped rushing quite so loudly and mortally after that, and was replaced by a hard insistent *clank*. Something that looked like a spear-tip jabbed out of the necron's left eye socket. Then it happened again and again. Before it phased out, Iulus was dimly aware of a human clinging to the creature's back and hacking for all his worth. The ice-spike's final blow punctured the necron's forehead, dead centre, and it flickered from existence.

The human, a conscript by the look of his uniform, landed heavily but on his feet.

He grinned at Iulus. Behind him, there were other conscripts hacking with blades, picks and axes. 'I have saved an Angel,' he said, and offered his hand.

Iulus got to his feet, ignoring the human's aid because his weight would have toppled him and he didn't want his saviour to suffer that indignity. 'Who are you?' he asked instead.

The necron elites were defeated. The entire war cell had phased out, removed tactically from the battlefield by their masters below and abroad.

'Kolpeck,' said the human. He sketched a salute, but it was awkward and rough. 'Falka Kolpeck.'

Iulus liked him already.

History would not remember the deeds of the Damnos Ark Guard in the liberation of Kellenport. They would fail to record the courageous actions

of the four hundred souls who ventured beyond the western gate from the Courtyard of Thor to certain death. Sicarius and his glorious Second would be the heroes and for them alone the laurels of the battle attributed.

But Iulus Fennion would always know the full truth of it.

He regarded the bedraggled remnants of the Ark Guard that had fought and died in the ‘wastes’ alongside the Ultramarines and felt... *surprise*.

Ever since Ghospora City back on Black Reach, over a century ago, he had known humans had mettle. To fight greenskins from behind barricades and fortified battlements was one thing; to charge headlong into hand-to-hand combat with necrons was something else. Perhaps these hundred or so soldiers before him were suicidal.

They were mainly miners, he decided, Damnosian labourers pressed into service as a last act of a desperate world to shore up its decimated armies. They’d just returned from the Capitolis Administratum bastion with the acting lord governor. With the Deathwinds’ payload depleted, it was no longer safe and he was to be secured within Kellenport.

Word had come through Daceus from the front. Sicarius was pressing on into enemy-held territory, to Arcona City and the Zephyr Monastery. He’d requisitioned forces from the rearguard, both squads of Devastators and Brother Ultracius. Kellenport was won, but he wanted to keep it that way.

According to Tactica briefings, Commander Sonne had over fifty thousand Ark Guard at his disposal; a large part of the planet’s remaining population. Iulus was given the unenviable job of galvanising them and ensuring they held the line and the ground already won.

Agnathio could not make the long walk. The damage done to his motive functions had reduced the mighty warrior to an undignified shuffle and until a Techmarine could be tasked with conducting the correct rituals and rites to effect repairs, he would remain so. The Dreadnought joined Iulus’s command and the brother-sergeant was glad of his presence and his wisdom.

Presently, he had one ear to the recently restored long-range comm-feed.

‘Brother.’ The return was crackly and broken, but Iulus recognised the voice of Praxor. ‘I’m sorry that you’ve been left behind.’

‘It is no matter,’ Iulus replied. ‘My duty is to the captain and the Emperor whatever form it takes. How goes the battle farther out?’

‘Tough.’ It was rare for Praxor to be so upfront and honest about the severity of the fight ahead. He was usually possessed of the same vainglory as their captain.

Iulus wondered what had changed.

‘You lost battle-brothers?’

The voice that came back over the feed was quieter, almost hushed, ‘More than I’m comfortable with. The Shieldbearers are at barely half-strength.’

‘We always knew this war would be arduous. Galvia and Urnos were wounded but we are inviolable still.’ He was referring to the fact that ever since they’d been formed, the Immortals had yet to sustain a casualty. That feat might be put sorely to the test on Damnos.

‘I only wish you were fighting by my side, Iulus,’ said Praxor, his mood oddly candid. ‘I have need of your counsel and temperance.’

‘Guilliman willing, we will all survive this campaign to fight another in the primarch’s name.’

‘Or die in the prosecution of it.’

Iulus nodded without trace of regret or denial. ‘If that is his will, then yes.’

Praxor left a pause as if agreeing with his fellow sergeant then asked, ‘Any word from Scipio?’

The activation runes on the portable hololith projector were flashing. Iulus needed to cut this short. ‘None, but there is another comm shroud over the Thanatos Hills.’

‘May Guilliman watch over him.’

‘And all of us. Courage and honour, brother.’

‘Courage and honour.’

Iulus cut the feed. Troopers were filing in from the western gate, more Ark Guard. There were twenty thousand men with heavy cannon and servitors. The majority looked like the conscripts arrayed before Iulus in the reclaimed ‘wasteland’ in front of the first defensive wall.

The hololith unit flickered to life, a grainy blue three-dimensional image suspended in mid-air through a projector node, and Iulus looked away from the marching men.

‘Lord Fennion.’ It was Commander Sonne, from somewhere within the Kellenport city-bastion. He gave a crisp salute but his eyes appeared haggard, his face drawn and his uniform bedraggled.

‘I am a Space Marine sergeant,’ Iulus corrected him, nodding in recognition of the salute, ‘so you may refer to me as such. I am no one’s lord.’

‘Duly noted, sergeant. I want to convey my deepest appreciation for your efforts in liberating Kellenport. You have saved many lives with your actions and all of Damnos expresses its gratitude to you, our saviours.’

The words were there, but the belief was not. Sonne did not think his life or the lives of his people were saved, nor did he regard the Ultramarines as saviours. Iulus saw a broken man before him, one that was going through the motions and had all but given in to fatalism.

‘Further hard work is needed, commander. We have only stalled the necron advance, not stymied it completely.’

‘I am at your disposal, as are my men. I’ve already sent the twenty thousand requested to the wastes.’

‘You might want to reconsider naming that zone,’ Iulus advised.

Sonne nodded, mildly chastened. ‘Of course... Yes. It was the Courtyard of Chronus before the desolation. So it shall be again.’

‘Chronus it is,’ said Iulus. ‘Our tank commander will be pleased.’

Sonne didn't understand the reference, but acknowledged the remark with another nod anyway.

Iulus went on. 'Your thirty thousand will defend the city-bastion whilst the other twenty will be split evenly garrisoning the defensive walls. The third wall we mine and give up to the enemy.'

Sonne went to object but Iulus cut him off. 'We're already stretched and defending three walls will spread us too thinly. Our focus shall be on the first two walls, the first as a fall-back point for the second and then Kellenport city-bastion as our last redoubt.'

Sonne looked ashen at that last remark. If they lost Kellenport then it was over. For everyone.

'You push on for the outer territories?' he asked, a rare glimmer of hope in his tired eyes.

'Captain Sicarius is driving the spearhead purposefully, yes.'

As Iulus understood it, the 'spearhead' was actually a series of daring raids. The necron vanguard had been beaten, a tiny respite bought for the Kellenport defenders, but the mechanoids would return as soon as they'd calibrated for fighting against the Ultramarines. Iulus nearly said as much to Sonne but chose to stay his tongue. Perhaps some of Scipio's old empathy was rubbing off on him. But that had been a different version of his friend. Something, the death of Orad he suspected, had hollowed out that optimism and replaced it with a core of ice. He'd half heard of an altercation with Praxor in the past, something prior to Damnos, but had no wish to pry. The business of others was precisely that. Iulus knew his duty and how to do it to the best of his ability. He had gifts, the legacy of his Chapter brothers flowing in his veins, and he meant to honour that with each and every one of his actions.

Iulus only half watched Commander Sonne's salute, his mind on other things as the hololith shrank back into the projector node.

‘Don’t let it consume you, Scipio,’ he said to the wind, shifting his gaze to the Thanatos Hills where the necron barrage continued unabated. ‘Don’t give in to reckless hate, brother.’

Aristaeus loomed behind him; Iulus could hear the warrior’s careful tread.

‘Break up the squad,’ said the sergeant, ‘and distribute it around the separate battalions.’ He regarded the one hundred survivors from the battle for the plaza, the renamed Courtyard of Chronus. Falka Kolpeck was standing in the middle, their de facto leader. ‘These ones are with me.’

It had been so long since he had hunted.

For a moment he was skin and bone again and it was blood, not oil and circuitry, that flowed through him. The wild lands of his birth stretched as far as he could see and the hooting of cattle and herd-beasts called into the umber evening. The sun was dipping and he felt its warmth fading on his cheek. The coarse grain of his antique phase-rifle was a reassuring presence in his hand. The wind, ghosting through the hills and across the plain, touched his exposed skin with chilling tendrils.

As quickly as they came, the sensations bled away again and left numbness and sorrow in their wake. The sun did not warm him, the wind was as dead as the bloodless arteries of his mechanised body. No rifle identified him as a noble plains hunter. Instead, a pair of gruesome talons betrayed him for what he was – a monster.

Sahtah the Enfleshed groaned inwardly. Even as the tundra rushed by in a blur of greyish white, as his slaves followed his lead, he was not placated. Funnelling into a deep gorge, he paused before the carcass of a dead herd-animal. Its flesh steamed with recently exposed entrails. Sahtah plunged his talons inside, turning them incarnadine with the beast’s spilled viscera, hoping...

‘Why can’t I feel it?’

He rounded on his slaves in a sudden fury. 'There is no heat from the blood, no kill-stench. Where is it?'

Powerless to answer his demands even if they wanted to, the flayed ones merely stared and waited. Their flesh-cowls were rank with putrefaction but stirred a pang of jealousy in their lord.

'I want my robes!' Sahtah raged. His synthetic voice could only simulate his anger. In a quieter voice, he added: 'I want my body.'

His instincts told him the genebred humans were close.

'Soon I will have it,' he promised. 'Soon I will be enfleshed again.'



CHAPTER NINE

Brakkius led Retiarii up the slope. Brothers Renatus and Herdantes kept low behind their squad leader, weapons up. As soon as they were spotted, a strobe of emerald gauss-fire lit up the snow and ice. It was answered by bolter fire that incapacitated one of the raiders but didn't render it inoperative. Before Brakkius and his troops were retreating, the downed necron had already begun to self-repair.

Despite the lack of lasting damage, their attack provoked the reaction Scipio was hoping for. Three of the six raiders left the obelisk and went after Brakkius.

Two hard *bangs* from Ortus took one of the mechanoids in the side of the skull. It crumpled into a heap, shuddered and phased out. Another shot exploded a raider's shoulder and left it unable to shoot.

The crossfire was working. It drew the other three necrons out. Scipio and Largo had already sneaked into position before Brakkius's attack and were about to flank them when the sniper fire stopped. Scipio was about to give the attack order when he hesitated and looked over to Ortus's vantage point, wondering why he'd stopped firing.

'Brother, report,' he snapped into the comm-feed. Then came the screaming from back down the slope. It sounded like Renatus.

'Brakkius!'

The reply was frantic. ‘Under attack, sergeant...’

Scipio had moved out of the gorge and couldn’t see back down the path because of the slope’s sharp incline. He caught muzzle flashes, though, and knew the weapons that made them were turned away from the obelisk.

‘In the ice. Beneath us!’

Largo was ready to move. ‘What do we do?’

The raiders were laying down a thickening curtain of fire. Their slow, methodical advance would get them to the edge of the path and looking down on the gorge in a few minutes. Then Brakkus would face enemies to the front and rear. Scipio swore loudly. He still had no sense of what was attacking Brakkus in the gorge but he suspected it was the same foe that had neutralised Ortus.

‘We fight!’ Scipio came up off his haunches like a jackhammer and thundered half a clip into the nearest raider. Battered, the necron turned and unleashed a swathe of gauss-beams. Scipio took one in the leg that staggered him, but he kept on running. Just behind him, Largo provided support fire and tore the raider’s chest open with a series of precise shots. It phased out, leaving four and whatever was in the gorge.

A claw broke through the ice at Scipio’s feet, answering that question, and locked onto the sergeant’s ankle. Instinctively he shot downwards at his assailant, carving up the ground into jagged chips. Pitiless eyes glowed emerald through the glossy filter of the ice before dying into embers and then voids as the creature phased out.

It was not alone.

Scipio cursed again, realising there *had* been faces beneath their feet but not of Damnosian natives, not any more – they were necrons, flesh-wrapped nightmares that tunnelled and burrowed like mechanical insects. Brakkus fought the same foes. Ortus had been claimed by them. This was a trap, but one of the necrons’ making, and Scipio had blundered right into it.

‘Sergeant Vorolanus!’

The ice broke apart at Scipio’s feet and he was dragged downwards, Largo’s warning echoing behind him. He kicked out and made a solid connection, ceramite hitting necron metal. For want of a better strategy, he jabbed his chainsword into the ice-slush where the half-fleshed horrors were slowly emerging. Sparks fizzed and died as they hit the ground, cascading off whatever Scipio’s blade was locked against.

Talons. The creatures had long, curved talons just like the ambushers they’d met and destroyed at the Thanatos Refinery. Scipio cursed himself for a fool. He had rushed to engage without properly gauging the lie of the land, but he was an Ultramarine with his brothers beside him – all was not lost. He swung his bolt pistol around, sending two shells into the ice just as a lance of pain shot up his leg where the flayed one had impaled him.

A second broke free of the ice and loomed over him. Scipio yanked his chainsword free and parried a blow that would have slashed open his neck.

‘Hell-kite!’ Two more shells put down the invisible aggressor still lodged below, trying to emerge; a swing of the chainblade ripped open the cabling and servos around the other necron’s torso. It fell back, stunned, but was self-repairing.

‘Brother!’

Largo had his own problems. Three more flayed ones had pulled themselves free of the ground, like corpses come back to life to revenge themselves on the living. Largo sent tightly controlled bolter bursts into their ranks in an attempt to slow them but ammo was low and any damage caused wasn’t severe enough to take out the necrons permanently.

The fight in the gorge was fading too. The intensity of fire from *Retiarii* was lessening, which Scipio took to be a bad sign. Brakkus could be dead. When the raiders reached the edge of the gorge, he surely would be.

Time was slowing. Fate had caught up with Scipio Vorolanus. It had witnessed his reckless abandon, his selfish fatalism that had grown like a

cancer in the years since Orad's death and decided to make him pay for it.

Scipio railed. 'This is not the end!'

The flayed one he'd maimed was getting up. He swung the bolt pistol around to finish it but the trigger *chanked* empty. Powerless to intervene, still half buried under the ice where his spare clips were pinned against his belt, he watched.

Metal flowed like oil, running on the surface of the tundra. Wires and cables reattached themselves, weaving viperously across the ground, re-establishing function to vital systems. The spinal column severed by Scipio's blow caterpillared towards the half-wrecked torso, dragging abdomen and legs with it. Metallic fusion occurred quickly and vigorously – only the necron's cape of skin showed any lasting damage.

'Breath of Guilliman,' he spat through clenched teeth, looking heavenwards for divine intervention. 'Can't they just stay dead?'

Largo had run out of room and ammunition. He hauled Scipio from the ambush-pit and onto his feet. Back-to-back, they faced six flayed ones, a match for any warrior of the Second. The raiders had their own mission and closed on whatever was left of Brakkus and *Retiarii*.

Scipio slammed his last clip into his bolt pistol; Largo let his spent bolter sag on its strap and drew a combat blade.

'If I had known, Largo...'

'We would have still followed you, brother-sergeant. Only in death.'

Scipio nodded grimly. 'Only in death.'

A smoke contrail *foomed* across the Ultramarines eye-line, making them turn. It lit up the closest flayed one in an incendiary burst, tearing the creature into fragments. A pair of grenades followed in its wake. They emitted a low hum before attaching magnetically to a second necron. The explosion was hot and deafening. Frag showered the Space Marines' armour. Disregarding this new element to the skirmish for now, Scipio and Largo broke apart and were about to engage the enemy when a bola

whipped around a mechanoid's neck and took off its head in the resulting firestorm.

Three necrons phased out in under a minute. The raiders were turning, reacting to the change in engagement dynamics. Three las-beams pinned one, shredding leg joints and the chamber on its gauss-flayer; a thrown axe embedded in a second. Laced with explosives, it was blasted apart like the flayed ones.

Sensing the swing in their favour, Scipio cut down another mechanoid with Largo applying the killing stroke with his combat blade. The two raiders and flayed ones that remained, their forces so brutally punished, phased out.

In their wake, Scipio observed their saviours. His enhanced eyesight picked out their shadows in the snow-kissed crags above. They wore ice camouflage and had powder beneath their eyes. Even their guns were swathed in bleached-white rags and painted to blend in with their surroundings.

‘Show yourselves,’ Scipio addressed the half-darkness. ‘In the name of the Emperor’s Adeptus Astartes.’

Slowly, the hunters, or whoever they were, came down from their vantage points. They were well-armed. Scipio saw a tube launcher, heavy-gauge lascarbines, grenade lanyards and several improvised explosives amongst their battlegear. Every one of them carried an ice-pick too. It was this, and not an axe, that had been utilised earlier.

As they emerged into the light at last, though it was a fuliginous twilight that shadowed the gorge and the plateau at its summit now, a band of grizzled men were revealed standing amongst the Ultramarines. Scarred and as hard as the permafrost beneath their feet, Scipio knew guerrilla fighters when he saw them.

He nodded to the one who looked like their leader. A thick beard covered the lower half of his face and there were strange tattoos marking his

cheeks and forehead. He wore several ragged scarves and his nose, ears and around the eyes were red with overexposure to the cold. Bandages, several layers thick, served as gloves. A tattered cloak that might once have been a storm coat fluttered on a solemn breeze.

Though Scipio towered over the man, he didn't flinch or appear intimidated.

He looked down, extending a hand. 'We are in your debt.'

Besides taking a firmer grip on his lascarbine, the man didn't respond.

'The trap wasn't meant for you,' said a confident voice from higher up in the crags. It was a woman, moving slowly but expertly through the rocks. She was attired like the others but Scipio noticed a ribbed bodyglove beneath her scarves and cloaks. It reminded him of some kind of environment suit, albeit non-functional. Reddish hair, dried out and rough with the cold, peeked from beneath a furred hat. A pair of goggles, their lenses tinged a pinkish hue, hung around her neck.

Piercing jade eyes appraised the Ultramarine, taking in the curves of his armour, his sheer size and power, as she approached him.

'They're after me.' Stopping a few metres away from Scipio, she spread her arms wide. 'All of us.'

Pointing to the obelisk, she added, 'Communication tower, Emperor knows how it works. The Herald uses it to speak to us.'

Scipio frowned. 'Herald?' He recalled Tigurius's traumatic connection with a creature of the same name.

'He is their voice,' she explained. 'Don't see many towers this far out. Must be expanding.' The woman came closer, deciding she could trust the warrior, and held out her hand. 'Jynn Evvers.'

Scipio took it out of politeness, being careful not to crush her delicate fingers, and was surprised to feel some iron there. 'You're hunting them.'

'Why do you think they want to catch us? Got close too until you Angels arrived from on high.' She turned in profile, revealing a string of the self-

same tattoos down her neck as on the bearded man. They weaved like a strand of chromosomes. ‘This is my crew: Densk, Farge, Makker...’

The names were unimportant to Scipio, though this Jynn related all eighteen of them. Each man and woman nodded, smiled or returned grim indifference to the Ultramarine sergeant. Densk was the bearded one. He later discovered the man had no tongue – he’d lost it due to frostbite. He also later found out that there had once been more of them... lots more.

‘We should move,’ she concluded at the end of the introductions. ‘The metal-heads will be back soon.’

Scipio exchanged a glance with Largo – this must be the guerrilla’s term for the necrons. Out the corner of his eye, he noticed Brakkius emerging from the gorge. He was limping. Herdantes cradled a wounded arm. Between them they dragged Renatus.

Largo went to go to them when Scipio placed a hand on his shoulder. ‘Find Ortus,’ he murmured.

‘Captain Evvers!’ One of the guerrillas, a woman called Sia, was watching the perimeter. Her warning was met by the priming of lascarbines and an immediate dispersal of the human forces amongst the crags.

Scipio was mildly impressed – he’d seen squads of storm troopers that were only a little better disciplined. He didn’t move, though. An auspex chime revealed the identity of the new arrivals to him.

‘Stand down,’ he said, seeing *Venetoires* led by Cator run into view. ‘They’re with me.’

The guerrilla fighters eased off but only when Evvers gave the signal. Scipio’s opinion of them improved further. He surreptitiously battle-signed to Cator that the humans were allies. *Venetoires* were back amongst the others in short order after that.

‘I’m sorry, brother-sergeant,’ said Cator, speaking for his combat squad. ‘Doubling back cost us a lot of time.’

Scipio waved away his contrition. 'I should have waited, brother. And now...' He gestured to the carnage that had hurt the Thunderbolts.

'What happened?'

Brakkus and the rest of *Retiarii* joined them.

'We were ambushed,' said Scipio. 'In the gorge and up here.'

Largo returned but shook his head when he met his sergeant's gaze. Ortus was gone.

'Venatio is back with Captain Sicarius. His legacy is lost to us,' he said.

Scipio gritted his teeth, not liking the options. 'We can't get him back across the mountains.'

Largo was shaking his head again. 'It doesn't matter. There's nothing left of him.'

Now Scipio made a fist. He was trying hard to rein in his anger. He turned to the woman, Evvers.

'How close is your camp to here?'

'Not far.'

'Do you have medical supplies?'

'Some.' She looked worried, as perturbed about unfolding events as Scipio was.

'Take us there.'

Largo put a hand on Scipio's vambrace. His eyes counselled caution.

'What choice do we have? What else would you have me do, Largo?'

He let it go, but wasn't quite done. 'What about the mission?'

'Without a way through the mountains, there is no mission. Ortus is dead already, so too Naceon.' Scipio looked to Brakkus and his men. 'I won't lose another. Not senselessly, not like this.'

Largo nodded.

'So, your camp.' Scipio asked Evvers. 'Where is it?'

In the end, Jynn had no choice. She didn't want to bring the Space Marines to the encampment, for one thing their presence would attract the metal-

heads, but how could she refuse? It had been a close call whether to intervene on the Ultramarines' behalf, and as they wended through the mountains a part of her had begun to regret that decision.

Of course, the superhuman warriors would make excellent protectors but the humans had survived so far without them and Jynn had no desire to change that, plus she couldn't be sure that protection was the Space Marines' primary objective. They were death incarnate and being close to such beings would only invite the very spectre of mortality into their ranks.

As they climbed higher, up the steep ice-daggered slopes and brittle crags thick with snow, she wondered about their leader. From listening in on the Space Marines' hushed exchanges, she gathered his name was Scipio and he was a sergeant. Jynn knew about as much as most Imperial citizens did about Space Marines, which was precious little. To her, they were warriors of myth, Angels sent on wings of fire and wielding fists of thunder and lightning.

Such impressions were romanticised, of course, little more than cultural extrapolations from tapestries, statues and galleria. The truth was there before her. These were super-men, for sure, but they were fallible and could be killed; they weren't the untouchable immortals that some claimed them to be. Jynn would have been in awe of them, she felt, if her spirit had not been so embittered by the war.

The memory of Korve, her long-dead husband, came into her mind as they crested another high and the drifts thickened. What started out as a light dappling of snow upon her shoulder and head became a deluge that swathed Jynn's entire body. She slipped on a patch of ice and nearly fell. Reaching out, she braced herself on a rocky spur that felt smooth to the touch and realised it was Scipio.

'Be careful, Captain Evvers,' he warned, setting her upright again.

She nodded a curt thanks. 'It's Jynn,' she said. 'My name, I mean. It doesn't seem right that an Angel of the Emperor should call me "captain".'

It doesn't seem right that anyone should.'

'You carry the rank well... *Jynn*.'

She prodded the Ultramarine's plastron. 'And you are Scipio?'

Scipio looked down at her pointing finger, debating what to do about it. In the end he merely answered the question. 'I am Brother-Sergeant Vorolanus, yes, but you may call me Scipio. You very probably saved my life and that of my squad, so you've earned the right.'

She snorted derisively, echoing, '*Earned the right*, eh? Come on.' She turned and moved on. 'We're close.'

They reached the encampment in a few more minutes. It was high up and well shielded from the necrons' attention. The guerrillas must have had engineers and technicians amongst their group, for they'd erected bafflers to thwart the mechanoids' sensors.

Scipio counted six more men at the camp; one was a medic, the other looked like the individual responsible for the sensor jamming array.

Largo appeared at his sergeant's shoulder and spoke in a low voice, 'Our comm-feed is down, should we...?' He indicated the bafflers: slim, flanged antennae jabbed into the ground like a spear. Looking at them, Scipio realised the entire encampment, even its rough tents and boxy generators, was portable. He wondered how many times the guerrillas had been forced to move since the occupation and how long it had taken them to realise they needed to.

'No.' He held up his hand, flat with the palm down. 'Leave it. The comm-feed is no use to us out here, anyway.'

They followed Jynn Evvers, the guerrillas bleeding off from the main group to talk with their comrades and help explain why cobalt-blue Angels were in their midst. Scipio ignored their awed glances. Only the medic seemed unmoved.

'Medical tent,' Jynn supplied as they passed it.

Scipio gestured for Brakkius and the injured to peel off and get some attention. He held Brakkius's forearm as he was leaving and looked to Renatus. 'How bad is he?'

'Sus-an membrane coma. Only Venatio can bring him out of it.'

'Get him inside and see what can be done for his wounds.'

Brakkius tried to mask his shock. 'We're leaving him?'

'Better that than drag him through the mountains. He's safer with the humans. We will come back for him, brother.'

Satisfied that Brakkius understood, Scipio let him go and caught up to Largo, who was waiting a little way ahead. Cator, Garrik and Auris had stayed behind to watch the entrance. The humans had sentries but they were not Space Marines and Scipio trusted his Thunderbolts above all others.

Defensively, the guerrilla camp left a lot to be desired, amounting to little more than a few clustered tents, some razor-wire barricades and a handful of tripod-mounted heavy stubbers. Not enough to seriously deter a necron attack but then he supposed that was why they had the bafflers. It was meant as a place of shelter, somewhere to regroup and rest, not a fortress.

'In here,' said Jynn, without looking back.

Scipio left Largo outside. He was alone with the female guerrilla leader in what he assumed was her operational base. There were hanging charts and maps, a simple sleeping bag in one corner and a butane lamp kit turned off in the centre of the space. Low burning lumen rods dangled from the tent's internal guy ropes and provided the only light source. The blowing breeze that had started to pick up nudged the rods. As the shadows moved, more makeshift bomb and grenade combinations were revealed here and there. Someone had set up an improvised table and there were more maps and charts on it.

‘Found a lot of patrols on our forays inland,’ Jynn explained. She turned on the lamp kit and rubbed her hands next to the warmth. She looked over her shoulder at Scipio. ‘You generate a lot of heat, don’t you?’

The Ultramarine shrugged, as much as he could whilst wearing full power armour. He knew she was right but heat or cold was of no concern to one such as him.

‘We could have used some of your generators in the early days.’ She started to unbuckle her kit and peel off the bodyglove. ‘Certainly makes doing this a lot easier.’

Jynn had her naked back to him as she changed out of the sodden kit into something dry. ‘Good thing about having fewer mouths to feed,’ she said ruefully. ‘It means there’s plenty of extra rags to go around too.’

The tattoos on her neck went down her shoulder and across her back, all the way to the base of her spine. Despite her nakedness, Scipio didn’t avert his gaze. Jynn seemed unconcerned about it.

She called. ‘Densk!’

The bearded one from earlier came in, silent on account of his missing tongue. He stalled a little when he saw the Space Marine but moved around him to Jynn’s side.

‘Lamp’s hot,’ she said. ‘Three marks.’

There was a metal prong next to the lamp. Densk took it and proceeded to burn the three marks Jynn had requested. To her credit, she barely flinched.

When he was done, Densk dabbed some gauze with counter-septic on the wounds and left the tent just as he’d arrived.

‘Those scars,’ Scipio ventured when Densk had gone. ‘What do they represent?’

She arched her neck to look, touching one of the higher tattoos. ‘Kill-marks,’ she said. ‘One for each metal-head I’ve ganked. Everyone alive in this camp has them.’

Scipio counted at least seventeen kill-marks. He'd seen Chapter veterans do something similar on their armour.

‘Three from the ambush. Yours is the highest tally, am I right?’

Jynn taped fresh pads of gauze over the burns. She struggled to reach the lowest one. ‘Could you assist me?’

‘I’m no Apothecary,’ Scipio replied, but came forward and applied the last of the tape. He had to be careful; his gauntlets were ill-suited to delicate work, especially field medicine.

‘Thank you.’ Jynn stepped away, shrugged on a fresh bodyglove then an overcoat, and faced him. Her eyes were like shards of glass. ‘Yes, mine is the highest tally. And I’ll see it doubled, tripled until everyone one of those mechanical bastards is dead.’

Scipio recognised something in her demeanour. It was like looking into a mirror. The bitterness, the impotent anger. He wondered whom she had lost to make her this way.

‘You’ve buried many comrades-in-arms?’

‘No, but I’ve seen friends and colleagues die. And I’ve lost family too – my husband, but not to the necrons.’

‘My condolences,’ he said, even though he didn’t really feel the compassion of the words. He eyed the maps and charts, particularly the ones on the table. ‘You know these mountains?’

Jynn laughed but it was without humour. ‘We’ve been dying and surviving in these crags for over a year. Yes, we know the mountains intimately.’

Scipio walked up to the table. There was a marker to one side and Scipio used it to circle the Thanatos Hills. ‘And here,’ he added, drawing an arrow to represent the Ultramarines’ desired angle of attack on the necron artillery that would bypass their defensive cordon. ‘Do you know of an approach through to this region from this heading?’

Jynn studied the map for a minute. She smiled at Scipio. 'Now you'll owe me two.'

He eyed her curiously. 'You are not like most humans I have met.'

'Most humans haven't seen the things I have or endured what I've had to.' Sitting down on a crate, she started to field strip her weapons. 'Do you know how many times I've died out here in this arctic hell. Well, almost died?' Jynn held up four fingers. 'Makes you think about your existence a little differently.'

Though his expression was neutral, Scipio marvelled at her confidence. There was something about this woman, something great and indefatigable. Whatever her attire or current disposition, she was much more than she appeared to be. It wasn't disrespect, Scipio didn't feel that. It was fearlessness and a determination that made Jynn Evvers stand out amongst the human flock. Such a thing was rare and usually reserved for generals and great war-leaders with names like Macharius, Creed and Yarrick. She was just a miner turned guerrilla fighter but her charisma and presence were undeniable.

'Two? How so?' Scipio asked eventually, willing to play along.

Jynn took the marker and jabbed it into the centre of the Ultramarine's circle. 'We're the answer to your prayers, Angel.'



CHAPTER TEN

Though his mortal faculties had long since been surrendered, Sahtah the Enfleshed could still find prey. Other senses guided him now and though he didn't fully understand the instincts of his machine brain, he learned to embrace them.

Ice and snow were forming on his body, masking it against the all-consuming white. Scraps of delusion impaired his emerald vision. Images from a past he no longer fully remembered flicked back and forth like visual interference. The arctic mountains became high dunes; the tundra below, a desert plain stretching for leagues. There were cities, so small they were just specks, and carrion birds wheeled in flocks framed against the hot afternoon sun.

Sahtah longed to bask, to feel the sun's warmth against his neck and back, but his nerves were dead, his form cool and aberrant. Ever since biotransference it had been that way. Somewhere in the process, perhaps during the *long sleep*, his engrammic circuitry had been damaged. It was difficult to discern present from past, old from new. It hurt Sahtah's mind and made him want to scream.

The encampment had first appeared as an enemy village with high stockade walls and a wooden gatehouse. Now he saw it for what it was: a cluster of tents and the promise of new 'robes'.

He crouched and let the arctic storm smother him and his wretched companions. There were chunks of half-chewed flesh, the rime of dried blood around the flayed ones' mouths where they'd gorged themselves.

'We are ghouls...' Sahtah told them, though they didn't answer.

They would circle the camp and avoid the genebred warriors at first.

Sahtah wanted blood. He wanted skin.

Oh, how I hunger...

Fuge clapped his arms around his body for what must have been the fiftieth time. It was doing no good. Even the many layers of storm cloak, his padded jacket and bodyglove, couldn't keep the cold out – it was insidious. The storm had worsened. Visibility was almost nothing. He looked at the magnoculars, sitting next to his freezing feet in the tent, and decided to ignore them. Captain Evvers was quite strict – scan the perimeter every fifteen minutes – but Fuge was too numb to move. What good would they do anyway? The Space Marines were protecting them now. He'd seen them, walking back and forth like animated statues, unperturbed by the cold. Not everyone was so hardy. Fuge didn't see why he couldn't just find a warmer tent and a sleeping bag to crawl into.

The sentry was still bemoaning his poor luck when he noticed something outside the tent, maybe fifty metres away. It was hard to tell – the snow was thick and the wind was tossing it around like a maelstrom. Fuge reached for the magnoculars.

His goggles were fogged with an icy sheen, but he didn't bother clearing them when he pulled them down off his face so he could peer through the scopes. Training the magnoculars fifty metres distant, he tried to discern what he thought he'd seen earlier.

'Definitely something...'

His voice trembled, teeth chattering as he spoke.

The wind was really howling now, making even thoughts hard to hear. It tugged at Fuge's thermal layers, slipping in through the gaps, chilling him.

Through the greenish resolution of the scopes, he thought he saw something... *burrowing*. He knew of ice-worms that roamed the northern tundra – it was the closest thing he could think of to describe what he was seeing. But this was the mountains. No ice-worms up here.

Fuge zoomed in and worked the focus. Thirty metres out now. Just as he was about to raise someone on the vox, the wind kicked in, tearing his coat loose, and he dropped the magnoculars.

Scrambling at his feet – the fear was on him now for some reason – Fuge picked them up but only got the scopes halfway to his face when he felt a hot burn in his chest. He looked down and saw a metre of sharp metal jutting from his body. Lifting his head was an effort but when he managed it he met the gaze of his killer. Two emerald green orbs regarded him as a god would an insect. They flared, ignited by an infernal desire.

‘Your flesh is mine,’ the thing promised.

So frozen was he with terror, poor Fuge didn’t even scream as he was flayed alive.

Ankh watched as the last of the Undying’s limbs were finally attached to his body. The venerable necron shone with an unearthly lustre, gilded and ochroid as befitted his station as overlord.

It had taken time and many repair constructs to revivify his master.

As if a sudden power surge had granted him life, the Undying’s eyes flared brilliant and terrible.

‘Stormcaller is dead,’ he uttered.

‘He has returned to us, my lord,’ Ankh replied. *‘All must return in the end.’*

‘Architect,’ said the Undying. His mental functions were still slightly addled by his aeons of slumber. *‘I am whole and desire to exact vengeance.’*

‘Our forces have resorted to retreat protocols. It may be some time before Stormcaller and his vanguard can be resurrected.’

‘I have the means of resurrection,’ the Undying assured him, ‘and the tools of death.’ In his hand he clutched a brutal war-scythe, its blade coruscating with energy.

He exhaled breathlessly as the last of the scarab swarms reknitting his body retreated into the hidden alcoves of the chamber. The Undying’s revivification casket opened and the overlord strode out imperiously. His heavy footfalls *clanked* as they hit the metal floor.

Ankh bowed deeply in the manner of the old courts. ‘You are resplendent, my liege.’

The Undying glowered at him. ‘Send your drones, Architect. Retake the ground that the Stormcaller lost.’

Wrong-footed, Ankh stumbled a little. ‘I... My lord, our war cells are still reviving. All our repair constructs are needed to bring them online. It will only be a matter of—’

‘No. Send them now. Activate the monoliths and bring our legions into the city of the fleshed. I am awake and will not suffer the degradations of these interlopers any further.’

It was pointless to protest. The Undying was all and everything; Ankh was a mere cryptek at his whim and command. True, he had dominion over the scarabs and the tomb spyders. He could make them all cease with but a simple command, but the Undying was not an overlord to deny. His wrath might see Ankh destroyed and another set in his place. He had worked too long, too hard as Architect to allow that to happen. ‘As you wish, overlord.’

The Undying did not wait for confirmation. At some invisible, mechanised signal an aperture opened in the ceiling of the resurrection chamber. At the same time a band of light delineated a circular disc in the floor that began to rise. The overlord rode the levitating disc all the way out of the chamber, bound for the surface.

Ankh was linked to the tomb like no other in the hierarchy. He felt its movements, knew the position and condition of every scarab, tomb spyder and wraith that made up its dedicated cohorts. Through them, he was interfaced with the hundreds of thousands still slumbering, still self-repairing and gradually coming online, that made up the necron war cells.

With the repair constructs occupied elsewhere that process would take exponentially more time to complete. Ankh made the calculations in a nanosecond. In the next he retasked the swarms to attack the city above.

Izarvaah was not a subtle creature; he shared many traits with Tahek. He would gladly march his immortals and his warriors into the jaws of enemy guns, convinced of his own inviolability. Cloaked by lightning, his eldritch darkness swarming with wraiths, he assumed he was untouchable. At least one amongst the genebred saviours had disproved that belief.

Ankh was not so foolish or arrogant. His ways were cunning. He resolved to use a different method of attack.

But first he would chill their hearts and make their mortal bodies tremble. The Herald of Dismay extended his skeletal fingers and summoned the invocation node.

Unlike the Stormcaller, he would not fail.

Sicarius surveyed the battlefield ahead. Just like at Telrendar, Selonopolis and Ghospora, he looked every inch the hero. Cape flapping in the breeze, his patrician face open to the elements, he was Invictus, Cestus, Galatan – a true inheritor of Guilliman.

The forces from Kellenport Plaza had joined his spearhead. Sicarius had summoned their sergeants. Standing amidst the ruins of an Imperial temple, Praxor was amongst them.

This was an ill-fated place, he decided. It had none of the glory or culture of Macragge. Even Calth, its upper atmosphere writhed with poisonous fumes, had spirit. These were a broken people. Damnus should be defiant, yet the humans cowered in their last remaining city, their lord

governor in hiding and their military commander unwilling to leave the safety of his walls. Praxor thought of the sacrifices already made and wondered if the Damnosians were a people worth saving.

Daceus intruded on Praxor's dark thoughts and he was glad of the interruption. Never far from his captain's side, the veteran had a pict-slate clutched in his hand and showed it to Sicarius. It was a geographical map of the immediate area, radiating several kilometres from the Ultramarines position.

'Since the defeat of their vanguard, several necron phalanxes have started to converge on us,' said Daceus.

The initial defeat of the Stormcaller had immobilised the necrons under the lord's immediate command. The Ultramarines found them holding their ground where they stood, unwilling or unable to press. It made them much easier to neutralise. At first, it seemed as if the necrons were in retreat but soon other forces, those attacking distant areas of the city, were rerouted. Another necron command node had taken over. It regarded the Ultramarines as a threat it could not ignore, or tolerate.

Sicarius glanced at the slate, but only cursorily. His attention was on the horizon where the necrons could be seen in the distance manoeuvring and amassing. There were thousands.

'A cut from the gladius's blade has got their attention, then.' He smiled, but Praxor thought it had an indulgent, ugly quality about it.

A storm was rolling in, coming off the mountains. Low drifts were already curling across the tundra. Soon it would develop into a blizzard.

'Even if Guilliman were still with us,' offered Daceus, 'we cannot fight them all.'

Sicarius stepped down from a rocky plinth where he'd taken vantage.

'And yet, we shall still engage them. The weather turns, worsening still. We'll use it to our advantage.'

His sergeants were arrayed before him in a semi-circle. The Lions, along with Daceus, stood apart. Trajan stuck to the shadows, divorced from the rest but ever watchful. In the background, towering over them all, was Agrippen. The other Dreadnought, Ultracius, was with the squads waiting outside the temple ruins.

The venerable one's modulated voice rumbled, 'Our odds of victory against such a force are miniscule, brother-captain.'

Sicarius bowed to Agrippen's obvious wisdom. 'We are still the gladius, Ancient, and our thrust has barely pierced our enemy's armour. With the application of greater force, we will penetrate flesh and organs.'

Agrippen shifted and his servos churned as he moved his massive bulk. A few of the sergeants stepped out of the way to avoid being crushed. 'You mean to strike the heart.'

Sicarius was pugnacious. 'I mean to cut it out. The necrons come for us. We are a threat that they must neutralise. I shall turn that mechanised response against them.' He pointed to the silvered legions mobilising in the Ultramarines' direction. Pyramidal structures shadowed the horizon too, but they seemed to be locked on a less direct route. 'These are creatures of cause and effect. Whatever we do to them, they react accordingly.' He clenched his fist. 'It is a *weakness* that we can use against them. Force is met with greater force. Apply it in the correct place and the enemy will render its heart to us. That is when they are vulnerable.'

Brother-Sergeant Solinus spoke up. 'Tell us where you wish us to strike, captain, and it shall be done.'

Nodding approvingly at his commanders, Sicarius pointed to the slate at the core of the necron force. 'Here, right in the middle. With everything we've got.' He pointed the fingers of his left hand, making them into a blade. 'This,' he said, 'is the necron line. It is predictable, industrious. Here,' he added, making a fist with his right hand, 'we are. Our heavy guns will get their attention. We'll emulate their tactics and hold the line. The

necrons, realising they possess overwhelming firepower, will simply advance towards us.’ The bladed hand moved closer to the fist. ‘When the storm rolls in it will obscure our positions and mask our true intent.’

‘What is our *true* intent, captain?’ Praxor asked, not yet seeing the wisdom of this plan.

Sicarius smiled and made the fist into two fingers, which he then proceeded to move around his other hand to the tips of the fingers. ‘While our Devastators and Dreadnoughts hold their attention, you and I, brother, and the Indomitable—’ Sergeant Solinus nodded humbly ‘—will attack their flank, cutting a hole through to their very heart.’

Praxor was unconvinced but chose to keep his misgivings private. He was not Sicarius and did not see battles as his captain did. It was his duty to obey and fight to his utmost, for the Second, for the Chapter and Lord Calgar.

Sicarius picked up his battle-helm from a broken stone tablet nearby, indicating that the tactical briefing was over. He faced Trajan, clasping the crested helm under his arm. Sinking to one knee, he said, ‘Chaplain, bless us as we go to war.’

Behind Sicarius, the other sergeants followed their captain’s example and kneeled before Trajan. Praxor was amongst the last. Agrippen met his pensive gaze before the Dreadnought too bowed, as much as he was able, to the Chaplain.

It was a deadly gambit that Sicarius proposed. The Second had already lost so many.

Praxor’s slain battle-brothers rose foremost into his mind. As the Shieldbearers, they had been at the forefront of countless engagements for company and Chapter but they had never been as badly mauled in any action as they had on Damnos.

I am my captain’s sword, Praxor reminded himself of the oath he had sworn upon elevation to the Second and the rank of sergeant. *I am his will*

and blood, his fury and his courage.

But as Trajan's shadow fell over him and he closed his eyes to receive benediction, Praxor couldn't banish his doubts entirely. All of the catechisms and liturgies known to the Chapter couldn't do that.

After benediction, Sicarius dismissed the other officers. Ahead were the ruins where he planned to make their stand. By the time the Ultramarines had reached them, he reasoned that the storm would have already begun to impede visibility. Once in position, the attack would have to come swiftly.

The Lions were already moving to the centre of the battle line. Daceus was the last to leave.

Sicarius called out, 'Brother.'

Daceus stopped and turned. Like no other in the Second he wore his veteran status with the pride of a hard-won battle-scar. He had lost his left eye in a previous engagement – a bionic one replaced it – and his left arm was gloved by a formidable power fist, another relic earned during an earlier campaign. His face was a knotwork of scars and scabbed flesh. His laurels and purity seals were as abundant as the chips and grooves in his well-worn armour.

He had always been at Sicarius's side and the captain trusted Daceus above all others. He also confided in him.

'Back aboard the *Valin's Revenge*, just before planetfall, I was wrong.'

'Sir?'

'I said our chance of victory here was almost none. I was wrong.'

Daceus frowned, wondering what had changed.

'They are automatons, brother. They cannot function properly without leadership. When I struck down the leader of their vanguard, the others capitulated. It affected them, *tactically*.'

Daceus nodded, remembering. 'And unlike greenskins, these revenants are all cast into specific roles. One does not simply supplant the other.'

‘Exactly. If I can incapacitate their principal command node, it will send shockwaves throughout their war infrastructure. They will be crippled.’

Daceus’s eye narrowed as he thought about it. ‘An impossible victory.’

‘Attributed to the Second,’ Sicarius concluded for him.

‘Agemman’s position would be tenuous after this.’

Sicarius’s demeanour hardened instantly and he straightened as if insulted. ‘I serve the Chapter and its glory, Daceus, as do we all.’

The veteran-sergeant bowed, reprimanded. ‘Of course, captain. We are the inheritors of Guilliman. His legacy is the torch by which we light the darkness of the galaxy.’

‘You sound like Elianu.’

‘It is one of his sermons, or a part at least.’ Several affirmation runes flashed up on Daceus’s retinal display. ‘The battle company is in position. We move out on your order.’

Sicarius donned his helmet. It clamped to his battle plate with a hiss of pressurisation. His voice was full of grit as it came through the vox-grille. ‘Then make ready. Glory awaits us, brother. Guilliman is watching.’



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The water felt cold but it did nothing to revive Adanar as he splashed his face.

He was in the bombed-out ruins of ex-Commander Tarn's operations chamber. It looked quite different now from how it had been less than a year ago. Much of its superstructure was exposed, like the metal innards of some dying beast. The wounds from the necron gauss-artillery went deep. Parts of the chamber were little more than rubble. Blank map screens, thick with dust, reflected Adanar's grim face. He had aged twenty years since the invasion, or at least that was how it appeared to him.

Fresh water from the ice caverns below Kellenport's bedrock was still being pumped into the facility and Adanar stood bent-backed over a dirty basin in the corner of the room. He surveyed it despairingly. Tarn's old desk was broken, the two halves slumped in the centre where a chunk of debris from the ceiling had cracked it. Occasionally the walls shook – most of the paintings and tapestries had fallen and been crushed underfoot by the incessant necron bombardment. Statues of former nobles and Ark Guard officers, once standing proudly in alcoves around the chamber, lay shattered and discarded. *So much for glory now.*

An overwhelming weariness overtook him. The weight of it sank Adanar to the ground, one hand limply grasping the edge of the basin when he fell.

Fumbling around in his uniform jacket, he found his service pistol and set it down on the floor. Then he unwound the chain from around his wrist and took the locket-charm in the palm of his left hand.

‘How much more must I give?’ he asked.

The two picts inside of his wife and child couldn’t answer.

‘Why didn’t I flee? Why didn’t I send you away?’ The fingers of his right hand brushed against the laspistol’s grip. ‘Say I’ve done enough...’

He was abruptly aware of someone watching from the broken archway into the room. An ashen-faced Corporal Besseque was standing there staring.

‘Commander Sonne?’

‘What is it, Besseque?’

The corporal ventured a few steps into the chamber. ‘Sir, the— Are you all right?’

Adanar growled at him, tucking his possessions away again and getting to his feet. ‘Make your report.’

‘The Space Marines have signalled they are in position.’ He pulled a data-slate from the folds of his padded jacket. Besseque shivered as he did it – the water was still being piped in to the city but the heating was out. It was almost as cold as it was on the wall in the operations chamber. ‘I have the dispositions here. Our defences are ready, sir.’

Adanar ignored the proffered data-slate. ‘What good do you think they will do us, corporal?’

Besseque was genuinely confused. ‘The Space Marines, sir. They are a cause for hope.’

‘They cannot protect us.’ Adanar’s bile was really flowing now. All his grief, his sense of impotence and futility, it came out toxically. ‘We cannot even protect ourselves.’ The chamber was rocked by a close artillery impact outside but both men managed to keep their feet. Adanar slapped the wall where the dust and debris were still rolling downwards. ‘What use

are defences if our enemy can merely pass through them? What good are guns if our foes stand up again after we've killed them? What use is hope, Besseque, tell me that!'

Another tremor hit the chamber as the necron bombardment increased. A chunk of debris parted from the ceiling and struck Besseque across the forehead, preventing his reply.

As the corporal fell in a heap, Adanar picked himself up and ran to him. 'Besseque!'

A heavy contusion marred the corporal's forehead, spreading like a bloom of purple ink across his skin. The cut was only shallow. It left a thin trail of blood but Besseque was dead. An internal haemorrhage had killed him instantly. The data-slate he'd been carrying slipped tamely from his lifeless grasp.

Exasperated, Adanar sat down cross-legged next to the corpse. He laid one hand on Besseque's still chest. It was ridiculous. The horrors of the invasion, the bombardment – all the things the corporal had survived only to be killed by a chunk of rock, and not even a large chunk at that.

Adanar threw back his head and laughed. He laughed uproariously until his throat was dry and his eyes stung from the tears. All the while, the room shook and the necron guns thundered.

Adanar met Rancourt on the stairwell. The acting lord governor was shadowed by Sergeant Kador, who looked less than thrilled with his posting.

'Commander Sonne,' he said, slightly tremulously, 'I am glad I've found you.'

Adanar moved past him and Rancourt went with him, walking at the commander's shoulder. 'What is it?'

'I have been trying to get a meeting with you. Your aide – Becket, is it? – was supposed to inform you.'

Adanar took the stairs two at a time. They led up to the battlements. He was making it deliberately difficult for the Imperial official. ‘He’s dead.’

Rancourt let out a little gasp. Adanar had to begrudgingly give him credit – he was keeping pace. ‘Dead? The necrons killed him? Are they inside our defences?’

Adanar stopped halfway up the stairs and glared straight ahead. ‘No, acting governor, he’s back there.’ He thumbed over his shoulder. ‘A rock killed him.’

‘A ro— A what?’

Adanar faced him. ‘A piece of debris fell from the ceiling and he died.’

Rancourt peered upwards, as if expecting a similar fate.

‘What did you want?’ Adanar pressed.

When Rancourt saw the undisguised contempt in the commander’s eyes, he reacted. ‘Respect, firstly. I am an agent of the Imperium, the highest authority on this world. And I—’

‘No,’ Adanar replied flatly. ‘You are not.’

Rancourt practically screeched at him, ‘*I am the lord governor!* I demand—’

Shaking his head, Adanar interjected. ‘You are not. You are acting governor and your authority at this time is meaningless. I will grant you a guard detail, but your demands will not be met.’

Kador’s face darkened further at the news.

Rancourt grasped the commander’s lapels. ‘Let the Adeptus Astartes fight. That is what they were made for. We should make all haste to the Crastia Shipyards and evacuate.’

Adanar looked down at Rancourt’s scrawny fingers. He let the commander go.

‘Secure your evacuation, you mean.’

Rancourt made a plaintive expression. ‘As the lord gov— As the *acting* lord governor,’ he corrected, ‘I should, by Imperial dictate, be amongst the

first, yes. But—’

‘Look around you, Rancourt. Look at the skies. What do you think those tremors are that shake the walls? What are you listening to when the air booms? It’s not thunder, not in any natural sense, anyway.’ Adanar leaned in close. His alcohol breath wafted back at him. ‘The necrons control the skies. They fill it with emerald death. Even if we could reach the Crastia Shipyards, even if they were still standing, we would not get off the ground. Our vessels would be destroyed before they even breached the upper atmosphere.’

Rancourt knew this. Despite his actions to the contrary, he wasn’t a stupid man, just a desperate one. He seemed to shrink with the realisation that Adanar was telling the truth. His voice quivered like a child’s. ‘But I’m afraid...’

At first, Adanar regarded him with disgust – this was the lord governor of Damnos, the one the people looked to for leadership – but then he only felt pity.

‘We all are,’ said the commander and carried on up the stairs.

‘I have never fought beside an Angel before.’

Iulus’s attention was focused on the battlements. His command was the second wall, the one farthest from Kellenport bastion, the heart of the last city on Damnos. The third was well mined and booby-trapped. He credited Commander Sonne – he had drilled his men well. They had marched from the western gate and assumed the positions on and around the walls as Iulus had instructed.

His keen eye for tactical dispositions picked out gunnery nests, heavy stubbers on pintle-mounts, bolter emplacements and lascannon at enfilading points around the wall. The lines of Ark Guard were not thick but they were steady and every man, woman and child capable of doing so carried a lascarbine, autogun or shotgun. The Damnosian armouries were bare. Everything they had was on the walls or in the courtyards and it was

pointed at the killing-fields where the necrons would come. He had named the courtyard below Xiphos, on account of the fact he liked the weapon. It was a cutting, thrusting blade and in the Terran dialect meant ‘penetrating light’ or something close to that – he was no expert in translation. There had been overly much darkness and not enough light on Damnos. The name was a fitting one, he decided.

As if only just realising he’d spoken, Iulus raised an eyebrow at Falka. ‘What did you say?’

The trooper was alongside him, part of the Ultramarine’s retinue, his ‘One Hundred’. ‘I said: I’ve never fought beside an Angel before.’

Iulus returned to surveying the defences. ‘I am not an Angel. I am a soldier, like you. Why must you humans constantly over-venerate?’

Falka laughed. It was a deep and wholly honest sound. ‘Me, a soldier? No. I’m a rig-hand, a miner. Have been all my life.’

Iulus looked at him askance. ‘Then you do a convincing impression of a soldier. I had not thought humans capable of such reckless courage as you showed. Do you crave death? I have witnessed men commit suicide in battle in similar circumstances to this.’

Falka shook his head. ‘No. I want to live but think I will probably not, at least not for much longer. I lost... a friend, and I want my death to mean something so that her sacrifice will too.’

Iulus considered that before resuming his vigil.

‘Those studs in your head,’ said Falka a few seconds later. ‘What are they for?’

Iulus touched the tips of the platinum studs with his gauntlet. He was almost reverent. ‘They signify a century’s service to the Chapter.’

Falka whistled. ‘So, you’re over two hundred years old?’

‘Yes, though I have not really thought about it before.’

‘Are you immortal, then?’

‘No, I don’t think so. Long-lived certainly, thanks to the gene-science of the Emperor, but not immortal.’ Iulus kept his gaze ahead, as if drawing inspiration from the silent desolation of the killing-field. ‘Ours is a violent calling. Death is an inevitable fact of our existence. I’m not sure if an Adeptus Astartes’s mortality has ever been put to the test. I cannot think of one who has ever died of old age. That would be a failure of our warrior purpose, I think.’ Iulus angled his neck to look at him. ‘You ask a lot of questions, human.’

‘Just nervous, that’s all,’ Falka replied. ‘We all are.’

Iulus took a moment to look around the battlements and the Courtyard of Xiphos below. Haunted faces came back at him, with hollow eyes and empty hearts. A revelation struck him. The defenders were not merely guns and bodies, they were people and within they had already lost the battle. He had mistaken fatalism for fortitude, acceptance for resolve.

‘Trooper Kolpeck,’ he said, still scanning the frightened crowds. ‘How can I galvanise these men so they will fight for me as you did in the Courtyard of Chronus?’

Falka followed the Ultramarine’s gaze as it swept the walls and ground below.

‘Inspire them,’ he said. ‘Give them something to fight for.’

Now Iulus stared at the trooper, nonplussed. ‘There is no greater honour than to serve the Emperor in battle, and die in His name.’

‘We are a courageous people, proud too, but we have long been without hope.’ Falka rubbed the hard stubble on his chin, seeking the right words. ‘Tell a man enough times that all is lost and his world is doomed, and he’ll start to believe it.’

As if prompted, the image of the Herald of Dismay flickered in the sky over Kellenport.

Heed the edicts of the necrontyr, your doom is at hand. Your efforts are in vain. Abandon this futile defence, abandon hope and the—

The heinous image vanished, consumed by an explosion that destroyed the invocation node from which it was being broadcast. There were dozens of others erected throughout Damnos but this one was the closest to Kellenport, within sight of its walls. A stunned silence greeted its demise.

Iulus handed the rocket-tube back to one of the conscripts on the battlements. They had precious little ammunition and a part of him, an old part, regretted the waste of materiel, but it was worth it.

‘That’s enough negative propaganda for one war,’ he told Falka. ‘Hand me the vox.’

A trooper carrying a boxy vox-caster scurried over to the cobalt giant who had turned to address the stunned masses. It crackled loudly and there was a squeal of static before Iulus’s voice came through.

‘I am Brother-Sergeant Iulus Fennion, of the Ultramarines Second Company. I am warrior-born, clad in the Emperor’s metal, bearer of his wrath. You have been under the boot of your oppressors for too long. It ends. Here. Now. On these very walls. In this very courtyard. My brothers and I will bleed with you, and through blood will buy back your freedom. Do not surrender this world without a fight. Show these horrors that you wear the Emperor’s metal too. Show them our faith will not be daunted.’

Iulus drew his chainsword. All of Kellenport, the warriors on the walls and in the Courtyard of Xiphos – his battle-brothers included – were listening.

‘Damnos shall not yield.’ His voice grew in stature and power. ‘We shall not yield!’ He thrust the blade aloft and everyone who heard him cheered. Their fear and anxiety, their long-held despair and heart-gnawing grief came out in a cathartic flood of noise. It resounded off the walls and the barricades. It was a call to arms, an affirmation of belief that they all had needed to hear.

‘How was that?’ he asked Falka when the noise had finally subsided.

He took the receiver-cup – a little dumbstruck – and gave it back to the trooper with the vox-caster. ‘Stirring.’

Iulus looked stern as he about-turned to face the battlefield again. ‘Good. Now I expect them to fight.’

Words, just words. That was all they were. Even when spoken aloud and with purpose by an Angel of the Emperor, Adanar could not deny the fact. His faith had been crushed long ago under the tenement rubble that killed his wife and daughter.

He wanted to be uplifted, to believe there was anything else but death for the people of Damnos, but he couldn’t.

Corporal Humis, his new aide, stepped into his peripheral vision. ‘I can hear cheering.’ He was standing at Adanar’s shoulder and turned towards the commander. His face was full of hope. It could get a man killed, hope. It could hollow him from the inside out and he wouldn’t realise he was dead until he dared to hope again. By then it was too late, he was already a walking corpse, a shadow waiting for some hell to claim him.

‘It is just a false dawn, Humis, that’s all.’

The corporal licked his lips. He’d been Adanar’s aide for less than an hour. ‘Perhaps a few words would steel the troops on this side of the wall. Perhaps a rousing speech–’

‘There’ll be no speeches. There’ll be no hollow words.’

‘But, commander... Why not?’

Adanar fixed him with a withering gaze, and as Humis looked into his dead eyes he understood.

‘Because I won’t lie to them, corporal. I won’t lie.’



CHAPTER TWELVE

It had been aeons since the throne room had enjoyed attendance. It was a dust-clogged ruin now, its lustre dulled, its ostentation tarnished and decrepit.

Old statues lined the alcoves, clutching ancient glaives, their appearance skeletal and overly regal. Sickly luminescence emanated from the geometric sigils carved into the floor and walls, the chamber's only light source. Their emerald glow limned the throne. It was immense, set upon an oval dais and wrought of gold or some superior mineral compound that looked like gold. Rune-sigils marked its every surface.

Ankh toured the dilapidated halls and anterooms with an air of detachment. It did not surprise him that the Undying avoided this place now. It was a reminder of a long-dead age, of a former life. Sahtah bemoaned his loss of skin and blood like a crazed, hungry dog but he was not alone in that malady. It was an affliction that clawed at every necron, at least those whose memory engrams still functioned with lucidity.

He flickered out of time for a moment, bending the chronology of the universe and mocking its laws with his advanced science. Ankh was back in the revivification chambers again, the lowest catacombs this time.

Malady.

The forming of the word in his subconscious had brought something to mind, something aberrant. He regarded the humming caskets of the destroyers. This cancer, the one which the destroyers represented, was everywhere amongst the necrontyr. Ankh would have pitied them if he were still capable of such an emotion. Nihilistic, fatalistic and possessed of the conviction that their sole purpose was to eradicate, the destroyers were a breed apart.

Madness flowed through their mechanised arteries, fed the electric impulses of their cables and hard-wiring. This was the fate of all necrons. They butchered their bodies, removing limbs and replacing them with repulsor platforms, tesla beams and gauss-cannons – all the better to destroy, all in the service of the destroyers' only creed: annihilation.

Delusion was common, as was a false sense of pre-eminence.

It was at times like these, when confronted with the realities of their existence and its potential corruptions, that Ankh felt the necrontyr's fall most keenly.

Virus plagued them, more insidious than any disease of mortal flesh. They had exchanged their humanity for bodies of metal, their sinews for servos, their individuality for servitude and base sentience. They had done all of that and still they were not immune to corruption. Little wonder that so many of Ankh's kind were angry or insane.

He would revive the destroyers soon.

Tens of thousands of caskets lined the catacombs. The tomb went deep into the world's heart and many levels were surrendered to the revivification chambers. Of all the constructs, the destroyers numbered the greatest. A dull glow emanated from every runic archway to every sarcophagus. To a non-machine mind the vista would be incomprehensible, stretching into infinity in all dimensions.

The role of the destroyers in this conflict was assured and predestined – he had already witnessed it with his own cold, dead eyes. Ankh just wanted

to look upon them and remember the shared doom of his damned race.

Another flicker of chrono-dislocation brought him back to the throne room. His true business was here, now that he'd satisfied idle curiosity. The effect of translocating was disconcerting. It pulled at the strands of Ankh's sense of reality. For a moment, he tried to recall what this place was like before biotransference. But the images in his subconscious mind were far from vivid.

Despite the stability of his memory engrams, he found recollection a little difficult to come by sometimes. He was a master of the elements, a chronomancer, a phantasmal manipulator, a walker between universes, but still he could not always grasp the thread of his former existence. In fact, the more he tried the more it unravelled until he realised his grip on the days before the long sleep was eroding, inexorably.

He regarded a cracked mirror of polished jet along one of the walls. Faces swarmed in and out of focus within its reflective surface. It was not Ankh, nor was it several beings. Rather, it was just one, trapped inside the stone a fraction out of time like the cryptek in his speculum. Ankh liked this particular torture most of all.

He uttered, 'Awaken.' It was more than just a word; it was a command, a mechanical imperative that put balefires in the eyes of the statue-guardians. The lych-like creatures arrayed through the hall came jerkily to life. Rimes of filth cracked open as their slow-moving joints stirred. Dust motes spilled from their servos and webs of gossamer parted from their cabling like torn funerary shrouds.

'We serve the royarch,' they chimed as one.

Standing in the centre of the hall, within the protective cordon of a ceramic sigil-totem inscribed in the floor, Ankh was surrounded.

He bowed. 'I am the Architect, the royarch's vassal and extension of his will.'

The guards did not react. Instead they stood with their pole-armed glaives straight against their armoured bodies, pommel down against the floor.

‘Your apotheosis is at hand,’ Ankh declared. He drew a portal with his staff in which a vision of Damnos was projected. It showed the walls of Kellenport, occupied by the fleshed and their genebred saviours. ‘Our world is overrun and the royarch calls you to war.’

One of the lych-like guards stepped forward. He wore a circlet of tarnished gold around his forehead and his shoulder guards were cracked pieces of super-hardened ceramic – this was the leader. He raised his war-glaive and cut through the portal-image, banishing it.

His eyes flared with millennia-old anger. ‘We obey.’

Largo listened to the wind as he kept vigil over Renatus. His wounded battle-brother was deep into sus-an membrane coma now and would not easily be revived. It was a regenerative measure, triggered in extremis when a Space Marine was so badly injured that he could fight no further. Much of Renatus’s armour had been removed so he could be examined properly. His power generator, helmet and plastron were nearby, laid out reverently by Herdantes. There were blade marks in the ceramite, as long and thick as one of Largo’s gauntleted fingers. They were a killer’s marks, aimed for the weak points and targeting vital organs. Renatus had survived by virtue of being Adeptus Astartes, but only barely.

Largo hadn’t witnessed what happened in the gorge but suspected it was bad. Herdantes was on the other side of the tent, lost in shadow and catalepsean sleep. Another hour and it would be Largo’s turn. The other Ultramarine hadn’t spoken about the ambush. There’d been little time and too much blood. Brakkus had left the tent earlier, in need of air and an opportunity to stretch his injured leg.

Outside the medi-tent, the storm was building. Largo didn’t like it. He didn’t like being stuck in this camp with the humans and so far away from the rest of their battle group. He didn’t blame Scipio. He was Largo’s

sergeant, as brave and resourceful a Space Marine as he'd ever known, but there was no denying the necrons had them reeling. He wanted, bitterly, to strike a blow.

'I will watch him,' said the medic. His name was Holdst, a man of middling human years but with a world-weary air that made him hunch. 'If you need to rest, like your comrade.' He glanced at Herdantes.

'I need no rest. I am a Space Marine.' It came out harder than Largo had intended, but he wasn't sufficiently moved to apologise.

'Of course,' said Holdst. He'd been washing the blood off his hands and carried a pinkish rag that he used to dry his fingers. 'There's nothing further I can do for him, though.'

'I understand. The Chapter thanks you for doing your duty to the Emperor.'

Holdst lingered and set down the rag.

Largo looked at him.

'There is more?'

'This was my world that has become a wasteland. I had a family, a life. I am angry too.'

For a human, Holdst was remarkably perceptive. Largo was about to respond when Holdst turned around at a noise behind him. It was hard to see what had got the medic's attention, the tent was poorly lit and his body was in the way.

'Fuge?' he said at first, then, 'Merciful Thro—'

Four blades punched through Holdst's back and lifted the medic off his feet. His legs were already spasming as the thing wearing Fuge's face stepped into the tent and the light. Largo was up, his bolter loose.

'Herdantes!'

The other Ultramarine snapped awake and armed himself.

Twin muzzle flares tore open the darkness, filling it with fire and noise.

Poor Holdst was shredded. The man was already dead when Largo and Herdantes opened up at the ghoul inside the tent with them. Bolter shells exploded against its tough carapace but failed to slow it. The creature sprang, its body swathed in bloodied flesh flayed from one of the sentries, and landed on the bench supporting Renatus.

Largo drew his gladius, afraid he'd hit Renatus if he kept on shooting. In his peripheral vision, he saw Herdantes turn and spray wide as another flayed one ripped through the tent lining and came scurrying inside. The blast pitched the necron off its feet but it was followed by another and another.

Largo kept going. Renatus was in danger. A fifth creature emerged on his flank and he was forced to engage. A swipe of his gladius parried its talons wide of the mark, leaving them to scrape the ceramite of his greave, before Largo triggered his bolter point-blank and blew a hole in the flayed one's torso.

'Herdantes. Our brother!'

Seeing the danger, Herdantes was moving. He punched one necron in the jaw, stunning it, before bounding onto the slab where Renatus slumbered. The necron crouching over the wounded Ultramarine was different to the others. There was a gleam of malicious sentience in its eyes and its trappings were more elaborate.

'Fleeessshhh...'

It hissed at Herdantes. Its teeth were gummed with blood and viscera. There wasn't time to lift a gladius as a swipe of the necron's talons ripped Herdantes's armour open and sent him sprawling.

Largo reacted to his brother's cry of pain and converged on Renatus. But he was too late to stop the creature lopping off Renatus's head and bathing in the bloody fountain projected from his neck stump.

'No!'

A flayed one tried to stop him, but Largo rammed his gladius into its neck all the way to the hilt. A second he gunned down with the last of his ammunition, before discarding both weapons and leaping for Renatus's slayer, his hands curled into strangling claws.

The creature wearing Fuge's face punched both talons into Renatus's lifeless body, hoisted the dead Space Marine onto its back and, pumping its legs, sprang through the roof and out into the night.

Largo's fingers closed on air and he cursed again.

Herdantes had been finishing off the last of the flayed ones in the meditent but saw what happened. There was something akin to fear in his voice. 'It will defile him...'

Largo roared through clenched teeth, took up his fallen bolter and ran outside into the storm.

The camp was in chaos. Screaming merged with sporadic las-fire, half heard through the wind, as Scipio rushed from Jynn's command tent and realised they were under attack.

He tapped the comm-feed in his ear, scanning the darkness for threats. 'Brothers! Thunderbolts! Report!'

Cator's voice, crackling with the weather interference, came through first. 'Something got through the gate... went under... everywhere... Engaging!' Percussive bolter fire cut him off. Scipio saw the muzzle flashes in the distance. Several more came from the direction of the meditent and he was torn.

'Largo!' he shouted down the feed. Silhouettes crossed his vision, the guerrillas were running back and forth as they struggled to fight an enemy they couldn't see. Scipio almost shot one of them on reflex. 'Captain Evvers,' he called behind him. 'Marshal your troops before my brothers and I cut them down by mistake.' She was on the vox in her tent, trying to find out what was happening.

Her reply was cut off by the voice of Largo, loud and urgent in Scipio's ear. 'It's got Renatus! It cut off his head, sergeant. It took him.'

First Naceon then Ortus and now Renatus – this war is exacting a heavy toll.

Scipio crouched in the lee of another tent. The tripod guns had started rattling. Someone was panicking. 'Largo, repeat. You're not making sense.'

'It took him,' said Largo – his breathing was hard, he was running and angry. 'I'm getting him back.'

A skin-draped horror emerged from the gloom before him and Scipio realised at last what was attacking the camp.

He ran at the flayed one, thumbing the activation rune of his chainsword.

There was a hollow *prang* and a cascade of sparks rained down onto the snow as blade met talon but Scipio would not be denied. He aimed a punch at the creature's neck, followed by a blow that cut through its clavicle and severed a clutch of cabling. It crumpled and Scipio finished it. Instant phase-out told him he'd done it right.

Jynn Evvers came running up beside him. She was armed and kitted out for a sudden departure. 'We're overrun.'

Scipio's eyes were on the darkness. 'They're here for us.' Shadows cast in the camp's portable floodlights swivelled in all directions. It was like trying to catch smoke. A dozen gun battles were happening at once but most of the guerrillas were firing at shadows. Or each other.

Jynn sounded rueful. 'I know.'

Before Scipio could respond, Brakkus joined them. His cooling meltagun suggested he'd had a recent encounter.

'Necrons have tunnelled into the camp and bypassed the sentries.'

'How many?'

Brakkus shook his head. 'Hard to tell. Could be as many as twenty, possibly more.' He clapped the stock of his weapon. 'I took out two, but

there are skirmishes breaking out everywhere.'

'Have you seen Largo or Herdantes?'

'No. I went back to the medi-tent but they were already gone.' He met Jynn's questioning gaze. 'I'm sorry, but your medic is dead.'

Her face tightened into a hard line as she suppressed the grief. That wouldn't serve her now.

Brakkius focused his attention back on his sergeant.

'We can't mount an effective counter-attack in these conditions. What are your orders, sir?'

Nodding, Scipio said, 'Signal the squad, all Thunderbolts to regroup at the command tent.' He turned to Jynn. 'Your men, too, Captain Evvers. Bring them all here, what's left of them. We're falling back.'

Scipio broke into a run, away from the command tent.

'Sir, where are you going?' asked Brakkius.

He looked over his shoulder, his face determined. 'After Largo. He'll ignore the order. He wants revenge for Renatus.'

'How do you know?'

'Because it's what I'd do.'

'Wait!' Brakkius pulled a spare bolt clip from his belt and threw it over.

Scipio caught it, nodded and ran off into the night. The snowfall thickened in his wake, smothering him from sight as if he'd never even been there.

Brakkius raised the others on the comm-feed.

Scipio's blood was up. He was crouched low against the wind, using the falling snow to mask his advance through the camp, but all he really wanted to do was unleash his anger. One clip, given up by Brakkius, was all he had – that, his chainsword and his gladius – he'd need to make every one count.

He headed for the medi-tent, hoping to pick up on Largo's trail. The camp was relatively small and should have been easy to navigate but the

battle was spilling over its borders into the mountains beyond and the weather conditions were impeding even his superhuman senses. The guerrilla fighters had trained in this arctic waste, they'd fought and survived the environs but even so they would be blind in this blizzard. Their screaming punctuated Scipio's every thought. He blocked it out, focused on finding Largo.

Can't lose another. Not this way.

The medi-tent was empty, aside from the carnage. Even the medic's corpse was gone, though Scipio discerned bloody drag marks in the snow.

What kind of automatons are these things?

He found Herdantes a few metres away. He was slumped against a rock, veiled in snow and holding his ruined chest so his organs stayed inside.

'Brother-sergeant,' he rasped. The frozen air from Herdantes's mouth was blood-flecked, suggesting internal bleeding. Even his Larraman cells were struggling to form clots. 'Opened me up,' he continued, moving his hand for a few seconds to show the red crater in his torso. 'But I killed it, sent it back to whatever hell spawned it.'

Scipio wasn't sure what that place was or if the necrons could even *be* killed. He knelt beside Herdantes, assessing the damage. 'Where's Largo?'

Herdantes went to speak but the blood in his throat only gurgled. He pointed to the darkness just outside the camp instead. It was north, deeper into the mountain range. Scipio narrowed his gaze and made out the jagged silhouette of a frozen peak.

'Are you armed?'

Herdantes nodded wearily. His breath was coming out in ragged gasps. Patting the bolter on his lap was difficult. 'Half a clip.'

'Use them wisely. I'll return,' Scipio promised. A group of guerrilla fighters appeared out of the blizzard and he waved them over. 'Get him up, regroup at the command tent.'

The storm was so loud, the humans just nodded.

Scipio left them and headed for the jagged peak.

Largo was hunkered down behind a cluster of snow-caked boulders, staring into a sheer-sided rock face above. He glanced over at Scipio as he crouched next to him.

‘It’s up there,’ he whispered, nodding to the fathomless darkness.

The blizzard was getting worse. It made following Largo’s gesture almost impossible.

‘I see nothing,’ Scipio hissed.

‘It’s there. It’s got Renatus. Look...’ Largo unclasped his bolter’s targeter and gave it to the sergeant.

Scipio lined the crosshairs over a plateau above. The night-vision scope picked out the shoulders and spines of massive rocks in the darkness. He tweaked a dial on the sight to heat-tracking. A muffled red shape resolved as the image went from hazy green to grainy blue. It was moving. There was another shape in front of it, though its red glow was less vibrant.

Renatus. Scipio suspected the dead Ultramarine’s generator was providing most of the heat trace.

‘It took his head, brother-sergeant. Tore it off in front of me.’

Scipio scanned the area through the targeter. A chasm fell away a few metres beyond the boulders, explaining why Largo had given up pursuit. A fragile ice escarpment led to the edge of the precipice which was thorned with dagger-like crags.

He brought the crosshairs back up to the plateau again, gauging the distance the necron had climbed. The fact they were capable of such feats surprised him. ‘Where is your squad, brother?’ Scipio asked.

Largo was nonplussed.

‘Where are your brothers?’

Largo looked behind at the snow-shrouded encampment.

Scipio still had his eye on the plateau. Something was happening. ‘We cannot indulge in personal vengeance, Largo.’

‘Renatus—’

The sergeant cut him off. ‘Is dead. But the rest of your battle-brothers still live. We’re— *Move!*’

Scipio dropped the targeter and thrust Largo aside as the necron landed between them. It had vaulted the chasm.

Both Space Marines were on their feet quickly with weapons drawn.

‘Circle it!’ Scipio shouted. He began strafing along the necron’s flank, drawing its gaze, as Largo went the other way to blindside the monster.

It tracked Scipio’s movements, like an alpha predator tracks a threat. Scipio levelled his chainsword, but kept the movement slow. His bolt pistol was at his side, ready.

It was a *ghoul*, this thing. Ropes of skin clung to its skeletal form and great tranches of flesh swathed its back, fashioned into a cape or robes. Blood crusted its muzzle and thicker visceral fluids drooled through the cavities in its structure, hanging off cables and congealing over wires. Its face was the most disturbing aspect of its appearance, for it was a mask of flesh. The human called Fuge had been butchered for his skin and this creature had taken his face whole, robbed the man of the only thing left to him in death – his identity. Even so, the mask was breaking, stretched too thinly across the necron’s gruesome visage, and patches of gore-streaked metal showed through. As the flayed one glared at him, Scipio saw a piece of chewed skin tear and fall to the ground.

‘*A face...*’ It spoke with sepulchral madness, trembling with anguish. ‘*I had a face. Give me my face...*’

Scipio realised it wanted *his* face or anyone’s. It was the only reason it had jumped from its perch. It had decapitated Renatus and lost his face. Now the wretched creature wanted another.

Only Scipio’s psycho-conditioning stopped him balking in terror.

Largo could wait no longer. He’d drawn his gladius – with only the necron between them, he might hit Scipio with his bolter – and leapt at the

creature.

With viperous dexterity, the flayed one parried the blow and stabbed Largo in the shoulder. It drew a shout of pain from the Ultramarine.

Scipio launched his attack a second later before the necron could injure Largo further.

Again, the creature moved with preternatural swiftness, coiling its body around to slash at the brother-sergeant. The talons missed Scipio's neck by a finger-width and he stepped back, warding off the monster with a chainsword thrust. It smacked the weapon aside, chain-teeth spitting sparks but doing little else.

Largo attacked again, slowed by his wound. He managed to land a blow on the necron's shoulder but it *pranged* off as if striking adamantium. The resulting shockwave ran up Largo's arm and into his shoulder, numbing it.

'*Flesh...*' A jagged wound ripped open Largo's face, drooling blood.

The blizzard was worsening and enveloped the combatants in a swirling maelstrom.

Scipio's shout was almost robbed by the wind. 'It's not working. Follow me, brother.' He peeled off from the attack, making for the escarpment.

'What are you doing?' asked Largo, taking off after Scipio.

'Do you trust my judgement, brother?'

'You are my sergeant.'

That was all the answer Scipio needed.

Behind them, the necron turned. Despite its fluidity in combat, when not under imminent threat its insanity seemed to slow it down. It took a few seconds to realise its prey was running, then it sprang into the air with a dense crunch of servos and landed on the boulders, squat like a skeletal gargoye.

'*Flesh...*' it hissed, filled with a terrible yearning. '*I need it...*'

Backing slowly towards the escarpment, Scipio could feel the ice cracking under his weight. This was no ordinary necron, he realised. It was

one of the masters, a superior construct. Within a few seconds of the engagement, Scipio knew the chances of the two of them defeating it were slight.

‘When an enemy seems unbeatable, do not attack it head-on.’ The sage words of Telion came back to him. *‘Instead, devise another strategy that turns its strength into a weakness and balances the odds.’*

It was massive, a hulking monster of a necron. Judging by its size and the strength behind its blows, Scipio reasoned it probably weighed more than him and Largo combined. He remembered how it had leapt from the plateau, the power in its servos, and saw the raw need in its eyes to take their skin.

‘Are you ready, Largo?’

They were barely a half-metre from the edge where the escarpment curled like a clenched finger and was at its weakest.

Largo nodded.

The flayed lord’s shoulders were heaving up and down with the movement of its chest. It had no lungs, no way of dragging air into its body even if it needed to. It was emulating a remembered behaviour.

Scipio was reminded of a rabid dog. He’d holstered his bolt pistol, and pulled out his gladius as he called to it. ‘You want our faces,’ he said, drawing a shallow cut across his cheek with the blade. ‘Come and take them.’

The flayed lord threw back its head, emitting a shriek of machine-noise, and sprang off the boulders.

Scipio waited until it reached the apex of its jump and then shouted to Largo. ‘Now!’

The Ultramarines threw themselves aside a split second before the necron crashed down in their wake. It whirled around when it realised its prey had gone, skin-robcs flecking the snow with blood and matter.

Cracks veined the ice, but the escarpment held.

Largo had rolled onto his back. 'It's not breaking!'

'Give it some encouragement,' Scipio bellowed.

Largo unleashed his bolter against the cracking ice. The effect was instantaneous.

A massive chunk of the escarpment sheared away from the rock face and took the flayed lord with it. Their last image of the creature was its hellish eyes, blazing, thwarted.

Largo got up and punched the air. 'Ha! Bastard!'

Scipio grabbed his shoulder. 'Now we go.'

Both gave a last look to the plateau where Renatus's headless corpse was lying unmourned, without honour. The destruction of the flayed lord would have to do as tribute.

Then they ran back towards the camp and the command tent where Scipio hoped the rest of his squad were waiting.

The sun was warm against his tanned skin. It felt good to be out in the mountains, alone and unshadowed. Sahtah couldn't remember the last time he'd been climbing, he couldn't remember...

He couldn't remember...

...Anything.

Reality came crashing back like a cold wave. The sensory illusion faded and he was clinging to the rock face again, his talons lodged in the sheer-sided wall of the mountain. Sahtah had been broken for a moment, but his mechorganic body had healed him. He blinked, though it was an android interface rather than a physical one – he had long since surrendered his eyelids. Even during the long sleep he had not closed them. His awareness during those aeons had been fleeting, confusing, as if he were only partially alive and a passenger in someone else's body.

He didn't know how far he'd fallen but the ice-gorge was dark and deep. The spines of rocks scraped and broke against his body. His robes were being torn. Sahtah moaned, climbing faster, but the damage only

worsened. A false sense of urgency filled him. He wanted to be out of the chasm and back amongst the peaks. Reaching the lip of rocky plateau, he pulled himself up and found the feast he had left behind.

It had no face.

Sahtah wanted a face. The one he wore now was virtually gone; his robes were in tatters too. He regarded the semi-armoured carcass lying in front of him.

It would have to do.

When he saw the glistening ribbons that bound it, the redness inside, the pallor of its succulent organs, he was overcome. Like the ghoul he knew he was but inwardly reviled, Sahtah sprang onto the corpse and continued to feed. And as the red matter inside splashed across his borrowed face and drizzled down the cage of his ribs and amassed in his joints, he was visited by such horrific visions.

Flesh palaces resolved in his ancient mind, infinite realms devoted to the skin. Corpses hung from hooks and ringed the vaulted ceilings on chains like gruesome chandeliers. Blood ran in rivers, thick with viscera and carrying chunks of bone. Piles of offal, threads of muscle and intestine formed incarnadine sculptures that decked the stinking halls. And everywhere the feast of the flayers went on indefinitely, lost to madness, lost to flesh.

Sahtah threw back his head and emitted a keening that reverberated around the mountains. It signalled his desire, his terrible anguish and the certain knowledge that he was damned.

In the distance his slaves heard the call of the master and echoed it.

‘Why have they stopped fighting?’

Across the encampment, the flayed ones had shuddered to an abrupt halt. As one, they squatted in the dirt and growled – a dirge of machine-noise that hurt Jynn’s ears.

Only the Space Marines seemed unaffected. The one Scipio had called Brakkius was standing stock-still and peering into the darkness. He moved at some unseen disturbance ahead – Jynn had no idea what – and signalled to the others who had recently joined them.

‘Is it Scipio?’ she asked.

Brakkius regarded her as a disapproving mentor would his student. His eyes were two ovals of blood-red. ‘*Brother-Sergeant* Vorolanus is still absent.’

Clearly the cobalt giant didn’t approve of first name familiarity.

‘Who then?’

Jynn’s question was answered when three of her guerrillas emerged from the blizzard supporting one of the Ultramarines. His injuries looked bad but he was walking, albeit with help.

‘Herdantes...’ There was an edge to Brakkius’s voice, an undercurrent of suppressed anger that frightened her. She also felt something else at the sight of the stricken Space Marine.

She realised it was anxiety.

For Scipio.

At Brakkius’s command, two Ultramarines went to their wounded comrade and took his weight off Jynn’s men. The three guerrillas looked exhausted when they finally reached her.

‘The metal-heads are no longer killing us,’ said Sia. She had a small cut on her forehead and the arm of her jacket was slashed, but otherwise she was unharmed.

‘Glad you made it,’ said Jynn, exchanging a brief embrace with all three of them. Of the twenty-four guerrillas she’d started with at sun-up that day, only nine remained before the night was out. Doc Holdst was amongst the tally of the dead. It was hard to be grateful for anything when confronted with such wasteful loss.

Jynn turned to Brakkius. His attention was on the Space Marines dragging the one called Herdantes to the command tent. ‘We need to move. My people, or what’s left of them, are all here.’

Brakkius didn’t bother to look at her. ‘Mine are not.’

She tugged on his vambrace to get his attention. It was like trying to move a mountain. Brakkius didn’t shift. Jynn went on anyway. ‘Look, those monsters have stopped for whatever reason. Maybe they’re fallible after all and there’s a malfunction in their wiring or something – I don’t care. I’ve lost nearly two-thirds of my people and the rest of us won’t last much longer once those metal-heads come around again. We have to move!’

This time Brakkius met her gaze. It was impossible to tell through the lenses of his battle-helm but she hoped there might have been a measure of respect in his eyes. He held her gaze for a few seconds before looking back at the darkness.

Another Space Marine approached him and stopped by his side. ‘Herdantes is badly wounded.’ He glanced at Jynn. ‘The human is right, we must leave this place.’

‘I won’t leave him, Cator. You go – lead the others back to Lord Tigurius if you can. I’m staying.’

Brakkius resumed his vigil.

In the end, Cator didn’t have to decide. Two more cobalt giants came running through the blizzard.

Jynn recognised Scipio – the other one she’d heard him call Largo.

Now they could go.

‘I’m pleased you’re alive, Jynn Evvers,’ said Scipio upon reaching the command tent.

‘So am I.’ It was a truthful answer at least. She was about to say more when the low growl emitted by the dormant flayed ones grew into a

shrieking cacophony. Several of Jynn's men were sick, some wept openly. It took all of her resolve not to break down too.

‘What is it?’ she asked, her hands pressed to her ears.

Scipio exchanged a knowing look with Largo and said, ‘Time for us to leave.’

He recognised that sound and as they fled back down the mountain, headed for what she assumed was an army of Space Marines somewhere below, she heard Largo mutter to himself.

‘It's not dead.’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fear saturated Damnos. It permeated its air, its rock and ate away at its people like a cancer. Their screams, their plaintive moaning, their abject grief was an urgent throb at the back of the Librarian's mind.

Tigurius was a supreme psyker, the most accomplished of his Chapter, perhaps of any Chapter. There were others with power, of course: hooded Ezekiel, enigmatic Vel'cona, dreaded Mephiston. All were masters of their art but Tigurius was of the Ultramarines, the purest of all Space Marines, and his abilities were prodigious. Even so, he struggled to find a path through the necron shroud and the fear they propagated.

His mind had touched that of the necrons. It found only infinite darkness and endless hate. There was something buried in that well of nothingness, a warning; he felt certain of it. Without knowing why, he realised it was important and that by not seeking the truth of that vision he would be allowing some heinous evil to pass. Tigurius had fortified himself, performed the many rituals and psychic mantras designed to steel his mind against any potential aggressors. The Herald was strong, far more potent than he had first realised. Tigurius resolved that this time he would be prepared.

Inscribed in the ice with the pommel of his force staff were three concentric rings. Double-banded, he had also wrought sigils of warding

and aversion to bind them together. Tigurius crouched down in the centre, his eyes closed, and tried to ride the darkling waves of his subconscious.

Everlasting night filled his mind, the fearful voices of the humans pushed to the fringes and no longer a distraction. He went deeper and fashioned a psychic beacon that he attached around the Hood of Hellfire like a halo. Still, the darkness would not yield. Landscapes resolved below him as he soared across Damnos as a mental projection of himself. It was grey and bland, the life had left it.

Was this a vision of the future? Was he witnessing their ultimate failure?

Something glowed up ahead and Tigurius soared towards it. Psychic winds buffeted him, tried to throw him off course and dash him against the rising mountains on either side. He renewed his efforts, making his body into an arrow that sliced the air apart and cut through the tempest.

For a moment, a tiny light shone below him but it was fleeting and quickly snuffed out. The glow ahead intensified, turning from a phosphorescent white into a sickly emerald. Too late, Tigurius realised the danger he was in and tried to flee. The light became a blazing green orb that reached for him with the tendrils of its light.

One caressed the Librarian's arm and pain, hot and incandescent, fed into his body. His heart was thundering, a dull ache filled his head and a keening wail deafened his thoughts.

Must return...

All his efforts were focused on getting back but something was stretching the psychic landscape below, reshaping it so the distance became light years instead of leagues. Behind him, the baleful sun rose further and its tendrils grew with its influence.

They lashed at the Librarian like the appendages of some ocean-borne beast, a kraken or leviathan of old. Tigurius was forced to weave and pinwheel and dart as the sparrow eludes the eagle. Though he had not moved from his chosen spot since the vigil began, he still felt the physical

exertion of his efforts. Mind and body were concomitant aspects of most beings – one affected the other. At that moment as he angled through the mental sky, his mind was being put to the sternest test and it visited that self-same tension upon his body.

Back at his vigil point, Tigurius had blood in his mouth and a tremor in his limbs.

Maintain focus...

Below, grey mountains and cities became monuments of emerald and obelisks of necron devotion and servitude.

Death...

The wind promised a certain end should he let the green light touch him.

Only light can outrun light and in so doing bend the laws of time. That revelation prompted a response. Tigurius fashioned his arrowing form into a beam, pure and focused and so thin it left the baleful sun in its wake. The crouching form of his physical body loomed before him, solace for his mind at last.

Tigurius came to swathed in a feverish sweat. It took a moment to regulate his breathing, another to ensure he had awakened in the physical world and this reality he inhabited was not merely verisimilitude.

The vision was beyond his grasp. It lay behind the emerald sun and the Herald was preventing him from seeing it. With that obstacle alone, Tigurius might have triumphed but, combined with the darkness shroud, it was near impossible. He did witness something, however. The snuffed-out light – it was a glimpse of the future. Prescience was guiding him to something, some event yet to transpire. It must be close; otherwise he would not have seen it. Somehow, the keening he had heard was a component of that possible future.

Like the vision, he knew deep down that it was important. That he must act. Though his limbs protested, Tigurius got to his feet and let his instincts pull him. The mountains beckoned. Drifts that had yet to fall

upon the lower regions swathed the peaks in a storm. He headed upwards, leaving his battle-brothers behind. They were deep in the valley, monitoring the Thanatos Hills. Urgency governed the Librarian's step – there was no time to summon the other Ultramarines, no time at all.

Praxor advanced through the ruins slowly and carefully. He crushed something underfoot and looked down.

It was a bent piece of flat metal, frozen solid and cracked down the middle. Frost-edged letters were described on it in Gothic script.

‘Arcona City,’ said Etrius. His voice was low and sombre as if he were touring a mausoleum.

In many respects, he was.

Praxor assembled the fractured letters into a more meaningful arrangement and nodded. Kellenport really was the last human bastion on Damnos.

The Ultramarines line was well dispersed. Each of the cobalt giants kept a wary eye on the way ahead, watching the ruins for hidden threats. According to reports, too many had already fallen to necron ambush. Sicarius led from the front, as he always did, his Lions of Macragge alongside him. The stretched battle line was a deliberate strategy from the captain. Not only did it make it easier for the Ultramarines to pick their way through the rough ground, they'd also present a harder target for the mass fire of the necrons. Once the storm hit, it would present the illusion that a larger force was arrayed against them too. Engagement would happen soon, but they kept the pace even so Atavian and Tirian could keep up.

The Devastator squads occupied one end of the line. Heavy bolters and plasma cannons were low-slung on their cumbersome rigs. Too weighty for a human to bear alone, the Space Marines hefted them with relative ease. The missile launchers and lascannons, being shoulder-mounted, were pointed down and steadied by the gunner's other hand. Ponderous but

implacable, the Dreadnoughts marched with the Devastators. Their cannons were simply a part of their bodies, whirring and auto-targeting as they scanned the immediate area. As soon as battle was joined, these heavy guns would close ranks and present a concentrated volley of fire to hold the necrons' attention.

Just as Sicarius had predicted, the storm was rolling in. It began a half-kilometre back, the incessant ice flurries getting thicker and faster by the minute. There came a sweeping veil of finer snow in their wake, fogging the air and veneering the forlorn ruins still further.

Praxor moved on. 'Tactica briefings suggest there was a garrison here at the start of the war,' he said to Aristaeus down the comm-feed.

'There was... before the city was left to rot in the wake of necron victory. Look at the earth banks around the ruins, brother-sergeant.'

Praxor did. What he had initially mistaken for emplacements and earthworks, he now saw for what they truly were. Fused by ice to the very bulwarks they were sworn to protect were hundreds upon hundreds of Guardsmen, frozen forever in the moments of their deaths.

The necrons had turned this once proud Imperial city into a bombed-out mess. It was a grim place now, inhabited by ghosts and their terrified memories. Had he been anything other than Adeptus Astartes, Praxor might have quailed at this realisation.

'Apparently, Arcona was once a key city on Damnos,' added Aristaeus.

Praxor's mood was as cold as the weather. 'Looks like every other ruin on this hollow world.'

They were making steady progress across a roadway that had suffered least in the bombardment. Only part of its surface was cratered and it was still navigable. The quiet gave Praxor too much time with his thoughts. Even the thickening snowfall failed to smother them and he railed against the doubts plaguing him.

I am Adeptus Astartes. I am without fear, unaffected by doubt!

His misgivings weren't so easily silenced, though. Captain Sicarius was an incredible warrior, the greatest Praxor had known. In his presence, a warrior of Ultramar felt invincible, became capable of feats even a Space Marine would think impossible. He had... an *aura* about him that was undeniable. Yet he was relentless, even reckless. Heedless of casualties or cost, he would pursue his plans and vendettas until they were achieved or he was dead. In a perverse way, it was this obsessive, mercurial nature that made him the hero he was. It was also why he garnered voices of dissent within the Chapter.

Praxor was torn. He had not believed he'd ever think this way, but here on Damnos... this was beyond what the Second had ever faced before. He was not superstitious but Praxor couldn't deny the sense of foreboding that was building steadily within him. He didn't like the sensation; it felt almost treasonous.

Less able to pick their way through the denser rubble, the Dreadnoughts had shifted position in the battle line to walk along the roadway. It brought Agrippen close to Praxor and he nodded to the ancient warrior when he joined them.

Ahead, the Lions grew distant as they forged off with their captain. Sicarius was ever eager to be the first to battle and kept a close counsel with his command squad. Save for Argonan, who had died in the landings, he had yet to lose a single one of his chosen Ultramarines.

'They are a breed apart from the rest of us.' It came out more ruefully than Praxor had intended.

'And yet you aspire to join their ranks.'

Praxor glanced at Agrippen but the hulking Dreadnought was unreadable. The words simply emerged from his vox-speakers as fact. 'No. I am proud to serve as the sergeant of the Shieldbearers. It is my honour and oath to the Chapter.'

‘I don’t doubt it, brother. But I know your service record. You and the Shieldbearers are almost always leading the line, the first into any engagement, always at the forefront of our assaults. Some of a more cynical nature might suggest you were trying to prove something.’

Insulted, Praxor’s voice took on a hard edge that he was careful to monitor in the face of the venerable Agrippen. ‘Only my unswerving loyalty and dedication to the Ultramarines.’

‘Do you think that is in question, brother?’

‘Is this really the time for such a conversation, on the cusp of battle as we are?’

‘Tell me of a better time to discuss honour and courage than before going into war against our enemies,’ said Agrippen. ‘But you are avoiding my question.’

Praxor left a long pause. He did not find the answer easy. ‘Perhaps. There are times when I have questioned.’

‘At Ghospora, a campaign over a century old.’ It was a statement, not a suggestion.

‘You of all of us, venerable one, should know that time is immaterial when concerning matters of honour.’

‘Aye, I do. It displeased you that your captain left you behind?’

‘It stunned and humbled me,’ Praxor admitted. ‘It felt as if I were being punished, though I did not know why.’

‘Humility is as important a lesson as learning how to wield a gladius properly or fight in a squad with your brothers.’

Praxor nodded and saw the wisdom in the Dreadnought’s words.

The roadway was coming to an end. They were deep into Arcona City now and the drifts were coming down in swathes. Even through the blizzard, Praxor could see the necron phalanxes manoeuvring to intercept them. It wouldn’t be long.

‘Before we go to battle, I must ask you something, Agrippen,’ Praxor said, voicing his mind as he had wanted to since they’d made planetfall.

‘Speak. I shall answer if I can, brother.’

‘Are you here to watch for Agemman’s interests? Is what they say in the senate true?’

‘As all should do, I serve the Chapter alone and my Lord Calgar.’ Agrippen was stern but there was no hint of reproach in his modulated diction. ‘I possess the wisdom of centuries and all I see are two great heroes, dissimilar in method but equal in courage and honour.’

‘In the senate, I have heard talk from Agemman’s ambassadors of Sicarius overreaching himself.’

‘He is daring and innovative,’ Agrippen conceded.

‘But there is concern that this will go too far and of the consequences when it does.’

‘And how does our Lord Calgar respond to such concerns?’

‘He is not present. His voice is absent from proceedings.’

‘And what does that tell you, brother?’

Humbled again in the time it takes to field-strip a bolter, Praxor decided he would speak less to Dreadnoughts in future. Their logic was as redoubtable as their armoured bodies. ‘That I should not listen to Chapter politics.’

‘And what do you think, Praxor Manorian? Do you think Cato Sicarius, your captain, overreaches himself?’

Praxor’s gaze went to the Lions out of reflex. Sicarius was as fine a warrior and a captain as there was in the Chapter. Perhaps he was even the best they had.

‘Until now, no.’

‘And now?’

‘He does things, formulates tactics and executes plans that I could never even conceive of.’

‘That is why he is captain of the Second. It’s why his legend will endure long after he is dust. But you haven’t answered my question again.’

Praxor bowed his head. His answer was forestalled by Sicarius’s voice blasting over the comm-feed.

‘Ultramarines! We are engaging!’



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sporadic gauss-fire erupted across the ruins, forcing the Space Marines to hunch over. It kicked up snow and fragmented rubble but missed the Ultramarines who advanced steadily, returning fire. Bolter flashes lit up the icy gloom in retaliatory bursts and spread the necrons' aim across the line so that no one part of it was ever under heavy barrage.

A blanket of snow and ice rolled over the battlefield, carried by a biting wind. Neither necron nor Ultramarine felt it, their metal bodies and their armour protecting them, but it made targeting more difficult.

'Holding positions!' shouted Praxor, prompted by a rune-signal on his retinal display. The Shieldbearers adopted firing postures. Farther up the roadway, the Lions had slowed to allow the rest of the company to catch up.

Sustained bolter fire came from the more advanced tactical squads, punctuated by plasma bursts and missile expulsions. At the end of the line, the Devastators unleashed their guns. A heavy bolter salvo filled the air with the dense *chug-chank* of high-velocity shells. Missiles boomed from their tubes. Plasma and lascannons spat incandescent death in a series of bright lances. The storm made it difficult to tell easily, but the necron frontliners were being torn apart by the fusillade.

‘Keep it up,’ ordered Daceus, shouting between bolter bursts. ‘Make them pay for every damned step.’

It was as intense as any battlefield Praxor had fought on. His warrior-spirit soared. The line was dug in well, spread thin and hurting the necron phalanxes. But they were not like most enemies and could absorb a lot of punishment. Even obscured by the fog, their numbers were staggering too.

‘Seems we have poked the nest,’ offered Krixous.

‘And they respond to the threat,’ Praxor replied, pointing. He opened the comm-feed. ‘Captain, monolith rerouting on our position.’

He saw Sicarius turn towards the floating pyramid of living metal moving slowly into a flanking position.

‘Maintain fire,’ he said. ‘We need to draw them on.’

But the necrons had stopped advancing and occupied static positions. A small cohort of elites had joined the raider constructs, their heavier fire swelling the barrage.

Praxor registered a couple of hits on his tactical display but so far no red icons. Several Space Marines were at amber status – injured but still effective.

Elianus Trajan added his voice to the battle, ‘Repel them, brothers. Bring down the soulless xenos, hated in all its forms. Do not relent. There is no forgiveness, no quarter. Guilliman is watching!’

He couldn’t see the Chaplain – the fog was too thick now – but Praxor noted his position on the tactical map, accompanying Atavian’s Devastators. He was advancing swiftly: soon he’d be with the tactical squads. Praxor could almost feel his wrath already.

‘Pour it on!’ yelled Daceus. All the while the shadow of the monolith was getting closer. Still the necrons took the hammering, refusing to move, refusing to commit their command nodes to the fight.

‘Do they know our plan, captain?’ he asked over the clangour.

Sicarius was adamant. ‘Impossible. They are not engaging because of the monolith.’ Daceus heard the snarl behind his captain’s battle-helm. So far, the captain’s objectives were eluding him. The storm was worsening, though. Visibility was weak to poor. If they were going to break off then now was the time.

‘We need to destroy that thing. Do you still have your melta bombs, sergeant?’

Daceus let off a burst of bolter fire then nodded.

Sicarius holstered his plasma pistol. ‘Give them up.’

Handing them over, Daceus said, ‘What are you going to do?’

Mag-locking the additional melta bombs to his armour, Sicarius replied, ‘Take out that monolith. Gaius, I’ll need your blade.’

The company champion bowed his head. ‘I am yours to command, my lord.’

‘Captain—’ Daceus began.

‘It is my duty, sergeant,’ he said, and his posture took on a nurturing look. ‘I know you would throw yourself into the hells of the warp for me, Daceus. You are more than merely my sergeant – you are my ally, my friend.’

Daceus saluted by slamming his fist against his chestplate. ‘Courage and honour, Cato.’

‘Courage and honour, Retius.’ It had been many years since the two had exchanged first-name greetings, and never before on the battlefield. There was something about it, and this war, that Daceus did not like. It felt significant in a way, an ending of sorts. It did not portend well.

Sicarius showed none of his sergeant’s misgivings. ‘You have command. See the plan out.’

Then, together with Gaius, he ran into the fog.

Praxor saw two cobalt figures running from the Lions’ position. With the adverse weather, he couldn’t be sure who they were.

‘Brother-sergeant?’

‘I don’t know, Etrius. Maintain fire.’

Sergeant Daceus’s voice crackled over the feed. ‘All flanking forces, converge on the Lions’ lead. We move now!’

The rest of the command squad broke off from the battle line, headed in the opposite direction to the pair of Ultramarines.

‘Temple of Hera,’ breathed Praxor. ‘It was Captain Sicarius.’

‘Guilliman’s breath, what is he doing?’ asked Krixous.

Though he was saying it, Praxor could still not quite believe it. ‘He is living up to his legend, and going to destroy the monolith.’

Etrius was incredulous. ‘Alone?’

The reply sounded hollow even to Praxor. ‘Gaius Prabian is with him.’

‘Make their sacrifice a deed of honour!’ boomed Agrippen, plasma cannon pulsing. ‘He is Cato Sicarius, High Suzerain, Captain of the Second and Master of the Watch. On this field, he is Guilliman’s sword; we are *all* Guilliman’s sword.’ The Dreadnought had regrouped with the Devastators and was intensifying fire along with Ultracius.

Praxor found his purpose refocused after the ancient warrior’s words. Sicarius’s reckless bravery would not be in vain. In his retinal display, he saw Indomitable was moving. Not to be outdone by Sergeant Solinus, Praxor led the Shieldbearers after them. As they joined up with the Lions, his gaze met Trajan’s.

‘He has the courage of Invictus and the guile of Galatan. Banish your doubts, brother-sergeant.’

They were moving too swiftly for a long reply, so Praxor merely nodded. Still the necron phalanxes weren’t moving, content to hold and defend while their ponderous war engine got into position. If the monolith managed to open up its power matrix in a singular beam-pulse, the plan was finished. Broken off from its phalanx, the machine was fairly isolated but attacking such a thing beggared belief.

‘Stay on me! Move as one!’ Daceus was keeping the line intact, marshalling the tactical squads into position so they could prosecute Sicarius’s plan.

They deviated far from the roadway, which was now wholly occupied by the Devastators and Dreadnoughts. The necrons’ reaction to the barrage was feeding more mechanoids into the grinder. Their supplies were endless, their sense of self-preservation obsolete, despite the strange cries that came from each mechanoid as it was struck down. Phase-outs were happening constantly but just as many of the creatures self-repaired and returned to the fight.

The Ultramarines couldn’t win by sheer weight of arms – they didn’t have enough battle-brothers.

‘Any eyes on the command node, yet?’ Daceus had drawn them to halt, out of the firing line and approaching the flank of a necron phalanx exchanging fire with the Space Marine heavy guns. The storm was so thick now, they could only see through their retinal senses or magnoculars.

Solinus was at the scopes, scanning the silver horde. ‘Nothing from here.’

On the opposite side, Praxor also returned a negative.

‘We need to get into them, force their hand,’ said Daceus. He opened the feed. ‘All heavies advance and resume fire.’

Praxor watched the line move up through the fog. Agrippen and Ultracius anchored it with Tirian and Atavian’s Devastators in the middle. The necron casualties intensified. And with slow inevitability they started to shift.

Daceus grinned ferally. ‘That’s it, you xenos scum...’

But the attack would still be stalled if the monolith couldn’t be destroyed, and without Sicarius they would have little chance of eliminating a necron overlord.

Praxor looked to the looming pyramid. Its capacitors were wreathed with emerald lightning, preparing to fire. It would need to be soon.

‘Keep low, brother.’ Gauss-beams flashed overhead, forcing Sicarius into a stooping run.

Gaius Prabian kept his combat shield up and close to his body. Several blasts had already skimmed off its surface.

The power armour of both Ultramarines was pitted and scored from where they’d run the necron gauntlet. Ahead, the shadow of the monolith finally reached them.

It was immense, a horrifying testament to the mechanoids’ power. In truth, Sicarius believed the necrons to be much more than mere robots. They were something else entirely. Something ancient.

Although Arcona City had been pummelled into dust during the necron invasion, some ruined structures were still standing. Using the fog to cover their movements, the two Ultramarines skirted around to the monolith’s flank. Its gauss-arc projectors were patrolling the immediate vicinity but looked incapable of firing whilst the machine was feeding energy to its crystal power matrix. Close up, they got a chance to see the shimmering unreality of the monolith’s surface and the eldritch sigils engraved upon it. Truly, this was an engine of evil.

Sicarius noticed the crystal at the pyramid’s summit start to glow brighter as the capacitors fed it power from their lightning field. Its power matrix was coming on-line.

A small retinue of raider constructs protected the monolith, moving in step with it, their weapons ready but not yet firing. In his time as a warrior of Ultramar, Sicarius had prosecuted many tank ambushes. An armoured column was a fearsome force in battle; its guns were powerful and its resilience potent against all but the heaviest weapons. But it was also relatively slow and cumbersome. Surgical strikes by squads bearing armour-busting grenades were deadly to tank formations. This monolith

was no tank, and Sicarius suspected its strange surface would be resistant to most weapons, but he was determined to at least neutralise if not destroy it utterly.

A commando move such as the one he was about to attempt didn't exactly follow the strictures of the Codex but then Sicarius had his own way of interpreting Guilliman's writings. He hoped the primarch would approve of his ingenuity and bravura.

'Champion,' he said, resting a hand on Gaius's shoulder guard as they crouched in the ruins and peered out at the passing monolith, 'you are my unsheathed sword.'

Gaius nodded slowly, his eyes on the raiders. There were only five of them. He ignited the blade of his power sword and it hummed hungrily.

Before he let him go, Sicarius added, 'Beware that portal at the front. Only Hera knows where it might lead you. Courage and honour.'

Gaius growled back through the vox-grille of his ornate helm. 'Courage and honour, my lord.'

The two then split apart, Sicarius headed around what appeared to be the rear of the monolith and Gaius engaging from the front.

The Champion vaulted the ruins and cried, 'For Ultramar!'

Turning as one, the raider screen opened fire with their gauss-weapons. Gaius Pradian was an experienced warrior. As Champion he had slain countless warlords, alien potentates and demagogues. Before Damnos, he had never engaged necrons. Held in an aggressive gladiatorial position, his combat shield absorbed much of the mechanoids' fire and enabled him to run and defend at the same time. Several beams lanced his shoulder guard and greaves, but he ignored the damage runes flashing on his retinal display. Perhaps realising hand-to-hand combat was inevitable, the closest of the raiders stopped firing. Instead, it brandished its gauss-flayer like a club, intending to cut the Ultramarines Champion apart with its barrel-blade.

Gaius's shield broke skeletal teeth and snapped the necron's corded neck as he thrust it into the creature's face. The head was hanging by a piece of cabling at an odd angle when the mechanoid crumpled. A second creature Gaius cut down with his power sword, slicing through a weapon barrel and then the necron itself. The wound was catastrophic and it phased out. The third and fourth were dispatched by fierce sweeps of his blade – the air hummed and crackled as the weapon bisected it. The fifth he battered with the shield. He was a force of will, a deadly guardian intent on his mission. All three necrons phased out. He stalked over to the last, the one he'd injured but not quite enough. Already, the necron's broken neck was repairing itself. Gaius slammed the edge of his shield against the cabling that was holding the mechanoid's head to its body, severing it.

'Stay dead,' he spat, and the last of the retinue phased out...

...Only to return, or so it appeared, through the portal – five more raider constructs, carbon copies of the first. They moved slowly, resolving first as dark shadows in the pooling emerald light, then as actual beings of metal and hate.

Gaius Prabian faced them down and, touching the blade of his power weapon to his forehead, saluted.

No, he had never fought necrons before. It was to be a challenge.

'I am the unsheathed sword,' he vowed, and charged.

A battle tank had flanks, it had hatches and tracks, it possessed weak points and was forged of metal in a foundry – this monolith was something else. It had no aspects, save perhaps the front and that was only because the emerald portal suggested it together with the direction it moved in. The flanks or rear were merely faces of the pyramid, constructed of some dark pseudo-metal, a substance that didn't appear entirely corporeal or, at least, constant. Looking carefully, Sicarius could see that the sides of the monolith rippled, their hue changing in the light like oil upon water. He wasn't even certain that an explosive charge could be attached to its surface, let alone destroy it. Priming a melta bomb, he eyed the gauss-arc

projectors. The cannons protruding from the machine swivelled and turned to draw a bead on him and Gaius Prabian, but they were powerless as a defensive measure whilst all the monolith's energy was being used to unleash the crystal power matrix.

That situation wouldn't last. Sicarius slammed the first charge against the flank of the machine. It took hold and stuck there. Then he attached another. And another. He planted four melta bombs in total, all of his and Daceus's supply.

A pulse rippled down the side of the monolith as they went off, expelling intense microwaves that the machine seemed to absorb and nullify. Ordinary metal would slough and corrode against a melta bomb, but the material comprising the monolith was much more resistant.

Despite its alien resilience, the combined explosive fury of Sicarius's melta bombs would not be denied and the captain shouted his approval as something in the machine died and it floated slowly to the ground. At its peak, the crystal faded as the charging of the power matrix was forcibly aborted.

'Brother Gaius.' Sicarius ran around to the front of the machine in time to see his Champion destroying the last of the retinue. Even the emerald portal was dormant, revealing bare metal behind it. With its structural integrity damaged, the necron monolith became nothing more than a monument, inert and powerless. At least for now.

'Should we enter?' Gaius pointed his sword at the area where the portal had been. It seemed he intended on cutting their way inside.

'No. We return to the others. We don't know how long the war machine will be offline. Let's make the most of it.'

Mission achieved, they headed back to the line.

Behind his battle-helm Sicarius smiled. Perhaps there was glory to be had on Damnos after all.

Sicarius's return was heralded with restrained joy. There was no time for celebration. The Devastators and Dreadnoughts were taking a lot of fire. With the monolith neutralised, at least for a time, the others had to press the attack from the flank and cut into the necron horde.

The captain of Second Company lifted his Tempest Blade into the air as the mechanoids advanced into a position where the edge of their formation was exposed.

‘There is still no sign of the command node,’ Daceus warned.

Sicarius was not about to be denied. ‘We can wait no longer.’ He slashed his sword down. ‘Ultramarines, attack!’

It was infectious. Praxor felt the groundswell of strength and righteous anger first in his feet, then his legs until it infused his entire body. Sicarius was the source of that power, he was certain of it. In his presence, it was as if a halo of inner fortitude surrounded them and made them capable of the deeds of legend.

‘I am my captain's sword!’ he swore, power sword tearing open the first necron in his path even as his bolt pistol shattered a second. All of his doubts, his notions of Sicarius's vainglory, were banished from his mind in that single attack. In their place came an utter certainty that they would triumph, that Cato Sicarius would lead them to glory.

He had never fought harder, neither had the warriors around him. Together with the Lions of Macragge, the Shieldbearers and the Indomitable ripped into the necron flank and sundered it. They were several ranks deep, mechanised limbs and appendages tossed like metal refuse, before the Ultramarines slowed.

‘Come to me,’ he heard Sicarius rage at the heart of the battle. ‘Face me now!’

The captain searched the silver horde for the command node but still it would not present itself. Row upon row of endless necron warriors did instead. The Tempest Blade was reaping a heavy tally, but it could not slay them all. Even the mighty Cato Sicarius could not achieve that feat.

Praxor glanced behind him. They were slowly being surrounded. Even now, some of his warriors had formed a rearguard with battle-brothers from Solinus's squad. In a matter of moments, they would be enveloped.

Trajan was at the front with the Lions, spitting curses and litanies. He would never surrender – he was, in every way, Sicarius's Chaplain. But it occurred to Praxor that there was now a certain futility to this plan.

Without sight of the necron overlord the Ultramarines were effectively attacking an infinite production line of necrons. In that, there could be no victory.

In the end, it was Solinus that was the first to break.

'We should retreat,' he said, defending against a flurry of attacks before replying with one of his own. 'There is no glory in this, for Damnos or the Second.'

Smashing necrons with his crozius, Trajan was quick to silence him. 'Hold to your purpose and the orders of your captain. Fight for the glory of Ul–'

A necron blade in his gorget cut the diatribe short. Trajan blasted the creature with his bolt pistol, before dismembering it with his crozius, but could not remove the metal wedged in his neck armour.

The circle of Ultramarines was getting tighter. They were back-to-back now, their gallant charge stalled by the sheer amount of resistance facing them.

Sicarius turned to Daceus. 'Signal the other squads, close and concentrate fire on this part of the line.'

'Our brothers might be hit also, lord,' suggested Venatio. The Apothecary was holding his own, as gifted a warrior as any of the Lions.

Sicarius was quick to counter. 'It's worth the risk. Daceus, give the order.'

'Should I order the Dreadnoughts to engage, also?' came the veteran's gruff reply.

‘Negative, they won’t reach us in time.’ Sicarius sounded angry. ‘This isn’t working. We’re disengaging.’ It wasn’t an easy decision but the captain of Second didn’t like lost causes, nor did he like admitting to them. He opened up the comm-feed to the flanking force. ‘Cut a hole through them. Fall back.’

Despite his daring actions that neutralised the monolith, despite goading the necron horde into being outflanked, despite everything the plan had failed. Sicarius needed something to strike; something to attack and kill that might make a difference. He could not do that slaying endless hordes of mechanoid warriors. Though it was difficult to admit, he had underestimated the necrons and their forces. He resolved not to do so again. He needed greater numbers.

Victory was possible; he felt it in his heart. It could be won at the tip of his Tempest Blade, but for now it eluded him.

Cutting his way back through the necron ranks, one hand dragging an injured Brother Samnite of the Lions, an unpleasant taste filled Sicarius’s mouth. It was at once acerbic and unfamiliar.

It was defeat.

In the chaos of the melee there is little time for thought. Instinct takes over. It is a part of every Space Marine’s genetic coding; it is the reason for his existence, his purpose and God-Emperor given duty. War is not just their craft, it is their sacred calling.

So it was for Praxor as he fought his way back through the horde that had slammed around the Ultramarines like a vice. The warriors of Ultramar had sprung the ambush but they were the ones caught in the necrons’ trap. These things, with their cold logic, their calculating processes, could not be fought like an ordinary foe. And they were endless; at least, it felt that way as Praxor’s shoulder burned with the continuous hacking through living metal.

Trajan punctuated his every blow with grating vitriol. The Chaplain had removed the metal sliver from his neck, or rather it had phased out along with the necron it belonged to, but it had left him with a razored harshness to his voice. If anything, it only made his wrath even more imposing. These realisations would come upon Praxor later, after the maddened fight to break out of the necron phalanx was done.

Punching through the other side, mechanoids exploding dangerously around them with the heavies' suppressing fire, an ordered retreat was put into effect. Veteran-Sergeant Daceus was first out, battering his way through with his power fist. He marshalled the line, setting up a fire base of bolters to open the gate of the trap for the others. Slowly, the Ultramarines emerged. Mercifully none fell, but Samnite was injured and so too were three of Solinus's men. Praxor had been spared more casualties.

The mist thickened further still, enabling the Ultramarines to make a tactical retreat without pursuit. Sicarius was the last to leave the fight. His reticence to do so and his rage were almost palpable.

In truth, all of the Ultramarines felt it.

'Retreat to the line,' he snarled when they'd put some distance between the phalanx. He caught Daceus up. 'Have the Devastators and Dreadnoughts begin a staggered retreat. We're withdrawing from Arcona City.'

Snow and fog swallowed the Ultramarines. It took the necrons too, who merely continued their implacable advance. They already had forces headed to Kellenport, a phalanx of monoliths. Some of the other phalanxes would reroute there too.

'Are we regrouping with the others?' asked Daceus. In the background, Venatio supported Brother Samnite. Gaius Prabian kept a wary eye on the fog as if expecting a necron to spring forth at any moment, but none did. The mechanoids had even ceased the gauss-barrage.

Sicarius sheathed his blade. He took a while to do it and for a moment Praxor thought he might plunge back into the fog and seek his prey anew. ‘No, the necron artillery *must* be destroyed. I want heavy armour and the guns of the *Valin’s Revenge* on these metal heretics. But the assault squads should be reappropriated. We need to attack and withdraw, disrupt their formations, strike at the weakest points. Heavy punishment hasn’t worked, so we sting them with punitive raids instead.’

‘Lord Tigurius won’t be pleased, captain.’

Sicarius was remorseless. ‘He will submit to my orders. The Librarian’s pleasure is not my concern. Make it so, Daceus.’

The veteran-sergeant saluted, opening up the long-range feed as they began the march back towards Kellenport. He only got a few footsteps when Agrippen spoke up.

‘Are we still trying to win this war?’

All eyes went to Sicarius who’d turned at the Dreadnought’s voice to face him. He removed his battle-helm so the venerable warrior could see his eyes. ‘Of course. If victory is possible then we must strive to achieve it.’

‘Though I serve the Chapter eternal and would glorify it with every deed, I can see no victory here.’

It was a bold statement. Only Agrippen as one of the First and a revered Ultramarines veteran could have made it. The old and wise had ever had the right to challenge the decisions of the young and reckless.

‘There is,’ said Sicarius with finality. He replaced his battle-helm, the last part of his statement grating through the vox-grille. ‘I will make it thus.’

Agrippen bowed. If he had any further doubts, he did not voice them but merely continued the march instead. Praxor had no idea if the Dreadnought was assuaged. When Agrippen had spoken up, he’d at first thought this was the moment when Agemman, through his venerable

champion, would make his feelings known about the captain of Second. In the middle of a campaign, the timing would have been inauspicious but seldom were the moments when Sicarius could be brought to task.

The words, though not as inflammatory as they might have been, lingered. They resonated inside Praxor's skull, kindling the sparks of his own uncertainty. He wished they were not on the battlefield, though perhaps that was where the instincts to follow and obey were simplest to adhere to. Trajan was an iron-hard bastard but he was their Chaplain. His counsel would be greatly appreciated. In lieu of that, Praxor opted to be pragmatic. He organised his squad into the march, silently proud at their battle-conduct. It was a defeat, but the Shieldbearers had acquitted themselves well. Even still, it was hard fought for little to no gain. Heading out, he rotated his shoulder to work out some of the muscle ache.

‘Should I summon Apothecary Venatio?’

Praxor winced as he snapped his dislocated shoulder into place. ‘No, Krixous,’ he said. ‘It’s just been a long time since I hurt this much after a fight.’



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Aboard the Valin's Revenge, two years and nine months before the Damnos Incident

By the time Praxor left the battle-cages, most of his brothers had gone to their cells for nocturnal meditation. True, some still trained on the shooting ranges or otherwise occupied their minds towards the betterment of making war in the Emperor's name, but the way back to his dormitory was largely empty.

The Cullinar Suppression had gone well. A task force of Ultramarines, on direct orders from Lord Calgar himself, had been sent to the little known planetoid of Balthar IV to eradicate an uprising of the tau in one of its principal cities. Cullinar was wracked with xenos, who'd managed to sway a significant amount of the human population with their lies including much of the noble family that ruled it. All efforts by the Vardia Imperial Guard 15th and 18th battalions had failed to break the will of the xenos, whose influence had spread to neighbouring enclaves. Allow them to go unchallenged for much longer and a planet-wide secession from the Imperium was in danger of becoming a reality.

The arrival of the Ultramarines put a stop to that. Breaking into fire-teams, they cleansed the avenues and excised the root of alien taint within three days. Not all of the Second had been chosen for the duty, which had

also included elements of the First Company veterans and Tenth Company Scouts. Praxor had neither seen nor heard Torias Telion at the battle, but knew the Master Scout was behind enemy lines pulling the strings and blowing things up. He suspected the explosion that had swept in a firestorm through the sewer lines where Praxor had then led the Shieldbearers to kill the tau ambassador was caused by the invisible hand of Torias Telion.

Scipio had fought with the Master Scout at Black Reach. Most only glimpsed him in shadows or on the training fields, for Telion was a supreme mentor within the Chapter. Praxor admitted, shamefully, to a pang of jealousy on that account. He had bled with the Master Scout on Cullinar, but had never seen him. He had seen the Terminators, led by Helios, and was as impressed as he'd been on Black Reach when they'd joined bolter and blade together.

Sicarius had not led the assault; rather it was Agemman that had captained the battle force in a methodical cleanse and burn approach. It was painstaking and exacting, where Sicarius would have been direct and brutal. The war had taken longer, Praxor suspected, than it would have with Sicarius but the risks were less and the results almost guaranteed. He would have preferred to serve his liege-lord, but Praxor was still ebullient after their victory and celebrated by performing seven hours of training katas upon return to the *Valin's Revenge*. Agemman's strategy was utterly unlike Sicarius's, though adherence to the Codex ensured certain basic similarities, but these were almost unnoticeable due to the way they were applied. The experience had led Praxor to consider observing some of the senate sessions when afforded the opportunity. They were headed back to Macragge for an official ceremony: Mikael Fabian, the captain of Third, and Master of the Arsenal, was to be honoured.

Ultramarines vaunted the successes of their Chapter; they did so proudly and in full voice. All who could attend would be expected to be there.

On his way across the flight deck where the Thunderhawks slumbered, their landing stanchions mag-locked to the ground, and mindless servitors toiled, Praxor saw another Space Marine.

He was also not wearing his power armour, but instead had a blue surplice with a cowl to hide his face. His bulk and manner marked him out as one of the Chapter.

‘Brother,’ he began in idle greeting.

When the Ultramarine looked up, he realised it was Scipio.

Praxor’s mood hardened to steel in an instant. He had witnessed first hand lately Scipio’s disregard in battle. To Praxor’s mind, there was a difference between insane bravery and just plain insanity. ‘You are no longer in Venatio’s care, then.’

Scipio stopped in front of his old friend. ‘I left the apothecarion a few hours ago.’ He looked Praxor up and down, noting the training fatigues and half-carapace he was wearing. ‘I see you still live in the battle-cages when not at war.’

Praxor raised an eyebrow. He felt a challenge in his brother’s tone. ‘And is that something to frown upon? Does it not make me a better warrior in the eyes of my captain and my Chapter Master?’

‘It depends on your motives, brother.’

‘And you suspect them to be less than admirable, do you, Scipio? It sounds as if you have decided my reason already and deemed it an unworthy one.’

‘A selfish one, perhaps.’

Praxor licked his lips. It took all of his self-control not to unsheathe his rudius and smack Scipio around the head with it. ‘You were in that sus-an membrane coma for several weeks so I shall allow for your behaviour. Do not forget your place, brother.’

‘I am of sound mind, I can assure you, Praxor.’ Scipio drew back the hood. His eyes were diamond-hard. He wasn’t about to back down. ‘And

we are both sergeants. *You* perhaps have loftier designs.'

Now Praxor let his anger show. 'What is your issue, brother? Ever since Karthax you have carried your aggression like a clenched fist aimed at whoever or whatever displeases you. Is that anger now focused on me?'

'Seekers of personal glory will only ever find the means to undo themselves,' Scipio spat.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'They are the words of Orad. You should know them, brother.'

'What? What are you even doing here, Scipio? Were you awaiting my arrival so you could pick a fight?'

Scipio's mouth was a hard line. He gave nothing away, so Praxor was forced to continue without his participation.

He leaned in close. 'Do you know why I go to the battle-cages, why I seek to perfect my warrior-self? I shall tell you, Scipio, I shall do so because you and I are brothers, we are friends. I do it to become strong, in mind and in body. You cannot blame yourself for what happened. It was frailty that Karthax exposed. It was a tragedy, but one brought about through weakness.'

'So I have heard you claim... *several* times.'

Praxor frowned, incredulous.

'I awoke from my coma days ago.' There was a grating undercurrent to Scipio's voice. Whether it was caused by his ire or his injuries, Praxor didn't know. He went on. 'Venatio had me confined to the apothecarion while my wounds healed—'

'A pity whatever damage was done to your head and humours was not also allowed convalescence,' Praxor interrupted. He was in no mood for Scipio's misplaced anger, but when he went to move around him the other Ultramarine stepped in his path. 'You are rash, brother. That's why you spent time on the Apothecary's table. I would counsel caution in your

future actions.’ He was no longer referring to campaigning, Praxor made that much obvious with his tone.

Scipio’s blood was up, though. He would not be denied this reckoning. ‘While my wounds healed,’ he said again, ‘I heard talk of Karthax and Orad.’

‘I did not speak ill of him, brother.’ There was a warning in Praxor’s voice, one that suggested he did not enjoy the inference Scipio was making.

‘Weakness, was it? Is that why he fell?’

Praxor clenched his fists. There was no avoiding this now. Tensions had run high between them for months. It had to come out; this was as good a way as any.

‘You know the answer to that. Now,’ he added levelly, ‘do what you came here to do.’

Scipio roared and threw himself at Praxor. Anger fuelled a rain of blows that battered the other Ultramarine before he could reply or throw up any defence. Still pumped and alert from the battle-cages, Praxor blocked a frenzied punch to the side of the head, deflecting it with his forearm before planting a jab in Scipio’s stomach. An elbow-smash to follow crunched Scipio’s shoulder blade and the combination was finished by a blade-kick to the ribs.

Scipio tumbled and rolled, grunting in pain, but got his footing quickly.

‘You’re still weak from the apothecarion,’ said Praxor, wheeling around Scipio’s flank, forcing him to rotate. ‘Let your wounds heal and we’ll settle this in the battle-cages in the proper manner.’

Scipio shook his head. ‘We do it now.’

Praxor scowled. ‘You are a fool, Scipio. A slave to your emotions and your anger.’

‘Are you afraid, brother?’ The curled lip made Scipio’s face ugly in the half-light. There was something dark inside his eyes.

Praxor shook his head – it *was* inevitable then – drew the rudius and tossed it aside. This was a fist fight. He would not dishonour it further by using a weapon, even a blunted one, against an unarmed combatant. ‘You want me to break you, brother, I *will* break you!’

Scipio charged, but Praxor was quick to avoid his battering ram of an attack.

‘Reckless...’ He slammed a fist into Scipio’s flank. A chop to the side of his brother’s neck paralysed the nerves and sent pain sparks into his eyes. ‘And ill-considered.’

They faced off, circling one another. Despite the inappropriate setting, the hangar deck made for a perfect arena. Their audience, the servitors, continued their labours without pause or regard. The long shadows of the Thunderhawks bathed the combatants in darkness. Scipio was breathing hard, belaboured by his injuries. Praxor had yet to break sweat.

‘Where is the warrior Torias Telion has spoken so highly of?’ he goaded.

Scipio came on again. He feinted, drawing Praxor’s guard, and landed a heavy blow on the other sergeant’s cheek. A headbutt brought white dagger-flashes to Praxor’s eyes and he staggered.

‘He’s right here,’ Scipio promised and hit him again.

Despite his earlier advantage, Praxor was being worn down by his brother’s fury and was forced back a step. Sensing his superiority, Scipio leapt and came at Praxor with his fists linked in an overhead smash. Had the blow connected it would have probably shattered his clavicle but Praxor sidestepped out of harm’s way, punching Scipio hard in the gut with the same motion. The other sergeant grunted then choked as the air blasted from his lungs.

Expecting that to be the end of it, Praxor relented but Scipio whirled around and caught him with a wild haymaker. He felt the bone crack and reeled at the force of the impact. An uppercut from Scipio’s other hand glanced Praxor’s chin. He had enough presence of mind to retreat

defensively, so the blow was telling. Throwing up his arms, Praxor hit the side of Scipio's head with the flat of his hands, stunning him. Dizziness made the other sergeant sluggish and Praxor used it to his gain, blocking another all-or-nothing swing and driving a knee into his brother's stomach. Seizing Scipio's wrist, he bent it around and used his weight to push him down to his knees. The other arm he wrapped around his neck and squeezed.

‘Yield!’ He was breathing hard, partly from exertion, partly from anger. Scipio still struggled.

‘You’ve lost, brother. Give it up.’

Still Scipio fought. He made enough room for an elbow strike to Praxor's gut and drove it back hard.

Praxor grunted, hurt, but held on.

‘Weakness,’ he hissed between clenched teeth, spitting phlegm. ‘Yes, you’re right, brother. It was weakness.’

Scipio roared, anger lending him strength, but Praxor didn't let up. Rather, he pressed further.

‘But who is weak, now?’ He wrenched Scipio's neck when he tried to move. By now the air was being cut off to his lungs, though a Space Marine could last much longer than an ordinary man in a choke-hold – even one made by another Space Marine.

Praxor leaned in so he could speak directly into Scipio's ear. ‘You are a patrician son of Ultramar, an inheritor of Guilliman,’ he said, almost pleading. ‘This does not befit your Chapter or your heritage. Don't dishonour that any further.’ His grip lessened, allowing Scipio to speak, albeit in a rasp.

‘I have no honour left.’

Praxor loosened his arm further. Scipio had stopped struggling now and hung like dead weight in his arms. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Do you know what happened on Karthax?’

Praxor's eyes narrowed in confusion. 'A tragedy, the death of a hero – we lost Orad.'

'It was more than that. No one else knows... No one but the captain and maybe Daceus.'

'What happened?' A strange sensation was working its way up Praxor's spine as he asked the question. He couldn't quite place it; it had been a long time since he'd experienced the emotion or one similar.

Scipio's confession was delivered with sobs for a fallen brother. 'I killed him, Praxor. I killed Orad.'

'We need to move, now!'

Scipio was waving the human guerrilla fighters farther down the mountain pass, but his attention was fixed on the upper slopes behind them.

It was Largo who had spotted it, skulking in the peaks, concealed by the drifts. Not content with its feast, it still craved their skin and had come to claim it. What was more, the flayed lord was not alone – it had brought its cohorts with it. Like slaving dogs, ruddy with the life-blood of others, they galloped down through the icy crags on all fours. A wave of sheer terror had swept through the humans upon the first sighting. Men and women, those who were left of Captain Evvers's group, had fled wildly. One had even pitched off the side of the mountain in his haste to escape. The scream only lasted a few seconds before it was lost to the wind or snuffed by the razored flanks of rocks.

'What do we do?' asked Brakkus. He was kneeling down by the edge of the pass, bolter aimed at the peaks where the silhouettes of necrons were steadily gaining ground on them.

'Look how it moves,' added Cator, a little incredulously. These things were not merely the automatons the Ultramarines had first suspected them to be; they were so much more than that. 'An automaton should not be that agile.'

‘We can’t outrun them,’ said Scipio, once all of the humans had passed him. ‘So we fight.’ He turned to Cator. ‘Have Garrik and Auris get Herdantes back to the camp. Brakkius, Largo and I will hold back the necrons for as long as we can.’

Brakkius went to protest, as did Cator, but Scipio silenced them with a glance. ‘See it done,’ he said.

Neither Ultramarine would see their sergeant endangered but they were dutiful soldiers and followed orders.

Only Largo made no reaction. He still had unfinished business with the flayed lord – the blood of Renatus was on the fiend’s talons and he would make it pay for that. He eyed the storm intently, tracking each shadow as it moved through the drift, a patch of grey on white.

‘I’ll return as soon as Garrik and Auris are on their way,’ promised Cator. The others were at the front of the column, scouting the way ahead, all except Herdantes who was only able to limp alongside the guerrillas. His wounds were healing but it would take time. A ready bolter filled his grasp and Scipio didn’t doubt his purpose, only his combat effectiveness.

‘See that you do,’ said Scipio, clapping a hand on his brother’s shoulder. ‘We’ll need all the bolters and blades we can get.’

Cator saluted and set off down the pass in search of the others.

‘That leaves the three of us for now,’ said Brakkius, somewhat redundantly. He checked the load of his weapon – the ammunition count was low. Scipio saw it flash red in the darkness. He had a similar number of shells remaining in his pistol.

Largo wasn’t watching, but breathed deeply. ‘The air is crisp and clean. I like it up here,’ he added. ‘I think I will be happy to lay my gladius down in this place.’

Scipio didn’t bother to reprimand him. It wasn’t fatalism. Largo had simply come to terms with his probable death and embraced it. If anything, Scipio admired him for it. He racked the slide of his bolt pistol.

‘Hold them off for as long as you can,’ he said, the whipping wind adding drama and sorrow to his words. ‘Let’s give our brothers every chance to reach the sanctuary of the camp.’

Brakkius nodded. His weapon was already primed.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ he said. ‘It has been an honour to cross blades and shed blood with you.’

‘I could not be prouder of the Thunderbolts,’ Scipio replied. ‘You are my warriors, my brothers.’

‘Courage and honour,’ added Largo in a level voice.

Brakkius echoed him.

‘And to the hells of the warp if we fail in this task,’ said Scipio at the end.

Shoulder-to-shoulder, bolters ready, they waited for the flayed lord to come. There’d be no precipice to send it over this time, no cunning ploy to trap or destroy it. Scipio was as proud as any warrior of Guilliman. He was one of his patrician sons, something a friend had told him long ago – a shame it took his imminent demise to realise that. But he was not dragged down by hubris, either. He knew this creature had the beating of them. He avowed he would make it work for its feast. While there was blood still pumping in his veins and the veins of his brothers, there was hope. A keening cry split the rushing of the wind, giving it a sharp edge that felt as if it could shear steel. Death was coming.

It would reach them soon.

Anger and shame warred with excitement in the mind of the Enfleshed. Since his apotheosis, a need had arisen in his jagged psyche. It was a wholly unnatural hunger. He had railed against it at first, but now he embraced it and let it consume him.

If I am damned then so be it...

His slaves scurried on all fours like pack hounds on the hunt. He resisted the urge to prostrate himself like that; he was still a noble lord of the

necrontyr despite how debased his form had become. He was not an animal yet, not quite.

He revelled in his agility, leaping rocks, darting around crags and racing down the icy slopes towards his prey. Flashes boomed in the darkness below, framing the genebred humans in orange, as they unleashed their weapons.

The Enfleshed felt no fear, only anticipation of the kill, of the skinning to come. His talons clacked and scraped of their own volition at the prospect.

Flesh...

It was as if his mind was being pulled apart, stretched taut in many directions at once – loathing, self-pity, feral abandon, ennui, self-satisfying sadism. He was Sahtah no longer; only the Enfleshed existed now.

One of the slaves was struck in the chest. The Enfleshed lost sight of it as it fell with a pseudo-scream. The storm of hot metal was intensifying the closer he came to the end of the slope. Something chipped his armoured shoulder, but he paid it no heed. To his left, another slave was destroyed. The Enfleshed smiled, or at least he did so in his mind – his rictus jaw was incapable of such expression – it meant more skin for him.

I shall devour you all...

He imagined hot blood coursing down his gullet, the succulence of ripe flesh rolling around in his mouth. It was intoxicating. A final thought penetrated the shattered remnants of his memory engrams as he leapt the final few metres to the kill.

I am lost...

The heavy shells burst hot and hard against his chest as the prey tried in vain to stop him, but the Enfleshed was not to be denied. His talons fanned in a killing arc, eager to eviscerate...

...when another figure emerged through the storm.

The light surrounding him was painful to the Enfleshed's dead eyes. The aura seemed to expand, washing over the others in a wave of azure. It was fringed by crackling bolts of power, coursing over a growing energy dome like vipers. It struck the Enfleshed mid-flight and threw him back.

A scream tore from the Enfleshed's throat and was echoed by his slaves, who felt it sympathetically. Pain snapped at his nerves, some real, some imagined – though he couldn't tell one from the other. Blood, dried hard by the frost, cooked off his joints and servos in a ruddy haze. He tried to stand, poised to attack this newcomer and rend his face from his skull, but another bolt arced from the figure's fingertips – his eyes were alive with power – and now the Enfleshed felt fear.

His chest was torn apart, his living metal body sloughing into slag. Sahtah, the Enfleshed – his head was so scrambled, he couldn't tell who or what he was any more – felt his memory engrams exploding one by one. Though he grasped at it with his melted talons, he could not seize his fading identity. Sentience shrivelled and turned to dust like bones upon a pyre. Slumping to his knees, Sahtah felt oblivion approaching. It stirred a final thought in his destroyed consciousness, one that would echo for aeons.

Peace...

Tigurius regarded the steaming remains of the necron lord with contempt as it phased out. His storm had vanquished the other flayed ones too and the mountainside was disturbingly empty barring where his psychic lightning had scorched it.

He allowed the aura around him to fade and with the absence of the light, darkness swarmed in around them again.

‘Your intervention is timely and most welcome, Lord Tigurius.’

The Chief Librarian turned at the sound of Scipio's voice. As he nodded, it took a moment longer for the fire in his eyes to die.

‘I was travelling the Sea of Souls when I witnessed you in peril, Sergeant Vorolanus,’ he said, motes of power still drifting from his lips and an unearthly resonance in his timbre.

Scipio bowed. ‘We are glad of it.’

Tigurius looked beyond the brother-sergeant and his warriors. ‘Who are these people?’

Drawn by the lightning storm, the human guerrillas and their Ultramarine escorts were standing a little farther down the path.

Scipio glanced over his shoulder where the humans had sunk to their knees before the Librarian.

‘They are our saviours, Brother-Librarian.’

Tigurius eyed them curiously, unconvinced. ‘Get up, all of you.’ He turned back to Scipio. ‘How so?’

‘One amongst them can lead us through the mountains, bypassing the necron picket lines.’

Tigurius considered this for a moment, before answering, ‘Bring the scout with us, the others we must leave behind.’

Scipio opened his mouth to protest, but the Librarian’s steady gaze, latent with psychic power, stopped him. He nodded then gestured to the humans. ‘Captain Evvers.’

A woman, the farthest forward in the group, who had now all got to their feet, looked up.

‘You’re with us. The others—’

‘Are coming with me,’ she said firmly, shaking her head. ‘I won’t leave them, not now.’

Tigurius glowered at her impudence. He released a little of his power into his eyes, which crackled with tiny lightning sparks. ‘You will obey. This is not a negotiation.’

The one Scipio had called Evvers cowered a little but stood her ground. ‘I need them. To get through the mountains. I need their skill. So do you.’

Tigurius didn't like it. Being beholden to one human was bad enough. To be argued down as well bordered on intolerable. 'I am tempted to ignite you like a flare, little human,' he said. Evvers looked like she might shrink from the threat but stayed steady. Despite her obvious frailty, she impressed the Librarian.

He laughed, as alien and unusual a sound as Varro Tigurius was ever likely to make. 'You have some courage in you.' He slammed his staff into the ground. 'Stay close. None of the Ultramarines here will be responsible if you fall behind.'

Evvers nodded. He could tell she was shaking and eager to be away from his penetrating gaze. 'Same goes for you,' she said, by way of rejoinder and went to marshal her troops.

'She is... *forthright*, brother-sergeant.'

Scipio nodded in agreement. 'I have never met a human like her.'

The drifts were lessening. Winds still howled around the peaks, chill and desolate. The storm wasn't done, it would come again.

Tigurius watched Evvers leading her troops down the slope. 'I saw into her mind. She carries much grief and anger, but believes she can master it and do what is asked of her.' He turned his gaze on Scipio. 'Do you believe it, too, Brother Vorolanus?'

Scipio's eyes narrowed. 'Do I believe what, my lord?'

'Exactly as I asked.'

'She will do her duty, as will I.'

Tigurius's expression was neutral, he gave nothing away. 'Then that is all any of us can be asked to do.'

'What else did you see, my lord, in the Sea of Souls?'

Scipio had been there when Tigurius had tried and failed to identify the darkness plucking at the edges of his prescience. He knew it had disturbed the sergeant and now he wanted assurances. But the Librarian couldn't provide them.

‘Nothing.’

‘There is no doom in our future, then?’

‘No, there is a tragedy to come but I cannot see it. A terrible will is blocking my prescience. For now, my eyes are blind, Scipio.’

The expression on the sergeant’s face told Tigurius he had only enhanced his misgivings. That could not be helped. A lie would not serve him, either.

They left the slopes after that. The valley where the rest of the Ultramarines waited was not far. If what Scipio said was true and the humans could indeed find a way through the mountains and the necron defence line then victory was possible. The artillery could be destroyed and a foothold gained on Damnos all in the same move. Tigurius only wished he could grasp the thread of his disquiet. A sense of foreboding weighed upon him still. His psychic flight had done nothing to dispel it. The dark shroud over his thoughts was heavy and obscuring. Perhaps when the mission was done and the Voidbringer vanquished that veil would be lifted. He only hoped that by then it wouldn’t be too late.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After months of continuous bombardment Adanar Sonne was used to the sound of the necron guns. They were a constant throb against the inside of his skull, a heavy-handed passenger demanding his attention. At the moment, the artillery was silent and it was the absence of their din that was unsettling him.

‘It’s like a lullaby, don’t you think?’

Corporal Humis frowned. Not long after the Ultramarines had defeated the necron vanguard, a curious stillness had descended on Kellenport. The silence of the guns in the Thanatos Hills could mean anything. Perhaps the Emperor’s Angels had destroyed them somehow and salvation would come from the stars in the form of an evacuation boat, or perhaps the necrons were merely preparing to unleash some greater horror. For now, the air was quiet... except for the screams.

‘I don’t understand, sir.’

‘Of course you don’t,’ Adanar replied. He was using the lull to tour the battlements, to check on their defences. Even if they were fated to die – and Adanar was certain this was the case – he would ensure they would go down fighting, in blood and fire. ‘You haven’t been on the wall as long as I have.’ He turned to look at him. ‘You don’t come from Kellenport, do you, Humis?’

‘I was stationed at the Zephyr Monastery, sir.’

Adanar smiled thinly. ‘Ah, protecting the priests and their relics.’ He carried on down the wall, saluting the officers blindly as he went. Humis followed in lockstep with his commander. ‘Well, your piety has got you this far, I suppose.’

Humis had no reply to that.

‘So, what’s left?’ Adanar was all business again as he regarded the fire-blackened remains of the Kellenport artillery.

Consulting a data-slate, Humis said, ‘Three *uber*-mortars and three long-nosed cannon, sir.’

‘Earthshakers?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And what of the *Hel-handed*?’

‘Still functional.’

Adanar nodded, satisfied. He already knew that the rail guns, cannon nests and emplacements were below thirty-five per cent. They were useful against infantry, but it was the really big guns that mattered – and they didn’t come much bigger than the *Hel-handed*.

‘Raise Sergeant Letzger on the vox,’ he said. ‘I want to see through the eyes of his god-engine.’

It took a further eighteen minutes to cross the battlements and meet with Sergeant Letzger. They passed strung-out squads of Ark Guard and conscripts on the way. All of Damnos, the remains of its entire population, had mustered in one last act of defence. The officers saluted, some even muttered greetings – many were just silent, contemplative of their fates. It seemed to Adanar that the army had thinned greatly since he’d last been around the wall.

A broad-shouldered, stocky man, Letzger was one of the few original officers to have survived the siege of Kellenport thus far and was the city’s, and the Ark Guard’s, gunnery master. Sweat-stained breeches, a pitted helmet strung with webbing and a flak jacket riddled with cigar

burns painted a dishevelled picture of a man that Adanar trusted with his life.

‘Commander Sonne.’ Letzger saluted when he saw Adanar approach. His bare arms were covered in wiry black hair that failed to stop the Guard tattoos from showing through. His leather gloves were cut off at the ends, revealing oil-stained fingers. It didn’t stop Adanar from shaking the man’s hand after he returned his salute.

He appraised the cannon. ‘How does she fare?’

The *Hel-handed* was a massive artillery piece. It was so big that it had to be built into the very foundations of the city wall and had immense recoil dampeners and impact compensators wrought into its leg stanchions. The column-like barrel was telescopic and segmented in four places. It required a crew of six men to fire it. A team of three was needed to rotate the barrel. Its firing platform was large enough for half a platoon of Ark Guard to stand on. Kill markings ran down the barrel, a source of pride as well as an illustration of Letzger’s vengeance against the necrons that had invaded his world and murdered his friends.

Such engines were described as ‘Ordinatus’ by the Adeptus Mechanicus. This one had been fashioned and anointed by Karnak, but the tech-priest was no longer able to perform the rites of the machine – he had died in the early weeks of the invasion. The fact that *Hel-handed* had kept firing without pause or complaint was a testament to the fortitude of its machine-spirit. There was not a day went by that Letzger did not thank it for that.

‘Still operational, sir. The break in the bombardment has given us a little time to effect some minor repairs.’ Letzger nodded to the work crews halfway up the barrel reaffixing plates and the servitors welding sections back together. ‘She’s holding.’

There was a tang of ozone in the air. Adanar tasted it on the back of his tongue. The smell was in his nostrils. It was preferable to the stink of

death, at least.

‘And the shield?’

Letzger breathed in. He genuinely enjoyed the acrid taste in his mouth.

‘Still burning out my nose hairs, commander.’ He smiled and his entire face seemed to crease up like an old rag. The stubble on his face was patchy and clumped with the movement of his features. Letzger really was an ugly brute.

Because of its size and importance, the *Hel-handed* was protected by a void shield. Such measures were usually only afforded for Titan god-machines but certain static installations like defence lasers and macro cannons also possessed them. With its sheer mass and destructive potential, the *Hel-handed* easily fell into that distinction. The void shield was the only reason it had not been rendered to scrap by the necron guns months ago.

‘You’ve come to sample the view, I take it?’ Letzger added.

Magnoculars only penetrated so far through the fog, but looking through the sights of *Hel-handed* was like peering through the eyes of a god.

‘Only if it won’t interrupt your labours.’

Letzger gestured to the machine behind him with a wide arm. ‘Go ahead, sir. Her gaze hasn’t wavered since the killing and death began.’

Humis balked a little at the gunnery master’s words. Adanar allowed himself some private amusement – Letzger’s pragmatism was infinitely preferable to the desperate hope of most of his officers. At least it was honest.

Mounting the platform, nodding to the crews who saluted him crisply, Adanar took up a position in the sighter’s chair and looked through the *Hel-handed*’s crosshairs.

Unsurprisingly, the view was fixed on the Thanatos Hills where the necron artillery was based. It was something of an unfair fire exchange but Adanar sensed the challenge was relished by Letzger’s old girl. The arc of

pylons and heavy gauss-cannons blighted the rugged horizon line. Several years ago, when his family was still alive, Adanar had trained in the Thanatos Hills. His barracks were based at the old refinery. That too was in ruins now, little more than a blast scar on the ground. So much was gone, never to return.

He squinted through the sighting lens, careful not to alter any of the gunnery master's measurements. He couldn't tell why the necron artillery had stopped firing but he did see something moving to the west. It was on the fringes of his vision through the scope. Adanar turned to Letzger.

'There's something out there.'

Letzger gave the reports back to his chief engineer and took up the secondary sighter's seat. He peered through the lens.

'Eighteen degrees west,' he bellowed into the vox-horn. Several metres above him, a trio of crewmen rotated the barrel precisely.

Letzger adjusted the scope, tweaking it for focus. 'Clever bastards.'

Adanar had the same view but wasn't seeing whatever the gunnery master was.

'See the hill line?' asked Letzger.

Adanar nodded.

'Watch the peaks.'

Adanar stared. The drifts were blowing themselves out but despite that and the incredible range of the *Hel-handed* it was still hard to discern detail. He *had* seen something earlier, though, so he tried to focus on that. His eyes narrowed and he smiled.

'They're moving.'

'Aye, it's no hill line out there.'

'Necron pyramids,' Adanar asserted.

'Trying to sneak up on us. Hoping we'd think the barrage was over and relax our guard.'

'How close do you think they are?'

Letzger made some adjustments, consulted instruments. He also lit a cigar and puffed on it enthusiastically.

‘Too close.’ He started yelling orders at the crews, shouting out coordinates. There was a flurry of action as his men reacted. Letzger left the sighter’s seat and looked at Adanar.

‘We need to get you off the platform now, sir,’ he said politely.

Adanar matched the gunnery master’s salute and left with Humis. They were heading back down the wall when he noticed something else that gave him immense displeasure.

‘What is *he* doing on the battlements?’

Humis didn’t catch on immediately. Adanar had to point him out before the corporal understood.

Rancourt was on the walls, his guard detail with him. It looked like he was trying to inspire the men, but was getting strange looks and wary salutes instead.

Adanar scowled and thrust out his hand. ‘Get me Kador on the vox, right now.’

Sergeant Kador kept his voice low; the acting lord governor was only a few steps ahead of him and he didn’t want to be overheard. ‘He insisted, commander. I believe he wanted to do his part to galvanise the men.’

A stream of invective made Kador wince ever so slightly. ‘I understand, sir.’

There was more, and the sergeant could see by Commander Sonne’s hand gestures, as far away as he was on the battlements, that he was extremely displeased.

‘I will do so immediately.’

The vox link was cut abruptly and Kador gave the receiver cup back to his comms-officer. His face was as hard as Damnos ice. ‘Bring Governor Rancourt to me. Now.’

‘Never let it be said that Lord Governor Zeph Rancourt sat idle while his people suffered.’

Kador thought he looked knowingly officious in his robes and suspected the only reason the lord governor had ventured from his quarters was in fear of the ceiling falling in on him. Upon hearing of Corporal Besseque’s death, he’d been especially paranoid about that.

‘Commander Sonne has ordered me to escort you from the wall, sire.’

Rancourt looked genuinely nonplussed. ‘But who will inspire the men?’

‘He assures me they are well steeled already, sire.’

‘Yes, of course...’ His gaze drifted to the southern gate. ‘The Crastia Shipyards,’ he said. ‘They are a short march in that direction. With the cessation of bombardment, an evacuation might be possible.’

‘Commander Sonne has ordered that no one is to leave the safety of the city.’ Rancourt returned his gaze to Kador. His expression was distinctly conspiratorial.

‘A small mission from the city gates would likely go unnoticed.’

The sergeant’s face was like stone. ‘What are you suggesting, sire?’

‘Nothing. Only that an enterprising officer might be well rewarded should he deliver an Imperial official from certain peril.’

Kador leaned in close, just to be sure there was no misunderstanding. The relish in the lord governor’s eyes made him want to clench his fists. ‘No one leaves the city. *No. One.* These are my orders, sire. The Crastia Shipyards have been taken. Even if there were a vessel capable of taking us to orbit, the area is likely to be swarming with the enemy. Necrons employ hidden snares. They have troops able to bore through earth. There’s no telling what hazards we would encounter.’

The lord governor looked as if he might argue but Kador’s glare placated him.

‘Yes, of course. I was merely speaking hypothetically.’

‘Hypothetically, sire, indeed.’ Kador stepped aside, indicating the lord governor should make for the battlement stairs.

‘You are a dutiful servant, sergeant,’ he said as he passed.

‘Thank you, sire.’ Kador watched him go. Perhaps Governor Rancourt was right, perhaps the ceiling would fall on his head. He could but hope.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A low rumble ran through the earth below the newly christened Courtyard of Xiphos. Iulus felt it through his armoured boots, his greaved legs. In his core, he knew the necrons had found some fresh way to attack Kellenport.

He expected to see lumbering war machines, bipedal walkers, arachnid constructs or a host of other mechanical horrors pounding towards the walls. But no emerald beams scorched through the snow-fog that had rolled down off the mountains and swathed the world in dirty white. There were no ranks of blinking, soulless orbs as the phalanxes marched on the city. Even the necron communication-nodes were silent. It was something else.

Iulus scanned the third wall, the one that was mined with as much explosive as he could spare. The rumble beneath his feet grew deeper and heavier. Some of the men had to steady themselves on the battlements to stop from falling.

‘Battle positions,’ he bellowed. The order was relayed through the other Immortals. The entire defensive line, including the troops in the courtyards, tensed.

A Space Marine can exist in a state of heightened battle-tension for hours, even days. Their enhanced physiologies are genetically engineered to cope with even the most arduous mental extremes. For a human it is

unbearable. Like a sinew pulled taut across a muscle it can only be strained for so long. Over-tense it and it will snap.

Still the tremors persisted.

The men looked fit to break.

Despite the absence of a vox-caster, Iulus's voice reverberated around the wall. 'Hold positions!'

Again, he searched the third wall. The proximity triggers were rigged throughout the ruins. There was no way the necrons could have bypassed them all. He searched the killing-field on which their guns were aimed and primed, despite the fact he knew no enemy could set foot there without first coming through the third wall. Where was the fire? Where were the explosions and the shrapnel storm he had laid for them? *Come on, come on... We shall unleash death upon you.*

'Where are they?' hissed Kolpeck, the normally stoic conscript showing signs he was on edge.

Iulus silenced him. 'They are close. Be ready, brother.'

He'd said it without thinking, by rote. Iulus didn't take it back. He could see instantly the effect it had on Kolpeck's resolve. He was emboldened. In another life he would have made a fine Space Marine, Iulus was sure.

'I am at your side, brother-Angel.'

'And I yours,' Iulus muttered. Breaking up his squad had felt unnatural at first. Iulus would still have preferred his brothers by his side but Kolpeck was a good soldier and a fine companion. He had never really thought much of humans before. This enemy they faced was enough to push an Ultramarine's resolve and strength to the limit and yet here these men stood, in defence of their homes, defiant to the last. Yes, Iulus was proud to stand with them and learn an important lesson about the depth of the human spirit.

Small motes of debris were shaking loose from the defences now. The Ark Guard in the gun nests had to hold onto their pintle-mounts and

tripods to prevent them moving and fouling their aim. Several troopers knelt, leaning against the wall for stability. Some prayed, making the sign of the aquila. Others locked arms with their comrades for mutual support.

‘Like ice in your veins,’ Iulus said to them, his abyssal voice carrying on the wind. ‘Your spine and will as steel.’

A conscript with a rocket tube gestured into the whiteout fearfully. ‘What if we cannot see them? What if they are already upon us?’

Iulus growled at him. ‘Get hold of your fear, seize it and lock it fast. *I* will see them coming.’

Except he couldn’t see them. Iulus saw no more than the frightened conscripts on the wall. How quickly a man’s insane courage could corrode in the face of inaction when confronted with the unknown. There were no horrors in the universe that could compare to what a man harboured in his own mind. It was a place where daemons and monsters reigned, where blades and guns were no protection. And it was here that a Space Marine was armoured the most.

But still, the humans held.

A cry echoed across the battlements. It was followed by the crack of splitting stone as part of the wall collapsed. Huge plumes of dust, grit and snow spewed up into the air like a frozen geyser just under fifty metres from Iulus’s position. Men and materiel were swallowed in the cloud, their screams dampened by the crash of sundered stone.

In the other direction, another section of the wall fell, broken in two as if its foundations had rotted through or succumbed to rapid erosion.

Uncertain where best to turn first, Iulus reached for the vox. He was scanning the dust cloud for some clue of a necron attack, when Kolpeck left his position and raced for the ladder to the lower level.

Iulus shouted, ‘Trooper, stand and fight!’ He had no time to go after him. Something was happening to the wall but he was still ignorant of the cause. He eyed the third wall again, but the mines and explosives were

intact. He heard no las-fire, no bolter bursts. Kolpeck had fled, climbed down the ladder and was racing down the stairs to the Courtyard of Xiphos.

So much for human courage, Iulus thought bitterly. Perhaps the war had broken the man. Cracks were usually hard to see until it was too late to shore them up.

At least the rest of the One Hundred were holding firm. He'd glared at them all when Kolpeck had run, defying them to move with sheer force of will. None did.

Putting the thought aside as he would a spent clip or blunted gladius, Iulus barked down the vox. 'Aristaeus.'

He was the closest Ultramarine to the site of the second collapse. Iulus himself was in command of the wall section where the first collapse had taken place.

Aristaeus's reply was riddled with static, the dust and grit muddying the signal even at close range. 'Nothing, brother-sergeant. I see...' The vox-return crackled.

'Repeat. I cannot make you out, brother.'

'A hole, brother-sergeant. There is a vast hole opened up in the wall right down into the earth.'

Iulus heard screaming over the vox-return and could imagine the fates of those on the section when it collapsed. Aristaeus continued.

'I can see into its depths. There is...'

There was a pause as Aristaeus consulted his autosenses and cycled through his retinal spectra.

Iulus's patience was threadbare. They were under attack but he still had no idea by what or from where the next assault would come. 'Speak, brother. What do you see?'

'Darkness, only darkness.'

Crouched at the battlements, one eye on the dissipating dust cloud ahead of him, Iulus frowned. 'Is your retinal display malfunctioning? Tell me what you see through infra-red and night vision.'

'Nothing, brother-sergeant. It's just black, like oily cloud. Visual filters have no effect.'

'That can't be good,' said Kolpeck. The grizzled rig-hand was out of breath and clutching a strange device in one hand. He'd obviously gone to retrieve it after the attack. It was based on a long metal spike with some kind of data-slate at the top. Iulus had never seen one before but its design suggested some kind of seismological mining tool.

'A soldier does not desert his post, Trooper Kolpeck.' His voice was stern but now was not the time for a long reprimand. He wanted to know what Kolpeck had found.

'I'm sorry, brother-Angel, but I was acting on a hunch,' he replied with a little less contrition than Iulus had expected. 'I told you, I am a miner not a soldier.' He brandished the seismological device. The data-screen was grubby with dirt and hoarfrost but a series of undulating lines were visible along three horizontal axis. 'They are *beneath* us.'

The three lines were depth markers. The last, therefore the deepest, was jagged with activity. Iulus saw what the necrons were doing. Undermining was a common siege tactic, well-used and perfected over millennia of war. Here the necrons had added a fresh element – they were using the darkness as a way to conceal themselves.

Iulus seized the vox, nearly crushing it in his gauntlet as urgency overtook him. 'Aristaeus, burn it! Burn the hole. The mechanoids have tunnelled underneath us!

'Pour everything you've got into that bore hole,' he shouted, running the battlements in long, metre-eating strides. 'Turn the cannon emplacements, fill it with hell and frag!'

Iulus got halfway to the site of the first collapse when the ground beneath him gave way and he was falling. Another bore hole had opened up in his path. Several of the One Hundred plunged to their deaths, unable to move in time. It was a dishonourable end for such brave men. Iulus reached out, his survival instinct impelling him to grab a chunk of rock jutting from the broken rampart.

He stared down into the abyss below and saw the darkness there that Aristaeus had described. Unhooking his weapon, he could almost sense the presence of alien minds regarding him and fired.

The bolt pistol scream resonated inside the bore hole, magnified as it rebounded off its sides. With the darkness cloaking the advancing scarabs, Iulus didn't realise he couldn't miss. As soon as the first creature was hit, the illusion faded and the blackness receded to reveal a chittering host of the things. They scurried up the walls, which were ridged with the burrowing action of whatever monster or device had hewn them, in a swarm. Their eyes glinted like tiny emeralds in the natural shadows of the circular cavern, mandibles champing.

When Iulus's bolt fire struck them, a stream of the scarabs exploded, leaving burning contrails in their wake as they fell. He panned the pistol around, finger tight on the trigger, and left a muzzle scar across the open air. Still holding on one-handed to the piece of broken rampart, Iulus gave a wordless cry.

He could not kill them all. Even with the las-fire flashing down from above, the scarabs would soon breach the surface. He estimated there were hundreds of the things and for every one he destroyed, another four replaced it. His ammunition counter was burning to zero when Iulus noticed a large mound ripple through the undulating mass. Down to his last rounds, he switched targets and fired a close burst into the mound. The scarabs outside it were blasted apart like a piece of ablative armour revealing a much larger construct beneath. It moved slower than the others

but its carapace was thick and absorbed the impact of the explosive bolt shells without pause. Iulus was debating whether to draw his chainsword and drop into the bore hole to kill the monster personally when it swung a gauss-blaster arm in his direction and fired.

The beam cut into the Ultramarine's battle plate and he cried out. Armour shed like snake skin as the flaying effect of necron technology went to work and Iulus's greave was reduced to half-corroded mesh.

The pain was so severe he dropped his pistol. For a moment his grip wavered. Several more of the larger mounds were moving through the scarab swarm, which had almost reached him. Dangling off the edge of the precipice, Iulus realised it would mean his death to fall now. Eternal night reigned in the depths of those bore holes, as cold and unnatural as the creatures emerging from it.

A hand clasped around his wrist. Then another and another. Iulus looked up to see Kolpeck's straining face above him.

'Heave!' he yelled to the other conscripts – all from the One Hundred – who were trying to rescue their captain.

'At your side, brother-Angel,' Kolpeck said again through gritted teeth.

It took the combined efforts of four men to lift the Ultramarine even a small amount. They were all rig-hands, all strong men used to back-breaking labour in the Imperial mines beneath the Damnos ice, but none had ever worked so hard to lift something such a short distance.

It was enough for Iulus to swing his free arm around and grip the battlements with both hands. He pulled himself up as another gauss-blast speared the rock where he'd been hanging a moment earlier. The conscripts fell back as he emerged back over the top.

'Back! Fall back!'

Iulus turned towards the bore hole even as the conscripts started to retreat. He unclamped a pair of frag grenades from his belt just as the first wave of scarabs was spilling over the edge of the wall. Ignoring the

smaller creatures, he tossed the explosives over the shiny bodies. A low boom came from beyond and below. The mechanoid spyder did not emerge and Iulus thanked the Emperor that his grenades had done their work.

He contemplated staying and trying to hold off the scarab swarm coming at him – he had already drawn his chainsword – but decided to fall back with the others.

Kolpeck was just behind him, waiting for his captain.

‘We need to get off the wall,’ he said, bringing his lasgun to bear on the smaller mechanoids.

Iulus pushed the barrel down. ‘Then do it. Marshal the One Hundred. Every man is to head for the Courtyard of Xiphos. We’ll stand a better chance of holding them there.’

Kolpeck nodded and ran. He was already shouting orders at the men, ushering them downwards, organising them into groups.

Unclamping his last pair of grenades, Iulus tossed them towards the scarab swarm and jumped from the wall.

The explosion blossomed behind him, kicking up debris and broken scarabs as the Ultramarine landed hard on the Courtyard of Xiphos. From there he could see the wall was breached in no fewer than six areas, each sunken by a bore hole and now swarming with scarabs. Gauss-fire cracked from the spyders, stripping men to bone and ash.

‘Heavy weapons, target the larger mechanoids. Bring them down!’

From across the courtyard, rocket tubes and heavy stubbers hammered into the spyders. They were tough and took a lot of killing, but they were falling. So too were the Ark Guard. A mass retreat was in effect. Even done in good order, the humans were still pressed on all sides. The walls were empty, apart from the dead. Several squads had been overwhelmed completely in the first few seconds of the breach, swallowed beneath the necron wave. Even their bodies were no longer there, the scarabs had stripped them from existence.

The first wall was behind him, and Iulus knew they would need to fall back to here if they had any chance of surviving, let alone repelling, the attack. A massive bore hole opened in the Courtyard of Xiphos, splitting flagstones and toppling shattered monuments. Men went with it, whole swathes of Ark Guard lost with a tortured scream. Iulus thought he saw something gargantuan surface from the depths. It looked segmented, almost centipedal, but was quickly swallowed by the unnatural darkness. Scarabs and spyders spilled forth in its wake.

‘Incendiaries into the bore holes,’ Iulus bellowed, pointing to the fresh attack point. ‘Burn it down. Cleanse their route of assault.’

He saw Aristaeus, a rack of three promethium flamer tanks rattling on his back. He reached the circular crevice in the courtyard and threw the tanks in. Bringing up his boltgun in the same motion, he fired off a single round and a jet of liquid flame as thick as the pillars of Hera’s Temple shot up from the bore hole.

The blast wave took Aristaeus off his feet but he was quick to recover and head for his sergeant. The other Immortals were doing the same, marshalling their troops with them, converging on Iulus as they sought to consolidate their forces.

Slowly, the squads came together. Stragglers were picked off easily by the scarab swarm but a concentrated wall of fire was ripping steadily from the Ark Guard now. At the orders of their Space Marine captains, they formed firing ranks and bathed the courtyard in hot las.

‘Brother-sergeant.’ Aristaeus reached Iulus’s side and held out his sidearm. ‘You seem to be without the Emperor’s wrath.’

Iulus punched his chest, the air filling with las-beams around him. ‘Here is where I keep it, brother,’ he said, but then smiled as he took the bolt pistol.

More Ark Guard joined the others massing outside the gates to the first wall – even the troops on the battlements had opened up with their

weapons – and the rate of fire intensified. The scarabs and their larger, monstrous cousins had seemed infinite at first but now they were withering. None of them could penetrate the slowly retreating Imperial cordon. Even the spyders were pinioned by lascannon beams from the first wall battlements. But the necrons were tenacious and fed even greater numbers into the meatgrinder. Like a river of mercury swollen at its banks, they began to lap at the sides of the Imperial defences.

Several soldiers at the outer edge where the Ultramarines presence was weakest were dragged screaming into the swarm.

Iulus tightened the cordon further still but his troops were already shoulder-to-shoulder with their backs against the gate of the first wall. He sensed the tide turning, the sheer overwhelming force of the necron constructs tipping the balance. What had started out as an organised defence of hold and repulse was turning into a desperate last stand.

Behind him, there came the churning of gears as the mechanism to the gate was activated. It did not open wide but it was enough to admit a towering war machine into the Courtyard of Xiphos.

‘The walls of Chundrabad shall never fall!’ Agnathio’s multi-melta tore a hot line through the scarabs. Men of the Ark Guard hurried from the Dreadnought’s path as he bullied his way to the front rank. ‘I serve the Chapter eternally!’

Though he moved slowly, his motive servos still spitting oil and steam, when Agnathio reached the necron horde it reeled. So indomitable, so utterly relentless, the venerable warrior’s example was followed by all. Together, they threw the scarabs back.

Agnathio had been joined by the rest of the Immortals and several platoons of Ark Guard who lent their fire to the Imperial barrage.

As if sensing the futility of their attack, the necron machines retreated like ants from a fire and withdrew to their bore holes.

The shooting from the Ark Guard was slow to relent. In the end it took all of the Ultramarines to bring the humans back down again. They had survived a terrifying ordeal and fear did not give up its hold on lasgun triggers easily. When the noise of the barrage died, a wintry silence swept through the Courtyard of Xiphos. Already, the drifts were covering the evidence that a battle even took place. There were only the half-flayed remains of dead Ark Guard, anyway; all of the destroyed necrons had phased out. It made for an eerie scene.

Iulus rested his hand on the still-hot shoulder casing of Agnathio's multi-melta. 'We owe you a debt, honoured one.'

Pride was not really amongst a Dreadnought's limited emotional responses. Agnathio was typically matter-of-fact. 'I am my Chapter's servant. I seek only the glory of Ultramar.'

'Well spoken, brother,' Iulus murmured, humbled by such stalwart courage and loyalty.

Brother Galvia had been one of the Space Marines from the first wall to come and bolster the beleaguered defenders. 'Do we return to the second wall and try to regarrison it?' he asked.

Iulus shook his head. The second wall was all but rubble now, the bore holes had seen to that. It would be indefensible. He turned to Kolpeck who was crouching nearby, breathing hard while some of the men around him were puking out their nerves.

'Find as many of those seismographic staves as you can,' said Iulus. 'Plant them around this cordon, ten metres out.'

'I could take them as far as the second wall,' Kolpeck suggested.

'No. Ten metres, no farther. Do it quickly.'

Kolpeck saluted, gathering up some men he trusted, and went about his orders.

Iulus's face was grim as he surveyed the ruins in front of them. Aristaeus was by his side and must have seen his expression.

‘Something wrong, brother-sergeant?’

‘That was just a probing attack to test our strength,’ he said. ‘This isn’t over.’

Iulus did not intend his words to be prophetic but as he said them there was a flash of emerald light around the rubble of the second wall. A crack had opened in the air itself. The drifts did not fall there. It was as if something had interrupted the very ebb and flow of nature. The crack widened and became a pool of light that expanded again into roughly the size of a large doorway. Within it, the emerald light rippled as if something very deep down beneath the pool was attempting to surface. Shadows loomed there. Iulus could not be certain but he thought he could make out a long, glowing corridor with the shapes of necrons marching down it, growing more distinct with every step.

Another portal opened up a few metres away. A third followed swiftly after that. Down inside the bore holes a chittering clangour arose as the scarabs returned.

On the battlements, some of the Ark Guard were pointing beyond Kellenport’s walls. Officers were looking through scopes. Iulus could hear the larger guns rotating to fresh trajectories.

Some of the men were muttering amongst themselves. A few in the front ranks who could see the enemy emerging had turned and were trying to reach the gap in the gate, but it had already closed.

‘Hold to your positions!’ Iulus bellowed, revving the teeth of his chainsword. He levelled it at the trio of portals and the shadows coming through them. ‘Death comes for us. It comes clad in metal and with engines instead of organs. We shall hurl it back, back into the abyss. Faith in the Emperor.’

The rallying cry was taken up by his brothers; some of the One Hundred, including Kolpeck, echoed it too.

‘Faith in the Emperor!’

Emboldened, perhaps even shamed by the ragged band of conscripts, the rest of the Ark Guard stopped trying to flee and gave voice.

‘Faith in the Emperor!’

As the shout of defiance echoed to nothing, Kolpeck, alone, could be heard.

‘And in the name of our brother-Angel, Iulus Fennion!’

Iulus wanted to rebuke him, but then the Ark Guard and the conscripts resounded with, ‘Iulus Fennion! Brother-Angel!’

Despite himself, Iulus felt a slight swell of pride. It lasted but a moment as the shadow of the monoliths loomed through the gaps in the wall and the necrons emerged at last.

‘Keep your courage steady,’ he told Kolpeck as gunfire filled the Courtyard of Xiphos.

Letzger sweated like a stuck pig. The gunnery crews had worked well; *Hel-handed* was ready to unleash her first salvo.

‘Let ’em have it!’ he cried into the vox-horn.

Even with the dampeners and compensators, the recoil from the cannon was immense. It shook its staging platform like the hand of an angry god, while the explosive shell fell like its clenched fist.

A huge cloud of dust and debris rose up from the strike point, obscuring the slow-moving phalanx of monoliths from view. It looked like a direct hit. Certainly, Letzger had made no mistake in his calculations. That heavy a missile payload... Nothing in human creation could survive that.

Some of the gunnery crew were already celebrating. It was as much fear as it was exultation that fed their shouts and angry cheers.

Letzger stayed at the scopes, sweating. He was wearing plugs, but his ears still rang from the report of *Hel-handed*. She was a noisy bitch, all right, sometimes capricious, but he loved her and he loved what she could do.

Through the scope the smoke and dust was clearing. Ice and snow around the blast site had melted away to steam, adding to the obfuscation.

‘Let me see it,’ he murmured. ‘Let me see your broken carcass.’ He’d never fired on monoliths before; he didn’t know what happened to them when they were destroyed. Perhaps they phased out too; perhaps he was looking for a ghost he’d never see.

The image resolved. Letzger sagged at his post and the men groaned in despair. It was still there. Three of the necron pyramids advanced towards Kellenport. Somehow, impossibly, he had missed. The crater was so large, its effect so awesomely powerful, he didn’t know how. But *Hel-handed* had been fouled somehow.

Wiping away the perspiration on his forehead and lips, the cigar cinched between them no more than a smouldering nub, Letzger peered through the scopes more intently for an answer. He saw tendrils of darkness, coiling and twisting between the triumvirate of war machines. They appeared in synch, feeding off one another, boosting the terrible shroud that had somehow saved them.

The only mercy was that, for now at least, the monoliths were not firing their weapons. They had phased forces into the vicinity, but otherwise their power matrices were dormant.

For an experienced crew, it took six minutes to load, prime and fire an Ordinatus like the *Hel-handed*. Letzger prided himself that his men were the best. As he bellowed the orders to reload, he knew the old girl would be spitting fury in less than five.

As he watched the monoliths float towards them, in defiance of all natural laws of physics, he clutched the aquila bracelet on his wrist.

‘Come on, sweetheart,’ he said, patting the gun. ‘This time...’

Adanar was running the battlements when the first shot from the *Hel-handed* rang out. He’d not got far, and even though he knew he was out of position, stopped to watch the magnificent weapon in action. The blast

wave, felt even where he was standing on the wall, was invigorating. His heart sank to a cold and pitiless place when he looked through Corporal Humis's magnoculars and saw the monoliths were untouched. He'd always thought nothing would survive a blow like that.

From the Courtyard of Thor behind him, the *uber*-mortars and long-nose cannons churned out shells as if on a production line. With their subterfuge revealed, the necrons recommenced their barrage from the Thanatos Hills. As the emerald beams from pylons and gauss siege-cannon started up, Kellenport was under siege once more.

This time, however, the mechanoids were aiming for the walls.

A chunk of crenellation spumed into the air, trailing dust, grit and snow. Men went with it, broken and half-flayed.

Adanar ducked, grabbing Humis's jacket before he fell off the battlement like several others. The screams of the falling men didn't last long as they cracked against the ice-hardened flagstones of the square below.

'I've lost one aide today,' he said through gritted teeth, dragging the corporal bodily against part of the wall that was still intact. 'I don't intend on losing another.'

Humis was a little shell-shocked but otherwise grateful. He gestured to the blast-scarred section of wall. It gaped like an old wound, still festering. 'We are dead men out here on the wall.'

Adanar nodded. 'Agreed. All except the heavy cannon and gunnery nests are to drop below the wall to the lower level. The emplacements are dug in harder, that should give them some protection. For the rest: heads down and hunker down,' he added, as Humis got on the vox and started relaying orders to the officers spread throughout the defences.

The corporal put his hand over the receiver cup, though he scarcely needed to – the combined barrage from both sides was deafening. 'What about the troops in the Courtyard of Xiphos? They'll lose the support fire from the platoons.'

Adanar thought for a second. He ducked again, as did Humis, when another explosion rocked the wall. More screaming followed.

‘Tell Sergeant Fennion he’s losing his support and offer to open up the gates. He’s a warrior-knight, so I doubt he’ll retreat easily, but at least the Ark Guard can get behind shelter if the Ultramarines want a glorious death.’

Adanar could tell by Humis’s expression that he’d shocked the corporal. ‘I’m sorry, Humis. It’s hard to see any hope amongst all this death.’ Subconsciously, he rubbed at the locket-charm strung around his wrist. ‘It’s been too long since I’ve seen anything else.’ Another blast shook Adanar from his reverie. ‘Give the order. The Angels are not immortal, they’ll either fall back or they’ll die like heroes.’



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It felt strange to be above the ground. So long he had dwelled in darkness, his thoughts lost in a timeless miasma without meaning. The long sleep had gnawed at the Undying. Even his name, his true name, was denied to him. He was only the Undying now, an immortal king upon a decayed throne. Eternity was not the paradise he had hoped for. With every waking moment, as his lucidity returned to him, it became a terror instead.

How can I exist for all the long aeons of the galaxy? Will I not atrophy? Will my mind not erode to oblivion?

As a member of one of the necrontyr's royal houses, he enjoyed certain privileges. No servitude as an automaton for him. Though the Undying had lost part of his identity, he knew that much. Plebeians and nobles were separated by a gulf. Since the necrons had embraced metal over flesh, that divide had increased exponentially. Not only was freedom denied to the lower classes, so too now was true sentience.

Though tarnished and tattered, the Undying's vestments looked regal enough. As he'd left the tomb, eager to dispense death and annihilation, his lych-like guardians had found him.

Like their lord, they carried long war-scythes in silvered fists. As they bowed, he saw the flare of recognition in their eyes and knew these were no ordinary slaves.

‘Retinue,’ he had proclaimed. ‘Summon my phalanx to war.’

Immortals had filed from the bowels of the tomb, rank upon rank recently armed and revived. They were the Undying’s honour guard. In the lowest levels, the very catacombs, the reviled spilled forth. Held aloft on humming repulsor platforms, the destroyers were a blend of necron and something else. Nihilism burned coldly in the depths of their eye sockets. Fused with gauss technologies, boasting cannons not limbs, they were amongst the tomb’s deadliest servants.

The Undying felt an instant kinship with them, despite the fact that the house shunned such creatures. Their curse, the slow descent into madness and destructive desire, was a fate shared by all. The destroyers’ presence was merely a reminder of that.

Lesser creatures joined the hovering gun platforms in legion, raider constructs and the flickering shadows of tomb wraiths. The latter were an obvious bribe. The Architect was trying to make certain of his position and influence.

That might have amused the Undying once but now, as he gazed out upon the frozen city of the humans, he only craved to vanquish. There was one out in the wastes who had defied him. He had led an attack and slain lords of his royal court. As the killing urge boiled up within him, the Undying vowed he would humble this worm. An arc of emerald fire raced up the war-scythe’s blade in empathy of its master’s rage, as he willed his forces onwards in the snow and ice.

They marched, their royarch at the forefront, and together their footfalls shook the earth. There were no war cries, no banners held aloft, none of the pomp and ceremony of other armies. The necrons were silent and implacable, their advance unstoppable. Nothing except total annihilation would do. And even then, the Undying’s lust for carnage would not be sated.

‘Let it all burn,’ he growled, and in the balefires of his eyes it did.

Ankh surveyed the cold black metal of the necron artillery approvingly.

Rows of pylons, once held in stasis and now dredged from the very earth, stood alongside static gauss siege-cannons. The latter were long, multi-barrelled monstrosities. Their flanks were wrought from the living metal of the necrontyr and pulsed fluidly in the half-light. The former were sickle-shaped turrets that spat death from their gauss-annihilators. A wash of emerald light bathed the ordnance with every discharge of their power. Lances of energy scored the sky, cutting into it with harsh green jags of light. Where the pylons fed continuous beams into the heavens, the siege-cannons throbbed with the drumming staccato of their salvos.

The earth trembled. Far into the distance, the human city was slowly rendered to dust.

Ankh joined another of his noble brethren, who was watching the barrage from the same icy ridge but with prideful eyes.

‘Impressive,’ the cryptek conceded.

Tahek, the Voidbringer as he demanded to be known, turned on the other necron lord like a jackal scenting prey. ‘It is irresistible, world-slaying,’ he snarled.

Black vapours surrounded the Voidbringer, the reason for his name. They roamed and twisted about his metal form, seething through the gaps in his ribcage, spilling over his skeletal fingers and out of the sockets of his aeons-dead eyes.

This was the Night Shroud, a piece of ancient necron technology that had existed since before the long sleep. Not only did it swathe the Voidbringer, it encircled his dominion too. Like some unnatural fog it rolled over the ground and between the artillery emplacements, foiling the efforts of the humans to target them with any certainty. It was not foolproof, some of the weapons had been destroyed in the ordnance exchange, but the Voidbringer’s technology kept the damage to a minimum.

Effective as protection, it was when deployed as a weapon of terror that the Night Shroud truly excelled. During the taking of the Thanatos Refinery, Voidbringer had sent the darkness snaking through corridors, seeping into anterooms, infiltrating the hearts and minds of the crude human soldiery. Mortal fears amused him greatly. So primal, so instinctive, the horrors of the dark would ever plague the souls of the fleshed.

Tahek Voidbringer was powerful, Ankh knew this and it was the reason for his visit. He also knew of the Undying's malady. Despite his status, the long sleep had not been kind to him. Tahek was aware of that too and had set his ambitions to becoming royard.

'The Night Shroud proved extremely useful,' said Ankh, showing his appreciation with a slight bow. 'The humans are trapped inside their stone cage.'

'Did you doubt it?' Voidbringer snapped. A crackle of energy was fed down the haft of his staff but dissipated quickly.

Ankh went on, unperturbed. 'Your shadows blinded them to the machine host until it was too late. Their outer defences are in ruins, their forces driven back.'

'Yeeesss.' A fire burned in Voidbringer's eyes. It was as if he had discovered something in the cryptek's penitent demeanour. 'I know why you are here, *Ankh*.'

'To return your gracious favour, my lord.' Ankh bowed lower.

'*My lord*? Yes, that's right. I am of noble heritage and you...' Voidbringer's tone expressed his disdain. 'You are little better than a plebeian with certain... *gifts*.'

'I live to serve the necrontyr,' answered Ankh, carefully politic. Away from the tomb he was vulnerable. Although very unlikely, Tahek could decide to destroy him here and he'd be able to do little to stop him.

‘You will serve me,’ Voidbringer asserted. ‘The Destroyer curse has him, does it not?’

‘As lord, I bow to your wisdom. I am merely—’

Voidbringer seized Ankh by the chin, clamping his mouth shut and halting his reply.

‘This pact we have made is a wise one for you, *Ankh*. The Undying is mad. He has succumbed, hasn’t he?’

Ankh did not need to move his jaw to speak but the sound emanating from his vocal emitters was tinny and dull as it resonated through his metallic frame.

‘As will we all.’

Voidbringer nodded slowly. ‘The tomb is awakening,’ he said, ‘and other crypteks can be put to the task of weapon-making and revivification. Yours are not the only tomb spyders and scarabs, Ankh.’

There was a pause as Voidbringer allowed the threat to sink in, before Ankh was released.

‘Now,’ said the lord, holding out a skeletal hand. ‘Honour me with what you came here to give.’

Bowing again, Ankh produced a shiny black orb from within the folds of his robes.

As he took it, Voidbringer’s emerald eyes flashed with hunger and desire.

‘A resurrection orb?’

‘The very same,’ Ankh replied, taking a humble step backwards.

Waving the cryptek away, his gaze still locked upon the orb, Voidbringer said, ‘You may leave. Your favour will not be forgotten.’

A portal opened in reality, a long chamber stretching away from a green doorway of light that led back to the tomb and sanctuary. Ankh was pleased to be going. As he was about to go, the falsehood of Tahek’s

promise still ringing hollow in his mind, he stopped. He had his back to the noble but spoke anyway.

‘A word of warning before I take my leave.’

‘You warn me?’ Voidbringer’s tone betrayed his anger. The mad dog was straining for the kill.

‘The Enfleshed is gone, so too are his cohorts.’

‘And? He was a wretch and a ghoul. I am glad to be rid of his presence.’

Ankh turned briefly. ‘The genebred ones destroyed him. There is one amongst their ranks who has power.’

Voidbringer scoffed. ‘I have felt his presence. He is nothing, less than an insect.’

‘He comes for you.’

Now the flames of wrath truly flared along the Voidbringer’s staff. He was easy to rile and Ankh amused himself at his impotent rage.

‘I fear nothing,’ Voidbringer told him. ‘I am invincible.’

As he disappeared through the portal, Ankh’s gaze lingered on the orb and he whispered, ‘Of course you are...’

ACT THREE: SACRIFICE



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Scipio returned to the camp to find Squads Ixion and Strabo already gone.

It fell to Sergeant Vandar of the Victors to relate the news of Captain Sicarius's orders and the redeployment of the assault squads. He stepped forward from the defensive ring of cobalt the Ultramarines had made whilst stationed in the valley and approached Tigurius.

The Chief Librarian masked his anger well as he stopped to hear Vandar's report and survey the forces he did have left at his disposal.

'Did our brother-captain mention why he was recalling the assault squads?' he asked.

To his credit, Vandar kept his eyes up and his answers brief. 'The orders were relayed through Veteran-Sergeant Daceus, my lord, and no he did not.'

'I see.' Tigurius's face was carefully neutral but the air around him visibly crackled.

Just as they had found a way to sabotage and destroy the necron heavy guns bombarding Kellenport, Sicarius had taken away from them their chief asset in that attack. From the encounters he'd survived so far, Scipio knew it would have been tough enough to assault the Thanatos Hills.

Without Ixion and Strabo, the odds of mission success had narrowed considerably. If the necron forces were led by a lord too...

Withdrawal of the assault squads left three tactical squads, including Brother-Sergeant Octavian's. They carried the honorific Swords of Judgement and were amongst the best marksmen in the Second, possibly the Chapter. Ortus had matched his skill against their best many times. The record sheet was well-balanced. With the Ultramarine's death it would forever be so.

Scipio put such maudlin thoughts from his mind as he greeted his fellow Space Marines. Despite everything, it was good to be back amongst his brothers again.

Tigurius was not done addressing the battle force. 'Fortunate, then, that we bring good news.' He gestured to Scipio, inviting him to elaborate. 'Brother-sergeant?'

Several of the battle-brothers, including their sergeants, had been eyeing the humans that had joined them in the camp. For their part, the guerrillas looked wary and afraid. Only Jynn seemed unperturbed by the cobalt giants in their midst. She came forward.

'I am Captain Evvers, and these are my men... What's left of them, anyway,' she added ruefully. 'We are your salvation.'

Sergeant Vandar was looking down on the woman when he raised his gaze to lock eyes with Scipio. 'Why does this human speak for you, Brother Vorolanus?'

'She is bold,' added Octavian. It was hard to tell through his battle-helm but he sounded mildly amused at the woman's outburst. 'And what is this "salvation" she boasts of? Are we in need of rescue?'

Scipio shot Jynn a reproachful look, before bringing his attention back to Vandar. 'She does not speak for me,' he said, before addressing Octavian, 'but she does possess some useful information, a route into the mountains behind the necron's defences.'

‘Through the defensive circle?’ asked Vandar, suddenly interested in the human now. Vandar was known for his tactical brilliance, yet even he could not devise a strategy that would allow the battle force to bypass the necron defences around the artillery. He wanted to know more.

‘We have a way to breach the impenetrable mountain ridge, yes,’ said Tigurius, ‘but a plan is needed if we’re to make the most of this opportunity.’ His gaze fell on the three sergeants as he was walking away.

‘My lord?’ asked Scipio.

Tigurius didn’t look back. He was heading towards an isolated promontory of rock. Much like the Librarian’s thoughts, it was swathed in snow and ice. ‘I must consult the Sea of Souls,’ he muttered, his mind already drifting elsewhere. ‘The future is uncertain.’

‘Brother-Librarian,’ Scipio called, risking censure for using such familiar language.

Tigurius turned. His eyes were ablaze with actinic fire.

‘Are you sure that is wise, given your last attempts?’

‘Experience matters not, Sergeant Vorolanus,’ he replied solemnly. ‘Need drives us. I must *know*.’ A swell of snow spiralled up from the ground and the Librarian disappeared into it.

Scipio regarded his fellow sergeants. ‘Vandar, make the most of our reduced forces.’

Vandar nodded. ‘I shall bring victory to our cause, brother.’

The three departed to marshal their squads and prepare for imminent departure to the Thanatos Hills. Scipio left Brakkus to organise the Thunderbolts, while he spoke to the humans.

Jynn returned a steely expression as he regarded her.

‘Accompanying Space Marines into battle is no small thing,’ Scipio told her. ‘It is dangerous beyond imagining. For one, you are not equipped as we—’

‘Look at us,’ said Jynn, interrupting.

Scipio stayed his anger as he waited for what she was about to say. He took in the guerrillas. They were a sorry, but war-hardened sight.

‘What do you see?’ she asked, turning to her troops. When she looked back, there was a proud glint in her eye. ‘I see survivors. I see men and women who have lost their homes, their families, everything they have ever known or will know, and have only vengeance to drive them. We are aware of the dangers and we are not Space Marines, it is true, but do not say that we’re not equipped for this fight; months scrapping for our survival against these bloody things in the ice wastes says otherwise. We will fight, and we will die, but don’t expect us to slow you down – we won’t. We know these hills, this land. Dead or alive, I’ll get you through that cordon. Promise me one thing: make those soulless bastards pay for what they’ve done.’

Scipio met her fearless eyes and his anger ebbed in the face of Jynn’s glorious pride. ‘By Guilliman’s blood, I swear it,’ he said. He held out his massive gauntleted hand and uttered in a quieter voice, ‘For I desire revenge too.’

She nodded. Her tiny hand was engulfed by his but the gesture was all-important. A compact had been struck, a swearing of an oath that only death could break. In that moment, Scipio saw the grief in her eyes at her loss, and recognised it instantly.

Karthax, forty-five years after the Black Reach Campaign

The last remnants of the cultist army were being driven back from their walls by the guns of Helios’s Terminators. Enfilading storm bolter fire cut the wretches to fleshy ribbons, whilst bursts of heavy flamer cleansed any lingering heretics from the roadside bunkers.

The Fortress of Ardant had once been a bastion to the Imperial faith; now it was an abomination. Filth caked its walls, hell ruled its halls. Blood and flesh, not mortar, held its bricks together. The emblems of the aquila,

soaring proudly from its minarets and looking on imperiously from its crenellations, were defaced. It was rotten with cracked timbers and pitted stone, rusted metal and moth-eaten banners – yet it stood. Somehow this festering palace was more resilient than a bunker, in spite of its obvious decay.

With a thundercrack, the incendiary charges placed by Tenth ignited and the gates to the Chaos bastion were blasted open. Severed from the fortress itself they quickly crumbled to dust. From within the gaping maw behind the gates, a swarm of mutated cultists emerged in a frothing frenzy. Other beings came with them, once flesh but now something else, something terrible. They stretched the skin of their hosts, manifesting in the corporeal world as disgusting horrors dredged from man's worst imaginings.

‘Warp creatures!’ bellowed Helios, a statement of damnation as much as a warning. The First unleashed their weapons. The horde withered as assault cannons and cyclone missile launchers cycled up and let rip. Explosive payloads ruptured the throng, painting bloody welts across the smoke-blackened roadway. Half-putrefied cultists, little more than the walking dead, were blasted explosively apart.

Guard units from the Mordian VI, the Stygian Hounds, were ordered into the breach. Armoured formations began the slow grind towards the bastion: Leman Russ to pound, Hellhounds to burn and purify. In a single day, the Ultramarines had cracked open the enemy resistance, a feat the Imperial Guard couldn't manage after over three months of continuous siege. But it wasn't over yet. The broken gate led into a deeper heart of evil. It had to be excised.

Helios waved on the Ultramarines waiting by the Rhino transports on his right.

‘Advance, brothers. In the name of Agemman and the Chapter Master!’

Orad gave the signal to embark. The black-clad Chaplain was last aboard the transport, the access hatch still closing as he stepped inside and the tank drove off at speed.

Nine Ultramarines met him inside, down on one knee with their heads bowed as he entered the troop hold.

Scipio Vorolanus was amongst them.

Outside the patter of small-arms resonated through the hull. The Chaplain hardly noticed it.

‘Reject the taint in all its perfidy,’ Orad began, spitting vitriol against the inner surface of his skull-mask. ‘Resist and crush those who worship Chaos. Know in your hearts you are pure of purpose and that the Emperor walks with you. His light will vanquish the traitor and the daemon.’ As the engines thrashed, the sound reverberated and intensified around the hold. Orad fought it, his oratory rising from a shout to a scream. An explosion nearby rocked the Rhino on its tracks, but he kept his feet. ‘The Ultramarines fight with clenched fist around bolter and blade. We are the inheritors of Guilliman, the heirs of Ultramar. They know our names and they quail as we recite them with bolters as our voice.’

The engine slowed as the Rhino struck the enemy. A lethal rank of spikes gave the hard nose of the tank a killing edge. Crunching bone, the spatter of blood and the screams of the dead came dully through the hull. A body rolled under the tracks – something big – and the Rhino lurched up and over it before landing square.

‘For the glory of Ultramar, we shall know no fear!’

Screeching to a halt, the tank’s hatch slammed open and the Ultramarines charged out with Orad at their head.

Blood and death greeted their arrival. Cultists clad in rags, wrapped in pus-soaked bandages pressed in, a horde of the unwashed. The Chaplain cut through them, his crozius blooded, leaving a string of enemy corpses in his wake.

Scipio was behind him, he had a perfect view of Orad's back. His shoulder plates compensated for the movement allowing his arm to rise and fall like a piston as he bludgeoned. Rancid flesh gummed the brunt of his crozius. He flicked it off with a desultory gesture as a sporadic muzzle flare lit the end of his bolt pistol. Punished heretics exploded as the mass-reactive shells did their holy work. He'd engraved every one with a litany of hate and purging. Orad knew their order in the weapon's chamber and spoke each and every one as it killed a traitor. Nothing stayed his wrath.

It was... *inspiring*.

Chainsword chugging on the flesh of a dying cultist, Scipio forged himself a little space and briefly examined the battlefield.

Across the roadway, on the opposite side of the gate, a second squad of Ultramarines had deployed. Like Scipio's Thunderbolts, they were swarmed by enemies. He recognised Sergeant Solinus immediately and felt an urge to breach the gatehouse before him. Given Orad's fervour, the Chaplain wanted that honour too.

'Repel them!' he roared. 'Smite them! Become the Angels of Death!'

He was locked in battle with a ferocious warp-thing, a possessed flesh puppet of some daemon from the abyss. Tentacled appendages spewed from the creature's distended maw. Several fizzed and burned against the Chaplain's rosarius field impelled from the icon chained around his gorget, but at least one got through and bit into his power armour.

Pressed by his own opponents, Scipio thought he heard Orad grunt and saw the protective energy field flicker for but a moment when the Chaplain dispatched the bloated hell-beast with a hate-filled curse.

Sensing a shift in momentum, Scipio ordered his warriors with even more aggressive tactics. Bolters were slung in favour of gladius and pistol as the Thunderbolts closed hand-to-hand. Brakkus snapped a cultist in two across his armoured knee, whilst Ortus stabbed another in the throat and crushed the skull of a second in his gauntlet.

Cator unleashed a ragged line of fiery promethium into the decaying ranks from his flamer and they burned. Combined with the furious blade assault it tore enough of a gap for the Thunderbolts to advance, gaining precious ground into the gatehouse and the inner citadel beyond.

The horde of traitors that had sallied forth was slowly being cut down. Helios kept up a furious but disciplined barrage from the edge of the Ultramarines battle line, withering the enemy troops that had sought to flee the fighting.

Nothing must survive. Those were Calgar's orders.

Ground under the tracks of tanks, eviscerated by blades or crushed underfoot, it didn't matter – the only sure way to cleanse the fortress was to systematically eradicate everything inside.

Once the tactical squads were in, the Terminators would begin their implacable march to the gates. The Mordians would follow, bringing tanks and more flamers for the purge.

Elsewhere on the battlefield the Tenth were taking down gun towers, cutting off supply points and collapsing defences under Master Telion's expert direction. Several weapon emplacements had already been sabotaged, leaving behind twisted metal and blast-scarred sandbags.

A plasma cannon turret, protected inside a mobile bunker, slowly turned to draw a bead on the Thunderbolts. Its rotational axle was slicked with pus instead of oil and the bulbous maw of the weapon that extruded from the firing slit was malformed with corrosion. The weapon had almost built to expulsion when an explosive typhoon engulfed it – more of the Scouts' unseen work. Shrapnel and flesh-parts pattered against Scipio's armour as the Ultramarines fought through the last of the cultists and entered the courtyard behind them.

'Glory to the Thunderbolts,' said Scipio quickly but good-naturedly to Solinus.

‘It is for the Chapter, Brother-Sergeant Vorolanus,’ Orad said before Solinus could reply.

Both sergeants bowed to the Chaplain’s wisdom before moving into a slow run towards the inner citadel, a craggy, gore-stained structure that poked out of the centre of the bastion like a diseased talon.

It was the briefest of respites as they crossed the courtyard, which was littered with the dead but otherwise empty of threat, and reached the portal to the inner citadel. The door was like an open wound, festering with decay. Veins pulsed in the marblesque rock, like arteries swollen with plague. But it was unbarred.

Orad held the others back with his outstretched arm as he stood at the threshold of the inner citadel, staring. ‘It is dark as sin, but the way is open to us,’ he said. As he led them onwards down a shallow set of steps, Scipio thought he heard Orad’s sharp intake of breath. It sounded like pain.

‘Brother-Chaplain?’

‘It’s nothing,’ said Orad, though the timbre of his voice suggested he was injured. It had a faint gurgling quality, like there was blood or mucus in his throat.

One of the warp-thing’s barbs had got past his rosarius field and penetrated his power armour too. Scipio noticed crusting around the wound and some of the ceramite had even started to corrode.

Scipio paused, uncertain what to do.

‘It’s nothing,’ Orad said more vehemently and just for the sergeant this time. ‘Our enemy is close. We must destroy it. I will seek out an Apothecary later.’

He turned, signalling an end to it, and beckoned the Ultramarines on, closer to the nest of evil.

There was a stink upon the air, copper-blood and the reek of putrefaction. Corpse-fattened spiders and bloated flies skittered from the light as the Ultramarines switched on their lamp-packs. Grainy lances of

magnesium white stabbed into the blackness in all directions. There were alcoves where more corpses lingered, slumped against columns or strewn over debris from the fallen ceiling. The only route further into the citadel was ahead, over a stinking carpet of mould that stuck to the Ultramarines boots and led to a temple of horrors.

‘Steel yourselves,’ hissed Orad as they arrived at the entrance, the oleaginous glow of rancid lanterns spilling sticky light ahead of it.

As he touched the rim of the light, Scipio could almost feel it coating his armour in a film of decay. He suppressed the urge to remove his trappings and be free of the taint, wanting nothing more than to experience the cleansing fury of his ritual ablutions.

The foetid temple was no better.

Rusted chains hung lankly from a pitted ceiling, strung with flayed corpses and gossamer-thin webs of flesh-dust. Filth-streaked columns were inscribed with ruinous sigils and contained alcoves bearing cadaverous, half-fleshed skulls. A pit was hewn in the centre of the room, which had once been some kind of great hall but was now divested of its former use and put towards corruption. Something boiled within it, wallowing in a soup of pestilence. Noxious bubbles belched to the surface as the creature moved, disturbing bleached skulls and half-digested viscera.

So it wasn’t only a temple, it was also the abomination’s feasting chamber. It was the very root of evil on Karthax.

Orad had seen enough.

‘Destroy it!’

Squads Scipio and Solinus unleashed their weapons in a terrifying storm at the loathsome spawn in the filth-pool. For a moment, it was utterly obscured from view by the Ultramarines blistering salvo.

After a full minute of the hell-storm, the reports of bolters and the hiss of flamers slowly echoed away around the circular room. Smoke and fire

trailed from the pit afterwards. Most of its disgusting contents had been splattered around the walls or flecked the Ultramarines power armour.

As the smoke cleared, Orad ordered Solinus forward. The sergeant acknowledged, and approached the edge of the pit warily. He used his boot to nudge something within it, leaning back from the sight suddenly repulsed.

‘There is a body.’ Solinus waved the others forward.

Scipio crouched by the ragged corpse of a man. He was wearing robes and his flesh and bones had been utterly sundered. Bolt impacts marked his body. His exploded limbs and innards, the shattered bones and scorched skin were testament to the effectiveness of the Ultramarines weapons.

‘A sanctioned psyker of some sort,’ he decided, noting sigil-marks on the skin the fusillade hadn’t obliterated. ‘Cursed by Nurgle.’

‘So where is it?’ asked Solinus.

Scipio met his gaze, questioning.

‘Where is the beast?’ the other sergeant clarified.

‘That was not the creature I burned,’ offered Cator.

His battle-brothers were right. This thing was a puppet; no more than a vessel for whatever entity had claimed this place and transformed it into its own wretched domain. Where was the plaguebearer that had claimed the soul of this man?

Scipio turned around at the sound of ceramite clattering against stone behind them.

‘Brother-Chaplain, replace your battle-helm. This place is unclean!’

He went to go to Orad but was held back by the Chaplain’s warding hand. The wound in his power armour was seeping gore and pus. It crusted his entire forearm and was spreading.

His words were thick with phlegm. ‘Stay back.’

‘Lords of Ultramar,’ Solinus gasped and reached for his bolt pistol. ‘It has taken him, it has taken our Chaplain.’

Scipio pushed down his aim. ‘Wait!’

Orad went to speak again but bent double and vomited a stream of corruption. Chin drooling with sick, he spat a last gobbet of the stuff from his mouth. His eyes were sunken in his skull, the old wounds on his face throbbing, raw and reopened. He sank down, knee deep in the filth. His crozius fell from his grasp.

‘What are you doing?’ snapped Solinus. ‘He has the taint – we must end him now!’ He shook off Scipio’s grasp and brought up the weapon again.

Scipio stepped into his line of sight. ‘He is our Chaplain. Of us all, his faith is the most devout. How can this be?’

‘It matters not. Stand aside, now.’

Ever since Scipio had been a Scout, Orad had been his Chaplain. He had counselled his doubts on Black Reach, had instilled the power of his faith in him. And now he was damned, reduced to no more than a vessel for an insidious terror. The taint of Chaos had claimed him. It had breached his aegis through the smallest of cracks, widened it and rotted him from within.

Scipio drew his own sidearm. His voice was low and solemn. ‘I will do it.’

Nodding, Solinus lowered his aim. ‘Then do it quickly, before it is too late.’

Orad had wrapped his arms around his torso and was convulsing violently in the pool of filth he had created. There was no sentience in his eyes any more. He was a gibbering wreck, a once proud servant of Ultramar brought low.

But when Scipio drew a bead upon the Chaplain he hesitated.

There must be a way. Orad can repulse it.

In eerie synchronicity with the sergeant's thoughts, the Chaplain's neck snapped up and his dead eyes fixed onto Scipio's pitiless retinal lenses.

'*Mercy...*'

The trigger squeezed a little tighter in Scipio's grasp, but he couldn't do it. Orad shook with a sudden palsy. Something within the Chaplain was changing.

The sergeant felt a hand on his pauldron. The world was slowing as if mired in the very foul stuff that pervaded the temple. The reek of death and decay overtook the chamber, more noisome than ever.

'Kill it! Do it now!'

Scipio was only dimly aware of Solinus's urgent voice, of the slow *chank* of bolter shells filling their chambers, of the bounds of Orad's armour bursting apart like an overfilled lung.

Too late the first shell spat from Scipio's pistol, its burning contrails flashing in the air. The sheer lassitude of its trajectory brought on by the hell-transformation unfolding before him allowed Scipio to appreciate every spark, every mote of flame.

Too late, other shells joined it from the battle-brothers around him; nascent spits of flamer too and the glowing coruscation from a plasma gun.

Too late, Scipio realised what his hesitancy had cost them and shouted a warning to Brother Naius.

The husk of Orad's armour broke apart under the barrage but the creature that had stolen the Chaplain's flesh was no longer there. It had leapt onto the ceiling, latching to the rock with the acid-slime on its claws, spewing out barbed tendrils from a distended maw.

Three of the tendrils punched through Naius's chestplate and he fell, bolter loosing off wild rounds as he died and his death grip clenched.

Scipio reached him a fraction too late. He bundled Naius over with the barbs still hooked in him. They stretched and ripped free as he went down,

breaking open ceramite and taking chunks of flesh into the darkness above as the beast retracted them. Then it was gone.

‘Naius!’ Scipio unleashed a burst into the gloom but hit only rockcrete. It was a pointless act, save for the fact of venting his anger. Resting a hand over the neck where Naius’s only intact progenoid was still harboured, Scipio got to his feet. He had been one of Solinus’s squad and now his legacy had ended – all because Scipio had hesitated. The Ultramarines were on the offensive, searching the vaults in the temple above, throwing out random bursts of fire as someone saw a shadow or detected the insidious scuttling of the daemon.

Avoiding Solinus’s furious gaze, Scipio went on the hunt for the thing too, determined to avenge Naius. It was Orad no longer. Trapped for a moment in the lurid glare of a pestilential lantern, the Ultramarines saw an abomination where once had been their Chaplain. Gelid-skinned, surrounded by flies, it was more corpse than man. A horn had sprouted from the daemon’s head; claws replaced hands; it had hooves instead of feet. It was emaciated, its innards showing through diaphanous skin. Pustules and boils puckered flesh that sagged like melted wax and a grotesque hump bent the monster’s back.

Seeing the Ultramarines’ obvious disgust, it chuckled.

‘What’s wrong... *brothers?*’ Its hideous voice was a slurred parody of Orad’s.

Bolter impacts riddled the wall where it was clinging like some human spider, but went wide of the mark. For such a diseased beast it was quick, racing up pillars and skittering through the shadows too fast for the Space Marines to bring it down.

‘Keep it pinned,’ shouted Solinus, directing warriors left and right in pairs. Three battle-brothers guarded the temple entrance and were primed to release a deadly salvo if the creature came within range and sight.

Scipio did the same and was about to give chase, determined the beast that had killed Orad would not escape, when something seized his arm. At first, he thought it might be Solinus and he turned with defiance on his lips. That emotion turned to horror when he realised it was Brother Naius. His armour was corroding from the inside out. A bloodshot eye, rampant with pestilence, glared madly from a wound in his eye socket. The point where the tendrils had pierced his chest bulged, cracking his plastron.

Swinging round his chainsword, Scipio cut Naius down – the second son of Ultramar he had condemned by his inaction – finishing him with a blast from his pistol.

Or so he thought.

Partially exploded, a huge cavity in his stomach yawning open with pustulant debris, the undead-Naius rose on twisted limbs. The chainsword had chewed off part of his helmet. Blackened nubs of teeth bared in a snarl as the creature came at Scipio.

‘Brother!’ The sergeant ducked when he recognised Cator’s voice. A *whoosh* of rapidly expelled promethium followed, sending heat spikes registering on Scipio’s retinal display when the flamer burst just missed him. It engulfed the undead-Naius, though, eliciting a scream that was no longer wrenched from his former brother’s lips.

‘Don’t let the mouth barbs touch you,’ Scipio warned, backing up and searching the shadows. Behind him, Naius burned away to ash, leaving rotten armour in his wake.

Seven grotesque pillars supported the vaulted ceiling of the plague temple. The daemon weaved and scuttled between them, using the darkness to thwart the Ultramarines.

‘Herd it!’ Solinus bellowed, his voice echoing from somewhere deeper in the vast room. Sporadic bolter fire followed and Scipio thought he saw the silhouette of something unholy coming his way. He pressed his body against one of the pillars and waited. He couldn’t see the daemon but he

could sense it. Not in a psychic way, Scipio was no Librarian. But it was in his nose, despite his olfactory filters; it veneered his skin, though he wore power armour over a mesh bodyglove; it buzzed in his ears like the droning of flies.

Scipio shut his eyes and focused on his instincts. The creature was fast but not impossibly so. He owed it to Orad, to Naius, to kill it.

Close now. The shouting of his battle-brothers was getting nearer. They were operating in a dispersed formation in order to cover the most ground. He heard Cator and Brakkus, the clipped shots of Ortus in the vicinity.

Not yet. He pressed against the pillar, denying the urge to engage, to wreak bloody havoc as an avenging Angel of Death. He needed for it to come closer.

When the moment arrived it almost took him by surprise, but Scipio's body was honed, conditioned to preternatural levels and it reacted out of instinct. He opened his eyes. Springing from cover, his chainsword was already swinging. The mouth tendrils spilled like dead worms as the blade-teeth cut through them. The blade continued its buzzing trajectory, embedding in the rib bone all the way to the base of the sternum. Face-to-face with the daemon, Scipio levelled his bolt pistol and for a split second it was Orad there and not a plaguebearer.

'Brother—' it began to mouth, a look of anguish on its diseased face.

'Get back to the abyss!' The bolt pistol fired and the shell struck the daemon in the eye, turning the creature back to its true form. It still wore Orad's flesh, strips of body-mesh clung tenaciously to his enhanced musculature, but it was not him.

It isn't him...

The plaguebearer's visage exploded in a bloom of viscera and bone-chips as the mass-reactive shell detonated, leaving it without a head. It sagged, deflated almost, as a keening wail ripped the air like a fat blade. Ichor exuded from the orifice in the neck, pooling about the dead

Chaplain's shoulders. The daemon was banished; its meat puppet was Orad again. A dead and decapitated Orad, but it was him.

Scipio nearly sank to his knees at the sight. Solinus steadied him. His voice was stern but genuine. 'That thing would have killed us all. You had no choice, brother.'

But Scipio felt differently. His inaction had caused Naius's demise; his bolter hand had slain what was left of Orad.

'I made my choice too late,' he breathed, avowing silently never to do so again. 'And it killed Orad. It killed them both.'



CHAPTER TWENTY

Sicarius signalled the retreat. He'd cut a path through the necrons, dispatching one with every blow of the Tempest Blade. The air was thick with the stench of phasal shift. At their captain's command, the Ultramarines bled back into the ice-fog, their forms lit by the star-flash of bolter muzzle flares. Slow to react to the lightning assault, the necrons didn't even attempt to give chase. They settled for a desultory salvo of gauss-fire and then continued their advance towards Kellenport.

'Does this seem too easy to you, brother-captain?' asked Daceus when they were clear. He reaped a heavy toll with his power fist and was sweating with the effort of killing, but they'd barely dented the enemy's forces.

Sicarius's initial silence betrayed his anger. 'It's ineffective, sergeant,' he replied at last. 'Our attacks are of no consequence.' He opened up the battle-force-wide comms-feed. Though the necrons were blocking most vox-signals, it was only long distance communication that was affected.

The leaders of the attack groups he'd deployed to harry the necron phalanxes returned with similar replies. The mechanoids were defending themselves but otherwise had ignored them. Since their first foray, this was the fifth engagement. No one had, as of yet, managed to get close enough to the core of the force to ascertain if a high-level lord was present.

Sicarius clenched his fist, his rage impotent for now. ‘Regroup, all squads.’

‘Sir?’ asked Daceus when his captain didn’t make any move.

‘This isn’t working. I have to draw it out, Daceus.’

‘My lord,’ the voice of Sergeant Manorian crackled over the feed.

Sicarius was brusque. ‘Speak.’

‘The necrons have stopped moving.’

Sicarius acknowledged then cut the link. ‘Something has changed.’

‘A new weapon in their arsenal? Perhaps they’re consolidating after our raids? They might be having an effect after all,’ suggested Daceus.

‘No, I don’t think it’s that.’ Sicarius eyed the fog, as if searching it for the answer he wanted. ‘But I will know the answer before we’re done.’

Sicarius stared through Praxor’s magnoculars, waiting for the rest of the force to join them. The Ultramarines would regroup in an area of sparse ruins, part of one of Arcona City’s commercia districts. Most of the megalopolis had been levelled by necron heavy artillery. These blackened nubs of debris were a rare feature on an otherwise bland and flattened landscape. The squads filtered in from the north and south; west was where the necron advance was coming from – though, in truth, they dominated most of the planet – and east led back to Kellenport. Ixion and Strabo, redeployed from the Thanatos Operation, arrived first on contrails of fire. Several of their number were wounded but they’d sustained no casualties.

Venatio was patching up the injured and stopped in front of his captain.

‘I’ll need to see that,’ he said.

Lowering the scopes, Sicarius glared at him. ‘Why do you think they’ve stalled their advance, Brother-Apothecary?’

‘That’s not my concern at this time. The injury to your shoulder is, however.’

A long cleft split part of the captain’s pauldron and there was blood gumming the wound. It looked deep. Praxor had been taken aback at first

when he'd seen it. He'd never known Sicarius to bleed. He knew he was flesh and blood, but Sicarius was such a peerless warrior, he had never witnessed more than a scratch against his armour. Praxor hoped it wasn't an omen.

The captain was about to protest again but Venatio's resolve was unwavering; so too was his stare. Sicarius passed the scopes back to Praxor and seated himself on a chunk of ruin for the Apothecary to examine him.

'The shoulder: how is it?' Venatio was removing the cracked pauldron and was probing the mesh layer beneath to get at the wound.

'Stiff,' admitted Sicarius, rotating the blade once the armour was removed. Acutely aware he was being observed, he turned to Praxor.

'Watch them, brother-sergeant,' he said. 'I want to know the moment anything changes.'

Praxor nodded and continued where Sicarius had left off. There was a ridge of blackened stone just ahead of the Ultramarines position. It was a better vantage point to observe the necrons so he made for it.

Agrippen met him there.

'How do you defeat an endless foe?' Praxor asked after a few moments as he looked through the scopes.

'The same as any, with courage and honour,' the Dreadnought replied.

The ridge was little more than a spur of rock, a collapsed column or statue – the damage and the ice made it hard to tell – and could just about provide enough room for Praxor and the ancient.

'Our forces are battered, though. I would follow my captain into battle until I could no longer wield bolter and blade, but it is hard to see how we will prevail.'

'The Chapter has been bloodied before. Some wars are merely harder than others. It is here that we truly test ourselves and prove our strength.'

Praxor tried not to think of the remark as facile. So much of what he knew, or thought he knew, had been tested on Damnos. Not all of it had survived the journey.

He looked below and saw that the rest of the battle force had returned. Sicarius was gathering them for something big, some fresh assault as he sought his prize.

Praxor chastened himself – such thoughts were unfitting for a Space Marine. He resolved to speak to Trajan at the earliest opportunity. He returned to the scopes.

‘They are like statues. What are they waiting for?’

‘Perhaps they seek to gauge our next course of action,’ suggested Agrippen.

Praxor lowered the magnoculars again and looked at the Dreadnought. ‘Tell me, brother: how would Agemman have prosecuted this war?’

Agrippen’s reply was emphatic but neutral. ‘He would not have.’

‘Damnos would have been left to burn?’ Praxor was incredulous.

The Dreadnought fixed him with a glare from the vision slit in his sarcophagus. ‘It would have been *made* to burn.’

‘You think that Damnos is already lost?’

‘It doesn’t matter what I think. I serve the Chapter. On this field of war, on this campaign, I serve Captain Sicarius. What I believe or what I know is immaterial; duty is what matters most.’

‘I am unworthy of that honour,’ Praxor admitted. ‘I do not see my captain’s mind and I doubt our purpose on this world.’

‘What do you doubt about it, brother?’

Praxor paused, weighing up his next words carefully, ‘These are a broken people. Imperial citizens, yes, but unworthy of that honour. It is hard to find accord with saving a people that does not want to save itself.’

‘Are you so sure they are without defiance? Courage?’

‘It is what I have seen, yes.’

Agrippen considered that for a moment, before saying, ‘Answer me this, brother: do you believe you are above these humans in some way?’

‘In all ways,’ Praxor said flatly.

‘Then is it not the duty of those lofty individuals to inspire and lift those beneath them so that they too might achieve some measure of greatness?’

Praxor wasn’t expecting that. The Dreadnought’s logic was hard to refute, so he didn’t try. Instead, he bowed his head. ‘Of course it is.’

‘There is more?’ Agrippen pressed. Praxor’s shame was not only at his discarding of the Damnosians’ right to protection and life.

He lifted his head. ‘I had thought you here to press Agemman’s interests and secure the pre-eminence of the First by undermining Sicarius. It was an unworthy belief.’

Agrippen was sanguine. ‘Your faith has been tested, that is all. It must be if it is to remain strong.’ There was no hint of reproach in his rumbling sepulchral voice. ‘As to the matter of Agemman, too much is made of this supposed rivalry. I trust in the wisdom and leadership of our Lord Calgar. Do you know why that is so?’

Praxor’s silence bade him to continue.

‘Because I have witnessed his courage and heard his words. Victory or death – one or the other awaits us on Damnos. I do not fear it. I do not let it concern me. It merely *is*. This is our duty. It is what makes us Emperor’s Angels. He will protect us and He will grant Sicarius the wisdom and guile to lead us.’

Praxor bowed his head again that such a noble warrior had deigned to share his wisdom with him. ‘*Victoris Ultra*, venerable one.’

‘*Victoris Ultra*.’

Servos whirring, gears grinding, Agrippen dismounted from the rocky spur and went to find Ultracius. He left Praxor to his thoughts and his duty.

‘What do you see, brother-sergeant?’ Sicarius asked a few moments later. He was done with the Apothecary and had come for a status report.

Praxor was looking through magnoculars at the distant enemy formations but the ice-fog was still thick. They'd reached the edge of Arcona City and were about to pass over its borders, if they ever moved again.

'They are waiting.' In spite of the weather, Praxor could see the massive phalanxes standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Their utter stillness was unnatural. Skeletal-faced, their eye sockets aglow, they reminded him of revenants. 'Do we attack?'

Sicarius shook his head, ignoring the proffered scopes. Daceus was with him, carrying his captain's battle-helm.

'We will fall back.'

'We continue to flee?' asked Praxor.

'A Space Marine does not flee, brother-sergeant,' interjected Daceus. His bionic eye seemed to burn with indignation. 'When met by an implacable enemy, he does not throw his strength at it until he is spent. He finds a way to bring the battle to his advantage.'

'We need to level the scales, Sergeant Manorian,' asserted Sicarius. 'A warrior has many weapons in his arsenal. This—' he brandished his plasma pistol. 'And this.' He tapped the hilt of his sheathed Tempest Blade before gesturing to their surroundings, 'but he must also use his mind and mould the battlefield into a weapon too.'

He paused, peering into the mists. 'How close are they now, brother?'

'Two kilometres and static. My lord, what are they waiting for?'

'What else?' Sicarius answered, and there was a hint of a smile in his voice as his eyes narrowed. 'For their potentate, the one who wields power.'

Sicarius was right. Praxor looked back through the magnoculars and found the necron lord who commanded the army. He had just emerged in the throng. It was an ancient, terrible creature with age-tarnished trappings and a body of shimmering gold.

‘I think the wait is over, sire.’ He handed his captain the scopes and this time Sicarius took them.

‘So it seems. Tell me something, Brother Manorian, have you heard of the Battle of Thermapylon?’

‘I know a myth, from the days of the Terran battle-kings.’

‘Go on.’

‘Seven hundred men of warrior blood held the pass of Thermapylon against the numberless hordes of Xeruclese from across the sea. Their sacrifice allowed the army of King Vidus to muster and throw back the enemy, harrying them all the way back to the beaches where they made their berths, and burn their ships at anchor.’

‘And the seas ran red with their blood and the sand became as crimson night,’ added Sicarius, reciting from the epic poem that recalled the legend.

Praxor was briefly wrong-footed; he didn’t know his captain had studied the arts. But then it was military history, mythic or not, and Sicarius was an arch-student of war. It made a certain sense.

‘Do you know how they triumphed?’

‘With blood and steel, I presume.’

‘Oh, their blades were red as the dawn, brother, but that wasn’t how they engaged an army of five hundred thousand with seven hundred men. No, they achieved their goal because they knew the lay of the land. Every death was paid for by a hundred enemy soldiers. It was a battle of attrition that could only end in suicide but it wrested time from the hands of fate and used it to the king’s advantage. His army was ocean-borne and won a great naval victory against Xeruclese’s allies. Much of the details are lost to time but the message remains true and relevant.’

‘I am ready to die for my Chapter, brother-captain,’ said Praxor.

‘That is not what I mean.’ Sicarius returned the magnoculars. ‘This war *can* be won. But we need time. We need our tanks – Antaro would relish

this theatre of war – and the *Valin's Revenge*. I plan to get us that time and cut down the necron overlord into the bargain. But I do not plan on dying to achieve it.' He turned, fixing Praxor in a gimlet glare. 'My legacy is not yet at its end, and I would add more laurels to my banner.'

Praxor nodded. Sicarius's defiance was stirring, even if he found his arrogance a little bitter with the casualties they'd already sustained.

'Outside Kellenport, at the edges of the city wall, we will funnel the necrons into our own pass and there they will fall to our fury. Tigurius will have destroyed the Thanatos guns by then and Antaro can unleash his armoured fists.'

'The necrons are formidable, my lord. They are not the hordes of Xeruclese, nor do they merely wield spears or travel in wooden boats.'

'Indeed, but we carry bolters and are Adeptus Astartes.' He turned to Daceus. 'We make for the Kellenport outer marker,' he said. 'Signal Sergeants Ixion and Strabo to range ahead of us there and tell them to make haste. The necrons are moving.'

Both Strabo and Ixion came back to Daceus swiftly. The speed of the reply sent a tremor of unease through Praxor as did the veteran-sergeant's grim face as he related the reply to Sicarius.

'Request denied, sir.'

'Explain, brother-sergeant.'

'They cannot. There are forces coming from the east, from Kellenport. The necrons have us blocked in.'

Sicarius took his battle-helm without response. When he slammed it down against his gorget, there was a *clang* not unlike a death knell across the frozen quietude of the wastes. When the captain did finally speak it was with the grating cadence of his vox-grille.

'Gather your battle-brothers, and have the other sergeants do likewise. We make our stand here.' His tone turned belligerent as he drew the

Tempest Blade and pointed towards the advancing horde and the necron overlord in its ranks. ‘Death or glory awaits us – I will welcome both.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ankh was connected to all the mechanoids of the tomb. They were his workers, his messengers, his eyes and ears. Truly, he was the Architect. Most creatures of the universe – he had come to think of them as simpleton children when compared to the majesty and intellect of the necrontyr – beheld the necrons and saw only machines. They were so much more than that. Their science had fundamentally changed their race. It was so advanced that to look upon it would be to perceive what primitive cultures called magic. These humans, a race of barely evolved primates, were one such culture.

To serve the machinations of his lord, he would unleash ‘magic’ of a terrifying magnitude. He had activated a doomsday phalanx of monoliths. Through the multi-faceted eyes of one of his drones, Ankh had witnessed the destruction of one of his pyramidal engines. It had surprised him. Perhaps it was why the Undying wanted so desperately to kill this one. Was the genebred warrior really any different from the rest of his species? Certainly, he attired himself more ostentatiously than any of the other armour-clad savages. Immobilising the monolith was also a feat worthy of note, especially done single-handed.

Ankh had moved the others at his overlord’s command. The Undying wanted to see annihilation; the talons of the Destroyer curse had made

their first incisions into his fragile engrammic sanity. Pre-eminent amongst these weapons of war was the Doomsday Monolith.

‘You desire destruction, my lord,’ Ankh said to the quietude of the tomb. Through the eyes of his creations he could see the trio of monoliths gliding into position; the nexus of energy between them had almost reached critical mass. ‘Then you shall have it.’

Ankh unleashed his ‘magic’.

‘Give me more. Break your backs if you have to, but bring those things down!’ Letzger was hoarse from all the shouting. Above the roaring thunder of the guns, he had to bellow to be heard.

His gun crews knew the drill, though. They knew that sweating blood was necessary and that their lives and the lives of their people depended on it.

Hel-handed boomed again, shaking dust from its foundations and sluicing debris down to the lower levels with every seismic explosion from its barrel. From the Thanatos Hills to the monoliths converging on the meagre defenders in the Courtyard of Xiphos, Letzger had changed targets. So far, his efforts to bring down one of the necron pyramids had been in vain. There was some kind of ethereal veil protecting them all. Shots that weren’t lost to the black void coiling around the machineries were otherwise absorbed by the living metal from which the monoliths were constructed.

The view down the *Hel-handed’s* crosshairs was not an encouraging one.

Letzger seized the vox-horn. ‘Leave ’em be and send a shell into the square.’ He rattled off a series of measurements, amending the cannon’s aim and trajectory. ‘And give those metal bastards a half-shell. Don’t want to crucify our Angels in the blast.’

Slamming the speaker cup down, Letzger was about to get settled on the scopes and watch the show when something bright blazed on the horizon.

Emerald light burned from some unseen source, forcing him to look away. He felt the heat against his skin and smelled his hair smouldering before the beam hit.

‘*Merciful Emperor,*’ he breathed as a green fire hit the *Hel-handed* and a god-weapon died.

Adanar felt the explosion before he saw it. He felt it even before the beam hit the Kellenport wall and tore the *Hel-handed* open. Letzger had been on that platform, the ornery old dog. After the emerald flash faded he simply wasn’t there any more; neither were his gun crews. The weapon was a twisted mess. There was little of it left. Most of the wall and the troops nearby, even those who had hunkered down on the lower level, had also been obliterated.

He turned to Humis, who had ducked behind the barricade. Part of the corporal’s uniform was on fire, ignited by the heat wave. Adanar was patting it down when he realised his own face was burned raw. It stung to the touch.

‘Throne of Earth,’ mewled the corporal. ‘We are all dead men.’

Adanar was getting to his feet. He’d only realised belatedly that he’d been knocked down – must have been from the void shields breaking. ‘We were dead men before now,’ he said, snarling at the pain in his face. ‘Yet here we are.’ He pulled his pistol. Something was materialising on the wrecked battlements amidst the fire-blackened debris of the *Hel-handed*.

Necrons.

The first of the men inside Kellenport died without realising what killed them. Their faces were still etched in terror as they turned to ash.

Adanar loosed off a shot that struck a steel skull in the jaw, making the mechanoid jerk its neck. It didn’t stop it from flaying the Ark Guardsmen in front of it.

‘Turn and fight!’ the commander raged. He was further away than he remembered and his right leg hurt with all the fires of the warp.

Slowly, the troopers below the battlements started to fight back. A sergeant was even shouting for order before a gauss-blast reduced his head to a greasy memory. He toppled, his neck wound cauterised, before someone else took his place.

Humis was running alongside Adanar, dodging the stray emerald beams and vaulting chunks of rubble. The platform wasn't that far, the enemy even less so. 'They must have used a weapon on us,' he said. There was a hollow sound in his breathing, as if he had a punctured lung. Perhaps he had. Humis didn't complain, though. 'It must have been powerful to cut through the shield.'

How were they even functioning? Adanar had no clue. They'd been punched across the battlements, caught in the blast wave – he knew that now. Somehow they'd stayed on the wall instead of being pitched to their doom, but they were both hurt.

Following their commander's example, more of the Ark Guard got up from their posts and joined Adanar and Humis. There weren't that many necrons on the wall yet; there was still time to block the attack.

'And now they're phasing in their raiders to finish the job.'

Adanar didn't talk. He assumed Humis needed to or he'd realise what they were doing and flee, or lose what scrap of sanity he had left.

A half-glance below revealed the Space Marines and some of the conscripts were exchanging fire with the mechanoids assaulting the square. The necrons obviously didn't possess the capacity to phase all of their troops onto the walls or they'd already be overrun. Silently, he wished the Angels luck. It seemed an odd thing to have to do. Over the last few hours, the Emperor's avengers had seemed altogether more human than Adanar had ever given them credit for. It was to the good and the bad, he supposed.

He was running past a vox-officer when a gauss-beam jagged out and took the poor swine in the gut. His innards were dissolved to atoms and he

slumped with a gurgle. Adanar crouched behind a broken crenellation, taking cover for the first time since the surge towards the gun platform. Hot, green energy flashed overhead as he stooped for the fallen vox-cup. A few seconds later, Humis was right there with him. The man had blood on his collar from where he'd been coughing. Adanar boosted the vox-signal as high as it would go and yelled into the cup.

‘This is Commander Adanar Sonne. All forces to the gun platform on the east wall. Repel the enemy at all costs.’

The barrage lessened as more troops joined the effort of dislodging the necron invaders, and Adanar was on his feet again. He patted Humis on the shoulder, indicating they needed to get going, but the corporal didn't move. When he looked back, Adanar saw the pallor of his face and the glass in his eyes. Humis was dead.

He carried on.

Las-beams were hammering the necrons now, who didn't bother to seek cover or retreat. They merely advanced, implacable as death.

Something was happening up ahead. He thought he recognised a desperate figure fleeing from the mechanoids, taking several squads with him. Adanar's fists clenched when he realised it was Rancourt. The cowardly worm was trying to save his own skin but had opened the trap the Ark Guard had forged around the raiders.

He wanted to shout, to tell them to turn back, but he was too far away and the din of gunfire was too loud. Instead, Adanar carried on. He was racing to his doom, and he knew it. He didn't care. This was the moment he had been waiting for. At last he would know peace. He couldn't just throw his life away, *she* wouldn't like that. But this was different. Adanar's sacrifice might save the lives of those Rancourt had endangered. His only regret was he wouldn't get to see the bastard suffer for it.

Just a few more metres and he'd be on them. He nearly tripped on a corpse. The poor wretch had been sliced in two by a necron beam. Though

hard to tell, Adanar knew it was Kador and that Rancourt had bolted when his bodyguard was slain.

The locket-charm around his wrist dug into his skin where his arm was blistered by the terrible emerald flash. Adanar tore it free and gripped it in his hand.

I'm coming... The words echoed inside his head, meant for those who had waited long enough already. Leaping the half-flayed wreckage of a gun crew, Adanar made it onto the platform and was ready to meet his end.

The Courtyard of Xiphos had lit up like some infernal flare. Snow and ice melted instantly before evaporating into steam as the beam struck the wall and fire washed over those below.

Some of the men closer to the impact point were flattened. Their uniforms caught alight and there was screaming. Other conscript squads were fleeing; some stayed to help the injured but Iulus waved them on.

‘Forward as one, bolter and blade!’

Except these men didn’t carry bolters, nor did they wear power armour or possess the strength and skill of a Space Marine. For more times than he needed to count, Iulus was impressed by the fortitude of men. The conscripts took up their weapons and kept up the fight.

The beam that slew the god-weapon on the wall hadn’t come from the Thanatos Hills. That barrage, as potent as it was and still persisting even now, was unable to knock out the void shields. The range was too far. No, the killing blow that ruptured the massive cannon’s aegis came from the monoliths. The pyramids had fired as a collective, unleashing a beam of such potency that it had overloaded a void shield.

‘We will die in this hellstorm,’ shouted Kolpeck beside him. It brought Iulus from his thoughts.

The two sides traded intense fire across the Courtyard of Xiphos. Most of the Imperials had found cover and this mitigated the fact that their

armour paled in comparison to that of the necrons. As each force advanced, the carnage only intensified.

Iulus nodded, 'Glory or death,' he cried to the rig-hand turned soldier. 'Embrace it and the Emperor will take you to his side when it is done.'

This *was* death. Iulus had a mind for tactical acumen, just like any Space Marine. He knew odds and strategy, and he could recognise a last stand. With the Ordinatus on the wall destroyed, so too went their final chance of survival. A sense of inevitability had crept into the ebb and flow of the fight. Iulus meant to sell his life dearly.

'Brothers!' he bellowed as the roar of bolters and heavy weapons pummelled the air.

Around him, the last of the Immortals gathered.

Aristaeus gave a nod. Galvia held up a clenched fist. Wherever he looked, Iulus saw his warriors proud and defiant in the face of certain destruction. Since he had been instated the squad's sergeant, they had never lost a battle-brother and had become dubbed the 'Immortals' on that account. It was fitting then that if that honorific was to be broken now they would die as one.

'Immortals to the end!' said Brother Pention and the cry was taken up by them all, the conscripts and Ark Guard too.

A beam took Uklidese in the shoulder and chest. He fell but was dragged up by Illion and Menalus. Venkelius was the next to drop, clutching at his gorget.

Then Aristaeus. Iulus reacted quickly, supporting him under the arm.

'Stand, brother,' he growled. 'We'll meet them on our feet.'

Agnathio was punctured by a dozen beams, the Dreadnought lanced through and spewing fire, smoke and fluids. The venerable warrior ground to a halt and his weapons cycled down to dormancy.

'Ultramar!' Iulus wanted it to be the last word on his lips. He spat it at the necrons, as if his will and vitriol could destroy them in an all-

consuming wave. ‘Ultramar!’

The Ultramarines took up the call, even those who were injured, even Venkelius who could barely speak at all.

‘Ultramar!’

It was an end worthy of note. Iulus found the admission of that strange. He had never considered death before or what it meant. He had always only thought in terms of function and need.

I am a warrior and my function is to kill in the Emperor’s name.

He had not believed his legacy was important, save to pass on to the next Ultramarine who succeeded him; that his deeds and actions really mattered. Faced with the imminence of mortality, he found his opinion changed. Dying well mattered and this was a manner of death that Iulus could be proud of.

‘Stand with me, Kolpeck,’ he said, using his body to protect the right hand, ‘and let us die well together.’

‘While I have breath, I will,’ Kolpeck replied. ‘For her, for Jynn.’

Iulus didn’t know who this person was but he understood the sentiment. Men were more than just materiel that could wield a gun, throw a grenade or drive a tank. They were flesh and blood, with hearts and minds. And it hadn’t been an honoured warrior, a stern-faced veteran consigned to the lectorum or even a Chaplain that had taught the sergeant this. It had merely been a man, a miner at that. The Ultramarine felt humbled and wished it could end differently for Falka Kolpeck.

Abruptly, at no outward or fathomable sign, the necrons stopped. A radiant emerald flash filled the Courtyard of Xiphos again but not from some doomsday weapon, it was translocation. Iulus detected the scent of phasal shift and as he opened his eyes saw that the raiders were gone. All of the necron cohorts had simply vanished.

A reprieve. He felt slightly robbed. The practical side of his character exerted its will over his emotions quickly though – they were alive. Most

of the humans, too, had survived. For Agnathio, they mourned. The Dreadnought was a steaming husk of blast-scarred armour. His life had left him.

‘Where did they go?’ Aristaeus asked the question as dumbstruck Guardsmen gazed around the walls or the square. They lived, but they didn’t know how or why. Even the tunnellers had fled, leaving nothing but rubble in their wake.

Iulus looked around too, trying to reason what had just happened.

Snow was forming, laying a fresh patina across the courtyard. Ice already crusted the wall as the bitter cold reasserted itself after the fire storm. Soon the scene would be virginal again, a chilling graveyard where the dead do not sleep.

Why does a force retreat? Either they are on the brink of defeat or they’ve found a better fight elsewhere.

Clearly it was the latter.

He uttered one word. ‘Sicarius.’

Adanar wasn’t dead and the revelation weighed upon him like an anvil around his neck. He should be dead. This was supposed to be his moment; this was when he was to be reunited with them. But the Emperor – damn his capricious will – wasn’t done with Adanar Sonne, it seemed.

Relief, not despair, washed off the other men on the wall. He could feel it almost palpably, see it in their surprised faces. They hugged each other; some even cheered, though the gesture was only half indulged. Fatigue seized them now that the adrenaline of trying to stay breathing faded. Life for another few minutes at least. Adanar half expected the necron artillery to release such a blistering barrage from some other *uber*-weapon that it obliterated the entire city and everything in it, but they didn’t. The necrons had retreated.

He was about to ask Humis to contact the army’s officers for a report when he remembered the corporal was dead. A screeching sound arrested

his attention. His despair and confusion turned to anger as he was confronted by Rancourt.

‘Blessed Emperor, we are saved!’ He was ebullient, but on the point of hysteria. ‘Our saviours are victorious.’ Rancourt looked at Adanar nonplussed. ‘Why aren’t you cheering, commander? We have won. Damnos is saved.’

Adanar slapped him hard across the face with the back of his gloved hand. The blow drew blood from the acting governor’s lip.

‘Shut up, you idiot. They are not defeated. There is no victory to be had here.’

A group of officers and troopers had gathered around the altercation, drawn by the raised voices.

Now it was Rancourt’s turn to be incensed. He touched his chin, but it wasn’t just his skin that had been stung by the commander’s reprimand. ‘How dare you strike a member of the Administratum?’ He looked around for an ally in the throng and pointed at a trooper. ‘You,’ he said. ‘Shoot him, shoot Commander Sonne at once.’

At first the Ark Guard trooper looked shocked and distinctly uncomfortable that he’d been singled out. He held up his hands, wanting no part of it.

Frustrated, Rancourt’s attention went to someone else. ‘You then,’ he bawled. ‘Shoot them both. I command you to execute them in the name of the Emperor and the Imperium.’

‘No.’

Rancourt was looking around rapidly, his gaze flitting from one soldier to the next. ‘You’re all in on it.’ He spat at Adanar’s feet. ‘Your personal guard, no doubt.’ Pointing a finger that he swept around the onlookers, he added, ‘You’ll all be shot for this. Disobedience, dissension—’

Adanar hit him again and this time put the administrator on the floor. Seizing him by the scruff of the neck, he lifted Rancourt up so he could

glare into his eyes. He saw fear in them.

‘You are a loathsome worm, Zeph Rancourt,’ he declared, ‘and your cowardice nearly killed us all. I suspect it may have killed Sergeant Kador, a good man and a good soldier.’

‘Kador was a traitor,’ spat Rancourt. ‘He tried to leave my side.’

Adanar’s eyes widened when he saw the butt of a pistol sticking out of the administrator’s robes. ‘What did you do?’ he rasped.

‘I didn’t kill him if that’s what you mean. It was a warning shot. I only winged him.’ Rancourt saw the change come over Adanar’s face and quailed. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Did you hit him in the leg, slow him down and lower his guard? Eh? Is that when the beam hit him?’ Adanar tightened his grip around the other man’s collar.

Rancourt’s feet were almost dangling off the ground. ‘Let me go, let me go,’ he pleaded.

Adanar brought him closer, eye-to-eye. ‘Oh, I’ll let you go,’ he whispered. With a grunt of effort, he lifted the administrator above his head.

‘Unhand me!’ Rancourt shrieked.

Adanar had him poised at the edge of the battlements. ‘As you wish,’ he said, and threw him off.

There was a wet crunch as the ex-governor hit the ground. Blood pooled in the snow, turning it crimson. Not one of the men on the wall emitted so much as a gasp, let alone tried to arrest their commander for murdering an Imperial official. But they all turned as the massive shadow drew over them.

One of the cobalt giants was walking up the steps and had reached the battlements.

Adanar nodded. ‘Sergeant Fennion.’

Iulus nodded back as the man went down on one knee.

‘Execute me if you must. I would have gladly done it again.’

The Ultramarine growled. ‘Get up. I’ve not come for your life nor do I care about what you’ve done. We are at war. There is no time for bureaucracy.’

Adanar got to his feet, frowning. ‘Then what is it you need?’

‘Your men,’ replied the cobalt giant. ‘Enough to make a difference.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Three groups tracked through the mountains. Scipio was up front, just behind Captain Evvers. He could see now why the Ultramarines had struggled to find a way through. She took them on a winding route, through almost invisible canyons, secret passes and sunken valleys. It was treacherous but no one fell to their deaths, the humans more sure-footed than their armoured protectors.

Scipio activated the comm-feed. ‘Brothers. Vox-silence from this point.’

They’d reached an outer marker of five hundred metres. Both Vandar and Octavian, who were in the other two assault groups, replied with affirmation runes that lit up Scipio’s retinal display.

‘What’s wrong?’ he called ahead.

Evvers, with three of her kinsmen arrayed around her, held up a hand. They were making certain of the route. Snow-shawled crags surrounded them, barely visible against the high mountain drifts. A wicked wind was howling in from the north and the humans had to keep low to avoid being blown off the peaks. Scipio approved of their caution; one false step could be terminal in this white-out.

Tigurius joined him, the inner glow of his eyes only just fading.

‘The truth is still veiled to me,’ said the Librarian.

‘What of our endeavours here? Can your prescience divine a path, my lord?’

He shook his head. ‘I cannot breach the veil. Something is blocking my sight.’ Tigurius looked down into the impenetrable fog and gloom.

‘Below,’ he added.

Although he could not see them, Scipio knew that a small army of the necrons awaited them there. The route through the mountains would allow them the element of surprise and they would need to make the most of it. Outnumbered and likely outgunned, the Ultramarines’ plan was predicated on causing as much damage to the artillery as possible before the defenders roused into action. There was a lord amongst the mechanoids, too, the one Tigurius called the ‘Voidbringer’. From their encounter with the ghoulish necron commander at camp, Scipio was well aware of their power. He wondered briefly what abilities this one would possess.

Evvers was waving them on.

Scipio would find out soon enough.

Voidbringer was frustrated. By attaching him to the artillery in the Thanatos Hills, the royarch had effectively leashed him. He wanted to cow these worms, eradicate them from the face of the earth and reclaim it for the necrontyr.

‘I am a conqueror,’ he decided, visions of conquest flashing across his memory engrams in a blur, ‘not a custodian.’

It only convinced him further that the Undying had submitted to the Destroyer curse and his sanity was all but eroded. The long sleep had taken a heavy toll and as such he would not be able to lead the tomb. Cast out by the other lords he would be reduced to a king of madmen, those who would butcher their metal bodies to the cause of annihilation.

Voidbringer wanted to annihilate but he also wanted to rule. He felt the pull of the infinite, time-eternal stretching before him like an endless

conduit, but he did not fear it. He embraced it. His glory would be everlasting.

The orb given unto him by Ankh hummed with power. He regarded it idly as the gauss-obliterators thundered all around him. He did not pretend to understand the arcane science of the crypteks; his own technologies were esoteric and well guarded by just a few of the royal cohort. Energy whorls shimmered inside it, like trapped event horizons collapsing and coalescing in microcosm. If he stared long enough, Voidbringer fancied he could unravel the inner secrets of the universe, unlock the vagaries of chronomancy and the manipulation of living metal. Such things didn't interest him. Let the crypteks be distracted by such petty diversions. Rulership required action, not contemplation.

Even still, the resurrection orb was fascinating. With it his ascendancy would be assured. A subliminal command, like a muscle reflex, opened a chamber in his metal breastbone. The chest cavity opened wide enough to accommodate the orb and Voidbringer placed it carefully within. It glowed briefly, connecting with the necron's systems and enhanced physiology. The surge of power it radiated through him made Voidbringer shudder. His staff of light crackled in sympathetic symbiosis. The cryptek could be useful, he supposed, but he also didn't trust him. Voidbringer also hated the fact he referred to him by his old name. *That* appellation was no longer fitting. None whose memory engrams still functioned remembered the royarch's name, he was just the Undying. It gave him power, a resonance that elevated him above the other nobles.

Voidbringer wanted that. He also wanted an advisor who was more pliable and less likely to betray him. The pact with Ankh was ended; Voidbringer resolved to destroy him once they had achieved victory on this world.

If he could have smiled, he would have.

‘Soon,’ he whispered to himself, the thought caressing his ego, ‘I will rise above all.’

Cocooned by images of his ambition, the Voidbringer failed to notice the figures creeping closer. Perhaps his awareness had been dulled by some outside agent, perhaps the dulcetly throbbing orb embedded in his chest played a part...

Ankh saw all. His tiny burrowing machines kept close to the genebred humans, followed them through the pass and into the mountainous peaks. They kept out of sight; the Architect ensured they remained undetected. Tahek had activated the orb, or at least begun its cycle – Ankh felt this too.

Multiple futures played out across his synapses, each one a subtle variation of the last. The attack of the artillery would cripple the necrontyr and cause a chain reaction throughout the royal court. Nobles would be destroyed, their memory engrams forever degraded. But then Ankh was not a noble, he was merely an elevated servant with certain skills. The rule of law in the tomb was about to change and he, in part, would bring about its apotheosis. His actions, or inactions, had helped to bring this about. The war on Damnos was about to take a debilitating turn.

Ankh was a necron, his loyalties were unquestionable in that regard, but he was also a survivor.

The raider sentries patrolled the perimeter with predictable regularity. Like automatons, they marched back and forth, gauss-flayers at rest, their fell eyes aglow. A blizzard was rolling down off the mountain, bringing with it a shrieking wind and veiling snow. It built up on their joints, settled on their vast shoulder plates. They betrayed no signs of discomfort. Essentially they were dead things, barely sentient and moving only through the borrowed will and animus of other more powerful beings.

Three pairs performed sentry rotations on the small section of the perimeter that abutted the sheer-sided cliffs of the Thanatos mountain range. One of the necrons paused in its cycle, alerted to something in the

icy mists. Its sockets flared with baleful energy as its twin also stopped, a few metres away. The inquisitive raider took two steps forward – at this sector of the perimeter they were largely isolated until the other sentry pairs crossed them again – before its head jerked violently to the side. It raised a hand, releasing its grip on the barrel of the gauss-flayer, to touch the brass shell lodged in its cranium. Emitting a low-pitched whine the shell exploded, taking the necron's head and most of its torso with it.

Realising it was under attack, the other raider switched to defensive protocols and was about to unleash its gauss-flayer in a spread firing pattern before a second shell punched through its eye socket to similar effect. Both mechanoids phased out instantly.

Seconds later, Sergeant Octavian and his Swords of Judgement were tracking low across the rugged hill line. The heat from the capacitors on the artillery was turning the snow into a thick, obscuring mist. It was above waist height and utterly occluded the Ultramarines from view. Reaching the site of the sentries' demise, Octavian opened the closed comm-feed by tapping the side of his helmet, red against the starkness of the ice-fog – with the first kills, vox-silence was no longer necessary.

‘Attack group “Iron Sights”: Hellfires away and mission achieved.’

The affirmations from the other sergeants came swiftly through Scipio's comm-feed. The sentries were down and all Ultramarines were in position. With the perimeter breached, the way to the necron artillery was open. It was a minute aperture for a small commando force to enter and Scipio meant to exploit it to the full.

The necrons had used machineries, perhaps tunnellers and other large mechanoids to reshape and flatten a section of the Thanatos Hills. He'd taken vantage from the cliff top, just before they'd descended to the base. Thermal-imaging through the scopes revealed a roughly diamond-shaped area, with the artillery pieces arranged around it, one at each point and another weapon in the centre. Five targets for three assault groups – they'd

miss Strabo and Ixion, but it couldn't be helped. Evvers and her guerrillas would have to do their part.

He regarded her through the uncompromising slits of his retinal lenses. She was watching the route ahead through a pair of infra-goggles, and seemed tense – her heart rate and breathing were elevated. Only Adeptus Astartes could undertake a mission of this magnitude and hope to survive. Some might consider it reckless for Scipio to throw the humans into it without consideration for their safety. He cast any lingering doubts aside as he felt an iron fist clench around his heart. Orad had paid the price for his lack of resolve. It would not happen again. They would do their part or they would die in the attempt.

Tigurius emerged out of the fog next to him. He kept low, just like the rest. The Ultramarines were crouching, whereas the humans only had to stoop to become invisible. If the Librarian knew what Scipio was thinking, it didn't show. He seemed preoccupied.

'I must seek out the veil across my sight and cut it loose,' he said, as if penetrating Scipio's mind after all. 'Lead them in, Sergeant Vorolanus, but wait for my signal. Courage and honour.'

The Librarian moved off into the fog on his own private mission.

Scipio watched him go until he was lost to the mist. He opened up the comm-feed again, 'All Ultramarines: close on targets.'

A tremor of unease rippled through the aeons-old consciousness of Voidbringer. It niggled insistently at the edge of his awareness but he allowed the reassuring drone of the orb to comfort him and eclipse it.

Tigurius hunted through the mist. He stayed clear of the places where the necron forces were most concentrated, guided psychically. They were little more than unmoving shadows, statues in the ice-fog. Emerald fire in their eyes was the only evidence of unnatural animation in the necrons and even that was dampened by the mist. Not that he truly needed to see. The

Librarian's witch-sight might be temporarily blinded, the strands of fate shut to him, but he could still feel...

It was close, the void blanketing his thoughts, that which had almost destroyed him with its malice when he had ridden the Sea of Souls as a psychic avatar. The hulking silhouettes of the pylons and massive gauss-cannons loomed here and there in the ice-fog, rising above the artificial white tide. In part of his mind, that which was largely committed to his subconscious for now, he was aware of his battle-brothers closing swiftly on the structures. Before they committed fully to the attack, he needed to find the one called 'Voidbringer'.

Emotions were easy things for a psyker to detect, even a nascent one. Hatred bled off this monster, as hot and acerbic as acid. Tigurius followed it, a jagged trail of red in his mind. At the end of it he knew he'd find his nemesis.

Without any Scouts, the attack force's best chance of making stealth an effective option was through the Thunderbolts. Scipio had drilled his warriors in the arts of subterfuge and operating behind enemy lines, much of his skill imparted by Torias Telion. They were not even close to matching the Master Scout's abilities but the blizzard and the fog were useful tools he could exploit, as was the fact the necrons seemed uncharacteristically sluggish.

Hugging close to the ground and sticking to the channels where the ice-fog was thickest, Scipio and his battle-brothers had crossed almost half the distance to their target without raising an alarm. The stillness of the necron defenders, eerie as it was, made the task of avoiding them easier. If they possessed some kind of sensors or form of auspex that didn't require visual confirmation they were either fouled by the weather or simply not attuned to the presence of the Space Marines.

A strange, preternatural darkness lapped at the edges of the artillery zone. Tigurius had described it as the 'Night Shroud', some piece of necron technology and part of the reason for his psychic blindness. Scipio

tried not to look at the darkness too long. They'd penetrated it easily enough at the perimeter and once through the veil, it was just the ice-fog in front of them.

The Thunderbolts' target was a pylon, situated at the farthest apex of the diamond. He checked the melta bombs mag-locked to his armour. Upon returning to the encampment after the encounter with the flayed ones, they'd re-equipped and resupplied. The original plan was a lightning attack, spearheaded by the assault squads and supported by tactical squads, but without Ixion and Strabo that strategy was no longer viable. They'd stealth their way to the objectives instead, attach incendiaries and ignite them at once in a single hammer-strike. Whatever the explosives only managed to cripple, the heavy weapons would finish.

For their part, the guerrilla fighters were well tooled. Carrying improvised bombs and grenades, as well as some of the magnetic foiling devices they'd used to prevent necron phase-out, they were capable of delivering a significant punch of their own. It was insanely dangerous, but Scipio had no compunction about throwing them into the battle just like his brothers.

He stopped a second to interrogate his retinal display. A series of runic indicators were making their way across his plane of vision. Distance notifiers expressed formation and proximity to the targets. All were making solid progress but a further engagement was nearing.

Each of the artillery pieces, pylon or heavy gauss-cannon, were manned by a small group of raider constructs. Scipio doubted the machineries needed crew to function. He didn't understand necron technology but he had discerned enough to realise that much of it was autonomous or controlled by the lords. Whatever their role, the raiders would need to be dispatched first before incendiaries could be deployed. The attack also had to be simultaneous. Wits dulled as they appeared to be, the necrons would

still activate with defensive protocols as soon as they realised their perimeter was breached and they were under fire.

A rune flashed silently on Scipio's retinal display. Vandar was already in position. He judged Octavian wasn't far either. Casting caution aside he increased the pace, not realising he'd attracted the attention of something dwelling in the Night Shroud.

As the force rod grew hot in his gauntleted fist, Tigurius knew he was getting close to his prey. The crimson energies he'd been following sparked and forked with almost palpable expression. Briefly, he portioned out a small part of his mind to check on the situation of his battle-brothers – they were nearing final positions.

Perfect synchronicity was needed, but the slow-returning threads of his prescience told him that would be so. Satisfied, Tigurius shut them out and focused all of his thought on finding the Voidbringer. Though he didn't know why, the veil was thinning. Visions swirled in his psychic eye, the fragments of those he'd tried to grasp before slowly coming together.

Marshal your thoughts.

Now was not the time to seek out the elusive truth and uncover the forbidding threat that had dogged him since the mission began; now was destruction and the unleashing of his psychic might. At last, he caught his prey, surrounded by a hot corona of red light. It was standing alone on a desolate ridge, surveying its majesty.

Inside his mind, Tigurius coaxed a ball of lightning into being.

Scipio became aware they were under attack when Densk was lifted off his feet as if a set of invisible hooks had caught him and begun reeling the guerrilla fighter in.

Jynn screamed, swinging her gun around to try and draw a bead on his attacker, but it was as if the fog had come alive to take him. Blood was spewing down Densk's beard, his cries of pain muffled by the fact he had no tongue. It was an odd, discordant sound. When a slash of crimson

washed the ground like the insouciant sweep of a painter's brush, Densk fell apart. His body disintegrated into shreds as his assailant revealed itself through the red haze.

Serpentine, with a necron's torso and a set of wicked talon-blades on each hand; it was a wraith. Only partially corporeal, the thing was half blended into the ice-fog. Its eyes blazed with a yearning for further carnage.

Jynn's snap-shot went wild. She half fell, backing up because the monster was so close. Scipio pushed her down as the necron's tail whipped out and the barbed tip missed her head by the smallest margin. He roared, weighing in with his chainsword. Like an adder, the wraith jinked aside and the blade-teeth bit ice-frozen earth. It flicked out a talon, which Scipio fended off with his forearm. Gouges raked down his vambrace but they weren't deep enough to penetrate.

Cator appeared behind it and thrust his gladius between its neck and collarbone. The wraith emitted a sort of part-scream, part machine-whine and twisted to slash at the Ultramarine. Scipio took his chance and cut off the monster's head with his chainsword. Critically damaged, it phased out, leaving only blood in its wake.

Jynn knelt by Densk's remains, sobbing. Scipio seized her by the shoulder and pulled her up. Their subterfuge was exposed. They had to act.

Furious at his impatience, for sealing Densk's death warrant on account of it, Scipio snarled down the comm-feed. 'All Ultramarines, attack now!'

Psychic lightning arced from Tigurius's force rod. It struck Voidbringer's staff as he turned, breaking his strange torpor. A serpent of light and energy, the discharged psychics roiled down the haft of the weapon. He wrestled with it, trapping the force as it coursed across the staff and asserting dominance.

Tigurius's eyes widened. That bolt should have ripped the creature apart.

Energies dissipating from the psychic attack, Voidbringer turned his attention to the Librarian facing off against him on the ridge. A nimbus of power was playing across the psychic hood the Ultramarine wore and his eyes were alive with actinic force. He held the rod out in front of him, so it formed a cross with his body as the spine.

‘Fell creature of the void, oblivion awaits you.’

Unmoved by the threat, Voidbringer only glared. The necron lord appeared... curious.

Again, Tigurius was surprised and horrified at the ancient intelligence in that gaze. It was like the mechanoid was appraising a laboratory specimen. The sensation was unsettling. Tigurius knew enough of the galaxy and its species to realise mankind’s pre-eminence was far from assured. Alien races clamoured to devour, usurp or study humans. It was part of the reason the Emperor had created Space Marines. But the necrontyr were something different, something so old and enduring that even an Adeptus Astartes as powerful as Tigurius was given pause.

Victory against this aeons-old culture with all their knowledge of the universe, their advanced technology, it was... *impossible*. They should give in now, submit to the will of the necrons and accept annihilation. They should—

Stop! The psychic echo was as much a command to his own subconscious as it was to the metal monster. Reasserting his composure, Tigurius smiled mirthlessly at the Voidbringer. ‘I thought the other one was the Herald of Dismay.’

Though his jaw didn’t move, a metallic voice, edged with the bitterness of millennia and abyssal deep, droned from the Voidbringer. ‘*You are the one who tried to penetrate the veil.*’

Tigurius nodded slowly. He felt like an insect being studied beneath a slide, but his resolve was as steel now.

‘I am your doom, creature.’

A tinny, grating sound rattled from the necron's mouth. It was laughter, or what passed for it at least.

Describing arcane sigils of warding that lingered in the air in fire, Tigurius beckoned the monster on.

Voidbringer's eyes narrowed. '*Are you a pyromancer, worm?*'

A flash of light burst from the staff before the Librarian could stop it and hit him square in the chest. Tigurius was spun off his feet and sent sprawling from the ridge.

'*Not a very good one,*' he heard the necron lord remark.

Picking himself up, the Librarian scowled. 'I think I loathed your race less when I assumed you were humourless machines.' Fire sprang from his fingertips, reaching up towards the ridge line above and forcing the Voidbringer to retreat. Earth blackened and cracked as the flames lapped at the edge of the spur, spilling over the lip of rock rising higher and growing hotter. Snow condensed into steam in an eyeblink, scalding the air.

The necron's withdrawal didn't last. A hazy silhouette resolved through the conflagration and the Voidbringer leapt through it, fire trailing on his ancient vestments.

Ice cracked under the impact as the necron lord landed next to Tigurius. He threw out an arm, bodily catching the Librarian who was smashed aside and scraped across the ground. Blood was drooling down his lip as he rose; he could taste the tang of it in his mouth too.

Voidbringer was strong, much more unyielding than the lesser constructs. And he possessed cunning beyond mere programmed response to attack and external stimulus. The necrons, especially these noble castes, were far from machines. Even artificial intelligence didn't describe them accurately. They were something else, something vengeful and terrible. Spite, hatred, malice – the emotions were raw and tangible. Tigurius could feel them like tiny blades rubbing against his skin, like acid-edged pins in his mind.

Though the creature was not a psyker – it bore no warp-aura that the Librarian could detect – the artefacts he wielded were formidable.

As the Voidbringer rose, energy crackled the length of its arcane staff. It coruscated around the tip, a strange pronged sigil Tigurius had seen emblazoned on the carapace of some of the larger constructs. Darkness exuded from his body. Tendrils of night coiled around his limbs and weaved through the necron's skeletal frame.

The monster was well named. Casting about, the Voidbringer assessed the level of infiltration by the Ultramarines and acted accordingly. Shadows stirred in the mist around Tigurius as the necron constructs guarding the artillery began to animate.

‘You are no warp sorcerer,’ said the Librarian, his voice echoing with gathering power.

The Voidbringer's eye sockets flared emerald-bright and Tigurius was transported back to his narrow escape in the world-between-worlds. *‘I am more than you could ever comprehend, human. I am eternal!’* A cascade of magnesium fire coursed from the necron's staff.

Tigurius was ready for the attack and quickly fashioned a defensive sigil in the air. The arc of flame spilled against it, dispersing around the edges of a cerulean shield. It struck again, the necron throwing more force behind the blow. Staggered, Tigurius struggled to maintain his footing but repelled the energies. Sweat froze upon his brow as quickly as it formed, only to melt into hot steam a moment later. He needed to assert dominance in the duel and threw a bolt of chained lightning.

Voidbringer's body became as incorporeal as mist as the darkling mantle he wore engulfed him, rendering the psychic attack ineffective. The Night Shroud expanded, drawing strength from the blackness surrounding the artillery. Shreds of shadow became as hard as onyx as they wrapped themselves around Tigurius and all light was eclipsed. As the baleful gaze of the Voidbringer filled his vision, the Librarian felt his armour contract.

Seals cracked, ancient parchments and votive charms tore and broke apart as the necron lord exerted his cruel will.

‘All is night. All is black at the end of days...’

Tigurius was fading. His mind was awash with endless darkness. It filled his senses, overwhelmed his thoughts and in that moment of near-destruction he achieved a mote of clarity. The visions, those that had dogged the Librarian since he’d made landfall on Damnos, became as clear as crystal. Death, it was death that he saw. Not the death of a world but the death of a hero. At first he believed it was him and this was, now, the instant of his demise. But the visions sharpened, just as the real world dimmed, and became more lucid. The truth was opened to him, a final torment before the end.

Tigurius saw...

Scipio hacked the last of the sentries apart. Its spinal column shattered and the necron phased out, but more were coming.

‘Attach explosives.’ He slammed the melta bomb against the base of the pylon, mag-locking to the strange metal. Cator and Herdantes provided covering fire. Bolt shells and incandescent plasma chopped into the ice-fog and the advancing silhouettes were blasted apart. Gauss-fire answered from the reinforcements coming in their wake as the damaged necrons reassembled and rejoined the attack.

‘Will this even work?’

Scipio turned at Jynn’s voice. She was hunkered down with Sia, returning fire when they could. She looked afraid. Densk’s death had clearly rocked her, but she remained determined to fight.

‘I don’t know,’ said Scipio. ‘That’s why we need to use everything.’ He glanced briefly at the tactical display in his retinal lens. All attack groups were in position. Then he saw Tigurius’s rune.

It was amber. The Librarian’s vitals were weakening. Scipio looked across the ice-shrouded plateau and found Tigurius locked in battle with a

necron lord. He was slowly being crushed, enveloped by a veil of darkness.

‘Cator, bring your plasma gun and follow me.’

Scipio ran off towards the Librarian, his brother in tow.

‘Wait!’ shouted Jynn. ‘Don’t leave us!’

Brakkus, Herdantes and the others were engaging the necrons closing on the pylon. They were stretched and more wraiths were moving sinuously on the undefended humans.

Scipio paused, torn. He had brought them into this fight. After they’d penetrated the mountains, he could have left Jynn and her guerrilla fighters behind. They could have watched from a safe distance. But he wanted to destroy the necrons utterly, smash their artillery and grab glory for gaining the Thanatos Hills. It was too late to turn back. The humans had chosen their fate. He ran to Tigurius.

‘Scipio!’ Jynn’s impassioned cries followed him all the way like a curse.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ever since becoming a battle-brother, Sergeant Atavian had been in the Second Company Devastators. It was a full-fledged Ultramarine's first calling in the Chapter proper – Maxima Atavian had simply never left. His squad were known as the Titan Slayers, a name which they'd earned for obvious reasons. As a heavy weapon trooper, Atavian had principally been responsible for the lascannon. It was his favoured weapon. Tank-killer, it was also called. Atavian's motto had always been, 'Why stop at tanks?'

The honour of carrying the Slayers' lascannon went to Brothers Hektar and Ulius. Sergeant Atavian had to satisfy himself with guiding their destructive fury. During his century of service, he had seen many monsters and machineries felled by the hot beams of a lascannon. Tyranid bio-forms, daemoniac engines of the Great Enemy, ramshackle ork battle-fortresses – Atavian had seen them all undone by this stalwart weapon. For a Space Marine on foot and at range, there was nothing so powerful. But here on Damnos, he had seen such technologies that he wondered if even a lascannon would prevail against them. Floating obelisks of living metal, skeletal warriors utterly destroyed only to rise as if unscathed, small beetle-like creatures capable of twisting a weapon's machine-spirit and turning it on its wielder – this was what the Second were up against, the necrontyr.

On bended knee and with their heads bowed, Atavian and his brothers recited the litanies of accuracy and function. They had formed a half-circle, heavies in the middle either side of their sergeant and bolters at the ends. A flattened column offered them little cover but a good vantage point to overlook the wasteland tundra between the edge of Arcona City and Kellenport.

Across from the Titan Slayers were their brother Devastators, led by Sergeant Tirian. Atavian gave him a curt salute when he'd finished the litanies and was on his feet again, to which Tirian replied by holding his power fist aloft and giving a slow nod. His squad, Guilliman's Hammer, occupied a staggered platform of rock. It might once have been the tiered steps of a temple but was all but obliterated now. Heavy bolters took the first level, the missile launchers behind them crouched down and pointing eastwards towards the advancing necrons.

The shadows of the monoliths were easy to pick out as the sun faded quickly on the horizon. These would be Atavian's principal targets, the living metal pyramids that fired death from the crystals at their zeniths. There was a larger monstrosity moving amongst the still-gargantuan smaller ones. It was taller, a tower of long tubular crystal attached to a conventional monolith base. Energies crackled between this one and the other two surrounding it. A node of some sort, Atavian decided. He put the targeting scope back on the stock of his bolter and addressed his warriors.

'Steel and death! Meltas and plasma to the fore, tank-killers with me at the rear. Remember how we took the *Soulmauler* apart, a renegade Titan, no less! Remind me why we earned the Principex Maxima that day and why our name shall pass in to legend when we are dead.'

Shouts of approval and affirmation met the sergeant's words. These were campaign veterans, despite their role as Devastators. He trusted each and every one.

‘Glory to the Titan Slayers and may the God-Emperor revel in our furious thunder!’

A collective roar belted from the Ultramarines mouths.

Sergeant Atavian had never been prouder. The cries of his Titan Slayers echoed into silence, as did the shouts of Tirian’s warriors across from them. One last look down the targeter revealed the necron hordes were coming within range. Emerald energy was building between the phalanx of monoliths. Everything depended on their incapacitation. Atavian prepared to give the order to fire.

‘Pinion’, the tutors of the Chapter, Praxor’s old masters, had called it. ‘When one force manages to outflank and surround another.’

To the west, the necrons from the tomb itself, amongst them their overlord and the one Sicarius wanted to bring to single combat. To the east, the forces that had got around them to assault Kellenport, recently recalled to close the Ultramarines in a trap they might not escape from.

Knowing he faced a foe on two fronts, Sicarius had arranged his forces in two semi-circles each facing an aspect of where a threat was coming from. To the rear he positioned the Devastators. The necrons had brought machineries: the hulking monoliths Praxor had seen the captain take on single-handedly. Through sheer bravura, he had destroyed one of them, or at least immobilised it. If only they had three more Sicariuses with the same fortune, the same skill to achieve that feat three more times. Tactical Squad Solinus completed the rearguard, ready to wade in once the heavy guns had done all they could.

Praxor was amongst the force facing the brunt of the necron infantry as well as its command echelon. The Dreadnoughts Ultracius and Agrippen joined them, stoic alongside the Lions of Macragge. At either flank, Sicarius had used the assault squads as anchor. They would strike at the heart of the phalanxes, cutting a way through so that the captain of Second might get his opportunity to kill the necron overlord.

Chaplain Trajan knelt in the centre, between the two semi-circles of Ultramarines. Their last stand was apparently on top of the remains of some ancient basilica. The Chaplain had discovered a large stone aquila buried under all the fallen snow. He performed a final blessing on top of the ruins, beseeching the Emperor to protect and grant them courage.

In his heart, Praxor knew this would be the single biggest and hardest battle he would ever fight as an Ultramarine. Making the sign of the Imperial eagle over his breast, he hoped it would not be his last. His gaze fell on Sicarius.

The captain was looking to the north, towards the Thanatos Hills.

‘It’s quiet,’ he said underneath his breath. His Lions, including Daceus, stood by silently.

Praxor spoke up. ‘A cessation to the barrage could mean that Scipio...’ He paused to correct himself. ‘Sergeant Vorolanus and Lord Tigurius have been successful in their mission.’

Sicarius turned. His eyes were hard like granite as they appraised Praxor. He hadn’t realised he’d intruded on the captain’s private thoughts.

‘*Scipio?*’

‘He is – was – my friend, brother-captain.’

Sicarius looked to the west. Battle was approaching rapidly.

‘We are, all of us, linked by a shared brotherhood. Our blood is the distilled life essence of our primarch, may he one day stir from slumber in the Temple of Correction. But some bonds are stronger than others. Do you understand?’

Praxor nodded humbly.

Satisfied he was understood, Sicarius drew his Tempest Blade and levelled it at the oncoming necrons. It was a gesture he was overfond of making.

‘Do you know what I see out there, brother-sergeant?’ he said. ‘I see destiny. I see our names alongside the legends of our Chapter’s greatest

heroes, inscribed for all time on the walls of the Temple of Hera. Are you ready to embrace it?’

He didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, Sicarius summoned his Lions and advanced to the front of the line. Agrippen was close by.

‘You wish to share in the glory of this moment, venerable one?’ asked the captain.

‘It is only fitting that I am by my liege-lord’s right hand. It is the Chapter’s will.’

Sicarius laughed, loud and belligerent, before putting on his helmet. So close now, the necrons seemed endless. The Lions appeared unfazed, their demeanour stoic. It had been Praxor’s desire to join them, to be like Gaius Prabian or Daceus. In these last moments before the final clash, he found himself questioning whether he could stare into the void and not blink.

He caught Vandius looking at him. Perhaps the Company Banner Bearer could guess what was on his mind. What he thought of Praxor’s ambitions was unknown; he merely nodded to the sergeant and fixed his standard high. The gilded twin-headed eagle perched upon the Ultima symbol around a deathless skull stared down upon the Space Marines as if measuring them. ‘Guardians of the Temple’, warriors of the Second – if they survived, even achieved victory here, it would be spoken about for hundreds of years to come.

Sicarius seemed attuned to the magnitude of the moment.

‘Destiny!’ His voice echoed around the shattered basilica like a clarion call. ‘Sons of Ultramar, if you seek renown eternal then it is before you. Ours is a proud line, it is cobalt and steel, it is unbreakable, it is spirit as adamantium. We are kings, you and I, like the old lords of Macragge in bygone days. On this soil, this frozen earth, we will make our stand and live forever in the annals of our brothers. Fight for the fallen, fight for the Second and the legacy left by those who came before us. Honour them with your deeds, your sacrifice.’ He extended his open hand and clenched

it tight. 'Reach out for immortality with your gauntleted fist and seize it!' The Tempest Blade was held aloft. Its edge shimmered in the fading sunlight, casting it in visceral red. 'In the name of Roboute Guilliman, *Victoris Ultra!*'

The call to arms resonated throughout the ruins, repeated by every Ultramarine who was about to give his blood to war. As the roar of it slowly faded, the sound was replaced by the merciless, clanking march of the necrons.

Sicarius turned away from the hordes for a moment to look at Praxor. 'Sergeant Manorian, you and your Shieldbearers will be at my side.'

'It is our honour, my lord,' Praxor replied. Yet after everything he'd seen on Damnos, it didn't feel as glorious as he'd expected.

Only the Lions were listening. Only they, his honour guard and inner circle knights, could hear what Sicarius had to say next.

'No battle cries for them, no rousing speeches,' he murmured. The Lions maintained their silence. 'They are devoid of humanity, these necrons. They have no capacity for compassion or pity, or any notions of glory or comradeship.' He spat the words, repulsed at such hollow creatures. Sicarius shook his head slowly. 'I will need to get into the heart of their ranks. Your blades and bolters will open the way.'

'We are your unsheathed swords, sire,' snarled Gaius Prabian with a vertical blade salute. He was eager for battle.

'When it comes, Gaius, you must lower your sword and allow me to fight it alone.'

The Champion assented but did so reluctantly.

'Daceus, you will lead them once I am engaged. Vandius, the banner must not fall.'

Both nodding, the veteran-sergeant clanged his power fist against his right pauldron, whilst the Second Company's standard bearer replied, 'To my dying breath, lord.'

‘And you, Apothecary,’ Sicarius turned his head to look at Venatio. ‘You know what your duty is.’

‘I hope not to have to perform it, but the legacy of Ultramar will be preserved, rest assured of that, my captain.’

Lastly, Sicarius spoke to them all again as one. ‘You are my brothers, my equals and peers. I expect of you what I expect from myself – duty unflinching, courage unwavering, blade unswerving. These soulless automatons will drown the galaxy in darkness if they are left unchecked. I care not for Damnos, I care that this foe is taught to fear the Adeptus Astartes. Mankind will not be destroyed without a fight. Let it begin here, on these frozen wastes. Whatever else, the Ultramarines must not fail. The necrons have to be stopped, one way or another.’

Vast phalanxes of raiders had been roused from the tomb. The Architect had done well, but the Undying was finding it increasingly difficult to keep hold of that thought. His mind was awash with visions of destruction and annihilation. The cold emptiness of eternity clawed at his resolve. Far from being an unfeeling golem of metal and machinery, he was deeply afraid of the long dark. He had already slept, it had seemed endlessly, and now awake he was confronted by oblivion of an altogether different stripe.

Destroyers glided on their repulsor platforms, moving slowly into formation at either end of the necron battle line. Abhorred by those who could still comprehend such an emotion, simply avoided by those with simpler engrams left to them after the long sleep, the destroyers were both loathsome and terrifying at the same time. Unlike most of the necrontyr, even those of the basest level, the destroyers had abandoned all hope of returning to *fleshtime*. Their bodies were... amended, given over to the pursuit of decimation. Though it scared him to admit it, the Undying liked the idea. He could imagine repulsors where his legs now were, a gauss-cannon to replace his arm; perhaps his war-scythe could be merged with the other limb too.

Such carnage I will reap... All the souls of this world.

Out in front, ahead of his bodyguard who crowded around him with glaives crackling with eldritch light, were the immortals. Stoic and implacable, these superior constructs would spearhead the advance. Anything that survived them was obviously worthy indeed and something the Undying should test his prowess against. Hubris then, and arrogance, still stirred in his cruel machine heart.

He surveyed the metal multitudes of skeletal warriors, each the same as the last, without need for banners or laurels of any kind, and knew the days of humankind were finite. These warriors were but a fraction of the cohorts still slumbering within the tomb. With a wordless command, the Undying impelled his army forward and imagined the slaughter to come.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jynn Evvers was strong-willed, some might even say fearless. She'd had to be. After losing her husband to the quakes – it seemed longer than a couple of years, more like lifetimes – she'd needed courage and had dug down into herself to find it. For a while, during the darkest days, Jynn had wondered if she'd come back from that insular place at all. Buried so deeply, she'd returned a different person when she'd finally emerged. The prospect of living her life alone, without Korve, terrified her. She would have gladly spent all of eternity with that man. Even the ice and the long, relentless days didn't seem so bad when he was still there. When Korve died, a part of Jynn died too. She became as hard and unyielding as the rock face she laboured over for the greater glories of the Imperium.

She saw the same sense of disconnection in Scipio. He was a Space Marine, as far from humankind as was possible without actually being a different species. Jynn was in awe of these warriors from beyond the stars, they all were, but she also pitied them. Never at peace, incapable of love. Bonds of duty bound them to their purpose. It was a noble one, and they valued honour, like any soldier, but had little else. Bred without fear, without compassion and only the will to act, they were the warriors that mankind needed. But why then did they feel grief? Perhaps it was to separate them, however thinly, from the unliving automatons that were trying to eradicate the people of Damnos? Perhaps it was some

anachronism of humanity that had endured whatever process it took to become a Space Marine?

There was a hardness to Scipio. Jynn had once believed she was devoid of emotion too and then the attack on the Thanatos Hills came and all of that changed. Guerrilla warfare was one thing, striking from the dark, ambushing small groups – it was dangerous but doable. This was insane. Out here in the open, Jynn felt exposed. She felt threatened. Most of all, she felt fear. She'd believed she'd given up on life, that it didn't matter if she died. She was wrong and it took mortality staring her in the face for her to realise that.

‘Sia, get down!’

Though the Space Marines bore the brunt of the fighting, there were too many necrons for them to repel at once. Without Scipio and the others, the humans were in tremendous danger. If they died here, their names would not be put on a plaque and venerated in some dusty temple. Their legacy would not live on for future generations. They would be dead and that would be an end to it.

Jynn grabbed Sia by the collar of her jacket and dragged her down behind the massive platform supporting the necron weapon. She'd heard Scipio call it a ‘pylon’. It was huge and terrifying, an arc of black metal spitting emerald-tinged death into the sky. The noise of it hurt her ears. Jynn had gritted her teeth so long that when she'd shouted to Sia she'd found it hard to dislodge them.

Sia went down with a grunt. She was clutching a pack filled with explosive. ‘We need to get this attached to the gun, bring it down. It's what Densk, Holdst – what all the others – would have wanted.’

Gauss-fire flashed overhead, burning the air with its acrid stench. Below the fog line everything else was hazy white. Necron silhouettes were moving in the mist, though. Their eyes were the first things that became

visible. Jynn saw them everywhere. Lucky for her and Sia, they had yet to turn in their direction.

‘You can’t avenge them if you’re dead. We have to stay down for a while.’

Sia shook her head. There was a wildness in her eyes, a sense of abandon that said she’d cracked under the pressure of it all.

‘It’s now or never, captain.’

Jynn reaffirmed her grip. ‘Sia, no.’

‘I can’t stay like this. Ever since the camp, ever since...’ She was crying. Sia threw off Jynn’s hand and was on her feet. She got a couple of metres with the pack and was unclasping it when the beam caught her in the chest.

Jynn cried out but Sia was gone, her torso vaporised by the flayer blast. She slumped, gurgling blood, and died.

Holding her breath, Jynn was waiting to see if the necron would follow up on its kill. The hard bang of bolter fire caught its attention and it moved away. Sia was right, even if her attempt at completing the mission was suicidal – they needed to attach the bombs. Jynn got down on her belly – even through the thermal layers, the icy ground felt cold – and started to elbow her way towards the fallen pack. She had explosives of her own, tied up in webbing around her back, but they’d need Sia’s too.

Screaming came through the fog, perversely crystal clear despite the hammering artillery. Jynn recognised the voices and knew they were getting slaughtered. It could have only been minutes, but it felt like hours. For the fifth time, she inwardly cursed Scipio. A means to an end, that’s all she and her men were to him.

Fear closed in again when she reached the pack. Her fingers were shaking almost uncontrollably, and not from the cold, as she tried to remove the improvised bomb. Jynn breathed deeply, trying to master her terror, and achieved a small amount of calm. It was just enough to remove

the explosive payload from the pack, arm it and attach the whole thing to the pylon. She wanted to detonate it immediately, but the resulting firestorm would kill her if she didn't get clear. Instead, she pulled out her pistol and made for the next artillery piece.

One down, one more to go.

Scipio was running. The sound of Jynn's voice still echoed on the air, but he banished it from his mind. Necrons were flooding the artillery now, summoned by their lord. The Ultramarines had nearly run out of time.

A glance at his retinal display showed that Vandar and Octavian had attached explosives and were ready to proceed. Scipio opened up the comm-feed to them both. 'Execute now!'

Plumes of fire erupted from locations around the plateau a few seconds later. In the distance, one of the pylons collapsed. Its weapon-arc crumpled as it struck the base, severed by the explosion. Emerald energy rippled across the remains frenziedly.

Scipio drove on, Cator just behind him.

The sergeant dispatched a necron warrior that loomed in their path with his chainsword. It came out of the mist late and Scipio had to react quickly. Instinct and urgency were guiding him. Consequence became secondary. All that mattered was Tigurius.

Cator blasted another off its feet with a quick burst from his plasma gun. The blue beam cut through its spinal column, ate up some of the torso and the mechanisms within. It was enough damage to make it phase out. But the necrons didn't stop. The Ultramarines were being overrun. Scipio shut off the urgent pleas for reinforcement from Brakkius. A blow-by-blow report was unfolding from the other Thunderbolts. He was pulling back, along with Herdantes. Largo too, together with Garrik and Auris, were trying to retreat. Scipio wasn't listening any more. He had to get to Tigurius. With a single act of bravura, he could save them all and atone for Orad's death.

Cutting down another of the advancing necrons, he yelled, ‘Brother, are you still with me?’

Cator was resolute. ‘Heading straight into the jaws of death, sergeant.’

An explosion tore up the ground nearby as another of the necron guns was ripped apart. It rocked Scipio and Cator on their feet and pushed away the ice-fog with a belt of emerald-tinged smoke. The Ultramarines let it roll over them.

The pall of smoke and debris was thick. They had to fight just to be free of it.

Largo was shouting down the comm-feed, ‘Necron artillery sixty per cent effective, damaged but still operational. Our incendiaries haven’t worked.’

Grey cloud was everywhere, a directionless void without end.

Largo was insistent. ‘Your orders, brother-sergeant.’

Checking the retinal display, knowing they were close to Tigurius but not yet within striking distance, Scipio found similar reports coming from Octavian and Vandar. Two of the artillery pieces were down, but the others were still functional.

‘Get heavies and whatever grenades you have left on those guns, brother.’

‘Negative, sir. We are no longer in control of the strike area. Necron aggression is too heavy. Falling back to the centre.’

Scipio cursed. Without the assault squads there was no backup plan, no route of egress should the mission fail. His voice was bitter. ‘I’ve led us to our deaths.’

He felt something seize his wrist and was about to lash out when he saw it was Cator. ‘We’re not done yet, Scipio. Courage and honour.’

Scipio clapped him on the shoulder and nodded once.

The smoke cleared. As the two Ultramarines emerged from the cloud, their objective came into sight – they’d reached Tigurius. At least they

could achieve something.

Another necron was coming at them out of the ice-fog and Scipio was forced to meet it. He only had time to point at the darkness crushing Tigurius.

‘Shoot it!’

Cator hesitated. ‘I might hit Lord Tigurius.’

‘Do it now, brother!’ The shriek of chainblade teeth striking metal sounded close by.

Muttering an oath to the primarch, Cator took aim into the dark veil and fired.

Pain was an outmoded concept in the experiential range of the Voidbringer. He had long ago outgrown the capacity to feel the sensation. Even so, he knew he was injured and the desire for self-preservation still influenced his actions. In order to find his attacker, he had to release the pyromancer. He was nearly dead, anyway. Voidbringer resolved to eradicate this new threat and then finish what he had started. Darkness billowing about him, withdrawn from crushing the pyromancer, the necron lord searched the battlefield. He unleashed the power of his staff and the hot beam found Voidbringer’s enemy and pitched him off his feet.

‘Insect!’

The brief moment of pique cost him. When he turned his attention back to the pyromancer he saw his enemy was far from defeated, he was glowing.

An aura of power surrounded Tigurius, chasing away the darkness from the necron lord’s unnatural veil. It was a magnesium-bright sun, banishing the shadow with the Librarian as its focus. Jagged forks of lightning peeled off from the aura around his body. His eyes were alive with a captured storm, mirroring the tumultuous thunderhead surging into being around him.

The air cracked with the sound of his voice. ‘Now you die, machine.’

Bolt after bolt of psychic lightning hammered into the Voidbringer, who reeled beneath the blows. A crack split the monster's chest, tore off an arm. His arcane staff spilled away on the eldritch wind summoned by the Librarian. Harsh and metallic, the necron lord roared as if in agony. Tigurius doubted it could feel, it was merely railing against its imminent demise. Even when the Voidbringer was nearly sundered, he didn't stop – Tigurius poured it on, opening his mind to the warp and releasing its terrible power.

Psychic lightning was ripping into his body, tearing away strips, burning mechanisms so old and complex that no human mind could ever hope to understand them. It was happening too fast – even the Voidbringer's enhanced regenerative abilities couldn't self-repair quickly enough. A mote of something cold and unpleasant flickered in his engrammic circuitry. Something akin to anxiety seized his aeons-old mind for just a moment as the necron lord contemplated the long dark.

I am the master of darkness, not its slave...

The self-declaration seemed pointless in the circumstances. Escape was still possible. He would not submit yet. Voidbringer *would* be royarch. He would self-repair, kill this worm that had stung him and assume the throne. Ankh, the self-aggrandising plebeian, had given him the means to do it. Before he was lost, Voidbringer activated the resurrection orb.

The monster was almost destroyed. Scipio watched from a safe distance, the broken body of Cator in his arms. A long burn marred the Imperial eagle on his plastron, but at least Cator was still alive. He glared, willing retribution on the necron lord. Leaking fluids, machine parts crackling and fizzing in his skeletal armature, the Voidbringer was done. Tigurius was relentless and so too was the storm blazing from his fingertips. It lit up the plateau, searing away the ice-fog.

Scipio's eyes narrowed. Something was happening amidst the storm. Impossibly, the necron lord was self-repairing. Despite the fact his form was being stripped apart by psychic fire, the Voidbringer was

regenerating! Living metal pooled together, running in rivulets over his shattered body, and started to form fresh carapace. Seemingly terminal wounds in the necron were reknitting, sealing. Scipio noticed the orb in the monster's chest. It was black like onyx and shimmered as the regeneration process perpetuated itself.

Thumbing the activation stud on his chainsword, Scipio knew what he had to do. To step into that lightning meant certain death. It was a small price. He only hoped his sacrifice would be enough.

Voidbringer was laughing. He glared down at the pyromancer who forced more of his crude sorcery into being.

It is to no avail, worm. I am eternal. I am—

He stopped laughing. Voidbringer's savage joy turned to anguish and horror. His wounds were reopening, his body was disintegrating. The pull of the long dark returned, teasing at his consciousness.

No, no...

An inner chill swept over him. The scent of the tomb and the dust of the long sleep filled his olfactory sensors. It was simulation, he was sure of it. His memory engrams were reacting to his approaching destruction. Voidbringer tried to engage with the resurrection orb, to shut off the process, but it was too late. Instead of healing him, it was disassembling his body, unravelling systems and the technology of his entire being. As the genebred ones closed with their weapons, sensing his demise, Voidbringer cursed Ankh. The Architect had tricked him.

Tigurius held up a warding hand.

‘Wait!’

The lightning was ebbing as he recalled the power of the warp back into check, marshalling the destructive forces he'd called upon by using his psychic hood as a cerebral dampener. It was a complex procedure and he created sigils of temperance and control in the air to focus his thoughts.

Instead of a conduit, the Librarian's force rod became a vacuum channelling the psychic energies away to dissipate harmlessly.

‘Wait,’ he breathed, feeling the pull on his physical strength as he asserted mastery of his mental power. Light gave way to dark, the ice-fog came back and the plateau was stilled. An intense fatigue washed over the Librarian, as if his entire body was a tensed muscle allowed to relax. He staggered and fell, but waved Scipio away as he came to help him.

He scarcely had the breath to command: ‘Finish it. Do it now.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Atavian saw the energy lances cut into the hard metal of the monoliths only for the damage to be absorbed and nullified a second later.

‘Mercy of Hera, are they impervious to all harm?’

Tirian’s voice came over the feed – Sergeant Atavian hadn’t realised he’d broadcast his words to the other Devastators. They were on an open channel, in order to better coordinate their fire. In the fury of the barrage, that fact had slipped Atavian’s mind. ‘I heard that Captain Sicarius destroyed one single-handedly,’ said Tirian.

‘I don’t doubt it, brother. Perhaps he’d be willing to come over from the front line, run the three hundred or so metres between us and it, and show us how he did the first time.’

Tirian’s booming laughter was at odds with the seriousness of the situation, but it made Atavian smile.

A few hundred metres was no distance at all. It was optimum range for lascannons but then most decent distances were – Atavian had never known a more accurate, more relentlessly deadly weapon. Hektar and Ulius hammered the advancing monoliths that were using their energies to transport necron phalanxes from outside Kellenport to the force attacking the Ultramarine rearguard in the ruins of Arcona City.

Tirian's squad drilled the infantry. The muzzle flashes of the heavy bolters were almost constant, burning through their belt-feeds in seconds rather than minutes. It was testament to the sergeant's skill and preparation as well as that of his gunners that not one of the heavies had jammed. He was no Techmarine, but Atavian muttered a blessing to the Omnissiah for that. Explosions blossomed in the packed necron ranks as high-velocity bolt shells smashed into the front ranks. It was like throwing rocks into the ocean. There was a ripple as some of the mechanoids were destroyed but then the sea of metal subsided again, the casualties swallowed into the horde or simply redeployed through the monolith portals.

The floating pyramids had to go, Atavian decided. By crippling the enemy's ability to recycle its fallen troops directly into the battle the Ultramarines at least stood a chance of slowing them down. As things stood, they couldn't even do that.

'Aim for the crystal nodes,' Atavian told his heavies. 'All weapons.'

As the Titan Slayers lifted their aim, a shadow fell across them. The whine of repulsor engines promoted Atavian to shout, 'Down!'

A pair of necron gun-platforms hovered overhead at speed.

'I can vanquish them!' It was Brother Ikus – he'd stayed on his feet. 'In the Emperor's name!' The burst from his plasma cannon engulfed the lead gun-platform, turning it into a mass of plummeting fire-wreathed wreckage. The second jinked out of the plasma bolt's path, avoiding the worst of its fury, and returned fire.

Ikus swung the heavy weapon around, grunting with the effort. The plasma coils on his back-mounted generator were still cycling. The necron's heavy gauss-cannon sent out a pulse of emerald light that bored through the Ultramarine's armour, transfixing him. Ikus shook as most of his internal organs were flayed to atoms and then crashed head-first down the steps.

‘Neutralise it!’ Atavian was pointing towards the gun-platform, which was wheeling around for another pass until one of Tirian’s missile launchers tore it open in mid-air. The necron plummeted to the earth just in front of the other Devastators, twisted and on fire.

Brother Korvus of the Titan Slayers slung his bolter as he went to take up Ikus’s fallen plasma cannon. Meanwhile, one of Tirian’s warriors had made it to the gun-platform’s crash site to execute the stricken necron in the debris.

‘Still alive,’ said Korvus, checking Ikus’s vitals.

‘Put that cannon on the monoliths,’ ordered Atavian, sending another of the bolter-armed battle-brothers to drag Ikus to relative safety. He turned his attention back to the monoliths. In the distance, they were turning their energy to something new. A web of light was growing between the three hovering structures, the larger one at its nexus.

‘That can’t be good,’ Atavian muttered, before ordering the lascannons to intensify fire on the middle monolith. The tactics had changed. Rather than overwhelm the Ultramarines with infantry, the necrons would scour their bodies from the very earth with hellish firepower.

Watching their implacable advance, knowing there was little else he could do to resist the monoliths, Atavian wished he had more lascannons.

Ullyious Ixion cursed as the necron gun-platforms escaped his wrath. He was still shaking loose the wreckage of the last machine he had crushed when he landed. The end of his jump took him into a phalanx of raiders and he immediately set about them with a deadly arsenal of plasma pistol and power fist. Alongside their sergeant, Macragge’s Avengers were imperious and brutal. A spew of flame ripped through the packed necron ranks from Ptolon’s flamer. His brothers leapt on the burning mechanoids and cut them apart with chainswords. It was tough work; the necrons were hard, but the raiders fell back before the assault squad’s onslaught.

More gun-platforms, a different group, were coming around again as Ixion looked to the skies. Engage, destroy, manoeuvre and repeat: these

were the tactical rotas of an Assault Marine. At their sergeant's sub-vocal command, Macragge's Avengers boosted into the air leaving scorched earth behind them.

Near the apex of the jump, Ixion asked, 'How does Strabo fare?'

The other assault squad, the self-dubbed Heroes of Selonopolis, were on the opposite flank to the Macragge's Avengers and focused on similar targets. Ixion had instructed Brother Ptolon to keep a tally.

'They outstrip us by a single gun-platform, sergeant.'

Targets, urgent and red, were coming into view through Ixion's retinal lenses. He took aim down the small barrel of his plasma pistol. 'Then let us even the score.'

Even in desperate battle, squad rivalry was evident. Sicarius liked it that way – it kept his warrior-brothers sharp. So did Ixion.

The necrons were everywhere. It was a battle without end. Ixion revelled in it.

'Death from the heavens, fire and wrath! For Ultramar!'

Below the aerial duelling between the assault squads and the necron gun-platforms, Praxor was cutting apart the last of a raider group sent to blunt his attack. The Shieldbearers were rampant through the mechanoids' ranks; Praxor had never fought beside his warriors this fired-up. He, too, was at the peak of his prowess. Deep within the thick of the necrons, they needed to be.

He saw Sicarius just ahead of him through the melee. It was close-up work, bolters and blades, just what Space Marines were made for. Though tough, the raiders were not as adept at close combat as the Space Marines – it put them at a disadvantage despite their regenerative capability. In hand-to-hand, or at close range, it was easier to ensure a necron was badly damaged enough that they phased out; at distance, where the Ultramarines had first engaged, too many were self-repairing and getting back up.

Though not equipped specifically for assault, Praxor had ordered his squad to switch to gladius and bolt pistols as soon as the necrons were within range. Advancing in a 'V' formation with the sergeant at the tip, the Shieldbearers were brutal and shredded the mechanoids' ranks.

Agrippen was merciless.

Both he and Ultracius had waded into the enemy through a few seconds behind Sicarius. They ranged at either flank of the captain and his Lions, crushing bodies with their power fists and unleashing close-proximity barrages with their main weapons.

Against the Dreadnoughts, the necrons had no answer. Their flying gun-platforms couldn't get close; Ixion and Strabo were marshalling the skies. Nothing else could touch them. Unable to draw significant firepower against the venerable warriors, the necrons were getting slaughtered. But where one raider fell, another three replaced it. And these were just the rank and file; the elites would be a much tougher prospect. Sicarius's plan was a risky one. If he didn't draw the necron overlord into battle soon, all of the Dreadnoughts' efforts, the efforts of all the Ultramarines, would be for nothing.

A moment of calm descended over Praxor, his closest foes all dispatched for now. It enabled him to take stock of the battle. The Ultramarines had ventured quite far from the ruined basilica and driven a small wedge of cobalt into the necron sea of metal. As it got further, the wedge narrowed like a slow-moving lance seeking out the heart of its foes – in this case, the necron overlord. Another phalanx was moving around to try and stymie the daring Ultramarines' attack.

Its machine-spirit humming for further death, Praxor pressed his power sword up to his battle-helm to beseech the blessing of the Emperor and the primarch before thrusting back into the fray.

The gilded necron overlord was not easy to miss. Sicarius had the creature target-locked in his left retinal lens. Schemata scrolled across the right,

overlaying his vision. Weaknesses were hard to identify in the monster's metal armature. He was plated like the other necrons, but bigger, the same size as the elites pressing ahead of him in a tight warrior-cohort.

They were of a different caste, these mechanoids; just as implacable but better drilled. The elites stayed close to their lord, just in front of a tight ring of bodyguards. The latter wielded shimmering war-glaives that looked like they'd shear straight through power armour. Much like the elites, these too would need to be broken open in order to reach the overlord.

He had gambled with the Ultramarines under his command, allowed them to fall into the necron lord's web, all so he could draw the monster out.

'You have me, creature,' he whispered to the confines of his battle-helm. 'Now come and claim me.'

Sicarius's mind was set: one way or another this war would end between him and the gilded necron. Even if he had to kill every one of the elites and then destroy the honour guard, he would do it. To the death.

The comm-feed in the captain's ear crackled, indicating long-range interference. He severed a raider's torso with his Tempest Blade, immolating another with a close burst from his plasma pistol.

'This is Sicarius. Proceed,' he growled.

The voice that answered was not who he expected but the news it brought allowed another plan to form in the captain's mind.

Cato Sicarius smiled.

'Daceus,' he said, turning to his second-in-command. 'Prepare the force to withdraw.'

The veteran-sergeant was pummelling a raider with his power fist as he looked up. 'Sir?'

'We fall back to Kellenport as originally planned.'

'Our forces are boxed in, brother-captain. We have no route of retreat.'

'Not yet. Defensive postures for all troops. Do it now, brother-sergeant.'

The order was relayed. The Ultramarines who'd fought the necrons back this far were told to give up the ground they'd won and consolidate at the ruins.

'I have an attack vector to the elites. We can engage. I repeat, we can engage.'

Ixion was soaring on the flaming pillars of his jump pack, locking onto his next target, when Daceus's voice brought his imagined glory crashing down to earth.

'Negative. Pull back to the ruins, all squads.'

The feed was cut. Ixion pulled up short, landing in a patch of no-man's-land with his squad.

Brother Ptolon thundered down alongside him. 'Sergeant?'

'We're falling back to the basilica ruins, all of us.'

Ixion looked heavenwards and saw Strabo was already on his way. He did not question, he did not doubt – he merely obeyed. But Ullyious Ixion did feel his wrath magnified at the denial of his warrior-urge.

He craned his neck, looking up into the stars appearing in the sky, and ignited his jump-jets in a stream of fire. 'Fly, Avengers!'

'Bring it down!'

Hektar and Ulius struck the lead monolith time and again but every blazing bolt was simply absorbed by the machine. Inexorably, it came forward with the other two monoliths moving behind it in perfect unison. Slow and ponderous, whatever the triumvirate was about to unleash would be terrible. As he shouted the order, Atavian knew they had to stop it. But as the energy nexus strung between the crystal nodes of each of the pyramids grew into a blazing coruscation, the sergeant was struck by a solemn truth.

We are going to fail.

Emerald lightning crackled around the lead monolith's apex as the energy tendrils were drawn up its tubular conduits and into its crystal matrix. A corona of light built around the crystal, increasing in intensity with the passing of each second.

Atavian gave the only order he could think of that would make any difference. 'Get into cover!'

A thick beam of power pulsed from the lead monolith's crystal. It struck the steps just below the Titan Slayers' position, turning the air to steam and the world to fire around them. The shockwave lifted the Ultramarines off their feet. Motes of dust and debris were suspended briefly in the blast radius. It resonated outwards like an earthquake, splitting the ground with a web of cracks centred at the origin point.

Despite the dampeners built into his helmet's systems, Atavian's auditory canal was overloaded with sound. Blood vessels burst in his nose and ears, nulling two of his senses instantly. Retinal lenses couldn't process the sudden influx of intense light; excessive heat warnings raced across the internal display before they too capitulated against the sheer strength of the blast. He remembered crouching down before the blast hit and the section of wall disintegrating in front of him. It was what he imagined an atomic explosion to be like. A sense of weightlessness overtook his body as Atavian realised he'd been lifted off his feet. Propelled backwards he slammed into a still-standing column and slumped, knocked onto his backside.

Ultramarines lay scattered around him, some Tirian's, some his own. They were thrown like debris before a storm – the deadly emerald beam showed no respect for the heirs of Guilliman. It was death. Pure and undistilled. Despite himself, Atavian couldn't help but feel awed by its incredible power. It didn't stop him from wanting to destroy it.

Cobalt-armoured bodies were stirring. Smoke and fire wafted and flickered between them. The stone steps were levelled, most of what was

left of the ruins too. The sound of scraping battle plate came from all around him as Atavian's battle-brothers got up and tried to regroup. Defeat was not a word in an Ultramarine's vocabulary, or so the sergeant believed. Pain-suppressing drugs were already flooding his nervous system and Larraman cells began the process of rapid blood-clotting as Atavian rose to his feet. A pall swathed the atmosphere from the displaced dust and debris. Patches of steam lingered in tiny squalls before crystallising as the cold reasserted dominance.

Atavian's tactical display revealed a lot of amber runes – almost all of the Ultramarines in the rearguard were injured. There were some red icons too, the disabled or dead. Ineffective battle-brothers were not his concern right now; he needed firepower, and quickly. He'd reached the end of the blast zone – perversely, the resulting crater provided some rudimentary cover. Several of his squad and what was left of Tirian's, including the sergeant himself, were already hunkering down.

Tirian handed Atavian his magnoculars.

‘Barely even a scratch.’

Atavian had to agree. It was a slow march that brought the necrons and their monoliths to the rear of the Ultramarines lines but for all the damage done to them they could have been advancing one step a minute and they'd still reach the Devastators intact.

He handed the scopes back. ‘Its weak point is the crystal power matrix at the machine's apex.’

Tirian nodded. ‘An easy enough target.’

Ulius was crouched down next to Atavian and said, ‘If something weren't fouling our auto-aiming systems.’

Removing the targeter from Ulius's lascannon, Atavian took a look. ‘Trajectory is off.’ He made some adjustments, looked again. ‘Still off.’ He gave the device back to Ulius and glanced around the crater. ‘Where is Hektar?’

‘Dead, sir.’

‘Where is his lascannon?’

‘With his body, brother-sergeant.’

Atavian’s gaze was on the advancing monoliths.

‘Bring it here.’

Ulius did as commanded. He kept his head down as the fire from the Devastators started up again. His caution was unnecessary. The monoliths were recycling, spewing repaired and revived necrons from their portals and undoing all the damage inflicted by Guilliman’s Hammer. Tirian was unimpressed.

‘We’re wasting ammunition,’ he growled, calling for a cease-fire. Missile launchers stayed primed but still; heavy bolters stalled with belts ready-fed. ‘The war machines must be neutralised.’

Since the blast, Atavian’s Titan Slayers hadn’t fired a single shot.

‘While they’re regenerating infantry, they’re not using those crystal matrices to eradicate us. It’s a cycle. Once it’s complete, the monoliths will charge those conduits and unleash the beam weapon.’

Ulius returned, hefting Hektar’s lascannon and setting it down next to his sergeant.

‘What are you seeing, Maxima?’ Tirian’s use of his first name made Atavian turn to face him.

Tirian’s scarred battle-helm was reflected back in his crimson lenses. ‘It’s what I’ve *seen*, brother.’

Overhead, stabbing beams of emerald were thickening the air. The necrons were within gauss-flayer range and releasing sporadic bursts as they advanced. Bolter fire answered but it was no more than a perfunctory response.

Atavian continued, ‘We cannot trust our auto-targeters. The necrons are machines of a type. Affinity with mechanisms is a component of their xenos construction. We are feeling their influence.’

‘The machine-spirits of our weapons are corrupted?’ Tirian sounded incensed.

‘No, but they’ve been compromised. The adjustments I made to Ulius’s targeter should have corrected the aim – they didn’t. Destroying those crystals will take accuracy but it must be done by instinct.’ Detaching the seals on his gorget, Atavian removed his battle-helm. Without the voice-augmentation of his armour, he had to shout to be heard. ‘By naked eye alone.’

He hefted the lascannon onto his shoulder. The weight of it felt good, almost nostalgic. Atavian side glanced at Ulius. ‘Follow my lead, brother.’

Jettisoning his helmet and mag-locking it to his thigh, Ulius tried to gauge his sergeant’s aim.

‘We are targeting the thirdmost machine?’

‘Yes. Wait until they’re powering up the main weapon. I will give the order when to shoot.’

It was sniper shooting with a lascannon. Tanks, Dreadnoughts, installations – a lascannon’s usual prey was large and relatively static. The monoliths *were* slow but whatever fouling technology the necrons were employing had narrowed the target-window considerably. It required peerless accuracy.

A sniper often prepared for days, scoping out the area, finding optimum position. They would gauge all variables: light, wind speed, weather anomalies, a target’s weak points. Though much more powerful, a lascannon lacked the subtlety of a rifle. Instead of days, Atavian had only minutes to prepare his shot. He considered recoil, trajectory, projected impact point. In the end he trusted to two things: instinct and faith.

The last of the repaired raiders emerged from the portals, prompting the crystal nodes on the monoliths to energise again. Frantic lightning arcs sprang from the central machine, creating a link between the other two.

Power was fed to the main crystal and the energy coruscation swelled brightly.

‘On my signal...’ said Atavian, adjusting his position by a fraction. Gauss-fire was chewing up the earth around the Ultramarines, taking chunks off the crater’s edge and spitting the debris against their armour. Sergeant Tirian had opened up with his heavies again, trying to give the lascannons some protection.

The glow around the lead monolith’s crystal was still growing. Beam release was imminent.

‘Make your blow quickly, brother,’ warned Tirian.

‘It will fall heavily. At my signal...’ Atavian muttered, bringing his cheek to the side of the lascannon and lowering the barrel tip by the smallest fraction.

When trying to disable a fast-moving target, let it come to you.

One of the rubrics of his old masters came to the forefront of his mind.

The monoliths advanced into prime firing position. It also brought them into Atavian’s crosshairs. He lifted two fingers from the cannon trigger. That was the signal.

Twin lascannon beams hit the thirdmost monolith as it was feeding the last of its power to the hub-crystal, shattering the node and sending a backwash of energy into the other two.

The struck monolith shuddered as a chain reaction of catastrophic damage rolled through its structure. Cracks formed in its pyramid hull, exuding sickly emerald light. Actinic fire bloomed out of its portal as the vast machine crashed to the ground and stopped. Rampant energy spikes crippled the other two, forcibly aborting the beam projection. Stung and in sudden need of repair, the remaining monoliths began a slow retreat, leaving the shattered war engine behind.

Despite himself, Atavian gave a shout of triumph.

It was echoed by some of the others in the rearguard. The defeat of the monoliths sent a ripple effect through the advancing infantry, who were being chewed up by the combined fire of both Devastator squads. Without the portals they could not immediately repair and redeploy. At last, their numbers were thinning.

A second problem compounded the first for the necrons. Tirian saw it through the magnoculars.

‘Brothers, we are reinforced.’ The savage joy in his voice was obvious. Atavian felt it too as he was given the scopes.

‘I see conscripts, Guard formations too.’ Increasing magnification, he added, ‘Iulus Fennion and his Immortals lead them.’

Tirian laughed, surprise and relief colouring his tone. ‘I confess I thought the Kellenport defenders vanquished and us an island in a sea of foes.’

Atavian handed off the lascannon to Hektar’s replacement. Now the monoliths were neutralised, at least for a time, he resumed his duties as sergeant.

‘We are still an island, brother,’ he asserted, ‘but now we have a channel taking us back to land.’

Orders from Daceus were already coming from the front line.

A full retreat was in effect. All forces were to return to Kellenport. With the concentration of Ultramarines in the area, several necron phalanxes had rerouted to tackle them. Somewhere in their midst, a necron overlord directed their efforts. Sicarius must have irritated them and now baited the trap. Kellenport’s walls were as good a staging ground for a pitched battle as any other.

‘It’s as if he planned it,’ said Tirian. The necron infantry was being pressed on both sides.

Before he donned his battle-helm, Atavian met Tirian’s gaze. ‘What makes you think he didn’t?’

Barring a skeleton force of defenders, Commander Sonne had virtually emptied Kellenport. Entrenched gun positions were dug out and formed into heavy weapon teams; the troopers from disparate squads were reappropriated into platoons; conscripts were armed and armoured from the dead and forged into their own battalions; and what was left of the Damnosian armour rode out into the wastes led by a small group of cobalt Angels.

Adanar was in the cupola of the lead tank, a Leman Russ with a damaged battle cannon but whose side-sponson heavy bolters worked well enough. Two others followed it in staggered formation, one either side. Both were damaged but still had some firepower left. Sentinel walkers, some without functioning weapons, and Hellhound tanks ranged the flanks. A stoic block of Chimera transports brought up the rear, with one exception. This vehicle was at the head of the slow-moving armoured column. Its roof hatch had been ripped off by a gauss-blast, so too most of the roof. The rest of the Chimera's hull was intact, as were its tracks and engine. It made the perfect transport for Sergeant Fennion and four of his men. The others were amongst the infantry platoons, their presence more galvanising than any tank.

For the first time since the siege had begun, Adanar felt something other than despair. It wasn't hope, only reunion with his dead family could restore that; it was something else, something that at least dulled the fatalism seizing him – it was vengeance.

The One Hundred seemed to Falka like a misnomer now. He wasn't sure there'd ever been a hundred poor souls in his improvised regiment in the first place, not exactly. It didn't matter, the name had resonance and the ex-rig-hand turned soldier liked that. What was left of the men marched with him in lockstep alongside the Ultramarines. The Chimera transport of the Space Marines moved slowly so the conscripts could keep up. Sergeant Fennion had initially dismissed the idea of riding aboard the tank, wanting to march the wastes as the humans did, but Falka had convinced him that he needed to be seen. He was a beacon, something for the others to look to,

and more inspiring than any banner. Reluctantly, the Ultramarine had agreed.

‘What are you thinking, brother-Angel?’ Falka asked, looking up in the direction of the Chimera’s ragged hull. He caught the last dregs of the sallow sun fading into the horizon. It painted the distant tundra red and rimed the edge of the mountains.

Iulus glared straight ahead as if he beheld destiny. ‘That you ask many questions and are impudent in the extreme, Trooper Kolpeck.’

Falka laughed.

‘That is why you like me so much.’

Iulus glanced at him askance. There was the shadow of a smile on his lips then it was gone again.

‘Are you ready for more war, Brother Kolpeck?’

Falka nodded. ‘Aye, my time is almost up I think. I’ll be happy to leave my blood here, just as long as I take a few of those metal bastards with me.’

‘Fearless and well spoken, brother. You would have made a fine Ultramarine.’

The necron lines were close now. Some of the mechanoids were turning in response to the new threat and sporadic bursts of emerald gauss-fire came rippling their way. It was different to the battle in the courtyard, even the fight to hold the walls. That was desperate, there was no choice but to take up arms or die. This was not like that. A silver sea stretched before the Imperial defenders composed of alien killing machines Falka didn’t understand or truly want to face.

Though they moved like skeletal automatons, he saw the awareness in their eyes and felt their emotions, such as they were. It was hate that burned in their balefire orbs, pure, hollow hate. The necrons would not rest until all of Damnos was gone, its population eradicated like some cancerous plague. It was this chilling fact that made Falka and his men, all

of the Damnosians, march to their likely deaths. Better to fight and die, than just to die.

Mortality had never really concerned him. He didn't know if at the end there was anything more than a dark void without feeling. He hoped there would be light, maybe not a Golden Throne in the Eternal Palace of the God-Emperor, but light enough so he could find Jynn and be reunited. That would suit him just fine.

Falka donned his helmet – it carried the markings of a sergeant inscribed with a combat blade by Iulus himself – and hollered to his troops.

‘Gather your courage, men. We are the saviours of Damnos, fighting for our native soil. The Emperor is with us. He has sent His Angels to fight by our side. In the name of the Imperium, honour them!’

Las-fire whickered from the Imperial ranks meeting the gauss-beams in a lattice of energy, crisscrossing lethally over the wastes. The shuddering report of heavy bolters joined it as the battle tanks opened up. Pintle-mounts blazing on their cupolas, engines screaming – the last armoured company of Damnos went to war.

An explosion, emerald-tinged and violent, lit up the distance in a viridian flash.

The afterglow still lingered in Falka's vision when he saw two beams of light strike one of the floating necron pyramids and destroy it. Beyond the enemy masses, through the cascade of gauss-flayer death, he saw the beleaguered Ultramarines too, Sergeant Fennion's true brothers.

Even amidst the firefight – seen in cracks between the melee – they were glorious. A figure strode amongst them, his armour gilded and with a white-red crest atop his battle-helm. A cape fastened to his ornate pauldrons via taloned clasps whipped about him as he killed necrons with a glowing blade. This was the personification of a hero. It was valour made flesh. An arch-angel. It was Sicarius.

With the Emperor's name not long passed his lips, Falka wept.

‘Immortals, dismount!’ Iulus leapt from the open-topped Chimera, landing squarely with chainsword drawn. In the next breath, he was running, a steady thud of shells spitting from his bolt pistol into the necrons. Four of his battle-brothers were alongside him, charging at full tilt, for the glory of Ultramar and all of Guilliman’s heirs.

The clash was fearsome, Iulus and his four battle-brothers weathering a hail of gauss-flayer bursts before they reached the enemy. Necrons responded to force. They had to be overwhelmed, struck such a catastrophic blow that whatever arcane engines animated them would realise destruction was imminent and quit the field for the sanctity of their tomb.

Considering their frailties, the humans showed incredible bravery to be only a few metres behind the Ultramarines. As he severed the spinal column of one of the mechanoids, Iulus felt a swell of pride for these poor doomed souls. In such an intense firestorm, casualties amongst the Guard and conscripts were horrific. Without power armour or an intensely hard armature, they fell quickly and in numbers.

Iulus lost sight of Kolpeck almost immediately. Inwardly, he chastened himself for it but this was war, the great leveller, and it had no use for sentiment. His chainblade growled, eager for the kill, and he fed it. Adopting a semi-circular formation, the five Immortals advanced, laying down an incessant barrage of fire. The necrons had thrown their infantry against them, a horde of raider constructs that the Second had become experts at fighting. Space Marines adapted quickly, learned the weaknesses of an enemy and how best to slay them. The Ultramarines, from Legion to Chapter, had been doing it for over ten thousand years. It was down to a fine art.

‘Killing is why we were born.’ Iulus recalled the words of his old trainer.

There wasn’t much guile to it. The fact that the bulk of the force was conscripted ruled out any intricate tactics. It didn’t matter. They would employ the hammer and hope it was enough.

As he cut down a raider trying to rise, Iulus caught sight of the tanks. The one with Commander Sonne was racing in the front.

Two battle tanks behind him were burning wrecks. He'd seen them stitched by gauss-beams and then explode. No rifle weapon had any right to be so potent against armour like that. It left a limping Hellhound and a Chimera with its multi-laser still functional to take on the monolith.

Whether reacting to their proximity or merely self-repaired and thrown back into the fray, Adanar didn't know or care, but one of the necron pyramids had turned and was heading for them. Lances of emerald death spat from the cannons arrayed around the machine's flanks. A concentrated burst chewed up the Chimera, riddling it with holes before the fuel reserve cooked off and turned the vehicle into a ball of oily flame. Adanar watched it buck and spin before crashing down on its roof in a smoking, fiery ruin. He let the backwash of heat flow over his face, toss the cape at his back – it was ragged and dirty by now.

The Hellhound slewed to a halt soon after, its axle giving out. The engine screamed hot but it was just grinding metal. Adanar turned. The tank's crew were still fighting to get out of the escape hatches when the monolith found its new target and immolated them. It was the broken axle that killed them. Fate was cruel sometimes.

Heavy bolters on the side-sponsons were throwing out shells, tearing through their belt-feeds with fury. Suddenly one of the guns clunked tight and the fusillade from the right side stopped. Then it was the left. Out of ammunition – they'd run their stockpile dry.

'I want that thing down!' he cried into the darkness of the cupola below.

A stuttering salvo of emerald beams stabbed into the tank's hull before the crew could reply. The tracks slowed almost instantly, engine noise falling from a shriek to a whine to a low hum. Deceleration. It could mean only one thing: the driver was dead.

Leaping down into the tank's hold, Adanar found a scene of bloody carnage. Crimson, though it looked more like black, painted the walls where the crew had been part-flayed by gauss-beams or shredded by internal shrapnel. In such close confines it was worse than a grenade going off. Adanar's position in the cupola had been the only thing that had saved him. Everyone else was dead.

'Can't let it live,' he muttered. Somehow, the locket-charm had found its way into his grasp. He rubbed it idly, though he didn't remember retrieving it. Dragging the driver – or what was left of his half-cooked, cauterised body – out of his seat, Adanar scrambled into the self-same position and hit the accelerator pedal hard. It didn't take a crew of five men to drive a tank. It took one with the will to do what was necessary.

Through the cracked view-slit Adanar made out the bulky form of the monolith. The view was mired by dirt and blood so he wiped it with his sleeve. Collision course set, he gave it everything. Stabs of light perforated the hull as the necron machine opened up again but miraculously he was left unharmed.

Just a few more metres.

The names of his wife and daughter were on Adanar's cracked lips. The sheer side of the monolith loomed, filling the view-slit with black.

'I am coming...' he whispered, and closed his eyes.

An explosion lit up the battlefield. Falka saw wreckage and fire, but he was too busy fighting for his life to make out details. It was the sound more than anything that arrested his attention.

To his right, a conscript pulled a frag grenade and was halfway through a throw when a blast caught him in the neck. He fell and the grenade went off, filling the area around him with noise and hot metal. Falka's vision faded to black. He was dimly aware of being on his back and of a damp sensation over his torso and legs. The dirt was soft and all sound slowly

bled away to a soft susurrus. Through the encroaching darkness he thought he could see angels coming through the white mist...

Victory was at hand. Iulus had been in enough battles over his decades of service to realise this. Attacked on both sides, at one a reserve battalion primarily made up of human soldiery, and the other a breakout force of Ultramarines, the necrons were well beaten. Smashed between such desperate and inviolable warriors, the mechanoids phased from the battlefield and left only the bodies of Imperial fallen in their wake.

He held his chainsword aloft, gazing around at the carnage they had reaped. '*Victoris Ultra!*'

Every Space Marine, every conscript and Ark Guard trooper raised their fists.

'Victoris Ultra!'

'And the glory of Damnos!' he added, seeking out Kolpeck amongst the exultant masses. The trooper was nowhere to be seen. Iulus had no time to think further on his ebbing sense of triumph – the captain and his honour guard approached.

Sicarius clasped him in a firm embrace. 'Well met, brother.' He withdrew and held onto Iulus's shoulder guards to help convey his delight at their arrival. 'Well met!'

Humble, Iulus bowed. He saw Praxor just behind the captain and caught his gaze.

'All is in readiness back at Kellenport?' Sicarius pressed, letting the sergeant go.

Iulus confirmed this.

'Then we had best make haste.' Sicarius turned to indicate the larger necron army behind them. The Ultramarines had put ground between them and small longer range skirmishes were still going on between the assault squads and the necron gun-platforms, but the majority of the phalanxes had slowed to a crawl. 'The overlord rebuilds his forces but will continue

the advance. We must reach the staging ground before he meets us.’ Something flashed behind the captain’s helmet lenses; either retribution or anger, but Iulus couldn’t tell which. ‘I vow this will be our last retreat.’

With that, Sicarius left him. It allowed only the briefest of reunions with Praxor.

‘I am pleased to see you still alive, brother,’ Iulus said genuinely. The two sergeants clasped forearms.

Where Iulus gave off a reserved ebullience, Praxor’s mood was dark. ‘Many are not.’ From the reduced ranks of the Shieldbearers, it was obvious that his squad had suffered.

‘Death or glory, brother,’ said Iulus. ‘It is our way, our lot.’

‘We have chosen death.’ Praxor saluted, though the gesture was perfunctory and intended to end the brief discourse, and tramped away with his battered squad.

The Dreadnought, Agrippen, followed in his wake.

‘Immortals indeed,’ said the venerable warrior, appraising Iulus’s men.

‘We are too stubborn to die, old one.’

‘When we reach the walls of Kellenport to make our stand, that trait will be tested, I feel,’ Agrippen replied before walking on.

Iulus looked out into the advancing necron sea, a silver waste bringing ruin to everything in its path. Ixion and Strabo were withdrawing too, having neutralised the vanguard of gun-platforms. The necrons were consolidating their forces. They had time and growing numbers on their side.

‘Yes,’ his answer came, too late for the Dreadnought to hear. ‘Yes, it will.’

Turning, Iulus saw the conscripts and Ark Guard gathering too. He stopped a corporal on his way. ‘You!’ The man looked up fearfully at the imposing cobalt warrior-knight. ‘Where is Trooper Kolpeck?’



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, bolters locked and ready, blades drawn and gleaming with the rising of the moon.

Before them, the third wall, its gates laid open for the sally of the Damnosian defenders. The humans were behind them now, tucked into their firing holes, pressed against their battlements and looking down on their champions arrayed in the Courtyard of Xiphos.

Praxor did not turn to look, he didn't need to. The humans had made their last act of defiance; it was up to the Ultramarines to become the true saviours of Damnos now.

'Do you remember our words about King Vidus?' asked Sicarius. The Shieldbearers were next to the Lions of Macragge in the line.

'A legend of triumph over adversity, my lord,' Praxor replied.

'Indeed, brother-sergeant.' Sicarius pointed to the third wall and its open gates, an expansive gesture of his sword-arm encompassing the courtyard.

'This is our Thermapylon, and we the seven hundred whose blades and courage blunted the cruel ambition of a tyrant. History repeats itself, Sergeant Manorian, it always does. We stand at the cusp of it now.'

The Lions stood straighter at their liege's words. Vandius thrust the banner of the Second higher and it caught the wind. Daceus sent a crackle of energy through the fingers of his power fist. Gaius Prabian drew the

blade of his sword against his shield, making the metal scrape in a wordless challenge.

This was what it meant to be a Lion. It was utter devotion; it was obedience and blind trust without equal. Sicarius only brought those who followed his will without question into his inner circle. Ironically, this was the closest Praxor had ever been to joining them and it was also the moment he knew he never would.

Agrippen was close, on the other side of Sicarius's honour guard. His eternal gaze was on the battlefield ahead. The Dreadnought was not here on Damnos to report on the captain of Second Company's actions, nor was he following any agenda Agemman had set. He was merely here to fight, to honour the Chapter's name and lineage.

'I am my Chapter's unsheathed sword,' said Praxor at last.

'Then make your blade ready, brother,' Sicarius answered, the Tempest Blade held before him, 'for the enemy comes! Courage and honour!'

The Ultramarines took up the bellowed cry, their voices in unison, their purpose as one.

'Courage and honour!'

Necron raiders were the first to breach the wall. As they did so the charges Iulus had set all those hours ago ignited, filling the Courtyard of Xiphos with rock and fire.

Tonnes of rock and plascrete descended on the necrons. Many metres thick, several kilometres long, the third defensive wall of Kellenport was obliterated in the blast, burying everything around it. Dust and dirt rose in a massive pall to blanket the advancing necron forces. It churned across the courtyard, brushing against the assembled Ultramarines and colouring the edges of their armour. The Space Marines let the debris cloud roll over them, unmoving. It only took a few minutes for it to be swept away on the breeze and an echoing silence to eclipse them. Seconds later, green balefire orbs resolved in the gloom as the next line of mechanoids thrust into the rubble.

With much of the vanguard crushed, the necron overlord had little choice but to press his elites into the breach. By now, the phalanxes rerouted to destroy the Ultramarines had been gathered. Necron immortals stumbled over the wreckage of the wall to be met by a stern barrage of bolter fire. They were beyond mere raiders though, and weathered the storm with impunity. Gauss-blasters answered in rapid-fire bursts that shimmered like green pyrotechnic across the snowy courtyard flagstones.

Falka watched it all through his firing slit on the wall. A thick bandage was wrapped around his torso from where the shrapnel had hit him. Despite the cocktail of drugs in his system keeping him upright and battle-worthy, the wound hurt like all the hells. Others weren't so lucky. Pelk lost most of his throat to the blast; Hiiken, an eye and the back of his skull. Men had died, but Falka lived. Perhaps the Emperor had blessed him; perhaps He had blessed them all. He hoped His gaze would fall on His Angels too as the necrons poured into the courtyard.

I am doom. The words echoed inside the Undying's cavernous mind. He had contemplated oblivion, his endless sentence of existence, and decided that all life must be eradicated from the universe. Cities burned, their populations reduced to ash by his wrath; worlds imploded, sucked into a vortex of obliteration; entire systems ignited into endless flame witnessed by his mind's eye.

This is death, this is all... I shall show it to the universe.

The curse was alive in his memory engrams, as pervasive as any flesh-borne contagion. It had condensed his self-awareness down into a singularity – the obsession with total destruction.

Hurl rock and earth, until the world is bare. It is as inconsequential as a speck of dust. Across the debris and the sundered remains of the defensive wall, the Undying found his prey.

This was the one who had defied him.

He glared, imagining the ending of all things, and outstretched a skeletal finger.

‘Eradicate them.’

Reacting to the voice of their overlord, the immortals marched into the billowing dust cloud in phalanx. The Undying went with them. His honour guard attempted to close around him, glaives drawn up protectively in the simulated behaviour of aeons past. With a curt gesture, like he was parting the waves of some ancient sea, the Undying broke apart their circle and advanced after the immortals. Obeisant, they followed.

I am no longer flesh. I am abomination. I am destroyer.

The hollow thoughts echoed in his slowly fragmenting mind. Weapons-fire was coming from beyond the debris. War was joined again. Igniting the blade of his war-scythe, the Undying stared into the storm and felt... nothing.

Two-handed, Scipio hammered the necron lord over and over again with his chainsword. Whatever the strange orb in the monster’s chest had done to it, the Voidbringer was reduced to scrap. With a final cry of anguish, it phased out, seemingly drawn into the artefact only for it then to collapse in on itself in a miniature event horizon.

Scipio sagged a little, his breathing rapid. ‘It is done,’ he announced, but Tigurius wasn’t listening. The aura was still emanating from his body and he focused to control it.

Extending a shaking hand, he uttered in a broken rasp, ‘Get me to the ridge, as high as you can.’

Surveying the immediate area, Scipio looked for further threats but the necrons had ceased their advance. In fact, in many instances, they had simply stopped. The effect of the Voidbringer’s destruction was potent and debilitating, it seemed. His constructs appeared slower, sluggish even, as if having to recalculate or waiting for the hole in their chain of command

to be repaired. Those necrons that had to defend themselves did; those beyond the immediate reach of the battle remained still.

Scipio raised the comm-feed immediately. 'Do not engage. I repeat, do not engage enemy unless necessary. The lesser necron constructs have suffered some kind of catastrophic failure and are reverting to defensive protocols.'

Octavian and Vandar confirmed. There was a clear zone around the artillery. None of the necrons were moving.

'What happened to them?' asked Vandar.

'I don't know, but hold your positions and prime whatever explosives we have left,' Scipio replied. 'We can level this artillery platform, bury it under the mountain. Make ready.'

The other sergeants issued clipped affirmatives before Scipio was back.

He turned to Cator. 'Are you strong enough to stand?'

The plasma gunner grunted. 'Try and stop me. I'll crawl out of this hell-hole if I have to, brother-sergeant.'

Satisfied, Scipio went to Tigurius. Weakened by his psychic exertions and not entirely lucid, Scipio had to help him up. Temperature spikes throughout his armour's systems filled his retinal display with warning icons from the heat still emanating off the Librarian's psychic aura. Lightning crackled across his arcane battle plate again, ripples and motes at first, but growing in intensity. By the time he and Scipio had staggered to the edge of the ridge, they were developing into jags and forks. Drawn into the foci of his force rod, Tigurius began crafting them into a massive nimbus of psychic energy.

'When we reach the summit,' he said, clambering across the rocks, 'get down. Tell your brothers to do the same and seek cover.'

As soon as they'd mounted the small ridge overlooking the artillery, Scipio jumped back down again and gave the order. Crouched with Cator at his side, he watched.

Tigurius was glowing. A tumult of lightning coursed across the sigils inscribed onto his armour, illuminating their designs, and fed into the force rod. The eye sockets within the skull at its tip were bleeding power ferociously. Arcane instruments – keys, chains, scrolls, all of the Master Librarian’s esoteric panoply – rose up with the quickening energies infusing him. It was as if they were partly magnetised and lifted in response to the sudden polarisation.

He lifted. Tigurius levitated off the ground, tiny thunderbolts striking the earth below his feet and leaving burn scars in their wake. A series of runic sigils lit up across the hard features of his face, unseen by the naked eye but visible with the tapping of his power.

‘I am a servant of the Chapter Librarian. My body is a conduit. My will is dire and filled with the fire of retribution!’

A split second of silence persisted where all was still and time itself simply ceased. It broke loose the instant the storm was released like a pent-up current rushing through an opened floodgate. Lightning pulsed outwards in a wave, ripping into the artillery, turning their living metal into slag and destroying them utterly. It cooked off the rest of the explosives placed by the Ultramarines and jets of fire leapt from the ground edged with a viridian lustre.

It burned the necrons too, immolating those close enough to the nexus of the storm, banishing wraiths who vanished like frost before the winter sun.

The light died as quickly as it had manifested. Tigurius slumped to his knees, his strength all but spent.

Scipio scrambled up the ridge. The Librarian waved him off.

‘I am alive.’ But he was also clearly weak. Tigurius’s eyes grew penetrating. ‘The veil is lifted. I can *see*.’

Ultramarines were emerging through the ice-fog. Brakkus and Garrik, the latter carrying his missile launcher at ease. Largo was just behind him. He carried something too, across both arms, but he was obscured by the

others and Scipio didn't see what it was. He was more concerned with Tigurius.

‘My lord?’

‘The veil is lifted,’ the Librarian repeated. His eyes were glassy, trance-like, ‘and the future unfolds, like a diamond with all possible roads laid out in its facets.’

Scipio came close, put a hand gently on Tigurius's shoulder. ‘My lord,’ he whispered, beseeching knowledge.

‘A hero will fall, struck down by a fatal blade,’ he breathed. ‘Futures kaleidoscope, one tumbling into another, fragmenting and resolving again. The images shatter but this is immutable. In all the facets, it is the same.’

‘Who will fall, my lord? Whose protection must we look to?’ The others had gathered around him, all barring Largo, drawn by Scipio's urgency.

Tigurius's eyes became clear. He seized Scipio's wrist in a fearsome grip. ‘It is Sicarius!’

Something cold filled Scipio's chest and made his movements leaden. Prescience was the Master Librarian's greatest psychic talent. He was seldom, if ever, wrong.

Sicarius will fall. The words inside Scipio's mind didn't seem real. He shook off Tigurius's hand, allowing the Librarian to slump, and turned sharply. ‘Are we close enough to contact Kellenport?’ he asked Brakkius.

‘Not while we're in the mountains.’

Scipio looked down at Tigurius. There'd be no psychic communion either.

The comm-feed crackled in Scipio's ear. It was Octavian. ‘Last of the charges primed. What is happening, brother?’

‘Full evacuation from Thanatos Hills, effective immediately,’ he replied.

‘Are we under attack?’ asked Vandar across the feed.

‘Negative, but dire news has reached us. Captain Sicarius is in peril.’

Scipio was on his feet. 'Help him,' he said, and rushed past Brakkius and Garrik as they moved to assist Tigurius.

Cator was up and held out his hand. He looked saddened. 'Wait—'

'There is no time, brother.' Scipio was about to dismiss him when he caught sight of Largo again. This time he saw that the Ultramarine carried a body, a still and inert body.

A second spike of cold jabbed into Scipio. This time it was soured by guilt.

'What?'

Largo bowed his head, looking down on the recumbent form he cradled. 'Most of the guerrillas are dead. The humans simply weren't made for this fight.'

It was a woman in his arms, a cold and lifeless woman.

The necron elites were tough, but Praxor's blade would not be denied. His power sword hummed as it cut through the thickened carapace of one, finding the crucial systems that animated it. He plunged the crackling blade deep, until hilt met the simulacrum of metallic bone, and the creature phased out. His Shieldbearers were fighting hard too. Close-range bolter bursts flashed in the encroaching night. A stream of liquid promethium lit a blazing conflagration in the enemy ranks. They moved together, with Sicarius and his Lions as their inspiration.

Despite the dark cloak drawn over his thoughts, Praxor felt uplifted and galvanised by his lord's presence. Before such glory, death would be a lauded thing destined for the annals of eternity. From his advanced position and proximity, Praxor had a good view of his captain.

Sicarius was imperious as he killed. The Tempest Blade flashed like a lightning bolt captured in his fist, unleashed time and again in a storm of righteous anger. It was easy to see why so many followed him, why he was spoken of in the same breath as Agemman and even Lord Calgar. He was ambition and arrogance, he was skill and courage personified, he was guile and reckless bravura. He *was* Ultramar.

Daceus and Gaius Prabian went before him, hewing a route through the necrons in order that Sicarius find his enemy, the one who led the mechanoids. Agrippen applied a similar fervour to his efforts; smashed necron bodies erupted with every swing of the Dreadnought's power fist, phasing out in mid-air before they could land. At such close quarters, he eschewed his plasma cannon and instead utilised the heavy flamer mounted to his armature. It scorched a ruddy line across the silvered necron hordes, burning their armour black. One fell beneath his foot and he crushed it.

‘For Macragge and the Lords of Ultramar!’

Overhead, Praxor caught the flaming contrails of Ixion and Strabo as they duelled with the flying necron gun-platforms. One of the Assault Marines fell like a downed comet, wreathed with emerald fire, his armour flaking away before he crashed out of sight into the melee below.

Elsewhere, the Devastators at the back of the line were cutting furrows into the enemy.

Sergeant Atavian punched the air in triumph as his lascannons tore an arachnid construct in half. Bursts from the other heavies scattered the smaller beetle-like creatures, melting their bodies with intense microwaves or engulfing them in bright plasma.

Everywhere the Ultramarines pushed and fought like the Legion warriors of old, those who had trod the same earth as Guilliman. But despite their heroics, more and more necrons were spilling through the sundered defensive wall and into Xiphos. Only one thing would break the deadlock and Praxor saw it.

It stood taller than the others, wreathed in archaic vestments that hinted at a royal heritage. The necron overlord's gilded metal body shimmered, half silvered by the moon, its ochroid nature only revealed in the flash of nearby weapons fire. Encircling its skull-like visage was a crown, a red gemstone in the centre. A blue pectoral hung around its neck and torcs

banded its arms. Clenched in its skeletal fist was a rippling pole-arm, glaive-edged and wrought with alien iconography. As its gaze alighted on Sicarius, the overlord's eyes flared.

'I am the Undying, I am doom incarnate...'

Sicarius holstered his plasma pistol as he faced down the overlord. He wanted to be on even terms with the monster. It was a moment long coming, but now arrived he was ready.

'We are the slayers of kings,' he spat, the words grating through his vox-grille. A crackle of energy coursed up the length of the Tempest Blade.

He would wreak such carnage against this thing.

Sicarius advanced, signalling his Lions to stay back. For a moment he thought he might have to kill the overlord's honour guard too but the Undying ordered them aside.

It was strangely martial, even ritualised.

Sicarius struck the first blow. Chopping with the bluntness of a broadsword, he cut into the overlord's arm. The Undying was fractionally slow to defend itself and a narrow gouge was scraped across its pristine metal. Split torcs cascaded like a fountain of unlocked treasure. A modulated cry was torn from the necron's rictus mouth but its face betrayed no emotion.

The glaive swept out in a wide arc, preventing the Ultramarine's follow-up. He parried, hot sparks dancing off the clashing blades before the combatants parted.

Sicarius came again, aiming a thrust for the necron's midriff which was turned aside by the glaive's long haft. A punch dented the captain's battle-helm and he staggered, before firming up his stance and rolling away a blow heading for his gorget.

He slashed downwards, cutting a jagged furrow in the necron's torso. The glaive's haft smashed against his pauldron before he could properly

defend, numbing his shoulder. Sicarius backed up again but the monster would not relent.

The Undying was slow, ponderous even, but tough. Every blow was like being hit by a tank. Sicarius went in again, unleashing a hail of blows against the necron's defences. The monster parried some, took others against its near-impervious body, before replying with a lightning-fast riposte that cut into Sicarius's plastron.

As the captain cried out, Praxor was filled with a terrible sense of foreboding. He moved towards the duel, as did the Lions, but a warning glance from Sicarius held the veterans at bay.

The necron overlord was gathering momentum. The Undying whirled its glaive in a circular arc, spinning it end-over-end. With a viper's speed, it snapped out, clipping Sicarius's shoulder guard. He leapt forward, forging the extra impetus into a double-handed blow that bit into the necron's forearm. Still, the monster came on undaunted. Its cries of pain had turned to laughter.

Enraged, Sicarius threw himself at the Undying, hacking and cleaving with the Tempest Blade like it was an extension of his inner anger. He fought the Undying back a step and felt the tide turning...

...until a flash of energy from the necron's open palm overloaded his retinal lenses and sent Sicarius reeling. Light, hot and emerald-tinged, filled the captain's world. He backed off, blinded, tearing at the seals connecting his battle-helm to the rest of his armour, and ripped the headgear loose. Blinking away the after-flare, Sicarius had time to parry a blurred attack. The overhead blow *pranged* hard against his sword, forcing him to one knee.

Vision still adjusting, he tore the plasma pistol from its holster and snapped off a quick blast. It struck the Undying beneath the chin, forcing the necron's head upwards and burning off part of its jaw. Staggering back

from the kinetic impact, the overlord leavened the press of its glaive and Sicarius stood.

This was it.

He was about to ram the Tempest Blade into the Undying's fleshless skull when something slammed into his side, stopping him.

Agony flared like a thousand burning needles in the captain's flank. As Sicarius looked down, disbelieving, at the glaive embedded there, he felt the world grow cold. A sense of weightlessness overcame him and he realised he was being lifted off his feet. The nerves in his fingers failed him and the Tempest Blade slipped free, clattering on the ground below beside his discarded battle-helm. Blood tanged his mouth, slipped over his swollen tongue like copper filings. He spat a gobbet and it stained the Undying's gilded carapace.

As the war-scythe was driven deeper, the genebred champion gave up a cry of pain. Emotionless, the Undying looked on.

'I am doom,' he rasped as the shouts of others clawed for his attention. More cobalt-armoured warriors were coming for him.

Shucked desultorily off the glaive like a piece of offal, Sicarius crashed earthwards and lay still. Immediately, the Lions surrounded him just as the necron overlord's honour guard closed too.

'No!' The word fell clipped and defiant from Praxor's lips. He drove the Shieldbearers hard into the necron elites, splitting them apart so he could reach the side of his lord. It was to no avail. He lost Sicarius amidst the crowd of bodies, the image of a fallen sword next to a captain's helm imprinted onto his mind.

He saw the banner, upheld defiantly by Vandius. Brother Malican was by his side. Daceus and Gaius Prabian led the line. They struck down two of the honour guard, exchanging a few blows before dispatching them. Stalwart as statues, they stood over Sicarius's body and felled anything

that came close. Venatio knelt behind them, working his ministrations. In Praxor's heart, he knew it was too late. Sicarius was dead.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

By the time the Ultramarines reached the edge of the Thanatos Hills and left the mountains for good, Tigurius was coming back around. Strengthened by the force of his will, he stood straighter and was able to walk unaided, albeit by leaning on his staff.

Evacuation from the mountains had been conducted in silence. Led by Scipio and his Thunderbolts, the Ultramarines were driven by a frustrating sense of urgency. Their captain was likely in very real danger but until communication was restored they were powerless to do anything.

‘Check again,’ said Scipio as the icy fells gave way to a stretch of flat tundra. Perpetual blizzards roamed this part of Damnos, kicked up in squalls that moved from region to region on the arctic winds. Weather was still fouling the connection to their distant brothers.

Brakkius shook his head.

They marched on. Scipio spared a glance for Jynn. She was being carried on a makeshift stretcher by two of the surviving guerrilla fighters. The rest were dead, left on the plateau where the earth and rock would bury them. Scipio checked the distance from the plateau on his retinal display. A few more kilometres and they could detonate the charges that would obliterate the artillery station.

His thoughts went back to Jynn. He'd left her, abandoned her to this fate. It was the right thing to do, Tigurius was in danger. But he couldn't shake the guilt that she and her troops should never have been there. Scipio was reckless and arrogant, believing they could take the necrons by surprise, sweep in and destroy the guns without casualty. He gave no regard to the potential loss of human life. It made him think of the earlier attack on the outpost and the death of Ortus. Brother Renatus, too, had lost his life on account of injuries suffered during that ill-fated assault. Again, Scipio's lack of temperance had done this.

Iulus's words, spoken long ago on the assembly deck of the *Valin's Revenge*, came back to him.

'You are becoming like him.'

He was right. Orad's death had changed Scipio, although he was only now realising it.

He hoped that Jynn would live.

The comm-feed in his battle-helm crackled. Brakkus had made contact with the others.

Agrippen barged through the silver horde. Scattering the last of the necron immortals in his way, he descended on the honour guard. One he crushed in his fist; the other he burned, pressing the flamer so close it scorched his armature and stripped away the paint.

The necron overlord glared up at the Dreadnought, a hellish fire ignited in its eyes. Sicarius had wounded it – the Undying's face was caught in the flux of self-repair. Agrippen cared not. He smashed his power fist down upon it brutally, crushing the gilded overlord into ruin.

The destruction of their lord sent a massive shockwave rippling throughout the necron ranks. As one they began to fall back. The Dreadnought was not to be denied, though, and tore apart the mechanoids as they fled.

Assuming command, he drove the Ultramarines forward. Only the Lions remained, surrounding their fallen captain protectively.

They harried the necrons across the rubble and out into the wastes. In disarray, the automatons were easy prey. During the retreat, the warriors of Sicarius exacted their vengeance in a tally of enemies that scoured the earth and cleansed the area around Kellenport completely.

Iulus heard a cheer resound behind him as all the men of Damnos witnessed the necrons' defeat. Like his battle-brothers, he was swept up in the moment. When he saw the Lions of Macragge arrayed around the slumped figure of his captain in a protective cordon his exultant mood ebbed. It was replaced by vengeance and the desire to vanquish the enemy utterly.

Stationed in the rear line of the army, alongside the Devastators, Iulus pushed his Immortals forward. He caught Sergeant Atavian's eye.

'Sicarius has fallen.'

Like Iulus, Atavian gave nothing away. 'Is he dead?'

'They watch over him like pallbearers.'

The grating rasp of Chaplain Trajan interjected. 'Rites will be spoken if he is slain. Now we must let our bolters and blades describe our litanies of hatred.'

He led them into the fleeing masses, crozius swinging. Iulus followed a little way behind. Atavian's advance was slower still with the heavy guns.

A gauntlet reached out and snatched Iulus's arm. He turned about to strike, believing a destroyed mechanoid had self-repaired, but it was Praxor. He wasn't wearing his battle-helm and his eyes were wide.

Iulus said, 'Brother?'

'He is dead. I saw him fall with my own eyes. Captain Sicarius is slain.'

Iulus's expression went from grief to resolution. 'Then we avenge him.'

For over an hour the Ultramarines pursued the retreating necrons, all the way to the far border of Arcona City. Thousands were destroyed in the

rout, the mechanoids unable to mount a defence or any kind of useful tactic that might have spared their losses. Without their overlord they were less than automatons, little more than directionless drones. Even the elites appeared locked onto a single course of action – full-scale retreat.

The as-yet unseen phasic generator teleported some of the constructs back to the sunken tomb all the way into the northern polar wastes. No Ultramarine had laid eyes on the device, and it was likely withdrawn upon their arrival.

Only when the last of the necrons had either been teleported or damaged into instant phase-out did Agrippen call a halt, his fury sated. Then the Ultramarines began the long march back to Kellenport.

The sun was high in the ice-blue Damnos sky when Scipio reached the city. The edges of its walls were veneered in hazy umber from the light.

Led by the Thunderbolts, the Ultramarines from the Thanatos Mission passed through the Kellenport gates just as a viridian explosion lit up the distant hills. So large and destructive, the blast was even visible from the city. The pylons and gauss-obliterators would not return. For one they were buried, for another the Ultramarines had used enough explosive to level the mountainside.

‘Sergeant Vorolanus.’

It was Tigurius. Scipio stopped and turned to face the Librarian.

‘I will see to our captain,’ he said. ‘Agrippen has command.’

Scipio bowed, acknowledging.

As they parted ways, Tigurius stopped. ‘I saw courage on the Thanatos Hills and a desire for self-sacrifice. Now you know who you are, brother. Remember it.’

The Librarian was heading into the distant hubbub of the city. Already, preparations were being made for the arrival of the Ultramarines armour. Several squads stood watchful upon the battlements, alongside the Damnosian soldiery.

There was no sign of Agrippen or the Lions. Scipio assumed they were in council, planning the strategic defence of the city. At least two other sergeants were not present at that meeting. Leaving Brakkius in charge, Scipio dismissed the Thunderbolts. His gaze lingered on Jynn as she was carried to the nearest medical station. He banished the bleak thoughts from his mind as he went to meet his brothers.

Hugging Scipio firmly, Iulus said, 'I am glad you're alive, brother.'

Scipio laughed mirthlessly. 'You sound like you had your doubts.' He turned to Praxor. 'Brother?'

He looked downcast, his shame obvious in his bearing. Praxor had believed Sicarius dead and become like the people of Damnos he had thought weren't worth saving on account of that fatalism.

The captain was injured, badly, but lived. The truth of it was revealed later when the courtyard had cleared and Venatio announced to the Lions that their lord still drew breath. He was still in the Apothecary's care, surrounded by his inner circle warriors. But Cato Sicarius would play no further part in the war on Damnos. As soon as possible, he would be ferried to the apothecarion aboard the *Valin's Revenge* and allowed to recover.

Scipio put a hand on Praxor's shoulder. 'Neither of us was there, brother. We didn't witness what you did.'

'I should have known, but instead I gave in to doubt.'

'All three of us have experienced much in this campaign. I confess I never thought this ball of ice would be a place for revelation.'

At this point, Iulus stepped in. 'It's not done yet, either.' He held up a data-slate displaying the planet's northern geography. 'Necron forces are stirring in the north. Scans reveal massive tectonic activity.'

Exhaling, Scipio marshalled his anger. 'So all we have done so far has merely set them back?'

Iulus nodded. 'It would appear so.'

‘We have sacrificed much for little.’

‘And more is needed.’

Scipio was pensive for a moment before he straightened and clapped his brothers each on the pauldron. ‘Then by the glory of Ultramar, it will be given.’

Praxor nodded determinedly. Iulus even cracked a feral smile.

All three looked skywards as a large vessel silhouetted the upper atmosphere. The sound of the battle-barge’s engines was loud, even as far up as it was, and smaller ships were disgorging from it.

Valin’s Revenge.

The Ultramarines on the wall, those in the courtyard, all of the Damnosian infantry looked up.

The voice of Antaro Chronus, veteran Ultramarines tank commander, came over the feed. ‘The heavens are clear,’ he announced, shouting above the sound of heavy machinery in the background. ‘We are coming, brothers.’



EPILOGUE

Ankh had foreseen this outcome. Not through any form of prescience or sixth sense, but rather the cold logic of cause and effect. The Undying's demise was inevitable; the necron retreat likewise. Tahek's death he had engineered purposely – it meant the skies were open for the genebred warriors to bring their vessels and machineries to the surface. It would give them hope, make them believe that victory was even possible.

That thought amused the Architect. In the depths of the tomb his spyders and scarabs were revivifying in thousands, *tens of thousands*. The phalanxes in full retreat on the surface were but a fraction of what lay beneath, and there were things much more terrible in those depths. As the battles raged above, Ankh had been busy waking them.

He felt the touch of an ancient sentience in the emerald gloom of the under-caverns. It was a royal chamber where he stood. As Ankh contemplated the vast catacombs and their slumbering hordes, a pair of eyes ignited in the darkness in front of him.

Ankh took a step back and bowed almost to the floor.

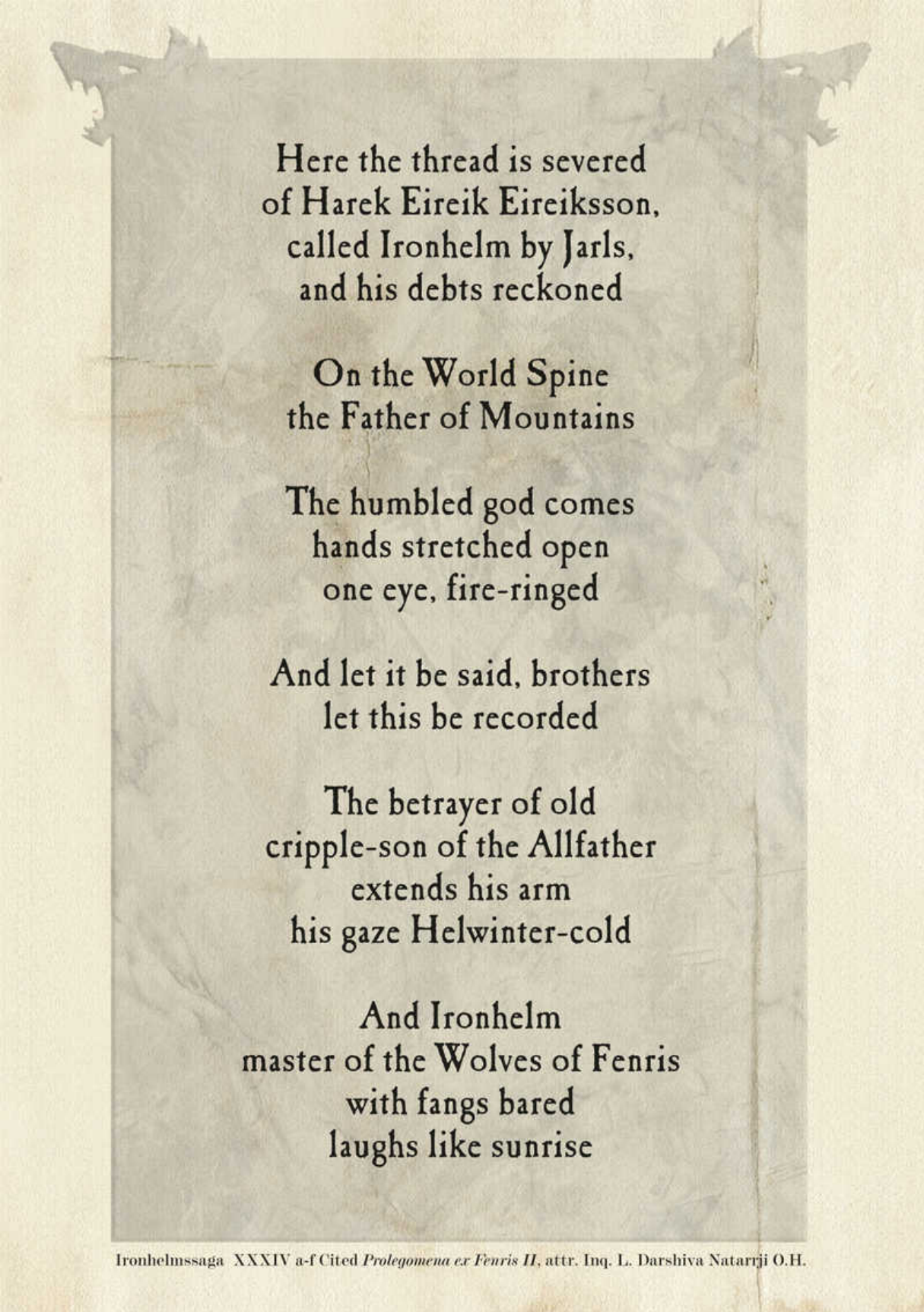
'My lord,' he purred as the royarch's gaze fell upon him.



BATTLE OF THE FANG

CHRIS WRAIGHT





Here the thread is severed
of Harek Eireik Eireiksson,
called Ironhelm by Jarls,
and his debts reckoned

On the World Spine
the Father of Mountains

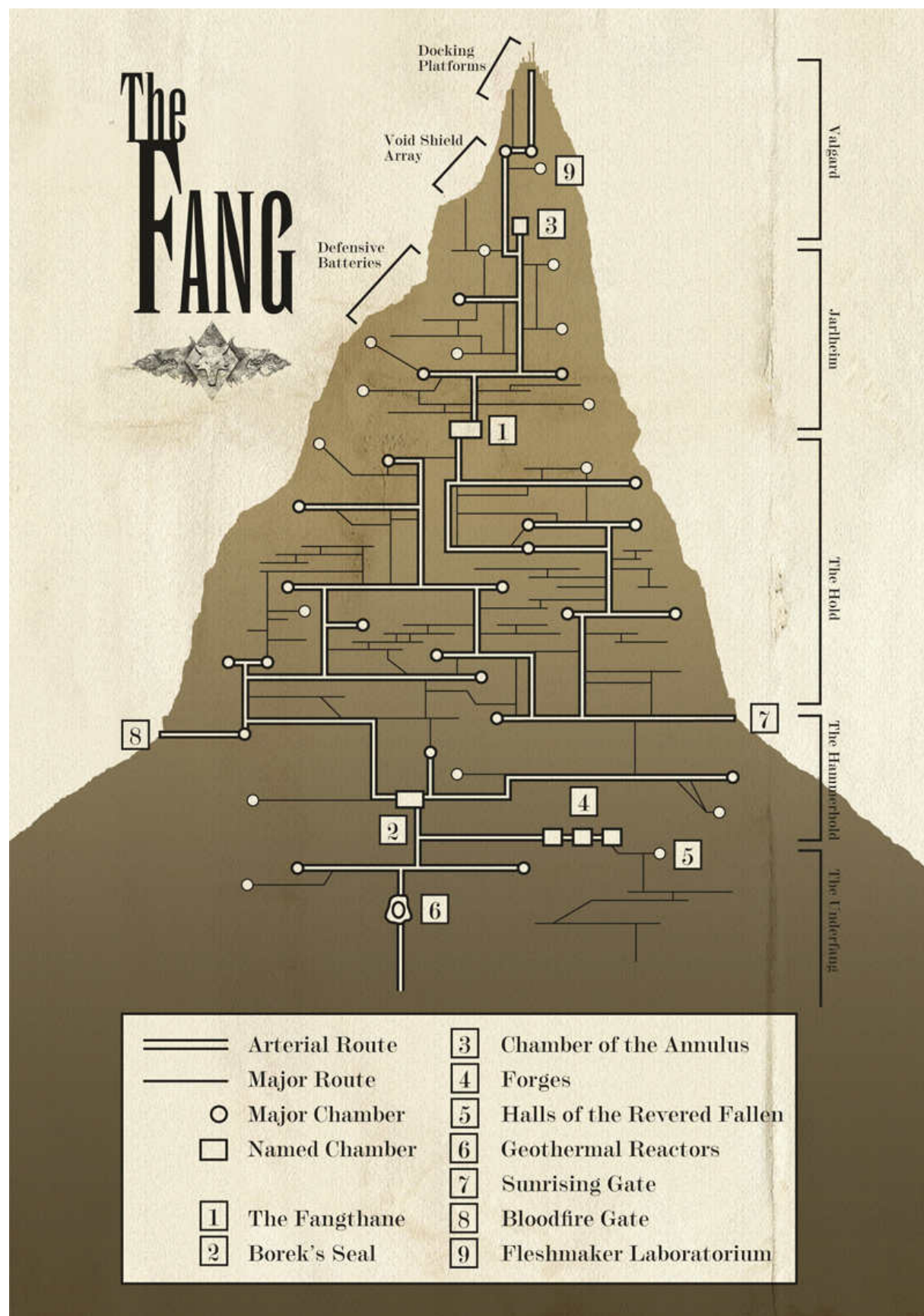
The humbled god comes
hands stretched open
one eye, fire-ringed

And let it be said, brothers
let this be recorded

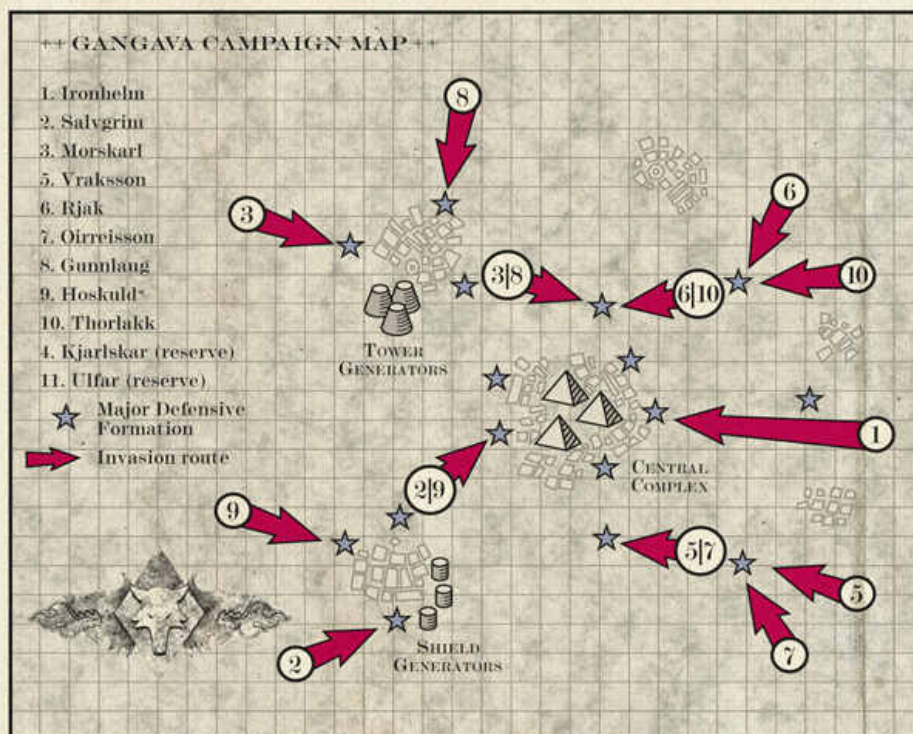
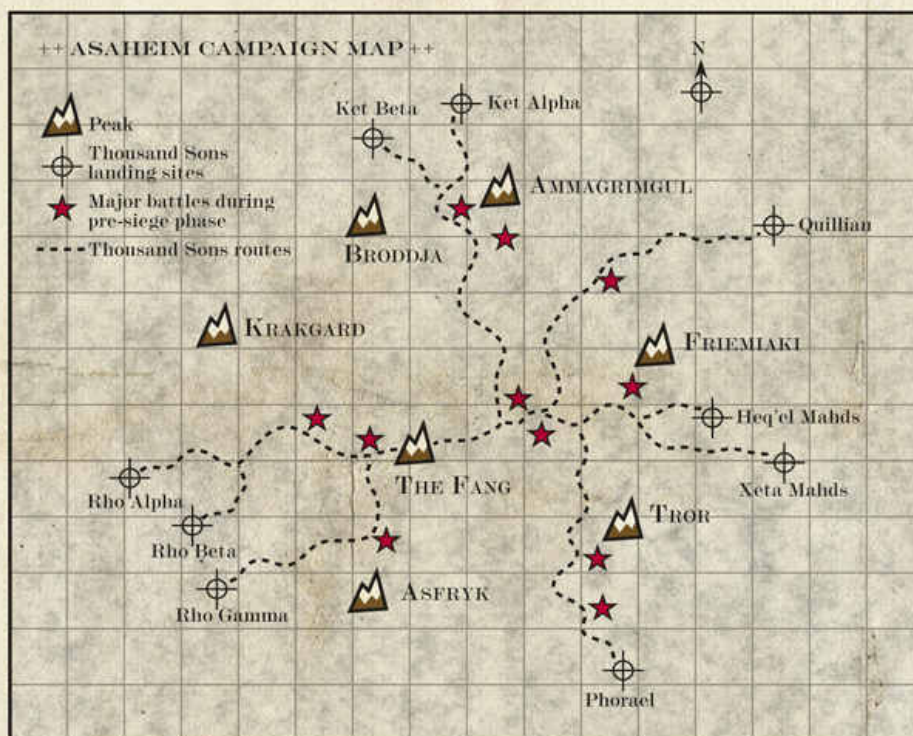
The betrayer of old
cripple-son of the Allfather
extends his arm
his gaze Helwinter-cold

And Ironhelm
master of the Wolves of Fenris
with fangs bared
laughs like sunrise

The FANG







BATTLE OF THE FANG



Chris Wraight



PROLOGUE

Strike cruiser *Gotthammar* powered smoothly through the void, its vast engines operating at less than half capacity, its wing of escorts keeping pace comfortably across the ten thousand kilometre-wide patrol formation. The cruiser was gunmetal-grey against the deep well of the void, its heavily armoured flanks emblazoned with the head of a snarling wolf. It had translated from the warp only hours earlier, and the last residue of Geller field shutdown still clung, glistening, to the exposed adamantium of the hull.

The *Gotthammar*'s command bridge was located near the rear of the gigantic vessel, surrounded by towers, bulwarks and angled gun batteries. Void shields rippled like gauze over metres-thick plexiglass real space viewers, under which the bridge crew laboured to keep the ship on course and with all its systems working at their full pitch of perfection.

Inside, the bridge was a huge space, over two hundred metres long, a cavern carved out from the core of the vessel. Its roof was largely transparent, formed out of the lens-like real space portals arranged across a latticework of iron. Below that were gantries ringing the edges of the open chamber, each of them patrolled by kaerls hefting *skjoldtar* projectile weapons. Further down was the first deck, across which milled more mortal crew. Most were clad in the pearl-grey robes of Fenrisian ship-

thralls, though kaerls moved among them too, stomping across the metal decking in blast-armour and translucent face-masks.

The floor of the first deck was broken open in several places, exposing deeper levels below. Bustling tactical stations clustered down there, and rows of chattering cogitators, and poorly-lit trenches filled with half-human servitors. Many of these were hardwired into their terminals, their spines or faces consumed in a mass of pipework and cabling, with exposed patches of grey skin the only reminder of the humanity they'd once enjoyed. Their service was different now, a demi-life of lobotomised servitude, shackled for eternity to machines that kept them alive only as long as they performed their numbing, mechanical tasks over and over again.

Above all those levels, set back at the very rear of the bridge cavern, was the command throne. A hexagonal platform jutted out from the vaulted walls, ten metres in diameter and ringed with a thick iron rail. In the centre of that platform was a low dais. In the centre of the dais stood the throne, a heavy, block-shaped chair carved from solid granite. It was far larger than a mortal man could have sat in comfortably, but that didn't matter much because no mortal man ever ventured on to that platform. It had been empty for many hours, though as the *Gotthammar* closed in on its target, that was about to change. Giant doors behind the throne hissed as brace-pistons were withdrawn. Then they slid open.

Through them walked a leviathan. Jarl Arvek Hren Kjarlskar, Wolf Lord of the Fourth Great Company of the Rout, massive in his Terminator armour, strode on to the dais. His battle-plate hummed with a low, throbbing menace as he moved. The ceramite surface was covered in deep-scored runes, and bone trophies hung from his huge shoulders. A bear-pelt, black with age and riddled with old bolter-holes, hung from his back. His face was leathery, glare-tanned, and studded with metal rings. A distended

jawline was encased in two night-black sideburns, lustrous and predator-sleek.

With him came other giants. Anjarm, the Iron Priest, clad in forge-dark artificer plate, his face hidden behind the blank mask of an ancient helm. Frei, the Rune Priest, in sigil-encrusted armour, his stone-grey hair hanging in plaits across the neck-guard. The doors slid closed behind them, isolating the trio on the command platform. Below them, the decks hummed with unbroken activity.

Kjarlskar grimaced as he surveyed the scene, exposing fangs the length of children's fingers.

'So what do we have?' he asked. His voice rose rattling from the vast cage of his chest like a Rhino engine turning over. He never raised it, so they said, even in the heat of battle. He never had to.

'Probes have been launched,' said Anjarm. 'We'll see soon.'

Kjarlskar grunted, and took his place on the throne. For such a giant, nearly three metres tall and two across, he moved with an easy, contained fluidity. His yellow eyes, locked deep within a low-browed skull, glistened liquid and alert.

'*Skítja*, I'm bored of this,' he said. 'Hel, even the mortals are bored of this.'

He was right. The whole Fourth Great Company fleet was buzzing with frustrated energy. Thousands of kaerls, hundreds of Space Marines, all chasing shadows for months on end. Ironhelm, the Chapter's Great Wolf, had kept them all busy pursuing the target of his obsession across the fringes of the Eye of Terror. Every system in the long search had been the same: abandoned, pacified, or home to conflicts too tedious and petty to bother with.

Running after ghosts was crushing work. The hunters needed to hunt.

'We're getting something,' said Anjarm, his head inclined slightly as he checked his helm's lens-feed. As he spoke, a semi-circle of pict screens

hung around the command platform flickered into life. The incoming data from the probes emerged on them. A brown-red planet swam into view, growing larger with every second. The probes were still closing, and at such vast range the image was broken and distorted.

‘So what’s this one?’ asked Kjarlskar, not showing much interest.

‘Gangava system,’ answered Anjarm, watching the pics carefully. ‘Single world, inhabited, nine satellites. Final node in the sector.’

Images continued to come in. As he watched them, the Jarl’s mood slowly began to change. The thick hairs on the exposed flesh of his neck stiffened slightly. Those yellow eyes, the windows onto the beast, sharpened their focus.

‘Orbital defences?’

‘Nothing yet.’

Kjarlskar rose from the throne, his gaze fixed on the pics. The visual stream clarified. The planet’s surface was swaying into view, dark-brown and streaked with a dirty orange. It looked like a ball of rust in space.

‘Last contact?’

‘Before the Scouring,’ said Anjarm. ‘Warp storm activity recorded until seventy standard years ago. Explorator reports list as desolate. We had this one low on the list, lord.’

Kjarlskar didn’t look like he was listening. He was tensing up.

‘Frei,’ said Kjarlskar. ‘Are you getting anything?’

The planet continued to grow as the probes took up geostationary positions. Angry swirls of cloud shifted across the surface. As the Rune Priest looked at the probe-relays, veins began to pulse at his shaven temples. His mouth tightened, as if some pungent aroma had risen, stinking, from the screens.

‘Blood of Russ,’ he swore.

‘What do you sense?’ asked Kjarlskar.

‘*Spoor*. His spoor.’

The clouds were breaking open. Beneath them were lights, laid out in geometric shapes, revealing a city, vast beyond imagining. The shapes were deliberate. They hurt the eyes.

Kjarlskar let slip a low growl of pleasure, mixed with anger. His gauntlets clenched into fists.

‘You’re sure?’ he demanded.

The Rune Priest’s armour had started glowing, lit up by the angular shapes carved into the plate. For the first time in months, the wyrd-summoner looked excited. Probe-auspexes continued to zoom in, revealing pyramids in the heart of the city.

Massive pyramids.

‘There can be no doubt, lord.’

Kjarlskar let slip a savage, barking laugh.

‘Then summon the star-speakers,’ he snarled. ‘We’ve done it.’

He looked from Anjarm to Frei, and his bestial eyes shone.

‘We’ve found the bastard. Magnus the Red is on Gangava.’

PART I:
OLD SCORES



CHAPTER ONE

Vaer Greyloc hunched down, keeping upwind, letting his naked fingers graze against the packed snow. Ahead of him, the plain stretched away north, bleached white, ringed by the peaks beyond.

He sniffed, pulling the frigid air in deep. The prey had sensed something, and there was fear carrying on the wind. He tensed, feeling his muscles tighten with readiness. His pin-sharp pupils dilated slightly, lost in their near-white irises.

Not yet.

Down below him, a few hundred yards away, the herd huddled against the wind, stepping nervously despite their size. *Konungur*, a rare breed. Everything on Fenris was bred to grip on to survival, and these creatures were no different. Four lungs to scrape the thin air of Asaheim of every last molecule of oxygen, huge ribcages of semi-fused bone, hind-legs the width of a man's waist, twin twisted horns and a spiked spine-ridge. A kick from a *konungur* could take the head off a man.

Greyloc stayed tense, watching them move across the plain. He judged the distance, still down against the snow. He had no weapon in his hands.

I am the weapon.

He wore no armour either, and the metal-lined carapace nodes chafed against the leather of his jerkin. His mouth stayed shut, and only a thin

trail of vapour escaped from his nostrils. Asaheim was punishingly cold, even for one with his enhanced physiology, and there were a thousand mutually supportive ways to die.

The *konungur* paused. The bull at the herd-head stopped rigid, its majestic horned profile raised against the screen of white beyond.

Now.

Greyloc burst from cover. His legs pumped, throwing snow up behind in powdered blooms. His nostrils flared, pulling air into his taut, lean frame.

The *konungur* bolted instantly, rearing away from the sprinting predator. Greyloc closed fast, his thighs already burning. His secondary heart kicked in, flooding his system with adrenaline-thick blood. There was no *mjod* in it – he'd been fasting for days, purging the battle-stimulant from his frame.

My pure state.

The *konungur* galloped powerfully, leaping high through the wind-smoothed drifts, but Greyloc was faster. His white hair streamed out over his rippling shoulders. He outpaced the slowest, tearing alongside the herd, fuelling its panic. The group broke formation, scattering from the bringer of terror in their midst.

Greyloc fixed his eyes on the bull. The beast was two metres high at the shoulder, over four tons of pure muscle moving at speed. He plunged after it, feeling his legs sear with the sharp pain of exertion. The fear of the beast clogged in his nostrils, fuelling the blood-frenzy pumping through his system.

It veered suddenly, trying to shake him off. Greyloc leapt, catching the creature's neck with his outstretched hand and swinging round to grapple it. The bull bucked, trying to break the hold, kicking out with spiked hooves and bellowing a series of echoing, coughing distress calls.

Greyloc pulled back his free fist and sent a punch flying at the *konungur*'s skull. He heard bone crack, and the creature staggered

sideways. Greyloc dug his claws into the ice-hard flesh, pulling at the cords within and dragging the beast to the ground.

The *konungur* screamed, collapsing in a flurry of limbs. Greyloc bared his fangs and buried his face in the animal's throat. He bit down, once, twice, ripping and shaking like a dog. He sucked in the hot blood, feeling it wash over his teeth, and the kill-pleasure poured into him. The body beneath him spasmed, kicked a final time, then shuddered still.

Greyloc flung the limp head of the bull aside and let his own fall back.
'*Hjolda!*'

Still pumped from the chase, Vaer Greyloc roared his triumph into the empty air, spitting out flecks of blood and hair. The rest of the herd were far away by then, bolting across the ice for higher ground.

'*Fenrys hjolda!*'

His cry echoing around the plain, Greyloc looked down and grinned. Endorphins raged through his bloodstream and his hearts hammered in a heavy, thrilling unison.

My pure state.

The carcass began to steam as blood welled up from its flank. Greyloc ripped the shoulder open with his bare hands, feeling the hot, wet slabs slap apart. He ignored the bull's glassy eye, now vacant and cooling fast. He tore strips of flesh free and gorged on them, replenishing the energy expended during the chase. *Konungur* meat was rich, rich enough even to satisfy the demands of his predator's frame.

It was only as Greyloc ate that he saw the snow ahead of him disturbed. He looked up from his feast, blood running down his chin. Something was coming.

He snarled with displeasure and stood. The beast within him was still roused and alert, still running with the kill-pleasure. In the distance, dark against the pale sky, a flyer was approaching. It came quickly, wheeling across the plain and descending sharply.

Greyloc wiped his jaw, which did nothing but spread gore across his white hair. Every sinew was still tight, every follicle erect. He growled with frustration.

This had better be good.

The blunt, snub-nosed flyer came closer, skirting the drifts. It was a four-man *skarr* gunship, open-sided and armed with twin-linked bolters under the wings. A single figure stood in the exposed crew bay, hands free and long red hair streaming out from the turbulence of the descent.

‘Jar!’ the newcomer bellowed over the roar as the flyer came to rest, bobbing a metre from the ground. The tilted engines thundered deep wells into the snow, melting and evaporating it and turning the drifts into slush.

‘Tromm,’ snarled Greyloc, not bothering to hide his anger. He was still pumped.

The Wolf Guard Tromm Rossek was in full battle-plate. He looked as bulky and ebullient as ever, and there was something joyous in his eyes.

‘News from Kjarlskar! Ironhelm summons you!’

Greyloc spat a mix of blood and saliva on to the snow.

‘Now?’

Rossek shrugged, still braced against the swaying movement of the gunship.

‘That’s what he said.’

Greyloc shook his head and shot a rueful glance at the mauled corpse of the *konungur*. Kill-pleasure was replaced with a numbness, the dull pain of frustration. With difficulty, he reeled in his hunt-state. He felt the hairs on his forearms relax even as he took a running leap and hauled himself on to the crew bay of the hovering gunship.

‘Good kill?’ enquired Rossek, a broad smile across his expansive, tattoo-laced face.

‘Get me back to the Aett,’ muttered Greyloc, slumping to the metal floor as the kaerls in the cockpit fed power to the burners.

It had been.

The gunship went north-east, banking between the ever-rising peaks. All of the Asaheim plateau was high, thousands of metres up, and even down on the prey-plains the air was perilously thin for mortals without rebreathers. Ahead of the flyer, fresh mountains were piled on top of one another, massive shoulders of ice-locked rock jumbled in a climbing pattern, ever higher, ever steeper. The engines of the gunship whined as they powered it upwards.

Greyloc hung on to the edge of the exposed platform casually. He could feel the blood on his face begin to crystallise. He was near-naked and the chill would immobilise even his body soon, but still he stayed on the edge, letting the frigid air tear at his death-white mane.

‘So what’s got him roused?’ he asked at last, adjusting easily as the gunship banked sharply.

Rossek shrugged.

‘Jarls are in the chamber. Something big.’

Greyloc grunted, and shook his head. The subsidence of the kill-pleasure was like a drug withdrawal. He felt surly and blunted.

The two figures on the gunship platform were physical opposites. Rossek was huge, red-haired, bearded, thick of limb and with a heavy-set face. His nose was flat and broken, his neck broad and banded with muscle. A dragon tattoo snaked across his left cheek, terminating at his temple where six metal studs protruded from the bone. In another Chapter that might have indicated six centuries of service. Rossek wasn’t that old – he just liked studs in his skull.

His lord was hewn from different stone. Greyloc was lean, rangy, and his flesh clung tight to the bone. The Wolf Lord’s face was drawn, as if preserved and stiffened by the ice-dry winds. Out of his armour, the tautness in his frame was evident. He was a prey-stalker, a plains-killer, fast, pale, and deadly. The brutish camaraderie of the *Vlka Fenryka*, the superhuman warriors of Fenris, sat uneasily with him. All the Aett knew

his prowess in the hunt, but they didn't trust his brooding, and they didn't trust the shade of his hide. He was white, and his eyes were the colour of steel.

Like a ghost, they said. Snow on snow.

'Are all the others there?' Greyloc asked, still standing in the face of the wind. He could feel ice creep across his exposed forearms and ignored it.

'Three Great Companies are off-world still, but Kjarlskar's one of them.'

Greyloc nodded. Ironhelm had been mustering his forces on Fenris for a long time, and the endless expeditions to hunt down his old adversary had seemed – at last – to be in abeyance. The Great Wolf's passion for finding Magnus had become an obsession, one Greyloc had argued against before. There were a thousand other enemies to hunt, and many of them would stand up and fight rather than shrink away into the aether when the noose closed.

'We'll see, then,' Greyloc said, watching as the mountains loomed.

The massive precipices were coming to a head. Vast beyond imagining, a single peak was rearing up on the horizon. As if the core of Fenris had been shoved through its mantle into a terrifying, unmatched pinnacle, a conical mountain-mass soared up into the darkening sky. Its flanks were sheer, snow-clad on jagged shelves of rock, glossy with ancient, undisturbed ice. In every direction, lesser summits crowded the view, clustering close to the broken skyline in the shadow of the Great One, the Shoulder of the Allfather: the *volda hamarrki*, the World Spine.

Against the gathering dark of the dwindling atmosphere, tiny lights shone at the distant summit. They marked the habitation of the Sky Warriors, the abode of the demigods, itself a tiny fraction of the bulk of that vast peak. The inhabitants of that place, whether kaerl or Space Marine, called it the Aett.

To the rest of the galaxy, awe-struck by half-snatched legends of Russ's fortress and never likely to see it, it was just the Fang.

Greyloc looked at the approaching lights impassively. There were other flyers coming in, at least three of them. Ironhelm was pulling all his forces back to the hearth.

'Perhaps he's given up at last,' said Greyloc, watching the flickering lights of the docking platform draw closer. 'Can that be too much to hope?'

'Wyrmlade! Enough splicing.'

Odain Sturmhjart strode into the laboratory, pushing aside fleshmaker-thralls impatiently. The huge Rune Priest, clad in sigil-encrusted armour, slammed his staff on the ground and ripples of excess power discharged against the stone.

Thar Ariak Hraldir, bearer of the Wyrmlade that gave him his name, looked up from his work. The low light made his eyes look like pools of resin-rich amber. The Wolf Priest was irritated, and his ragged, ugly face twisted into a scowl. A pair of curved fangs snagged his lips as he exhaled loudly. Slowly, aching from the hunched pose he'd held for so long, Wyrmlade straightened.

'Bone-rattler,' came the caustic reply. 'This, especially, is not a good time.'

Ahead of him, vials containing clear fluid were arranged in long rows on a metal table. Each was labelled with a single rune. Some stood alone, some were connected to one another by microfilament, others were linked together with strands of conductive plasfibre.

Wyrmlade gestured with a finger, and the lights in the laboratory rose. Strip lumens exposed white-tiled rooms, surgically clean, each leading off from the other like chambers in a den. Blast doors to the inner rooms closed, obscuring the view of what lay beyond. Before they snapped shut, there was a fleeting view of banks of equipment humming around

glistening centrifuges, of pictis updating steadily with rows of runes, and of man-sized tanks of translucent fluid against the walls. There were dark shadows suspended within those tanks, motionless and silent.

‘You tell iron-arse that,’ said Sturmhjart, and his ruddy cheeks glowed with mirth. ‘He’ll flay your skin off to cover what he’s missing. I’ve come to save you from that.’

The Rune Priest was built like all the Adeptus Astartes – solid, heavily muscled, broad and stocky. He had a circuit of augmetics around his left eye and a thick grey beard, stiff and matted from age. Bone talismans hung in chains from his breastplate, carefully arranged to channel his power over the elements. The pattern of runes on his armour might have looked random, but it was nothing of the sort, and every carving and incision had been made after days of scrying and casting. His cheerfulness was misleading too – Sturmhjart was the Chapter’s High Rune Priest, and wielded power of a terrifying magnitude.

‘He could try,’ muttered Wyrmlade, casting a final look over the vials before leaving them. As he walked from the long table, a drawer full of steel instruments closed with a smooth click. ‘Then he’d remember who pulled him off the ice, and who gave him his first scars.’

The Wolf Priest moved silently and slowly, carrying his bulk with an accomplished ease. He was old, and the centuries hung heavily on his ravaged features. Black, straggling hair framed his long face, and the tattoos on the flesh had turned scab-brown with age. His skin looked as tough as plascrete, weathered and beaten down by over five hundred years of ceaseless combat. Though ancient, his eyes were still keen and his grip still strong. His armour was as black as his hide, hung with ancient bones and covered in a second skin of gouges, plasma burns and blade-scores. Every one of his movements radiated a deep, old power, tested and tempered in the fires of war.

Two Priests. So opposite, so alike.

Sturmhart cast a sceptical eye over the ranks of vials.

‘Making progress?’

‘You’ve never understood the importance of this. If I failed to convince you a decade ago, I won’t do so now – you’re both older and more foolish.’

Sturmhart snorted a laugh, and it echoed from his chest like an erupting *krakken*. ‘Older, yes, though there’s more than one way to be foolish.’

‘You seem to know them all.’

The two Priests strode out of the laboratory. As they turned down the long corridor leading to the transit-shafts, lit only by flame torches against the polished rock, black-robed fleshmaker-thralls shrank back respectfully and inclined their heads.

‘I don’t know how long Ironhelm’s going to tolerate this research,’ said Sturmhart. ‘You haven’t been off-world for a year.’

‘He’ll tolerate it until it’s done.’ Wyrmlade turned his dour, sunken-eyed face to the Rune Priest. ‘You’ll tolerate it too. The work’s essential.’

Sturmhart shrugged.

‘Don’t interfere with the wyrd, brother,’ he said. ‘I’ve warned you before. If the fates permitted it, it would have been done already.’

Wyrmlade snarled, and the hairs on the back of his arms rose. Deep within him, he could feel his animal spirit glide to the surface. If Sturmhart noticed that, he showed no sign.

‘Do not presume to give me an order, brother,’ Wyrmlade responded, coming to a halt. ‘You’re not the only one who can see the future.’

Heartbeats passed, and neither figure moved. Then Sturmhart backed down.

‘Stubborn old bastard,’ he muttered, turning back down the corridor, shaking his ragged head as he stalked between the torches.

‘Never forget it,’ said Wyrmlade dryly, following closely. ‘It’s why we get on so well.’

The Chamber of the Annulus was high up in the pinnacle of the Fang, in the Valgard near the very summit of the huge fortress, surrounded by a seam of pure granite. It had been one of the first halls to be delved from the living rock by the Terran geomancers brought to Fenris to establish the VI Legion in the time of legends. In that age, tech-adepts had been able to level the very mountains and raise them up again, to shape the continents and quell the tumults of the death world's seasonal upheavals. They could have made Fenris a paradise if they'd chosen, and it was only on the primarch's orders that the planet was never altered from its fearsome character. Russ wished for his home world to remain the great proving ground of warriors, a crucible in which its humanity would be tested and honed forever.

So, as it had happened, only one mountain out of the hundreds on Asaheim had been changed from its primeval form, its chambers hollowed out and wrought by ancient devices of forgotten, terrible power. Now the knowledge brought by those long-dead artificers was fading fast, and no citadel of comparable strength and majesty would ever be built again. The Fang was unique in the Imperium, the product of a genius that was slowly bleeding out of the galaxy as humanity stumbled and unlearned the lessons of the past.

Within the Chamber, twelve figures stood around the Annulus, the huge circle on the floor with the sigils of the Great Companies inscribed on panels of stone. Eight of them were Jarls – Wolf Lords – including the pale figure of Greyloc, now in his war-plate and cleansed of the blood of the hunt. Three other Wolf Lords were off-planet, though Ironhelm had sent astropathic messages to their fleets advising them of Kjarlskar's discovery. Standing beside the Jarls were the three High Priests: Wyrmlade, Sturmhjart and Iron Priest Berensson Gassijk Rendmar, resplendent in his foundry-enhanced armour.

That left one place remaining. It was filled by Harek Eireik Eireiksson, Heir of Russ and the Great Wolf. Wearing his customary Terminator battle-plate, he cut a vast, ominous figure at the head of the council. His black hair and beard were long and full, the forks braided and sealed with

bone totems. Aside from Wyrmblade he was the oldest warrior present, having led the Chapter for three centuries and served for at least another hundred years before that. The blood of his victims had stained his battle-garb for so long that the grey had long since shrunk to darkness. Only the curved sheet of metal implanted across the right hemisphere of his skull glinted from the firelight of the torches, the legacy of the bloody duel that had earned him his iron implants and given him his nickname. In the semi-light of the Chamber, Harek Ironhelm looked as joyless and brooding as a spectre of Morkai.

‘Brothers,’ he said, fixing his gaze on each of the Wolf Lords in turn. His voice carried a permanent undertow of rumbling, grinding aggression. ‘The hunt is called. Jarl Arvek Hren Kjarlskar has uncovered the lair of the Traitor, and now, at last, we will have completion.’

As he spoke, a shimmering green hololith emerged over the centre of the Annulus. It was a planet, rotating gently. Points on the hololith were marked with warship battle-signs, all of them Fenrisian. Kjarlskar had blockaded the world.

‘Gangava Prime,’ said Ironhelm, relishing the words as they left his cracked lips. ‘What orbital defences there were have been destroyed, but void shields shelter the major settlements. Kjarlskar estimates tens of millions in the principal city alone.’

As Ironhelm talked, his voice became more animated. Greyloc saw the Great Wolf’s right hand, enclosed in its heavy gauntlet, flex into a fist as he spoke. A subtle kill-urge pheromone marked the air.

He’s combat-roused. Already.

‘We’ll take the Rout,’ Ironhelm announced, baring his thick, chipped fangs in a chill smile, as if daring any to disagree. ‘All of it. We strike, hard. This prize calls for the full wrath of the running pack.’

The hololith flickered as tactical overlays showed landing sites and ingress routes. The primary target was a massive urban sprawl on a high

northern latitude, hundreds of miles across. The swirls of citylight were uncomfortably arranged, and as Greyloc looked at them a hot sensation broke out behind his eyes. He heard low growls around the chamber as the others recognised the mark of corruption in the architecture.

‘How far?’ demanded Morskarl, Jarl of the Third, his question muffled by an archaic Heresy-era face mask.

‘Three weeks in the warp. The fleet is being made ready.’

‘And you’re sure he’s there?’ asked Iron Priest Rendmar in his strange, metallic voice.

‘Kjarlskar’s Rune Priest confirms it. The Traitor waits for us, confident in his strength.’

‘He invites the attack,’ said Jarl Egial Vraksson of the Fifth, narrowing his eyes across a heavily scarred brow and scrutinising the tactical display. ‘Why?’

‘There are over two million troops in the target zone. It’s fortified, and there are armament works within. He’s building a new Legion, brothers. We’ve caught him before he’s ready.’

‘A Legion with no fleet,’ said Greyloc softly.

He suddenly felt hostile eyes sweep across him. Ironhelm’s enthusiasm was infectious, and they didn’t want to hear contrary counsel.

‘And what of that, whelp?’ demanded Ironhelm. The term ‘whelp’ had been used in the past as a joke, a way for the older Jarls to poke fun at Greyloc’s relative youth, but there was a sharper edge in Ironhelm’s speech this time.

Greyloc looked back at the Great Wolf coolly. The entire chamber was alive with a rush for completion. The hunters needed to finish the job, and they were straining like hounds on the leash.

‘You think the Traitor didn’t foresee this, lord?’ he said, keeping his voice low and posture respectful. ‘How many false signs has he left for us already?’

Rekki Oirreisson, Jarl of the Seventh, a hirsute monster with a heavy jawline and bunched shoulders, grunted his displeasure.

‘The Rune Priest has ruled,’ he said. ‘Magnus is there.’

‘And if he is?’ replied Greyloc. ‘For all his degeneracy, he is a primarch. If Russ, honour to his name, couldn’t kill him, what hope have we?’

At that, red-eyed Borek Salvrggrim of the Second took a step forwards, hand reaching for his weapon-belt. There was a chorus of low, angry growls from other Wolf Lords.

‘Jarl, you forget yourself,’ warned Ironhelm, his powerful voice echoing around the Chamber.

For a moment, the danger lingered. The suggestion – even the intimation – that there were limits to the vengeful capability of the Rout was perilous.

Then Salvrggrim withdrew the challenge, grudgingly, casting a dark look at Greyloc as he did so.

‘We are committed to this,’ said Ironhelm, speaking to Greyloc as if demonstrating an axe-grip to a child. ‘It is blood-debt. It is completion.’

That word again. Like all the others, Greyloc knew the importance of it. They were hunters, the Wolves, and nothing was more important than bringing the chase to a kill. Plenty in the Imperium thought of Russ’s warriors as savages, but that betrayed their ignorance of galactic history – the Wolves did what was necessary to complete the task, whatever it was. That was the trait they’d been bred for. To leave a slaying unfinished was a cause for deep shame, something that burned in the soul forever, chewing away until the ache was cleansed.

‘There are other considerations,’ interjected Wyrmlade, too old to be daunted by disapproval. His lined, cynical face looked up at Ironhelm’s. ‘My work, for one.’

‘Do not mention that here,’ muttered Vraksson, glaring at Wyrmlade. ‘This is a council of war, not a discourse on your blasphemy.’

Wyrmlade gave the Jarl a cold smile.

‘Perhaps your pattern could have done with some tweaking, Egial.’

‘Enough,’ hissed Ironhelm.

Greyloc watched the Great Wolf carefully, noting the dilated nostrils and glistening irises. The kill-urge was powerful now.

This council will only endorse one outcome.

‘Disgust is strong in me,’ said Ironhelm. ‘We have him – the Crimson King, the architect of our dishonour – in our grasp and hesitate before taking the chance. For shame, brothers! Will we cower forever here, huddled around the fires while the deeds of our fathers keep us warm?’

There was a fresh murmur of agreement around the Chamber. The pack-scent had turned from one of surly belligerence to one of impatience. Greyloc saw how skilfully Ironhelm spoke to their pride, and remained silent. There would be no contesting the coming verdict.

‘We have our full strength gathered,’ continued Ironhelm. ‘No force remaining in the galaxy can stand against us when mustered together. Kjarlskar has him pinned, and, as we join him, Gangava will bleed under our claws.’

Guttural noises of approval came from Salvrgrim, whose vehemence for the chase was ever paramount.

‘This is it, brothers,’ snarled the Great Wolf, raising his clenched fist before him. ‘Do you not sense it? Do you not feel it in your blood? This is when we destroy the last dregs of Prospero!’

There was a sudden, massed roar from the assembled Jarls at that, a thunderous sound that rebounded from the cold stone around them.

Greyloc exchanged a quick glance with Wyrmlade, his only ally in the Chamber. The Priest’s expression, as ever, was sour.

‘And who will man the citadel, lord?’ the old Wolf Priest asked, timing his question to puncture the euphoria around him.

Ironhelm looked at Wyrmlade, and a mix of scorn and exasperation marked his features.

‘You, then,’ he spat. ‘You and the whelp, since your stomach for fighting is so weak. But no more than that. Only one Great Company will remain – the rest I will commit to this.’

He spun back then, facing the circle of huge armoured figures around the Annulus, and there was a murderous smile on his ravaged face.

‘For those who join me, honour beyond measure. We shall do it, my brothers! We shall do what even our dread father did not.’

His smile grew to a wide, expectant grin, exposing his fangs of tooth and metal.

‘We shall take the Crimson King,’ he growled, his voice grating deep within the curve of his breastplate, ‘and tear him from the face of the universe.’



CHAPTER TWO

The chamber's lights were dim, barely above the level a mortal would need to see by. Apart from the glow of floor-level lumen strips there were only four *prakasa* floating below the ceiling. They swam through the air lazily like jewels, tiny points of slow-spreading illumination in the warm darkness. From below the floor, the low hum of the ship's warp engines made them shiver like leaves in the breeze.

Ahmuz Temekh would have been able to read the text before him even in near-complete darkness, but the soft blush of colour was satisfying. He reached for the corner of a fragile page and turned it gingerly. His oversized fingers worked carefully, avoiding the rips that had already disfigured the ancient manuscript.

His violet eyes gazed down on the script. He knew what was written there. He knew what was written in all the books still possessed by the Legion. Only Ahriman, perhaps, had delved deeper, and he was gone.

‘You should not have strayed, brother.’

Temekh spoke aloud, feeling the shape of the words slip around his cultured lips. He spoke in Telapiye, the xenos language of the book's long-dead authors. Even with his superhuman control of musculature, he couldn't recreate the full range of sounds necessary – for that, he'd have needed two tongues, each with more prehensile range than his own. Still, that even his rough approximation was heard in the universe was

something. Since the last of the telap had been exterminated, it was entirely possible that Ahmuz Temekh was the only speaker of the million-year-old language left.

A faint chime rang out from the corridor outside Temekh's private chamber. He felt a flicker of irritation, quickly quelled. Aphael was only doing his job.

‘Come.’

As he spoke, a panel in the darkened chamber withdrew silently and slid open. The *prakasa* swelled into more light and their beams swept around the room, showing up the eclectic contents. A *hauxx* writing desk from Karellion, an aquarium of feldspar crystal populated with sparkling cichlids, a wraithbone sword-holder from the extinguished Saim-Arvuel craftworld.

So many trinkets. On ancient Terra, they'd have called him a jackdaw.

‘Still reading, brother?’

Herume Aphael ducked as he entered the room. He was arrayed in full battle-armour, which made him a half-metre taller than Temekh. His plate was deep blue, decorated with bronze swirls at the joints; only his bald, smooth head was exposed. The Pyrae sorcerer-lord spent much of his time in armour these days, and Temekh couldn't recall when he'd last seen him without it.

‘There's plenty of time,’ Temekh replied, putting the book down on the desk in front of him.

Aphael grunted, and stood opposite him. He was emanating impatience. There was no surprise in that – they were always impatient, his kind. That was the gift of their order, and what Magnus continued to value them for.

‘Why are you here, brother?’ asked Temekh, not wanting to waste the precious days before system-fall made anything but thoughts of combat impossible.

‘What are you reading?’ countered Aphael, looking at the book with distrust.

‘Nothing of value to the current campaign. The author’s light has been taken from the universe. By Angron, I believe – one of his many exercises of tolerance.’

Aphael shrugged. ‘He’s as barbaric as the Dogs, but keep your mind focused on the matter at hand.’

‘It is, I assure you.’

‘You would do well to assure me. You’ve become distant.’

‘If I have, it is in your imagination.’

Aphael smiled without humour. ‘And you’d know all about that.’

The Pyrae shook his head. As the flesh moved against the interface nodes in his armour’s neck-guard, Temekh could see the puckering, the slight reflectiveness. Was that an early sign, a giveaway symptom?

Oh, no. Not you too.

‘In any case, the assault plans are now advanced,’ Aphael said. ‘You should join the command group, or your absence will cause more comment among the conclave.’

At that, Temekh let his mind detach briefly from the physical, abstracting himself into a local vector within the immaterium. From his privileged vantage he saw the fleet around them as it powered through the warp. Strike cruisers, bristling with weapons, readied for the orbital war to come. Behind them, vast troop ships, crammed with thousands upon thousands of mortals bearing the single eye on their breastplates.

And in the holds of the great battleships were the Rubricae, Ahriman’s creations. They waited, silently, animated by nothing but the wills of those who led them. They would feel no hate against the Dogs as they killed them, the ones who had reduced them to their state of eternal, silent horror. For them, the years since the Betrayal were nothing. Even for Temekh and the others who had retained their souls, mere decades had passed since

Prospero had been sacked, whatever else might have happened in the universe of mortals. For Magnus's children, the wounds were still raw, still weeping.

He relaxed, and his soul snapped back to its physical bounds.

'The fleet is in good order,' he said. 'You are to be congratulated.'

'I don't need your approval. I need you on the bridge.'

Temekh bowed his head.

'I will come, then. And we will refine the instruments of our revenge together.'

Aphael frowned at Temekh's weary tone.

'Do you not wish to see them burn, brother? Do you not relish the pain we will cause them?'

Temekh almost replied with the words he had been reading a few moments ago.

There is a symmetry of pain in revenge. When a man will not withdraw his emotion from those whom he wishes to destroy, then even in victory he destroys nothing but a part of himself.

'Causing them pain will not bring back Tizca,' he said, gazing absently at the cichlids as they darted through the weeds of the aquarium. 'But if we have been so diminished that our only remaining satisfaction is in their destruction, then it will have to do.'

His violet eyes flickered back up to look at his comrade.

'So they will burn, brother,' he said bleakly. 'They will burn in ways they do not even begin to comprehend.'

Only to himself, silently and within the privacy of his psychically shielded mind, did he complete the sentence.

And so will we.

Freija Morekborn had the Blood Claw by the throat, and she wasn't letting go.

‘Damn you,’ she spat, before landing her knuckles on his slabbed, stupid face, breaking teeth and splitting skin. The Sky Warrior looked up at her blearily, arms limp. *‘Show. Some. Respect.’*

‘Daughter!’

Freija heard the voice from far away, interrupting her dreaming. Somewhere deep in her subconscious, irritation stirred. She was enjoying this one.

‘Daughter!’

This time, her shoulder was grasped. Unwilling, grudgingly, she was shaken awake. Her last dream-image was of the broken Space Marine sinking to the floor, beaten in combat, humbled and humiliated in a way that could never happen in the waking world.

She opened her eyes, seeing her father leaning over her. Her bedchamber was still dark, lit only by a wavering tallow candle set high into the rock walls.

‘What is it?’ she mumbled, shrugging off his rough hands. She could make out the familiar line of his shoulders, feel the calloused flesh on hers.

‘Get up,’ he said, turning from her and looking for more light.

Freija pushed herself up from the disarranged furs of her bunk. Her sand-blond hair fell in unruly clumps around her face. The tiny chamber was ice cold, but she ignored it. Everywhere on Fenris was ice cold.

‘What’s going on?’

Morek Karekborn managed to find a working glowsphere and sent it spinning up into the air. A thin grey light flooded across the untidy space. His blunt, honest face was thrown into stark relief, and the worry lines around his eyes looked deeper than ever.

‘Change of plan,’ the old warrior said, running a tired hand over his cropped head. ‘The Eleventh has been called off-world. We’re back on duty.’

‘*Skítja*,’ Freija swore, rubbing her eyes and trying to banish the heavy weight of sleep. ‘Again?’

‘Don’t question it. Just get into uniform.’

Freija looked at her father with concern. Morek was a rivenmaster, leader of five hundred kaerls of the Aettguard. His duties drove him hard, and he drove himself harder. He had the shadows of long-term fatigue in his face.

They’re killing him, she thought. *And they don’t even know it.*

‘We’ve just come off rotation,’ she protested, swinging her legs from the hard bunk and staggering over to the grey tunic thrown across the floor.

‘There are other detachments that could do this.’

Morek leaned against the wall.

‘Not any more. The Twelfth is the only one staying. Get used to it – we’ve got weeks of this to come.’

Freija still felt thick-headed from sleep as she pulled her tunic over her head and tried to drag the worst of the tangles from her hair. Weeks of being driven into punishing defensive exercises by the Sky Warriors, of being ordered around by whooping Blood Claws who’d forgotten what it was like to have a mortal body and mortal weaknesses.

‘Great,’ she said coldly. ‘Bloody great.’

‘Freija, my daughter,’ said Morek. He came up to her and put his hands firmly on her shoulders. ‘Be careful this time. Think about how you act, think about what you say. They’ve been patient with you because of me, but it won’t last forever.’

She almost shook him off. She hated his lectures, just as she hated his blind faith in his masters. He worshipped them, even though he knew that they’d all been mortal once. The Sky Warriors barely knew mortals such as he and she existed, even though without the loyal service of the Aettguard they’d be unable to keep even half of the Fang’s huge maze of chambers in operation.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ she said, dropping her fledgling defiance. ‘I can fight. That’s all they care about.’

Morek gave her a hard look. She knew how he felt. Like so many fathers, he wanted to protect her all the time. She was the only thing left for him. Part of her wanted to give him some kind of reassurance, some kind of certainty that she’d follow in his path, diligently doing her duty to Russ and the immortals. There were times when indeed that was all she wanted, but they made it so damned *hard*.

‘You show your feelings too much,’ he complained, shaking his head.

‘And what do you want me to do?’ she blurted, shaking free of him and reaching down for her boots. ‘If they wanted meek, shrinking servants, they’ve got the wrong planet. *Fekke*, I’m a daughter of Fenris, and my blood runs hot. Mortal blood, at that. They can drown in it.’

She looked up then, suddenly worried she’d overstepped the mark, only to see her father gazing at her with an odd expression.

‘Aye, you’re a daughter of Fenris, all right,’ he said, and his brown eyes shone. ‘You make me proud, Freija. And sick with fear.’

He pushed himself from the wall and made to leave.

‘Get into armour quickly, and get your squad together. We have an hour to take over from the Eleventh. I don’t want to look bad in front of that bastard Lokkborn.’

‘So what’s going on?’

Morek shrugged.

‘No idea. No idea at all.’

High up at the summit of the Valgard, ships blasted off from launch platforms like crows leaving a roost. Thunderhawk gunships mingled with the Chapter’s few remaining Stormbirds, forming an endless stream of jagged shadows against the nightshade-blue sky. Among them were the much larger *hlaupa*-class escorts, heavily armed variants of the Imperial Navy’s Cobra destroyers. Vessels of such size would not normally have been able to dock within a planetary atmosphere, but the sheer altitude of

the Valgard landing stages made it possible for them to make planetfall on Fenris. Twelve of them had left already, and the fabled hangars were swiftly emptying. Only seven days had passed since Kjarlskar's discovery on Gangava and already the fleet muster was drawing near to completion.

Far above the procession of surface-capable vessels hung the spacegoing fleet. Each warship buzzed with activity on all decks as the thralls prepared the plasma drives to power them to the jump-points. Some ships were new arrivals at the muster, having been recalled by Ironhelm only days before from long-range duty. Others had been held above Fenris in readiness for many months, waiting for the Great Wolf's call to arms. The serrated outlines of the strike cruisers glided amongst the swarms of lesser ships, each of them marked with the symbol of a Great Company and the black wolfshead of the Chapter.

At the centre of the muster, picked out by steady columns of gunships waiting to enter the cavernous launch-bays, was the pride of the Chapter, the colossal *Russvangum*. Built to a design now lost in the cataclysm of the Heresy, the massive vessel hung motionless in the void. Strike cruisers, themselves capital ships, passed under its shadow and were utterly obscured. It dominated local space just as the alpha-beasts of the plains dominated their packs. Like all such Space Marine vessels, it was designed to do one thing only – unleash overwhelming, morale-destroying, nerve-burning fury onto the surface of a recalcitrant world from high orbit. It had done such work many times, and its drop pod and torpedo arrays were charred black from heavy use. All the *Vlka Fenryka* were predators, but the *Russvangum* was perhaps the most potent expression of their awesome reach and power. Only the legendary *Hrafnkel* had carried a heavier punch, and that was now just a memory in the sagas.

From his tower high on the flanks of the Jarlheim, Ironhelm watched the final preparations for the muster take shape. He could see the launch trails of the Thunderhawks, thin and graceful, as they broke atmosphere and headed to the muster-points. Around him, tactical displays showed the

positions of the ships as they moved slowly into convoy formation. It would not be long before he too took his place on the flagship.

So many of them. So much power. All in one place, all directed at a single point.

A familiar thrill animated his gene-forged limbs. It would be days – weeks, even – before he'd be able to channel his eagerness properly into the battle-rage, and by then his whole being would be at a fever-pitch of readiness. Thinking of the carnage that he would unleash, a cold expression broke across his ragged face.

They have forgotten just what we are capable of. Reminding them will give me much pleasure.

All enemies of the Allfather engendered hatred in a son of Fenris, but Magnus was placed in a different category of loathing. It had always been that way with the Thousand Sons. The sagas still recounted in the caverns of the Aett told of the sorcerers' betrayal, their condescension, and – worst of all – their escape. The Legion hadn't been destroyed at Prospero, only crippled. That shame had hung over the Wolves for over a thousand years, staining whatever deeds they'd accomplished since and marking their failure like spoor-trails in the snow.

Perhaps, if the traitor Magnus had disappeared into the Eye of Terror and never re-emerged, that shame might have been bearable. But he hadn't. He'd returned over the following centuries, leaving devastation in his elusive wake. Precision strikes on Imperial worlds had continued, each aimed at retrieving some valuable piece of knowledge or esoterica. Despite the grievous damage Russ had inflicted on them, the Thousand Sons still had the potential to launch raids into protected space, and the knowledge of that burned at Ironhelm. It had burned at him for decades, until nothing else seemed important.

Despite all the resources he devoted to hunting Magnus, the chase had always come up short. There were always signs left behind for them to

find, mocking hints, challenges to catch the originator of the ruin and bring him in. On Pravia, on Daggaegghan, on Vreole, on Hromor. The Traitor had left his calling cards behind, taunting the Wolves who ever snapped at his heels.

We have been patient. We have waited. And now the trap closes.

Out of the corner of his eye a rune flashed over the doorway.

‘Come,’ he said, turning away from the view of the fleet.

Sturmhart stalked into the chamber. The Rune Priest’s eyes blazed with fury.

‘Why?’ he demanded.

Ironhelm spread his hands expansively.

‘Odain,’ he started. ‘This is—’

‘Tell me why.’

The Great Wolf sighed, and set the door to close with a flick of a finger.

‘You know Wyrmlade’s work. He needs watching.’

Sturmhart snarled, pulling back his lips.

‘Like a child? That’s more important to you?’

‘Only you can restrain him. He plays with forces that could destroy us all.’

‘You let him.’

‘Because he may succeed.’

‘Tell him to wait. Tell him to stop until the Rout is called back from Gangava. I will not be denied this honour!’

Ironhelm shook his head.

‘This is a critical time. The whelp is his protégé, and I need a wise head to keep the Aett in line. You will not be coming with us.’

Sturmhart growled, and a flicker of yellow energy snaked across his chest. Ironhelm could sense the furnace of frustration hammering inside the Rune Priest’s body.

‘Do not do this,’ he insisted, his fist gripping his staff tightly.

Ironhelm's eyebrow rose. Sturmhjart had never defied an order.

'You threaten me, Odain?' he said, letting a challenge-note enter his speech.

For a moment, Sturmhjart stood still, glaring at him, face contorted with anger. Eventually, reluctantly, he dropped his gaze, spitting on the floor with disgust.

'You don't understand,' he muttered. 'The witches. They take the elements and corrupt them. These are *my* enemies.'

Ironhelm looked at the Rune Priest carefully. Sturmhjart was a warrior after his own heart, a bloody-minded, fearless cutter of threads, but he had to know who dominated the pack.

'They are not. They are prey for all of us. Frei will be there, and the other Rune Priests, but I need you here.'

Sturmhjart balled his fists, and fresh slivers of elemental power rippled over the gauntlets. He was reeling his anger in, but it pained him.

'As Wyrmlade's nursemaid,' he spat bitterly.

'No, brother,' said Ironhelm. 'Wyrmlade has delved deep, and he holds fate in both hands. If he falters, you must be there. You must watch over this.'

Sturmhjart's expression shifted awkwardly from frustration to surprise.

'You heard me,' said Ironhelm. 'Whatever Greyloc thinks, you're to be my sword arm here. We must remember the Wolf Brothers, their failure and the reasons for it. I will not see that path trodden again.'

Sturmhjart's eyes flickered in doubt.

'You think he's—'

'Wyrmlade's as loyal as Freki,' said Ironhelm, relaxing as he saw the Rune Priest's anger retreat. 'But we have to watch for the future.'

He came up to Sturmhjart and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

'I do this because I can trust you, brother,' he whispered, drawing his head close. 'Most out of all my Wolves, I can trust you. Seek the truth in

the wyrd if you want, and you will understand – the Tempering is our destiny.’

Sturmhart looked back into Ironhelm’s eyes. He was still not reconciled, but he would take the order.

‘So I have full sanction, lord?’ he asked.

Ironhelm smiled grimly.

‘We always have full sanction,’ he said.

The Fang was vast beyond comprehension – a huge network of tunnels, shafts and chambers that riddled the highest levels of the peak. Even so, the fortress proper was dwarfed by the full bulk of the mountain, and only the very upper reaches had ever been delved into habitation. For the most part, the Wolves dwelt underground, their lairs hidden under kilometres of solid rock. Only at the very pinnacle, the terminus of the Valgard level, did artificial structures break the surface in any quantity. It was there that the mighty landing stages and docking berths had been constructed, clustered around massive towers that thrust from sheer cliffs hundreds of metres tall. Ancient drive mechanisms powered service shafts a kilometre deep, hauling materiel and wargear from depots in the heart of the mountain and delivering them to the transports waiting in the hangars. They were always busy, those places, testament to the restless spirit of the Wolves and their ceaseless voyaging into the sea of stars.

Haakon Gylfasson stood on the edges of one such hangar, watching the scores of thralls and servitors crawl over the steaming hulls of ships like vermin on a corpse. Dozens of vessels had left already, and most of those that remained were earmarked for the war-fleet. The ships left to the Twelfth were few, and for the most part the slowest and least well-armed. Only a single strike cruiser, the *Skraemar*, would remain in orbit to defend the planet, and it would have fewer than a dozen smaller craft in its escort.

That struck Gylfasson as entirely reasonable. What didn’t strike him as reasonable was the commandeering of the *Nauro*. That was personal, an affront, and in a way that most of his battle-brothers would struggle to understand.

‘I’m sorry, lord,’ said the kaerl for the third time, staring hard at the data-slate in front of her and trying to avoid eye contact with Gylfasson. ‘This is part of the requisition. The Great Wolf–’

‘Let me tell you something,’ said Gylfasson in his dark, feline drawl. He didn’t speak like a typical Space Marine, and had none of the overt, bristling threat about him that they did. His colouring was dark, and his facial hair thick and matted. He was slighter than most pack members, even when kitted out in his full array of Scout’s carapace armour. Only his eyes truly gave him away, the circles of amber pinned with black. No one but a son of Russ had those eyes. ‘I’m not a nice person. I don’t have the generosity of my brothers. I don’t hang around them much, and they don’t hang around me.’

The kaerl looked like she’d rather be anywhere else herself, but listened respectfully.

‘So don’t think I won’t take this personally. Don’t think I won’t find out who your rivenmaster is and get you placed on external patrol in Asaheim for a month. I need this ship. It’s my ship. It stays here.’

The kaerl looked back at her data-slate earnestly, as if some new information on it could possibly help her. Fifty metres behind her loomed the *Nauro* itself, sitting on the hangar apron and steaming gently. It didn’t look like any of the other vessels waiting on the plascrete. It was jet-black, untouched by the gunmetal grey that coloured the rest of the fleet. Its classification was uncertain – too small to be a frigate, far too big to count as a transatmospheric craft, and just under five hundred crew. It sat low against the ground, narrow and unusually slender. Nearly a third of its length was taken up by plasma drives, a ratio that made it colossally fast. Which was exactly why Gylfasson liked it.

‘You won’t find what you’re looking for there,’ said Gylfasson patiently, watching the kaerl play for time.

She looked up with a desolate expression on her face. The woman was built like most Fenrisians, heavy-boned and broad-shouldered. She'd seen combat, from the skulls woven into her uniform, so most things in the galaxy wouldn't shake her. Bartering with a Sky Warrior obviously did.

'Leave her be, Blackwing,' came a metallic voice from behind the kaerl.

His armour humming at a low, grinding pitch, the Twelfth's Iron Priest Garjek Arfang came pacing across the apron. He had his ancient Mk IV helm on, but Gylfasson could sense the amusement emanating from him. Somewhere, under all those layers of plate and augmetics, he was smiling.

'Stay out of this, Priest,' warned Gylfasson. 'This is my ship.'

'You're a Scout,' said Arfang bluntly. The kaerl took advantage of the interruption to withdraw. 'None of these ships are yours.'

'No one flies her like I do.'

'That is true. So be pleased that Jarl Oirreisson doesn't want it. He's taken a *hlaupa* instead. It will fall apart the first volley he fires, but when it comes to technology, he is a man of poor taste.'

Gylfasson looked at Arfang suspiciously.

'So it's not been requisitioned?'

'Not any more.'

'Then what's happening to it?'

There was a grating sound from behind Arfang's helm as the Iron Priest issued what passed for a laugh with him.

'Jarl Greyloc wants you on system patrol. You and the rest of the Scouts. He doesn't, I ascertain, like the Aett being under-manned.'

Gylfasson smiled broadly.

'Back on void-duty,' he said, looking over at the *Nauro* with satisfaction and thinking of the long, empty hours away from the reek of the Fang.

'You have no idea how pleased that makes me.'

Greyloc stood in the Chamber of the Watch, bathed in a column of cold light descending from the roof. The summit of the space was lost in

darkness. In the shadows, thralls hurried to and fro, handing over data-slates and speaking in low voices. Picts placed around the edge of the chamber flickered with rapid updates, marking the movement of the fleet to the jump-points. One by one, green indicators turned red.

‘Open a channel to the flagship,’ Greyloc ordered.

Thralls scurried to comply. An icon-blink told him communication had been established.

‘Lord,’ he said, maintaining the deferential tone he’d adopted in the council. ‘We have muster-complete signals. You’re clear to break orbit.’

‘All confirmed,’ came Ironhelm’s crackling voice from the bridge of the *Russvangum*. ‘We’ll be gone soon, and the Aett’ll be nice and quiet. Just how you like it.’

Greyloc smiled.

‘Indeed. I have hunting to catch up on.’

There was a rough burst of static from the other end. It might have been a snort.

‘You’re missing the best of it.’

‘Maybe so. The hand of Russ ward you, lord.’

‘And all of us.’

The comm-link snapped closed. Greyloc stood immobile for a few moments, his lean face pensive.

Then the picts began to update with fresh data. Position trackers showed massed movement. The fleet was underway.

A thrall approached the static Wolf Lord and bowed.

‘Orbital grid overview prepared, lord,’ he said, keeping his eyes on the floor. ‘You may inspect when ready.’

Greyloc nodded, hardly seeming to notice the figure before him. His white eyes were fixed on the rock walls beyond. The stone was still as bare and unadorned as it had been when first carved.

The centuries had done little to adorn the Aett. It was the same size as it had been in Russ’s time, still cold, half-empty and sighing with the

incoming ice-wind of Fenris. Sections of the lower levels had fallen into disuse, and even Wyrmlblade didn't know what had been left untouched in the deepest places.

We have not evolved. We remain the same.

The thrall hovered for a moment longer before scuttling back out of the light. He was replaced by a larger figure, and the heavy tread of Rossek echoed across the chamber.

'Tromm,' said Greyloc, snapping out of his thoughts.

'Jarl,' replied the Wolf Guard.

'You've kept the Claws busy?'

'They're knocking Hel out of each other in the cages.'

'Good. Keep them at it.'

'And after that?'

Greyloc scrutinised his subordinate carefully. Rossek was normally so ebullient, so full of energy.

'You don't agree with my decision,' he said.

The Wolf Guard kept his expression level. 'Someone has to guard the Aett.'

'You don't think it should have been us.'

'Since you make me speak, no.'

Greyloc nodded.

'Say more.'

Rossek looked him directly in the eye, as always. There was reproach there.

'We do not have the trophies of the other companies, lord,' he said.

'There are whispers that we lack spirit. They say your blood's cold.'

'Who says so?'

'Just whispers.'

Greyloc nodded again. The whispers had always been there. Since ascending to Blood Claw he'd had to fight for his honour against the slurs

that he wasn't a real wolf, that the Helix hadn't taken properly, that he was more ice-wight than true flesh-warrior of the Rout. The days when such news would have concerned him were long gone.

'They've said as much before. Why are you listening now?'

Rossek held his gaze.

'We need to be careful,' he said. 'The other Jarls—'

'Forget about them.' Greyloc placed a gauntlet on his Wolf Guard's arm, and the ceramite clunked dully. 'We have no reason to hang our heads, and there are more ways to fight than those recorded in the sagas. The galaxy is changing. We must change with it.'

Greyloc felt the uneasiness stirring within Rossek. The Guard didn't like such talk. None of the Wolves, with their reverence for tradition, did. Only the two warriors' long brotherhood kept Rossek from speaking out more, from protesting against the manner of war Greyloc had imposed on the Twelfth Company.

'Do you trust me, Tromm?' asked Greyloc softly, maintaining the grip. A hesitation.

'With my life, lord.'

His amber eyes were unblinking. Greyloc took some satisfaction in that. There were doubts there, like ravens clustering around carrion, but his core was loyal. So it had ever been, even after Greyloc had narrowly beaten him to replace old Oja Arkenjaw as Jarl. If the vote were held again, he had no doubt Rossek would have the numbers. The old warrior had always claimed not to want the honour, but every mind could change.

'Good,' said Greyloc, releasing his hold. 'I need you, Tromm. I need all of you. When Ironhelm returns from this mad *skraegr* hunt, things will have to change. We can't let these shadows blind us forever, keeping us chasing after ghosts of the past. You will see the truth of it, if you look.'

Rossek didn't reply. Such talk made him uneasy, and Greyloc knew he couldn't push too hard.

Across the picts placed around the chamber walls, the last of the fleet signals dimmed as the rearguard departed for the jump-points. Greyloc felt a surge of satisfaction then, and some of his preoccupation receded.

Ironhelm's latest campaign had embarked. The Aett was his.



CHAPTER THREE

Kyr Aesvai, the one they called Helfist, laughed hard, sending flecks of spittle from his semi-distended jaws.

‘Russ, you’re slow,’ he mocked, then leapt back into the attack. He whirled his axe round and hurled it down at his enemy’s shoulder.

Ogrim Raegr Vrafsson, the one they called Redpelt, sprang away from the incoming weapon.

‘Quick enough for you,’ he panted, falling away and bringing his own axehead into play. He kept it out wide, making room to swing, watching for the momentum of his opponent.

Crunches and impact sparks rang out further down the long row of iron training cages. The pair were not the only Blood Claws sparring in the pens – the entire infantry contingent of the Twelfth had been ordered into intensive drills in the days since Ironhelm’s fleet had left. Greyloc was a cold one, but no fool – he knew how frustrated his company would be at missing the action at Gangava, and made sure he kept them busy.

Helfist pressed the attack, stepping warily. His jawline was still basically humanoid, though his facial muscles betrayed the gigantism common to all Space Marines. His cropped hair was a dirty blond, and stubble ran across his tattooed cheeks. He retained the brutal energy of a

hmanni tribesman, and he carried himself with a strutting, confident menace.

‘Nope,’ he grinned, circling. ‘You’re too damn slow.’

Redpelt could have been his twin were it not for the messy shock of auburn hair and straggling sideburns. His fangs were similarly short, not yet extended by the long working of the Helix. He had an iron ring in his lower lip which glinted from the glow-globes above them. When he let slip his savage smile, which happened a lot, it dragged against his teeth like scree clattering down ice.

‘Stop talking,’ he said, beckoning Helfist on. ‘And start fighting.’

Helfist darted left, then checked back and dragged the axe-blade up, aiming for Redpelt’s torso. The two weapons impacted in a shower of sparks, locking the shafts. Helfist pushed two-handed, throwing all his massive strength into the shove.

Redpelt held it for a moment, then stumbled back, knocked off balance.

‘Ya!’ yelled Helfist, and pounced.

The axeheads clashed, then clashed again, each blow sending ripples of terrific force slamming into the defensive parries. Helfist was indeed the faster, and his uncovered arms moved in a blur.

‘Coming for you now...’ grunted Helfist through gritted teeth, his face a mask of concentration. Beads of sweat had formed on his temples, even though the fight-cages were winter-cold and glittering from the ice on the metal.

Redpelt didn’t reply, kept busy fending off the furious assault from his pack-mate. Both Blood Claws were out of armour, wearing leather tunics and greaves lined with exquisite knotwork. The axe-blades were blunt for training, but were still capable of breaking bones and tearing flesh. That was the way the overseers arranged it, to instil the proper respect for the blade and to discourage reliance on battle-plate.

Redpelt slammed against the cage wall, feeling the unyielding iron press into his back. He rolled away as Helfist's axe arced through the space where his chest had just been.

From outside the cage, a torrent of raucous laughter rang out.

'*Skítja*,' swore Redpelt, picking out the dark shapes of other Blood Claws standing out of the range of the glowglobes. He'd got an audience. A low jeering broke out as Redpelt evaded another swipe and scrambled to get out of range.

'Slow, slow, slow,' taunted Helfist, swaggering after him, breathing heavily, his face running with moisture. Redpelt took some satisfaction from the fact he wasn't making this easy.

'You'd fight better if you didn't talk so much,' Redpelt muttered, trying to regain balance and take the initiative back.

'Think that if it makes you feel better,' crowed Helfist, stalking after him, hefting the axe-shaft lightly. He had the superior smile of victory, and closed back into swing range.

'Yeah,' growled Redpelt, coiling for the spring. 'It does.'

He thrust suddenly upwards, hurling himself at Helfist's advancing torso and barrelling him back. Helfist had come in too close, too confident, and couldn't get his axe down in time. Redpelt wrapped him in a bear-hug and propelled him further, running him into the far wall of the cage. They hit it with a resounding clang.

Helfist's axe dropped from his clutches and he balled his fist, poised to deliver the crushing blow that had given him his name. Redpelt was quicker, and head-butted him full in the face. There was a crack of bone against bone, and the metallic tang of fresh blood.

Helfist's head rocked back, and his glittering eyes went glassy. Redpelt let his own weapon fall and clubbed the reeling Blood Claw with a flurry of punches, hammering him down to his knees.

A roar of approval rang out across the iron cage, punctuated by whoops and howls. Weapons were dragged along the bars, echoing up into the roof space and making the entire chamber reverberate.

The cacophony was so loud it almost obscured the gong that signalled the end of the fight. Feigning ignorance, Redpelt got in one more bone-crunching uppercut before the cage doors were slammed open and Brakk lumbered in to break them up.

‘That’s enough,’ he snarled, pulling Redpelt off the reeling Helfist and hurling him back across the cage. Even out of power armour the Wolf Guard was far stronger than either of them. ‘This is blade-practice, not a brawl.’

There was a chorus of disappointed boos as Redpelt clambered back to his feet and Brakk hoisted Helfist up against the cage wall.

Redpelt’s whole body ached. A hot trail of blood ran down his face from where the skin over his forehead had broken.

He felt drained, bruised, battered, fantastic.

Helfist was beginning to come round, his head lolling and eyes still out of focus.

‘That was stupid,’ growled Brakk. ‘Am I going to have to beat the stupidity out of you, Blood Claw?’

‘You could try,’ drawled Helfist, punch-drunk against the iron.

Redpelt grinned, limping over to his adversary. Brakk spat on the floor.

‘Get yourself cleaned up,’ he said. ‘The Jarl wants reports on your combat readiness, and you’re going to have to work a whole lot harder.’

Brakk stalked off out of the cage, pushing his way through the crowd of spectators clustered outside. Redpelt caught Helfist before he could collapse to the floor again and pulled him back up roughly.

‘Like I said. Too quick for you,’ he said.

Helfist’s vision was clearing. The blood in his wounds had turned dark with clotting. It took a lot to knock him over, but even more to keep him

down.

‘This time, brother,’ he replied, and grinned across blood-soaked teeth. ‘Only this time.’

Redpelt laughed, a throaty roar of feral enjoyment. The two fighters slammed their right fists together, and the bruised fingers clenched fast.

Wyrmlblade slumped back in his throne, feeling bone-weary. The work was exhausting, even for one with his gene-forged physiology. Days at a time of testing, refining, testing again, splicing, looking for the hidden flaws, rooting out the false positives and bearing down on the secrets wound within the vials and vessels. All around him, the low hubbub of the laboratory continued – thralls diligently poring over sample trays, cogitators chattering, vials of fluid gently bubbling at precisely controlled temperatures.

Nine days. Nine days since Ironhelm had left, emptying the Aett of the Great Companies and leaving the corridors sparse and home to whispers. In that time, almost nothing had been achieved, and much had been undone. Every step forwards was accompanied by many more backwards, sideways and down. It would be easy to despair, easy to lose hope.

Except, of course, that despair was as alien to a son of Russ as peace and stillness.

The secret eludes me only because I draw closer. Like prey on the ice, it can sense the hunter.

The analogy helped him. There had been times when intractable problems had been solved through the imagery of the hunt. The kill-urge could be sublimated, turned into a source of pure mental determination. That gave him hope, too. There was so much that he didn’t understand, but so much that he was beginning to see clearly. That the kill-urge had such origins was a positive sign.

Do I dare too much? Is this forbidden? Perhaps. But then we have never been ones for following the rules. Leave those to Guilliman’s sons.

He reviewed the evidence again. The pattern he'd been pursuing over the past few weeks was breaking down. Not irretrievably, but with severe consequences for the model he'd placed so much faith in. It would need another week of work to put right, to untangle the snarls. Not for the first time, he found himself in awe of the original architects, the ones who'd put the elements together, who'd forced the river of humanity into its new and lasting course.

Is this forbidden? he asked himself again, knowing the answer already. Of course it was.

A rune blinked on his armour-collar, alerting him to Sturmhart's presence nearby. The Rune Priest, for all his power on the battlefield, was an unobvious spy. Wurmblade sighed, stowing the data-slate in the arm-recess of the throne. He gestured to a nearby thrall, and the leather-masked mortal nodded his understanding. The blast-doors deep in the laboratory complex slid closed, masking the contents of the rooms beyond. Pict screens of sensitive results cleared, replaced by standard looking rows of runes.

Wurmblade rose from the throne, wearily preparing to meet the scorn and suspicion of his brother.

He fears much, and guesses much, thought Wurmblade, pacing through the interconnected tiled chambers in his awkward, age-corroded way. *Let him. If he guessed more, he'd fear more. Only Greyloc sees the potential, but his soul is strange.*

Wurmblade neared the entrance chamber to the laboratory and saw the hulking figure of the Rune Priest waiting for him, his rich, sigil-encrusted armour an odd counterpoint to the sterile realm of the fleshmakers.

I just need more time.

Wurmblade forced the familiar hooked smile on to his wrinkled features and went to greet his brother with the expected irascible banter.

A little more time.

The Thousand Sons flotilla flagship *Herumon* began to slow, making ready to break the seal between the warp and the materium. All around it, the rest of the fleet matched pace, fifty-four blue and gold warships and troop carriers grinding down to translation speed.

On the bridge of the *Herumon*, Temekh and Aphael stood side by side, Pyrae and Corvidae. The other members of the senior command retinue – Ormana, Hett and Czamine – stood around them. All wore full battle-plate over their robes and their helms had been donned. Most of them had spent the long, boredom-filled hours on the Planet of the Sorcerers honing and altering their suits. The helms now bore crests and flutes of gold and bronze, and their greaves were engraved with florid scripts invoking long forgotten epigrams.

Temekh regarded them tolerantly. Of his companions, only he seemed to see how far they'd fallen.

We have lost our taste. We are becoming parodies of ourselves.

His own armour was relatively unmodified Mark III, re-coloured sapphire to reflect Magnus's orders, but otherwise much as it had been before the Betrayal. He still wore the neatly clipped beard he'd adopted on Prospero, still kept his white hair trimmed close. He found himself wondering whether Amon, Sobek and Hathor Maat had done likewise. Those who had joined Ahriman's breakaway cabal had always been the most headstrong and those with the most power. The rump that had remained faithful to the primarch were the second-rate, the ones who had not dared to join the casting of the Rubric.

Not that it had mattered. The counter-sorcery had affected them all anyway, preserving less than a hundred of the Legion's sorcerers and condemning the rest, the Rubricae, to dust. Now the remnants of what had once been the Emperor's most finely crafted weapons were scattered into petty bands of raiders, vengeance-seekers and knowledge-thieves. This

grand fleet, this gathering of disparate forces, was the final gesture, the last echo of a disaster that had taken place over a thousand years ago.

‘Lord, we are preparing to make translation.’

The speaker was a shaven-headed crewman with heavy kohl around his eyes. He wore the robes of a senior watch officer, and must have served in the fleet for many years. Most of the mortal crew were much more recently drafted, the products of a long programme of cult-planting on a hundred Imperial worlds.

Aphael turned to Temekh.

‘And what do you see, prophet?’ he asked, his voice distorted by an elaborate vox-grille.

Temekh suppressed his irritation at being asked again, and cast his mind’s eye out on to the Great Ocean. The occult relations between warp space and real space unfolded before him like the branches of an equation, moving subtly against one another, falling in and out of balance.

He tracked the location of the fleet and traced it to its destination. The margins were slight. If they maintained their current orientation, they’d be coming in very close to Fenris.

‘You’re taking us in hard,’ said Temekh, snapping back into the present. ‘Too hard.’

Aphael laughed.

‘You want to give them time to prepare?’ The Pyrae shook his armoured head. ‘Remember how our orbital stations were taken down? In *seconds*. That’s the way to burn a world. The Ocean has been calmed for us, smoothed apart to let us drop right in on top of their heads.’

Temekh could sense Aphael’s smiles under his helm, could feel his eagerness for the clash ahead.

‘There’s nothing to worry us in the warp, brother,’ Aphael continued. ‘If you looked yourself, you’d see the Dog-fleet is already days away and beyond recall. With *speed* we will do this thing.’

‘Fine. Just don’t hurl us into the heart of the planet.’

Aphael didn’t laugh at that.

‘Time to translation?’ he asked, turning to the officer.

‘Imminent, lord.’

‘Then activate the screen.’

Ahead of the command group, a curved mirror rose gracefully from the bronze-plate floor. The glazed surface swam with colour, shifting and breaking like oil on water. Temekh looked at it with distaste. It was a crude representation of the aether, the result of looking at it through machine-spirit eyes.

‘Begin,’ ordered Aphael.

Across the fleet, warp drives powered down. The fifty-four ships acted in unison, their plasma drives growling into life and their void shields rippling into place.

The shifting vision on the mirror sheered away, replaced by the void. Ahead of them, terrifyingly close, was a single ball of pearl-white. It rushed toward the approaching ships, growing larger with every second. The Thousand Sons fleet, guided by its peerless scryers, had emerged from the warp closer and faster than any mortal-guided ship could have managed.

Temekh felt a low foreboding creep across his stomach. So this was it, the target of Magnus’s long and bitter planning. It looked smaller than he’d hoped for, a dirty ball of howling gales and cracked ice.

Aphael radiated savage energy. Ahead of the *Herumon*, other ships of the flotilla were becoming visible through the real space viewers. Streaks of superheated plasma scored across the heavens as the strike vessels raced to compass the target. In their wake, the heavy troop carriers lumbered into position. There were no mistakes, no botched rematerialisations.

‘Fenris,’ Aphael breathed, held rapt by the unfolding spectacle in front of him. Terrible forces spread out across the cosmos in tight formation, the

kind of forces not seen together since before the Betrayal.

Temekh, seeing the same vista unfold, felt nothing but a weary dread. He'd wept over the destruction of Tizca, but that did nothing to fuel his sense of revenge. By contrast, Aphael's eagerness felt vulgar and empty.

We have lost our taste.

The Pyrae was heedless. He walked toward the mirror, watching as the isolated globe filled the screen ahead.

'This will hurt you,' he murmured. 'Oh, this will hurt you *so much*.'

Adaman Earfeil's last day alive did not start well. Few of the astropaths manning the communications spire in the Valgard were Fenris-born, which made him one of only a dozen or so off-worlders on the entire planet. His native subordinates were rude, malodorous and given to making foul-mouthed jokes about his witchery. They didn't like the use of psyker powers, even though their own bone-rattlers leaked enough aether-born power to level a manufactorum. Even after forty years' service, he still hadn't thrown off the ways of his home world, the hive-planet Anrada. He hated Fenris. He hated the stink, he hated the boredom, and he hated the cold.

After little more than two hours' sleep, the chime summoning him to the astropathic gantry was infuriating. The entire choir had been busy enough over the past few days transmitting material for the muster. He emerged from his cell blearily, wiping the sleep from his sightless eyes. In the corridor beyond he felt the press of bodies hurrying back and forth. There was a low, concerned chatter over vox-beads. Something had got the spire roused.

Once in the Sanctum Telepathica, Earfeil strode confidently through the mass of kaerls and thralls around him, judging where they were from smell and sound alone. The passages from his cell to the transmitter thrones were as well known to him as the outline of his own body. Ever since waking, though, he'd felt a dull pressure mount behind his eyes, dragging at his thoughts and making his work difficult.

He took his station, feeling terrible. Thick-headed, lethargic and irascible.

A servitor creaked up to assist him into his transmit-throne, and he winced as he felt the cold steel of the interface implant itself into his wrist input nodes. There was no damn reason for that to be so painful – if the savages on this forsaken world had cared about anything like comfort, they'd have installed new equipment years ago.

‘Water,’ he croaked, knowing that it would take the servitor an age to retrieve a cup and bring it back, frigid and with an aftertaste of grit.

Clumsily, his headache getting worse, he began to decipher the programme of work ahead. All around him, he could hear more chatter as other astropaths began their litanies.

‘Blessed Emperor, Protector of Humanity, Lord of the Heavens, guide my thoughts in Your service and clear the landscape of my mind...’

Earfeil began to recite while adjusting the series of dials and levers on the console in front of him. The machinery felt warmer than usual – normally, his desiccated old flesh would stick to the ice-cold metal.

As he spoke, the itinerary began to appear in his mind. He couldn't see the text exactly, but the sending was clear enough as a mental image.

‘May my body endure and my soul remain pure, my Inner Eye remain clear and my Outer Eye remain dark as the eternal mark of Your favour...’

He kept speaking the familiar words as the iron hood, bristling with needle-slender probes, descended over him. He kept speaking as the probes threaded through the steel-ringed holes in his bald skull and came to rest in their allotted places. He kept speaking as the voices of the rest of the choir drifted out of focus.

My head is killing me.

There was no sign of the water. Earfeil pulled up the first transmission. Standard inter-world communique, something about convoy escorts on one of the Wolves' protected systems.

‘Maintain the ward of Your protection... dammit, Fror, why is this list so long?’

There was a crackle of broken static over the channel to the superintendent, a Fenris-born over two hundred years old.

‘Fror?’

Earfeil gave up. Senile old goat. The pain behind his eyes got worse. It felt as if the burned-out nerves had somehow reconnected.

What in Hel is doing that?

He considered calling for an apothecary, pulling out of the contact, then changed his mind. They all thought he was weak anyway, a soft-fleshed off-worlder with a smattering of unholy magick.

He opened up his mind.

The aether rushed in. A single eye stared back at him from the void, ringed with a circuit of crimson.

‘Holy Empe—’ he started, and then the pain really began.

Something massive entered his consciousness, something vast and ancient, something of such magnitude that Earfeil immediately knew he was a dead man.

‘Fror!’ he screamed, maybe out loud, maybe mentally. Dimly, he could hear other noises coming out of the darkness around him. There were heavy footfalls as someone ran across the chamber. Then there were screams. Then all was lost in the pain – the crushing, mind-bending pain.

He briefly thought about struggling against it. For a moment, a horrifying moment, he was taken back to the soul-binding on Terra. Back then he’d been exposed to sentience of such magnitude that it had burned out his eyes and seared his soul shut.

This is the same force.

No, it wasn’t. Not quite the same, though kin to it. Even as he writhed in his bonds, pinned down in his seat by the electrodes running through him, he could make out familiar shapes in the warp signature.

Close the link!

It was too late for that. Earfeil could feel his organs popping inside him, slapping open with hot, agonising explosions. Blood was running down his face, dribbling into his open mouth, frozen in a soundless rictus scream. The eye blazed at him, rippling with casual menace. This thing wasn't even trying hard.

+What are you?+ he sent, and his message was like shooting a microlumen into a star.

The eye didn't waver, but piled on more agony. It was then that Earfeil knew it was doing the same to all the astropaths. That should have been impossible – there were wards against infiltration across the spire, and the psykers were all soul-bound. This thing was tearing them apart as if the protection didn't exist.

He juddered in his throne, feeling awareness leave him. His nerves were burned away, giving some release from the pain.

This will isolate us, he thought as he fell towards death. *It wants us mute.*

That was the penultimate thought Adaman Earfeil ever had. The last one came hard on its heels.

And whatever it is, he realised, his burned body spasming in excruciation, *it's just like the Emperor.*



CHAPTER FOUR

Wolf Scout Haakon Gylfasson, the one they called Blackwing, sat in the command throne of the *Nauro* and surveyed the scene before him smugly. The landing stages were already far behind and the dark of the sky from the real space viewers had sunk into star-flecked black. The neon-white curve of Fenris fell away as the starship climbed higher, its engines straining against the powerful pull of the receding planet. It had taken many days of preparation to fit the *Nauro* out for an extended system patrol tour, but now the irritating wait was over and he was back where he belonged.

In the servitor pit below him, a dozen hardwired automata laboured at their stations. On the gantries above, six kaerls were strapped into restraint harnesses until the atmosphere was cleared and gravity generators could compensate properly.

‘Master, report when ready,’ ordered Blackwing casually, enjoying the feel of the ship as it thundered into low orbit range. The metal floor shivered slightly under him. The vessel was like a hunting-hound – lean, trembling, taut in the slips.

‘You’re pushing her hard,’ came the reply over the comm-link from the engine chambers. The ship’s Master was a veteran of working with Blackwing, and there was no confidence in the mortal’s voice that his warning would be heeded.

Blackwing enjoyed making him uncomfortable. He enjoyed making everyone uncomfortable. That was the joy of piloting an interceptor with a crew entirely composed of mortals – the absolute power, the knowledge he could drive this thing as hard as he wanted. It was a beautiful ship, a thoroughbred, and there was no fun in keeping the ascent within safety parameters.

‘Treat her mean, Master,’ he replied. ‘That’s the way she likes it.’

There was a muttered expletive from the other end before the link cut out. Blackwing grinned and summoned a hololith from the arm of the throne. The tactical display flickered into life in front of him, a swivelling sphere representing local space.

‘We’ll buzz the grid on our way out,’ he shared with the Tacticus, mentally plotting a trajectory that would take them to within a few kilometres of the first orbital gun platform. ‘It’ll take their minds off their tedious lives.’

‘I can’t raise them,’ replied the grey-suited Tacticus, seated at a console just below Blackwing’s position.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean I can’t raise them.’

Blackwing frowned and cut into the channel. There was a hiss of static.

‘Are our comms shot?’ he demanded.

‘We’re fine,’ replied the Tacticus, his fingers playing across a control panel that looked more like an organ. ‘It’s them.’

Blackwing flicked his eyes at the hololith display. The first of the gun platforms was swimming into augur range, a single rune floating within the emerald sphere.

‘What’s their problem?’ he asked.

The Tacticus turned away from his array and shrugged.

‘System failure,’ he suggested. ‘That, or they’re being jammed.’

Blackwing laughed harshly.

‘Yes, like that’s—’

The wolf-spirit within him suddenly stirred, as if uncurling from sleep. He felt the hairs on the back of his arms rise under his armour.

‘Keep trying,’ he ordered, and expanded the range of the tactical display. The figures within the sphere rushed into tiny points as the scope widened. More orbital platforms swept within the augur ambit.

‘Can we get the *Skraemar*?’ he asked, not liking what he was seeing.

‘Not responding.’

The sphere kept expanding as the sensor arrays took in more and more of local space. Then, at the edge of the range, more runes appeared. Lots of them. None with Fenrisian sigils.

‘How’re our shields?’ asked Blackwing, clutching the arms of the throne a little tighter.

‘Fine.’

‘Keep them fine. Now bring auxiliary plasma banks online.’

The Tacticus turned to look up at him, staring as if he’d gone mad.

‘We’re still within the gravity—’

Blackwing fixed him with a withering look.

‘I want attack speed. Now. Then signal the Valgard and tell them to throw everything they’ve got up here. Then get your prayers in.’

Blackwing turned to the tactical display and dug his fingers into the control arms of the throne. He poured on more power, and felt the febrile machine-spirit whine in protest.

‘Get used to it,’ he growled, gouging at the metal under his gauntlets.

‘It’s going to get a whole lot worse soon.’

Something had stirred within Greyloc’s mind even before the warning runes started to come in. He was deep in the Fang, working on the edge of his axe-blade Frengir, the one he’d taken from his life and kept by his side. The Wolf Priests didn’t like remnants of mortal days being retained, but a

blade was a sacred thing, and now he was Jarl they had less power to turn that displeasure into sanction.

He'd been honing the killing blade with a whetstone, working carefully to maintain the murder-edge. The head of it was iron, far softer than any axe he'd used as a Space Marine and useless for proper combat. Still, he'd kept it in pristine condition over the years, never letting the metal blunt or degrade. Scrapes of swarf littered the bare floor by the whetstone, scattered at his feet as he worked.

Then the runes glowed into life, set high up on the walls of the forge. At the same time, red sigils burst out across the collar of his armour, smaller versions of the data-feeds his helm would have given him had he been wearing it.

Greyloc put the axe down.

'Jarl,' came a voice into his earpiece. 'We're under attack. Multiple targets closing in, defensive grids coming under fire. Transmission spires compromised, casualties taken.'

The change was instantaneous. Greyloc grabbed his helm from its mounting and strode from his cell into the corridor beyond.

'All pack leaders to the Chamber of the Watch,' he snapped back over the comm. 'Including Wyrmlblade. Enemy numbers?'

'Over forty major targets closing,' came the response. It was Skrieya, the Wolf Guard he'd stationed in the Chamber. 'Possibly more.'

'*Forty?* From where?'

There was a hesitation.

'Unknown, Jarl.'

'Make sure Sturmhjart's there,' snarled Greyloc as he broke into a run, his whole body tensing. 'Hammer of Russ, there'd better be a reason why he didn't see this.'

Rivenmaster Gregr Kjolborn of the Reike Og orbital platform ran down the plasteel corridor to the command module, half-deafened by klaxons

blaring from every angle. There was a massive, shuddering boom, and his world tilted several degrees.

He slammed against the near wall and spat a curse.

‘Where in *Hel* did they come from?’ he muttered as he regained his feet. The doors to the command module had jammed open, and he could see the mess within before he’d burst past them.

‘Status!’ he panted as he took up position on the dais in the centre.

The command module of the gun platform was seven metres wide and circular. Real space viewers dominated the ceiling. Normally they would have opened out on to blank space. Now the plexiglass looked out on to an inferno. The whole structure, several thousand tons of plasteel and adamantium, was listing dangerously. Across the floor of the module, kaerls and servitors worked at a cluster of linked consoles, all of them alive with flashing danger runes. Far below, the curve of Fenris’s northern hemisphere glowed ice-white in the void.

‘Primary shield failure imminent,’ read out his huskaerl, Emme Vreborn. Her voice was flinty and unwavering, something that did her credit as the burning console in front of her spat sparks. ‘Power ten per cent above minimum. We’ve got a few minutes.’

Kjolborn nodded, feeling his blood continue to pump around his system. ‘Weapons?’

‘Critical,’ reported another kaerl.

‘Great.’

Kjolborn tried to take in the situation. Seven minutes ago there had been signals picked up on the long-range scanners. Two minutes after that the signals had turned into battleships. Either there was a serious problem with the augur array, or a fleet had come out of the warp staggeringly close to Fenris’s gravity well. There’d been no warning, no warp wakes detected, and no time to do anything other than power up the weapon batteries and prepare to return fire. As it had turned out, that response had been pitifully insufficient.

A wall of ships had swarmed at them at full speed, sending arcs of energy tearing into the linked network of orbital platforms. Several guns had gone down almost immediately, taken out by the massed volume of fire, their void shields overloaded and cracked apart in a blaze of released energy.

The defenders' counter-attack had been sporadic, with no time to coordinate proper firing solutions. In the wake of the initial assault, enemy fighters had spun out of the shadow of the larger ships, screaming into range and strafing the surviving elements of the defensive grid. It had all been too fast, too overwhelming. Now the outer network was in flames, burning and falling into the upper atmosphere, and what was left was going to do little more than slow the bulk of the fleet closing in on it.

'Has the Aett been warned?' asked Kjolborn, looking at the carnage around him, his mind racing.

'Oh, they know all about it,' replied Vreborn.

'Lucky them.'

For a moment, Kjolborn thought wistfully of the saviour pods slung under the planetside face of the platform. If he'd been bred anywhere but Fenris, he might even have contemplated trying to reach them.

'Divert all power from the shields and feed to the forward battery,' he ordered, running his gaze over the swirling pattern of light on the tactical displays.

'Sir?'

There was a second crash as something massive hit the platform from underneath. The lights failed, leaving nothing but blood-red backups. The crew of the command module looked like shadows of the Underverse in the gloom.

'You heard me. I want one shot before we go.'

The kaerls complied without further query. With an involuntary shudder, Kjolborn watched as the platform's void shields shrank back across the

real space viewers. The withdrawal left a shimmering trail in its wake, and then the blade-sharp unmediated view of the void.

‘Lock on incoming *Fyf-Tra*, bearing 2.-2.-3. Once you’ve fixed, hit it.’

Kaerls hurried to comply. Out of the corner of his eye Kjolborn saw another platform explode in a huge ball of hot white plasma and its signal wink out from the tactical display. He ignored it, concentrating on his target. Amid the sea of oncoming ships, an enemy frigate, already reeling from some other impact, was turning to bring a prow lance to bear. It caught the reflective light from the half-disc of Fenris on its armoured prow, and the sapphire plating flashed briefly.

‘Gotcha,’ said Kjolborn grimly, careless of the las-fire coming in from a squadron of fighters hard to port-nadir.

‘Solution ready,’ reported the second kaerl, working to compensate as the incoming fire sent the platform lurching again.

‘Knock it out of the void.’

Eye-watering fluorescent beams leapt across the gap, slamming into the frigate a hundred kilometres distant and breaking open the shell of void shielding. Massive, silent explosions rippled along port-ventral galleries of the vessel as the lethal energy cut through the hull-plates and ripped them aside. The ship stopped turning and began to spin down into an aimless death-spiral. More explosions broke out as something within the structure ignited and set off a chain.

Kjolborn watched the target die with a cold satisfaction. More enemy fighters homed in on the dark disc of the platform, tearing up the physical shielding with heavy las-fire.

‘What have we got left?’ he asked, wincing with each blow his platform took.

Vreborn smiled wryly in the dark, her face under-lit red.

‘Nothing,’ she reported. ‘That finished us.’

Kjolborn laughed savagely, watching as vengeful enemy contacts surged towards their position. Other gun platforms were firing more frequently now, but they were being destroyed as quickly as they were taking down their targets. The void was aflame across every viewer, punctuated with the dark shapes of broken hulls and the incandescent burn of debris falling planetward.

‘Worth a shot just to piss them off,’ he said to himself, watching fresh signals close in on his position and bracing for further hits. A squadron of gunships was wheeling toward them now, weaving between a slow-moving phalanx of larger ships to get a clean shot.

Vreborn wheeled around to face Kjolborn, suddenly animated.

‘The saviour pods,’ she said.

‘You’re not going to get to them in time, huskaerl.’

If the lights had been up, Kjolborn would have seen her look of injured scorn.

‘They’re projectiles.’

Kjolborn realised what she had in mind then, and shrugged. ‘If you can spin it, do it.’

The gunships, wedge-nosed sapphire Thunderhawks, raced into position, battle-cannons primed to fire. Kjolborn watched them come, wishing he’d had the time to get drunk before taking his seat. Just because he didn’t fear death didn’t mean he liked the idea.

And I don’t even know who’s doing this.

Vreborn worked furiously, tilting the platform upwards. The platform’s low-power manoeuvring drives had been shot to nothing, and the cumbersome disc swung round only slowly. As it turned, Kjolborn heard heavy clamps shoot back on the level below, releasing the saviour pod docking claws.

He stood up from the throne, watching death come for him from the stars.

‘This isn’t the way I wanted to go,’ he announced to the others in the module. ‘But you’ve been a better than mediocre crew. I mean that. There are only two others I’d rather have died with, and one of them—’

They were the last words spoken on gun platform Reike Og before the incoming Thunderhawks of the Thousand Sons unleashed their main cannons on the listing target. Without shielding, the end was almost immediate, and the fragments of metal, plasteel and bone that weren’t immediately vaporised in a cloud of atoms spun into the upper atmosphere, lit up, and burned into nothing.

So it was that huskaerl Vreborn would never know that, of the seven empty saviour pods jettisoned milliseconds before the explosion, four made it down to Fenris, two more were immolated by the backwash from another platform destruction, while one of them, against all probability, found its target. A Thunderhawk, roaring under the destroyed gun platform at full attack velocity, could do nothing to avoid the punching fist of adamantium-braced metal that had been ejected at the last possible moment. It was hit hard in the cockpit, flew wildly out of control and tore into the upper atmosphere at lethal, unrecoverable speed.

Just like the debris of the platform it had killed, it lit up like a meteorite before dying in a blaze of promethium-fuelled destruction.

Greyloc stormed into the Chamber of the Watch, seconds behind Rossek and Wyrmlblade. The Rune Priest Sturmhjart was already there, as were six of Greyloc’s Wolf Guard. One of them, Leofr, was still being enclosed in his armour by a dozen thralls, and the sound of drilling echoed around the dark space.

‘Tell me,’ the Jarl growled, taking up position within the column of light. From that vantage he could see every pict screen that lined the Chamber.

Greyloc could feel his mind working quickly, poised to tease out possibilities, assessing every scrap of information. There was no fear, just

a rapid, mechanical process of appraisal. All around him, his Guard stood ready, expectant.

‘Fleet is engaged, Jarl,’ reported Hamnr Skrieya, turning from the screens to face him. The blond, hulking Wolf Guard had a warrior’s shame etched on his face, and it made his speech savage and clipped. ‘*Skraemar* has taken heavy damage but holds position. Grid is down to twenty per cent.’

‘Who dares this?’

Skrieya let a flicker of hatred mar his intense expression for a second.

‘Archenemy, Jarl. The Sons.’

Greyloc froze for a second.

The Thousand Sons! Ironhelm, what have you done? You were the prey for this trap.

He shook his head to clear it and looked at the tactical hololiths. For a moment, even he, a veteran of a hundred void engagements, was taken aback. The invasion fleet was huge. Around the fifty-four points of light indicating capital vessels, hundreds of smaller signals swarmed and harried. The red lights indicating defensive assets were beleaguered. Even as he watched, three of them guttered out.

‘How did they get in so close?’ he demanded, feeling frustrated anger suddenly rise up within him. ‘Where was the warning?’

There was a distant rumble across the walls of the Chamber as the Fang’s defensive batteries opened up, sending salvos of ship-killer missiles hurtling into the void above.

‘We’ve been blinded,’ said Sturmhart. Like Skrieya, his face was written with shame. ‘I saw nothing, the augurs saw nothing.’

‘Damn Ironhelm!’ spat Greyloc. He felt the urge to lash out, to slam something heavy into the screens that reported the carnage above. ‘Can we contact him?’

‘No,’ said Skrieya, bluntly. ‘We can’t contact anyone. All astropaths are dead, all system exits blockaded.’

‘We need to join the void war,’ urged Rossek, looking away from the tactical display and preparing to leave. ‘There are Thunderhawks still in the hangars.’

‘No.’

Greyloc took a deep, ragged breath. The tactical displays were unequivocal. Though it had been raging for less than an hour, the war above was already lost.

‘Prepare the Rout to defend the Aett. We cannot stop them landing.’

‘Jarl—’ began Rossek.

‘Open a channel to the *Skraemar*,’ he ordered.

A crackling link was established. Over the background of it came huge, shuddering crashes. The strike cruiser was taking heartbreaking levels of punishment.

‘Jarl!’ came a Space Marine’s voice over the comm. It was thick with fluid, as if blood had welled up in the speaker’s throat.

‘Njan,’ replied Greyloc. He kept his voice soft. ‘How long can you hold them?’

There was a crude laugh. ‘We should already be dead.’

‘Then cheat it a little longer. We need time.’

A reverberating crash distorted the comm-link, followed by what sounded like a rush of flames.

‘That’s what we had in mind. Enjoy the fight when it comes for you.’

Greyloc smiled coldly.

‘I will. Until next winter, Njan.’

The link broke then, suddenly cutting off the reports of distant carnage. All that remained to indicate the struggle above them were the points of light on the tactical displays.

Greyloc turned to face his commanders, his white eyes burning.

‘We can debate how this happened later,’ he said. ‘For now, get ready to fight. Ready the Claws, ready the Hunters. When they get down here, we’ll rip their throats out.’

There was another rumble as the Fang’s colossal defence batteries sent death roaring into orbital space. Greyloc allowed the wolf within him to rise to the surface, and fixed the assembled Wolf Guard with an expression of pure animal loathing.

‘This is our place, brothers,’ he snarled. ‘We’ll teach them to fear it.’

The *Nauro* corkscrewed through the crimson blooms of detonating charges at full tilt, weaving a path through the shells of dying vessels and spinning away from the flickering tracery of incoming las-fire. In the cold silence of the void, the manoeuvring had a sharp-edged beauty to it, an exhibition of peerless ship-mastery.

Within the ship, activity was frenetic. Crew members raced to combat the fires raging on the lower decks while kaerls struggled to keep the void shields from buckling completely. The plasma drives were dangerously hot from being overburned, and the ventral augur arrays had been almost completely shot away. Any more big hits, and they’d be fast moving junk.

‘Get those lances back online!’ roared Blackwing, sending his ship plummeting steeply to avoid a barrage of plasma bolts.

The two underslung energy lances, the only significant offensive weapons the ship had left, had been knocked out of action after a collision with a huge, spinning chunk of somebody else’s prow-shield. The *Nauro* was already painfully exposed, and the inability to fire back wasn’t helping.

‘We can’t save them both!’ shouted a crewman from the pits below him. Blackwing couldn’t see who he was – he could barely see anything other than the dancing lights on his hololith display. Piloting a single vessel in three dimensions through a maelstrom of plasma and las-fire was a nightmare, even for a pilot with his superlative reactions and training.

‘Get me one, then!’ bellowed Blackwing, pulling the prow round just in time to thunder past the shattered, blazing hull of a Space Wolves frigate as it rolled gently into destruction. ‘Just one. Morkai’s hairy balls, that’s not asking for much.’

He wrenched the *Nauro* into a rare corridor of open space and tried to make sense of the tactical situation. His launch path from the Valgard had sent him straight into the orbital battle as it was breaking out. The Wolves, unprepared and massively outgunned, were being taken apart. The first rank of gun platforms was now cold and dead, a circuit of dark, drifting metal. The second and final layer was holding for the moment, but it had taken a horrendous mauling. Every successful hit from the defenders had provoked a hurricane of return fire. The Thousand Sons’ rapid strike vessels were quickly gaining the space to move with impunity, clearing the way for the larger battleships to take their places and pile on the pain.

The arrival of the *Skraemar* and her escorts had briefly halted the carnage, but the defending fleet was still outnumbered many times over. Only a handful of the Space Wolves, frigates were still operational, and once their protective chain was broken the *Skraemar* would take the full force of the onslaught.

‘Starboard lance semi-operational, lord!’ came a triumphant cry from below the command throne.

‘Semi?’ snarled Blackwing, wheeling away from a wing of enemy fighters and exposing his less-damaged starboard flank to them. The telltale juddering in the ship’s frame told him that there were still flank gun batteries in operation, which was something. ‘*Semi*? What does that mean?’

‘We’ve got one, maybe two shots. Then we’re all burned out.’

‘Another kill – that’s all I’m asking.’

He knew then that they were going to die. It would happen in the next second, or the next minute, but not long after. The planetary defence had

turned into a bloody-minded attempt to take out as many of the enemy as possible before they were all turned into orbiting streams of dust. Despite all of that, not one of the Twelfth's ships had turned and run. Not one.

Stubborn bastards, thought Blackwing, glancing at the forest of warning runes on his console with mild interest. *Stubborn, magnificent bastards*.

'Lord, I've got a link from Fenris,' reported a kaerl manning the comms platform. 'You should hear this.'

Blackwing nodded, his attention still fixed on piloting his ship through Hel, and blink-clicked to received the feed.

'*Nauro, Sleikre, Ogmar,*' came the broken, dry voice, filtered through the ship's internal systems. It was a recording – how long had they been trying to get through? '*Astropathic communications are down. Repeat: Astropathic communications are down. Break blockade and translate for Gangava System. Rendezvous with Great Wolf and demand urgent recall. Repeat: Demand urgent recall.*'

Blackwing cursed under his breath.

'They'll think we're running out on them,' he muttered, already looking for possible exit vectors. The *Nauro* was in the middle of the swirling mass of ships, and there weren't obvious escape tactics open to them. Beyond the immediate layer of attack craft there were larger vessels closing in. The net had a fine weave.

Ahead of him, close to the edge of the sprawling engagement sphere, he saw an enemy destroyer recoil from a direct lance hit. That was good – at least some of the platforms were still dealing it out.

'Lock on to that one,' growled Blackwing, already planning his attack pattern. 'Prepare the ship for warp transit, but we're not leaving till I get that kill.'

Klaxons blared deep inside the massive walls of the Fang, echoing down the snaking corridors of stone and making the bone trophies on the walls shudder as if still alive. Shouts rose up from the deep places, the shouts of

mortal men mingled with the roars of their superhuman masters. The Aettguard, the body of kaerls committed to the defence of Russ's fortress, had been mobilised. Hundreds of heavy boots drummed the floor as entire rivens mustered in their garrisons throughout the Hould level, reporting to armouries to collect additional ammunition belts and blast helms.

The Hould was the beating heart of the Aett. The thousands of mortal warriors, craftsmen, technicians and labourers who maintained the massive citadel lived out their entire lives there. They rarely left the Fang unless taken out of it by troop transports; the air was thin even for natives at that altitude. Their skin was as pale as the ice that covered the upper slopes, and they were all Fenris-born, of the stock that still roamed across the ice-fields below Asaheim and provided the recruits for the Sky Warriors. Their breed had been taken into the vast halls of the Aett when the first chambers had been hollowed out, and all could trace their lineages back over thirty generations or more. Only some – the kaerls – were kept at arms at all times, but all knew how to wield a blade and fire a *skjoldtar*, the heavy, armour piercing projectile weapon favoured by the Aettguard. They were children of a death world, and from the youngest infant to the oldest crone they knew the art of killing.

Higher up, past the huge, shadowy bulwark of the Fangthane, was the Jarlheim, the abode of the Sky Warriors. No mortal remained on those levels except on the orders of his Sky Warrior masters, for it was here that the twelve Great Companies were housed. The halls of the Wolves were often empty and silent, since they were ever called away on campaign to some far-flung corner of their galactic protectorate. At least one Great Company always kept the hearths burning, however, tending the sacred flames and paying obeisance to the wards that kept maleficarum from entering the Fang. In the Jarlheim were the war-shrines to the fallen, the totems collected by the Rune Priests from distant worlds, the armouries full of sacred weaponry. In the holy places, tattered banners from past

campaigns were laid to rest amid the dusty rows of skulls, armour and other prizes.

As the klaxons flared across the Twelfth Company's demesne, the narrow ways were lit with a savage fire. The masters of the mountain had been summoned, and it was as if the earth itself had been shaken into sentience. The stone reverberated with a deep tremor as the massed wolf-spirits were goaded into life. Armour was strapped on and drilled into place, beast pelts reverently draped over the ceramite, runes daubed on shoulder guards in thick animal blood, charms hung piously over necks and wound around armoured wrists.

Deep within the centre of the maze of shafts, galleries and tunnels, there came the beating of the great drum. It underpinned all other sounds, thumping out a heartbeat rhythm of dissonant savagery. Other drums joined it, working against the single note in a cacophonous, barbed disharmony. The vibrations coloured everything, making the entire labyrinth resonate with a growing crescendo of hatred and energy.

There were few sights more intimidating in the entire galaxy than a Space Wolf Great Company kindling the murder-make. One by one, their armour bolted into place and sanctified by Sturmhart's subordinate Rune Priests, the Grey Hunters emerged, hulking and strapped tight with lethal energy. They went softly like the hardened infantry they were, their red helm lenses glowing in the oily dark. Behind them came the ranged-weapon Long Fang squads, shadowy and bulkier, their faces heavily distended into the maws of beasts, hefting their massive weaponry as if it weighed no more than an axe-shaft.

Then, last of the infantry to emerge from the armourers' care, were the Blood Claws, the raw recruits. Bellowing curses at the enemy they lusted to engage with, the red-and-yellow streaked armoured giants jostled with one another to get to their mission-points. They were the most human of all the angels of death, still only half-changed by the moulding power of

the Helix-enabled gene-seed, but their eyes burned hottest with the ferocious delight of impending violence. They lived for nothing but the joy of the hunt, the winning of prestige at arms, the delight in the stink of blood and fear in those they'd been unleashed on.

Amid them, joined to Sigrd Brakk's pack, came Helfist and Redpelt. The superficial injuries of their duel had long since faded, as had the others they'd incurred during the days of constant training. The pack, twelve strong including the Wolf Guard packleader, jogged down a wide, semi-circular tunnel as the drumbeats thundered in their ears, shoving aside kaerls and thralls too slow to get out of the way.

'Morkai,' spat Brakk, his voice filtered through the battered grille of his helm. 'To get you bags of dung...' He shook his head, and bone totems rattled across the armour like dreadlocks. 'Just die quickly, or don't hold me up.'

Helfist grinned.

'We'll be hauling your pelt out,' he laughed savagely, flexing his power claw. Like all of the pack he wore his helm – the near-void altitude of the Fang was too punishing for the bare-headed bravado he preferred.

'If we think we can get something for it,' added Redpelt, raising his bolt pistol and checking the ammo counter as he ran. His pauldrons had been drenched in blood-red and the jaws of his helm had a row of teeth running along the lower edge.

'Where's this old man taking us, anyway?' asked Helfist. A shock of straw-pale horsehair hung from his helm and the two Runes of Ending, Ymir and Gann, had been etched on his breastplate.

'Sunrising Gate,' snarled the packleader. 'The only thing on the planet harder than your skulls.'

'Was that a joke, brother?' enquired Helfist.

'An insult, I think,' replied Redpelt.

Brakk came to a halt as the tunnel roof suddenly soared above them into emptiness. Ahead, the floor petered out into a pier overhanging a huge, dark shaft. The pit below was massive, wreathed in shadow and lit only by scattered red glowglobes. The beat of the drums rose out of it, deep and threatening.

‘Don’t we have Aettguard for gate-duty?’ demanded another Blood Claw, Fyer Brokentoorth. His voice was thick with the wolf-spirit, guttural, throaty and aggressive.

‘You think we’re waiting for the bastards to get to the gates?’ asked Brakk, turning to face the pack and backing toward the shaft. ‘Russ’s arse, lad, grow a pair – and then a brain.’

Then he was gone, sweeping down through the thermals, descending hundreds of metres a second, swooping from the Jarlheim levels to those of the Hould.

Helvist looked at Brokentoorth.

‘I thought it was a fair question.’

Brokentoorth ignored him and followed the packleader over the edge. Helvist’s helm signals showed the two of them plummeting toward the gate level.

‘Try to keep up, brother,’ he said to Redpelt, joining the remainder of the pack and stepping lightly over the edge.

‘Try to stop me,’ said Redpelt, taking up the last position and spreading his arms to control the descent.

Hurtling like scree in an avalanche, the Blood Claw pack sped toward their zone of engagement. Above and below them, the beat of the drums hammered out the fresh, urgent call. On every level, in every passageway, figures took up their allotted positions. Bolter batteries swivelled into firelocks, Land Raider engines gunned throatily into life, and throughout the Aett packs of grey-armoured warriors raced to their stations.

The Wolves had been challenged in their lair, and like ghosts loping across the ice they swept to answer the call.



CHAPTER FIVE

Blackwing had lost track of the damage done to his ship. After so many runes across the console had gone red, it started getting hard to differentiate between them all. The picture was bad, though. The *Nauro* had never taken pain like it. Even if every remaining shell, las-beam and torpedo somehow managed to miss them, the battered vessel was probably doomed from the damage it had already taken.

Still, the message from the Valgard had shaken things up a bit. Unlike his more hot-blooded brethren, Blackwing had never been too keen on the heroic last stand. He was a dark wolf, a hugger of the shadows, and that bred a powerful sense of self-preservation. It was why the Claws and Hunters disliked him, and why he disliked them. The seed of Russ was bountiful, though, and provided for the whole range of killers – his knife-hook from the gloom was as lethal as a bolter-round in the daylight, after all.

The destroyer he'd targeted lurched into view on the ventral screens. It was in a bad way too, having been hit directly by a gun platform. Those things spat out terrifying amounts of energy, and when one got you, you knew it. Apart from its heavy structural damage, the enemy ship seemed to have lost engine control and had begun to spin away planetwards. A long trail of rust-red plasma ran out to its starboard-zenith. Blackwing could

see the pricks of light along its flanks as it tried to power up its broadside batteries, but it wasn't getting them online any time soon.

'Do we have that shot?' demanded Blackwing, rolling the ship to bring his starboard guns in line with an incoming wing of gunships.

'Affirmative,' barked a kaerl at the gunnery pulpit, sounding more confident than he had done a moment ago.

'Then get a lock, and do it,' snapped Blackwing, watching with irritation as he lost power to his port shield generator. Something was badly broken down there, and there was nothing he could do about it.

'Twenty seconds.'

Then Blackwing saw death coming for him. A wing of Thousand Sons frigates had broken from the dogged assault on the *Skraemar* and its escorts and was sweeping back to clear up the remainder of the scattered Wolves fleet. The ships were moving fast. Too fast. At least three of them would be in range before he'd be able to pull away from the fleet action and break for open space. Gunships were one thing; frigates another.

'Lord, we have—'

'Yes, thank you, I have eyes. Lock trajectory to target and give me assault speed.'

That time all the kaerls looked up to stare at him, even those busy wrestling with fires on their consoles.

Blackwing gave them a cool stare back.

'Or will I rip your throats out, one by one?' he asked, pulling his bolt pistol from its holster.

The crew hurried back to their tasks. The *Nauro* yawed badly as the engines were goaded even further and the attack vector was replaced by an interception course. The targeted destroyer loomed larger. It was getting much closer, much faster.

'Ten seconds.'

‘Need it sooner,’ said Blackwing, gripping the sides of his chair and watching tensely as the target raced into proximity. He could see the plumes of flame along its sides, riddling the ornate gold trim of the decks. The ship’s captain was trying to get it out of the way, but with its crippled engines it was as becalmed as an ice-skiff in the doldrums. The gap between the vessels shrank further.

‘Five.’

The frigates were now within range, and sensors across Blackwing’s console registered their forward lances powering up.

‘*Skítja*. More speed!’

He briefly imagined the frantic comms between the destroyer and the incoming frigates. For all the world, it looked like he was on a suicidal ramming course, which was just the thing a barbarous savage would do.

By then, Blackwing could see the decoration on the destroyer’s baroque prow. It was called the *Illusion of Certainty*.

How apt.

‘Firing!’

The *Nauro* buckled as its remaining forward lance blazed into life, sending a searing beam of sun-white, ship-carving energy screaming toward the destroyer. It hit direct amidships, tearing through the weakened shields and burying deep into the structure. A ball of metal-laced flame burst outward, cracking the destroyer in two.

‘We’re going to hit!’ screamed a kaerl.

The *Nauro* plunged straight into the inferno. Far too close to pull out at such speed, it spun right through the heart of the disintegrating structure.

‘Incoming!’ cried another kaerl frantically, diverting scarce power to the front shields.

‘Hold your nerve!’ roared Blackwing, piloting the ship through the expanding globe of shattered adamantium at full tilt. A flaming section of the destroyer’s decking, itself almost as long as the *Nauro*, swung across

to meet them. Blackwing flung the ship into a downward plummet, only to bring the head back round as a rotating spine of struts and bracing swept past on the port side. Debris was everywhere, rolling into their path and clattering against the weakened void shields like daemon-fingers on the Geller field. Something massive and heavy hit them hard under the hull, making the ship buck like a steer before it careered into another storm of shattered plating.

‘And we’re through!’ he whooped, pulling the *Nauro* into a sharp starboard-zenith climb and feeding the engines everything he had left. Tongues of plasma snaked after him as he broke through the orb of devastation, curling away in his wake like whips.

Emerging from the far side of the destroyer’s death throes had given him precious seconds of time. The frigates would assume he’d destroyed himself in the ramming action. When they realised their error, the plasma trail would distort their targeting cogitators for a few seconds more.

A few seconds was all he needed in a ship this fast. He was on the edge of the orbital battle, and open space beckoned ahead.

‘Faster!’ he bellowed, trying to see what damage had been done on the passage through the destroyer’s ruin. It looked like he’d lost most of his shields, and there was a major breach across his dorsal enginarium.

‘Dammit, push her harder or I’ll still rip your throats open!’

The *Nauro*’s machine-spirit screamed its anger, protesting at the insane demands put on it, threatening to shut down and flush the life-support. Blackwing ignored it, screwing every last terajoule of power, wrenching every last plasma-burn of speed.

‘Status on *Sleikre* and *Ogmar*,’ he snapped, watching for the lance-salvo from the frigates that would make all his audacity worthless.

‘Destroyed, lord.’ The kaerl’s voice, though grudgingly appreciative, implied *And so should we be*. ‘We’re on our own.’

Blackwing grinned. Something about cheating death at the expense of others appealed to his darker nature.

‘Maintain course and speed,’ he ordered. There was no sign of pursuit from the frigates, which in any case were too slow to catch him now. He looked over the tactical hololith, watching as the swarm of ships fell further behind. Against all expectation, they’d punched their way free. ‘Get us to the jump-point, and calculate translation vector for Gangava.’

He turned to the row of console runes that he’d been ignoring for the past ten minutes. All still red. Technically, that meant the ship was almost certainly doomed. If it didn’t shake apart in normal space, then the warp would probably finish it. No shields, no weapons, shedding atmosphere and with nine decks on fire. Not a happy state to be in.

‘I’ll take it,’ said Blackwing aloud, unable to shake off his gruesome smile. ‘Blood of Russ, I’ll take it.’

The Skraemar was an ancient, powerful warship, tempered in the long decades of the Great Scouring and bearing the scars of a hundred conflicts since. Some of her encounters had gained sector-wide fame: she’d defied a whole squadron of the Archenemy for two weeks in the Aemnon Belt until heavy support could arrive to turn the engagement, had taken out the much larger eldar Corsair flagship the *Or-Iladril*, and had led the breaking of the blockade of Pielos V at the tip of a desperately underpowered Imperial Navy spearhead. Her machine-spirit was old and star-cunning, and every inch of her machinations was known by her Iron Priest Beorth Rig. She was fast, packed a deadly punch, and didn’t die easily.

So when she did die at last, isolated in high orbit above Fenris and surrounded by foes, the death was not quick. There was no sudden warp core breach, no decisive detonation of promethium tanks. She was cut in a thousand places, broken open by a million separate stabs of white-hot las-fire, raked by a score of torpedo impacts and turned black by clouds of burning plasma. They kept coming at her, wave after wave of gunships,

dancing around the crushing columns of spitting energy thrown through the void by the looming battleships.

The *Skraemar* never stopped firing, even at the end. With her hull cracked, leaking fire and blood, she wallowed in a tide of incoming ordnance, swivelling on broken engines to maintain a firing lock on the Thousand Sons warships around her. With her frigate escorts all turned to atoms and the last dregs of the orbital grid collapsing in smoke and sparks, she was alone, a single gunmetal-grey island in a swarm of sapphire and gold.

The *Skraemar*'s forward batteries thundered a final time, sending a torrent of whip-fast, spitting hatred toward a wounded Sons destroyer, the *Staff of Khomek*. All of her remaining power had been put into the volley. It ripped the enemy vessel apart from prow to stern, shattering the void shields with pure, overwhelming power.

The *Staff of Khomek* was a minor kill, joining the *Achaeonical*, the *Numeratory* and the *Fulcrumesque* in oblivion. The *Skraemar* had exacted a heavy toll with its defiance, but the end was coming quickly. Gliding through the tide of gently spinning scrap like a predator of the deep ocean, the massive profile of the *Herumon* emerged from the shadows and into firing range.

The *Skraemar* turned. Unbelievably, leaking oxygen into the void in great, jetting plumes, the crippled strike cruiser saw the danger and somehow managed to obtain a firing solution. On every deck, its remaining kaerls shouldered the burden of survival, performing acts of heroism merely to keep the plasma drives from exploding and the hull plating from crumpling inwards.

Njan Anjeborn, the one they called Greyflank, the only survivor amid the wreckage of his command bridge, still piloted the crippled strike cruiser, preparing for another salvo, knowing there would be no kill this time, but striving to draw his final tithe of blood.

Pitilessly, smoothly, the *Herumon* maintained its course. Taking no chances, lining up the ranked batteries with cool precision, the Thousand Sons flagship rounded down the options to a single, remorseless singularity.

It took position, opened fire, and the void became light.

As the brilliance cleared, the broken-backed *Skraemar* spun with a glacial agony away from the impact. The last of its shields buckled and fizzed out of life. A line of explosions ran along the port flanks, writhing against space like clusters of snakes. Other ships closed in, aware now that the Wolves flagship no longer had the teeth to so much as scrape the paint from their plating.

On the command bridge, Anjeborn struggled from the cat's cradle of ironwork around him, dragging his blood-drenched body back to the control pulpit. The pict-screens were all down. Vital systems shuddered and gave out, condemning the surviving crew below to suffocation or freezing. He looked around, searching for one last gesture before the incoming spears of energy cut the last of the life from his command.

There was nothing. The machine-spirit was cold and unresponsive. Anjeborn looked up, out through the plexiglass of the real space viewers and into space. His last sight was the golden hull of the *Herumon* sliding across his field of vision, blotting out the destruction beyond. He saw at close quarters the rows upon rows of drop pod launchers, the pristine launching bays stuffed with landers, the banks of void-to-surface immolators and the bronze lips of the torpedo tubes, all still unused.

The weapons that would bring Hel to Fenris.

As the explosions from below crashed their way up to his position, shattering what was left of his ship and sending debris far out into nothingness, Anjeborn watched his death coming for him. Clambering from his knees, he faced it standing, shoulders back, fangs bared, brazenly contemptuous of an enemy that hid behind such odds.

‘By your deeds are you known,’ he snarled as the final hammer blows struck and the vacuum rushed in at last. ‘Faithless. Traitors. Cowards.’

The Wolf Guard had departed for combat. Rossek, Skrieya and the other elite of the Twelfth had left for their stations, each in charge of their own packs. Only three Wolves remained in the Chamber of the Watch, and they would not linger there long.

‘The orbital defences are gone,’ said Greyloc grimly, turning away from the evidence of their destruction. ‘Counsel?’

Wyrmlblade scratched at the back of his leathery neck, his hook-nosed face crumpled into a grimace as he ran through the options. Augur statistics shone from the pict-screens, showing movements in space above them.

‘They’ll bring the troop carriers down out of range of the guns and come at us overland.’

Sturmhart looked at him questioningly.

‘They have control of space – why not bombard from there?’

Wyrmlblade cracked a crooked smile.

‘Stick to your charms, priest. The shields over the Aett were built to last a siege from fleets four times as big. The witches don’t have that firepower, not since we crippled them on Prospero.’

‘In any case,’ said Greyloc quietly, ‘they have not come to hurl death from afar. They want to take this place, to desecrate it.’

‘I sense nothing,’ muttered Sturmhart. He looked from Wyrmlblade to Greyloc with doubt etched on his face. ‘I sense nothing at all.’

The Wolf Priest shrugged. ‘They are masters of the wyrd.’

‘They know nothing of the wyrd!’ blurted the Rune Priest.

‘And yet they can blind you, and all your acolytes. Something powerful is protecting them.’

None of them said the name out loud.

‘But there are defences,’ said Sturmhart, looking sullen. ‘The Aett has wards in the stone, hundreds of them. Signs of aversion have been carved into the rock and infused with the world-spirit. No sorcerer can enter here, not even the mightiest of them.’

Greyloc nodded.

‘Your brothers have tended them with exceptional care. Now we must preserve them further. How many Rune Priests remain?’

‘Six, but four are acolytes and their powers are untried. Only myself and Lauf Cloudbreaker have the power to match a Thousand Sons sorcerer, should one gain the portals.’

Greyloc found himself cursing Ironhelm again, though he hid his emotions.

You were warned, Great Wolf. The signs were there. Magnus has played you for a fool, and I should have been stronger.

‘Then they’ll have to learn quickly. Ensure the wards are sanctified, and that the Aettguard rivenmasters know their significance. These will be where the defence must be strongest.’

Sturmhart bowed.

‘It will be done,’ he said, turning to leave. As he went, he walked with less of a swagger than normal.

‘He feels his failure,’ said Greyloc once the Rune Priest had left.

‘He shouldn’t,’ said Wyrmlade bluntly. ‘You know who’s directing this, and the one who left us open to it is not on Fenris.’

‘We will endure. Did any of the ships break the blockade?’

‘The last, Blackwing’s ship, was destroyed ramming the enemy. We are alone.’

Greyloc drew in a long breath. He lifted his gauntlet up and gazed at it for a moment. The armoured fist was scored with many wounds, all inflicted as he’d crunched it into the bodies of his enemies over countless

engagements. He looked at it for some time, as if trying to conjure up some power locked within it.

‘Packs will disrupt the landings,’ he said at last. ‘They will not set foot on Fenris unopposed. In time, we will have to meet them here, and I will need you then, priest. I will need you to keep the mortals strong.’

Wyrmblade nodded.

‘They will not falter. But the Tempering—’

‘I know. Do not let it cloud your judgement. The whole Aett will require your fire.’

Wyrmblade looked like he was going to say something else, then backed down. The pooling shadows under his eyes were dark as he bowed.

‘It will be so, Jarl. And when they get here, they will learn what that fire can burn.’

Greyloc nodded.

‘That they will, priest,’ he said. ‘I will count on it.’

The space above Fenris was conquered. Aphael felt warm satisfaction flood through his body. He hadn’t felt this good since... well, there had been many strange sensations over the decades, some of them more recent than others.

He sat on the command throne of the *Herumon’s* bridge, his crested helm removed and lying in his lap, and watched the last of the Wolves’ debris drift planetward before being consumed by the re-entry. He’d lost more ships than he’d planned, but none of the troop carriers had been touched. He briefly contemplated the contents of those massive vessels, reflected on what they could do and how many of them there were, and felt a further glow of satisfaction.

‘Lord, blockade has been achieved,’ came a voice from below.

A Spireguard captain stood to attention on the golden steps leading up to the control pulpit. Aphael looked down at him with amusement. He hadn’t felt this good for weeks.

‘Do you know why you’re called *Spireguard*, captain?’

‘Lord?’

‘Answer me.’

The man looked confused.

‘That is my designation.’

Aphael laughed.

‘And you have no further curiosity? My friend Temekh would be disappointed. To blindly accept what you are given is not our way – it is the way of those we punish.’

The man looked fearful for a second, swallowing against the strap of his tall golden helm.

‘There was a place once,’ Aphael explained, letting his mind’s eye wander. ‘There were real spires, watched over by thousands of men such as you. Many thousands.’

He looked back at the captain. The man was nothing like a Prosperine warrior. He was short, wiry, with hard, pale skin. All of his comrades were the same. They’d been taken from high-altitude worlds and conditioned for the extreme cold, and when they went into action they’d be wearing heavy plate armour, masks and rebreathers, not breastplates of burnished gold and crimson. Fenris was not a place that rewarded elegance in war.

‘Forgive me. These things were not long ago, at least as I see it.’

The captain waited patiently. They all did, these new mortals. A thousand cults, on a hundred worlds of the proud Imperium, now drawn together to create the Last Host, the bringers of revenge. They’d been taught that the Thousand Sons sorcerers were gods, heralds of a new dawn of learning and enlightenment amid the darkening shadows of ignorance and blind faith.

We were, once. We really were.

‘You may prepare for the landings,’ Aphael said then, turning to more prosaic matters. ‘Position the carriers over the Ph’i sector and take your

orders from Hett. Are the bombardment flotillas in place?’

‘They are, lord.’

‘Good. They may commence when ready. And what of the interceptor? The one that broke the blockade?’

The captain signalled his regret with hesitation.

‘It made the jump-point before we were able to run it down, lord. But it will be destroyed before it reaches Gangava, as the fates will it.’

Aphael raised a quizzical eyebrow.

‘The *Illusion of Certainty* had a squad of Rubricae onboard, led by Lord Fuerza.’

‘This matters how?’

‘The Dog vessel’s shields were down as it passed through the wreckage. For a microsecond, I am informed, there was transporter activity.’

‘You’re certain of this?’

‘No, lord. The augur records are incomplete. But Lord Fuerza is a skilled master of the technology.’

‘That he is. Go back and find more detail – much may rest on it.’

The captain bowed and retreated back down the steps. Across the cathedral-like space of the bridge, other crew members went about their business quietly and efficiently. There were faint echoing taps across the marble floor as white-clad orderlies handed data-slates to the Spireguard on duty. Sweeping lines of bronze edged the tall real space windows, all fashioned from transparent *yyemina* crystals. The hum of the *Herumon*’s engines was low and sonorous, blending into the myriad other soft sounds of competence.

Aphael swept his gaze across the scene, running through the itinerary to be completed before he would join his forces on Fenris. The curve of the planet itself hung low in the port-nadir viewers, looking untroubled despite the carnage unleashed across its upper atmosphere.

Then he felt it again, the urgent itching. The skin across his neck rippled and he snapped his head back. Sweat broke out across his body, clad as it was in robes of silk and sapphire armour.

He looked around watchfully, checking to see if anyone had noticed. The crew carried on unperturbed.

Gingerly, fingers moving slowly, he ran his hand up to the nape of his neck, feeling around the tender flesh where the collar of his armour rubbed against skin.

It was getting worse. There were spines there, and the beginnings of some curls of soft matter.

Feathers. Sweet Magnus, feathers.

He withdrew his hand and set his jaw. He could combat this. The Rubric made them immune, and he was one of the warriors, the Pyrae, strongest in body and least exposed to the warping of the Great Ocean.

Temekh must not see it, though. Above all, Temekh must not see it. It was time to don his helm again in any case. Combat would not be far away, and it reinforced the distance between him and the mortals.

‘I *loathe* you,’ he hissed suddenly, curling his bronzed lip at the real space viewers where Fenris hung, cold and inviolate. ‘This is what you have forced us to become. This is what you have made us.’

He rose from his throne, taking his helm in his fist, ignoring the crew around him, his blue eyes going flat. His moods seemed to change so quickly.

‘You will seek to purge your own corruption, and you will fail,’ he breathed. ‘We will prevent you. We will leave you crippled, as we are. We will leave you broken, as we are. And when the Time of Ending comes, as it must do, you will be weak and alone in the face of the Annihilator.’

He bowed his head then, wondering, just for a moment, where his fury was really directed.

‘As we are,’ he breathed, weakly.

The Hall of the Fangthane was the link chamber between the Hould and the Jarlheim. It had been delved centrally, right in the inner core of the mountain and directly below the landing stages of the Valgard. One of a number of bulwark points within the Aett, it was the only route from the one region to the next. Any enemy, should they somehow make it inside the Fang at the gate level, would have to pass up through the Fangthane to enter the higher galleries.

In a fortress of wonders, the Fangthane had an awe-inspiring quality all of its own. Its walls soared high up into the dark, hundreds of metres, curving gently toward a roof lost in penumbral gloom. The entire populace of the Hould, hundreds of thousands of souls, could assemble in its cavernous space, filling the frozen chamber floor with the warm breath of humanity. They entered from the west, ascending the huge Stair of Ogvai, lined with its images of ancient heroes carved from the mountain stone and lit by flickering torches.

In the chamber itself, images of Fenris had been delved into the walls, each more than fifty metres high and adorned with the intricate knotwork that was the glory of the stone-shapers. There were symbols of the Great Companies of old – wolfsheads, broken moons, claws, axe-shafts and bleached skulls. Monumental images of Fenris's elemental powers – the storm-spirit, the ice-bringer, the thunder-heart – were picked out in the flickering light, seeming to move in tandem with the flames and leaping shadows. Above them all were the runes, the sacred sigils that channelled the soul of the death world into the sphere of the living and warded against maleficarum.

The thralls came silently to the summons, all knowing the hallowed wyrd of the place. There was none of the coarse banter that normally rang through the corridors of the Hould, the routine obscenity and throaty, growling laughter. The Wolf of the Watch, the Twelfth Great Company Jarl, had called all those who had not been drawn to arms already. Such a thing had not happened in living memory, nor in the sagas known by the

thralls, nor in any rumour passed from one hearth to another, and the deathly quiet was tinged with unease.

So the ranks of grey-clad men and women marched between the two massive granite statues of Freki and Geri that guarded the west gate, each ten metres tall at the shoulder and crouched ready to pounce. Ahead of them they saw the chamber yawn away into the distance, vaster than any cathedral, lit only by racks of blood-red fire in man-sized braziers of iron. At the far end, most brightly lit of all, there was the mightiest of all the many statues, the colossal image of Leman Russ. The size of a Warhound titan, the granite primarch gazed across the space with a snarl on his craggy features. He had his sword Mjälнар clutched in one hand; the other was clenched into a balled fist. Other primarchs might have been rendered in a more contemplative pose, but not Russ. He'd been carved by the stone-shapers as he had been in life: an engine of war, a living god, a rolling, consuming furnace of violent, focused kill-urge.

Morek Karekborn waited in the front rank of the crowd, less than a hundred paces from the statue, feeling the reassuring weight of his *skjoldtar* in his hands. His riven, just under five hundred kaerls, lined the galleries all round the walls of the Hall, placed to keep order.

His heart was still beating from the hurried progress of the muster. He'd seen the Wolves leave, had watched them stream from the Fang like grey shadows. He'd seen others fire up the Thunderhawk transporters or begin deploying the heavy armour throughout the Aett. They'd worked with quick, blunt efficiency.

As ever, he felt the inadequacy of his mortal response. His spirit had sunk when he'd been instructed to guard the Fangthane while the muster reached completion, though he'd voiced no protest.

There will be no battle here, no murder-make. I cannot serve the Masters within the Aett.

He suppressed the complaint. It was unworthy. The wyrd would be interpreted by the Sky Warriors, and they had ways of reading it that were hidden from him.

I will learn to accept it. There are other ways to serve.

And yet, if battle was coming, he deserved the chance to stand at the forefront of it. He'd earned that, over the decades. Surely, at the least, he'd earned that.

A huge gong sounded from ahead of him, resounding through the gigantic space and throwing echoes back and forth across it. Another sounded from the far end of the chamber, and the stone beneath his feet vibrated.

What little chatter there had been faded into nothing. Vaer Greyloc, Jarl of the Twelfth, resplendent in the massive shell of his battle-plate, strode on to the platform at the feet of Russ. A mortal would have been dwarfed by the figure of the primarch towering above him, but the Wolf Lord had a presence that refused to be dominated. In the scant hours since the first council of war, Greyloc had donned Terminator armour and wore wolfc claws on each hand, each rippling from the power fields enclosing the talons. He wore no helm, and his ice-white eyes shone in the shifting firelight.

Like a shade of Morkai. Snow on snow.

'Warriors of Fenris!' cried Greyloc, and his voice rose above the dying echoes of the gong. Whether it was augmented by some auditory effect or simply projected beyond the ambit of mortal vocal cords, it reached to all corners of the hushed chamber.

'I call you warriors, as all those born on Fenris are warriors. Whether man or woman, whelp or elder, you all carry the spirit of Russ in your blood. You are killers, bred on a world that only respects killing. The time has come for you to take up that mantle.'

His pale eyes swept across the motionless ranks. Morek shifted his weight, letting his attention flicker up to check his men were at their stations. They were all paying full attention. It was rare for any of the Sky Warriors to address mortals in such a fashion, and they were soaking up his words.

‘The Archenemy is here. They will land on this world soon, in numbers that have not been seen for a thousand years. They come, so they believe, to take this place, to burn it, to defile the home of your fathers. Not since the days when the Allfather walked the ice has an enemy come to Fenris with the power to shake these halls. I will not hide the truth of it from you. That day has come again.’

The thralls made no response, but remained flinty-eyed and impassive, listening intently. Morek had been on distant worlds during campaigns and seen the way other mortals were. There were places where such speech would have induced panic, or provoked fist-pumping denunciations, or weeping, or collapse.

Not on Fenris. They accepted the wyrd, and endured.

‘You are sons of the eternal ice, so I will not say “do not fear”, because I know that you will not. You will defend your hearth with all the strength that is in your bones and fists. And you will not stand alone. Even as I speak to you, Sky Warriors have left the Aett, hunting for the first Traitors to make planetfall to burn their landings and bring death among them. Where the need is greatest, when it comes to the walls of the Aett, they will come among you too. The storm will fall here, that we may be certain of, but when it comes we will be in the eye of it with you.’

Morek felt his heart quicken. These were the words he yearned to hear.

They will come among us. The Sky Warriors, fighting with us. This is the honour I crave.

‘You will all be armed,’ continued Greyloc. ‘Even now, weapons are being brought from the armouries. Kaerls will instruct you in their use.’

Wield them as you once wielded axes. Every one of you will be called to fight. This is our time of testing.'

I welcome it. I glory in it. We will be tested together.

'Little time remains before the storm hits. Use it well. Remember your hate. Remember your inner fire. The Traitors come to challenge you in our own lair. They are numerous, but they know nothing of the wrath of Fenris. We will show it to them.'

Greyloc's words gradually rose in volume. As he spoke, his fists crackled more brightly with the vast energies held within them.

'Do not disappoint me,' he snarled, and the threat of his wrath ran like a chill wind around the chamber. 'Do not spurn this faith shown in your spirit and determination. These interlopers will be hurled back into the void, whatever pains we endure to accomplish it. You will be a part of it. You will do this!'

The claws rose in unison.

'You will do this for the Allfather!'

The crowd began to press forwards. Their blood was stirred.

'You will do this for Russ!'

Growled murmurs of acclamation broke out.

'You will do this for Fenris!'

The muttering defiance rose in volume.

'You will do this, because you are the soul and sinew of a death world!' Greyloc roared aloud, and his talons blazed into swirling life. It was as if his ice-cold demeanour had been cast aside like a cloak, and what remained was white-hot, burning with a fierce intensity.

As one, the crowd slammed their fists on their chests. The heavy, thudding sound rolled across the Hall like a peal of thunder on the distant peaks.

'*Fenrys!*' cried Greyloc, tapping into the waves of rage.

'*Fenrys hjolda!*' they thundered, and the wall of noise was deafening.

Drums broke out from hidden places in the Hall, and the driving rhythm rippled across the seething masses.

‘*Hjolda!*’ shouted Morek with the others, feeling his blood begin to pump harder. The murder-make was being roused, the animal spirit of the people of Fenris. It was a fearsome, wonderful thing. No other human world could match it, and the thrill of the impending hunt began to run through his veins.

Morek gazed at the lone Sky Warrior ahead of him even as he screamed out his words of defiance. The Terminator-clad leviathan was the representative of all he venerated, all he worshipped.

A god among men.

‘*Fenrys!*’ rang out across the Hall. The fires exploded into red, angry life, licking the stone and iron around them like writhing beasts.

‘*Fenrys hjolda!*’ repeated Morek, hefting his weapon and crying the words with feeling.

They will fight among us.

As the Hall descended into roars and bellows of untamed aggression and the pinions of war descended over the Fang, Morek Karekborn looked on the image of the Wolf King and felt his faith blaze like a comet in the empty skies.

This is what they cannot understand, he realised, thinking of the faithless who came to despoil the Aett in their folly and madness. We will die for the Sky Warriors, for they show us what we can become. Against this certainty, they can have nothing. Nothing.

He smiled through his shouting, feeling the hoarseness in his throat, welcoming it as the badge of his devotion.

For the Allfather. For Russ. For Fenris.

PART II:
WAKING THE DEAD



CHAPTER SIX

Twelve hours after the destruction of the orbital defences, fire came to Asaheim.

The Thousand Sons warships *Alexandretta* and *Phosis T'Kar* assumed geostationary orbit one hundred kilometres above the Fang and prepared their payloads for dispersal. The two ships had minimal crew – fewer than two thousand each – and virtually no void-war armaments. They'd been shielded from the battle by a dozen frigates and kept away from harm by ships more suited to close combat. In form, they resembled huge cylinders on a vertical axis wedged through the clinging superstructure of a conventional warship. Everything on board the two ships was designed to feed those cylinders, to keep them supplied with huge amounts of promethium and heavy plasma-derivatives they needed to operate. The curved muzzles were aimed planetwards, ready to unload the energies already cradling within their polished walls.

Aphael called them *planet-scourers*. They were capable of levelling cities and razing continents, and there was nothing left in Fenrisian space to hinder their operation.

Orders went out over the fleet mission channel and the devices began to power up. Within the narrow corridors around the cylinder housing, unearthly whining gave way to a low rumble. Chain lightning leapt across

the empty gulf between the cylinder walls, cracking against adamantium bulwarks and breaking out into the void. Generators geared up, pumping energy into enormous converters and channelling it through to the devastation engines.

The escorts withdrew, opening up a gap of several hundred kilometres. The entire fleet kept its distance, like a crowd of frightened prey huddling out of range of the hunter.

From his observation cell onboard the *Herumon*, Temekh watched the accumulation of titanic energies gain pace. The gathering of power was heady, and he could sense the bulging, raging torment locked within the weapons as the limits of containment were reached.

‘Lord, your chambers have been made ready.’

The Spireguard equerry standing at his elbow broke Temekh’s concentration, and he had to suppress an urge to lash out at the mortal. He closed his eyes for a second, maintaining his position within the Enumerations. Some old habits died hard.

‘Thank you,’ he replied. ‘I will observe this before leaving.’

Even as he finished speaking, the planet-scourers reached their firing level.

Massive, snaking columns of gold-silver energy thundered down to the target below, twisting and blazing as they sliced through the atmosphere and slammed into the continental shelf. The torrent kept up steadily, a seamless rain of millions upon millions of plasma projectiles, melded into two pillars of withering, draining power and focused on the apex of the mountain ranges below.

‘By the Crimson King,’ breathed the equerry, forgetting himself as he watched the lethal quantities of energy unleashed.

Temekh smiled.

‘You think that lightshow will hurt the Dogs? Don’t fool yourself – this is just to keep them busy while Lord Aphael oversees the landing.’

He turned away from the portal and darkened the viewers with a mental command.

‘There are other ways to tear the pelt from them,’ he said, walking from his cell toward the chambers that had been prepared for him with so much labour. The equerry trotted after him. ‘It is now time to set them in motion.’

Freija Morekborn heard the impact before she saw any evidence of it.

‘Hold your positions!’ she barked at her six-strong squad of kaerls, keeping the surprise out of her hard-edged voice.

They were operating in the upper levels of the Valgard, assigned to the hangars to assist the armoury staff in preparing the remaining Land Raiders and Rhinos for deployment. The work mostly involved standing guard while interminable Mechanicus rites were performed to prime the machine-spirits, and the waiting around while other squads had been sent to forward combat stations was maddening.

Then the fire came. The hangar was one used by the Thunderhawk transporters and opened directly out to the atmosphere of Fenris. There were powerful shields across the gaping launch bay, both to protect from bombardment and to retain a breathable environment so high up. One moment, the sky outside was the dark blue of the short Fenrisian dusk; the next, it blazed with a seething kaleidoscope of colours, the result of a torrent of hyper-energised plasma hitting the surface of void shields and going crazy.

The hangar, which had been filled with the clang and grind of mechanical equipment and lifting gear, was suddenly dominated by the high pitched hiss and fizz of the shields taking the strain. Warning klaxons from far above their position blared out again, breaking the concentration of the tech-priests huddled over their incense and sacred oils.

‘What is it?’ asked a young kaerl, a blond-haired recruit called Lyr, hoisting his rifle to his waist instinctively. He was fearless in a human

scale firefight, but the vast energies colliding only a few hundred metres away clearly unnerved him.

‘Standard bombardment pattern,’ said Freija, who had no idea what manner of forbidden technology had been unleashed. ‘Stand down, trooper. Until we get the order to fall back, we don’t move.’

‘Quite right, huskaerl,’ came an amused, metallic voice.

Freija whirled around to find herself facing the towering outline of Garjek Arfang, the Twelfth’s Iron Priest. She swallowed reflexively, and instantly berated herself for her weakness.

How do they do it? How do they project this aura of intimidation?

‘Lord,’ she acknowledged, and bowed.

‘That’s not capable of hurting us,’ continued the priest, speaking through his slatted vox-grille. Like all his kind, he had a hulking servo-arm sprouting from the back of his strange, gothic armour. Instead of the usual totems and trophies strewn across the ceramite, he wore the skull and cog of the Adeptus Mechanicus on his breast, interleaved with iron renditions of the cardinal Fenrisian runes. His dark battle-plate was heavy with the patina of wear and combat, and looked like it hadn’t been removed for some time. Freija had certainly never seen any of the Iron Priests out of their shells, and it was easy to believe the rumours that what was left of their mortal bodies had irretrievably melded with the arcane technology within. He carried a heavy staff as the badge of his priesthood, crested with the adamantium head of a hammer forged into the likeness of a snarling muzzle.

‘They do it to prevent us firing back.’

He walked past her and stood facing the open launch bays, watching the rain of blazing plasma slam into the void shield barrier beyond.

‘Our shields are fed by thermal reactors buried kilometres down,’ he said, half talking to himself. ‘This will do no more than stress the voids, but we won’t be able to send any ship-killers up through it.’

He turned back to Freija.

‘Inconvenient, no?’

There was a low grating sound from somewhere below his armour.

Growling? Clearing his throat? Laughing?

‘Enlightening, lord,’ she said. ‘Then we are safe to remain on duty here.’

‘Perfectly, huskaerl. For the time being.’

The Iron Priest looked from one kaerl to another, assessing Freija’s squad for some kind of suitability. He had a strange, clipped manner, and his movements were oddly stilted for a Sky Warrior.

Metal-heads. Even more void-touched than the rest of them.

‘I have chosen you,’ Arfang announced. ‘I will have need of an escort for my thralls, and my tech-priests are fully engaged.’

‘At your command, lord,’ said Freija, uncertainly. Anything would be preferable to killing more time in the hangars, but he hadn’t said what he wanted yet.

The Iron Priest nodded to himself, evidently satisfied. He placed his hammer-headed staff on the ground in front of him, and several hunched figures scuttled out of the shadow of a nearby Thunderhawk. They were servitor-thralls, the half-man, half-machine semi-automata that provided the menial labour for the armoury. Some still had their human faces in place, drooped in a lobotomised, vacant expression of emptiness. Others had rigid iron plates instead of features and their hands replaced with drills, vices, locks, ratchets and claw hammers. Some had bundles of vat-grown plastek muscles bunched across their wasted natural frames, bolted in place with rivets and governed by a tangle of wires and control needles. They were a motley collection of horrors, the result of the dark union of Machine-God and the Fenrisian aesthetic of savagery.

‘There are preparations to make. It will take days. When I call you, come without delay.’

‘Forgive me, lord. Where?’

The Iron Priest turned his armour-plated head to look at her. His helmets glowed a deep red, as if opening onto smouldering coals within.

‘Where else, huskaerl? Have you not heard the war-seers’ counsel? The battle-outcomes do not cogitate well. There is mortal danger here.’

That, for him at least, seemed to answer the question. He strode past her, clanking his hammer-staff on the floor as he went. Then he paused, as if considering the possibility that he may not have been entirely clear.

He turned, and Freija thought she detected something like excitement in that flat, unearthly voice.

‘Jarl Greyloc has ordered it, huskaerl. We go to wake the dead.’

The Fang was merely the greatest of the many huge peaks that clustered together in the centre of Asaheim. Other summits reared their heads into the icy air around the World Spine, scraping the atmosphere as it thinned toward the void of space. They were piled atop the shoulders of each other, all encroaching on the space of the rest, fighting like the dark *ekka* pines of the valleys to climb toward the light. Everything on Fenris was in conflict, even the tortured, broken land itself.

The peaks closest to the Fang had entered the legends of the *Vlka Fenryka*, etched on their communal consciousness since the Allfather had led them there in the half-remembered twilight of the founding. To the south was Asfryk, white-sided and blunt, the Cloudtearer. To the east were soaring Friemiaki and Tror, the brothers of thunder. To the west was bleak Krakgard, the dark peak where heroes were burned, and to the north were Broddja and Ammagrimgul, the guardians of the Hunter’s Gate through which aspirants passed to take the trials of passage.

The ways between the peaks were treacherous and known only to those who’d trodden the paths as aspirants. All were scarred with precipitous drops and deep crevasses. Some hunt-ways were built on solid stone, whereas others were on bridges of ice that would crumble to nothing with the first application of weight. Some led true, taking the hunter from the clefts in the shadow of the summits down to the plains where the prey

dwelt; others led nowhere but into darkness, to the caves that riddled the bowels of the ancient landscape, full of nothing but ice-gnawed bones and despair.

For all its majesty and terror, there were islands of stability in that savage land, places where gigantic outcrops of rock created broad plateaux amid the plunging cliffs. These were the sites where the Wolves came to commune with the savage soul of the mountain country. In the Summers of Fire, when the ice was broken across the planet and war came to the mortal tribesmen, great fires were lit in such places and sagas declaimed by the skjalds. Then would the warriors of Russ put aside the demands of battle for a short time and remember those who had fallen in the Long War, and the Rune Priests would delve far into the mysteries of the wyrd, attempting to discern the Chapter's path into the unknown landscape of the future.

It was at such a gathering that a younger Ironhelm had announced the first of the many hunts for Magnus. Further back into the past, the same location had played host to the decision to form the Wolf Brothers, the Space Wolves' ill-fated successor Chapter, now disbanded and a source of hidden shame.

For the Thousand Sons, who knew and cared nothing of this, the plateaux were merely landing sites, places to disgorge the troops and vehicles from their cavernous landers ready for the land assault to come. So, forty-eight hours after the destruction of the orbital platforms, they came in spiralling columns, darkening the skies with their numbers. Heavy, lumbering drop-ships disembarked from the holds of the troop carriers above and thundered down to the embarkation points, guarded by wings of gunships and shadowed by the void-to-surface batteries of the warships in orbit. One after another, the bronze and sapphire vessels broke into the atmosphere, streaking trails of fire as they plummeted.

By nightfall, dozens of them had come, just a tithe of the many that would follow. Wolf Guard Sigrd Brakk watched the twinkling lights of the latest drop-ship fall toward his position, hard under the shadow of the Krakgard, and his lips pulled back from his fangs. Like the rest of his pack, he was shoulder deep in snow, crouching in the lee of an overhanging drift-curve, waiting for the moment when the plateau he was overlooking was picked by the enemy commanders.

‘That one, lads,’ he hissed, satisfied, motioning toward the descending ship. ‘First kill of the night.’

Assault-Captain Skyt Hemloq kept a sweaty grip on his lasrifle. Despite his armour and environment bodyglove, the air was terrifyingly cold. That didn’t stop him sweating.

His feet crunched through the snow, illuminated by his helmet-lumen, sweeping across the blue-white surface. His squad, thirty strong and all equipped for the soul crushing climate, fanned out beside him.

So this is Fenris, he thought, gazing up in awe at the dark shapes of the peaks above. The nearest of them soared into the night, far larger than anything he’d seen on his home world of Qavelon, and that was reckoned a planet with many mountains.

There was something about the air. It wasn’t just the cold – there was something sharp, savage, about it. Even modified through his rebreathers and boosted with oxygen-mix from his backpack, it was thin and caustic. Perhaps it was the alt-clim drugs still swimming through his bloodstream.

It was quiet. The only consistent sound came from the whining engines of the drop-ship. The hulking lander, twenty metres tall and much broader, squatted on the meltsnow-streaked rock, gradually unloading its cargo of ordnance and manpower. Already over a hundred Spireguard had emerged from the cavernous interior, marching with false bravado on to a world that obviously wanted to kill them and looked perfectly capable of doing it

soon. They were the first, the ones in the line of fire, the ones charged with establishing the bridgehead.

And yet, there had been no resistance. No movement. Nothing detected on the surveyors.

The silence.

‘Stay tight,’ Hemloq voxed, fixing his gaze back on the scene before him.

The plateau was over eight hundred metres across on the flat. It plunged down into a chasm on three sides; on the fourth, the rock rose steeply in broken, tumbling terraces. Negotiable, but difficult.

He swallowed, trying not to let his vision get clouded by the myriad points of light across the flat landing site. Fixed lumen-arrays had been erected after planetfall and all the troops disembarking had helm-lights on full-beam. The effect was confusing rather than helpful, as the night was broken by hundreds of star-like points and banks of eye-watering brilliance.

The drop-ship sat in the centre of the open space, smoke and steam gushing from its exhausts, a dark outline ringed with whirling tracer lights. Hemloq knew the pilots were eager to take off again. Despite the gunships patrolling the dropsites, they were vulnerable while on the ground, like a prey-bird crouched on its nest.

Even as he watched, another company of troops disembarked, some of them with heavier weapons in tow. A cumbersome lascannon was unloaded, flanked by a dozen gunnery crew, ready for deployment at the site edges. In time, portable void shield generators and proper anti-aircraft defences would be deployed. When that happened, the place would be something like secure. Until then, they were vulnerable, and all of them knew it.

‘Sweep complete,’ came a vox from the far side of the dropsite.

‘Anything?’ demanded Hemloq, speaking more urgently than he’d meant to.

Damn it. Keep it cool in front of the men.

‘Nothing, sir.’

‘Then hold position. Until we get fixed surveyors online, your eyes are all we’ve got.’

The vox-link crackled out. Hemloq tried it again, and there was no response. That was just damn rude.

‘Keep tight,’ he said again. He was beginning to sound ridiculous with his military platitudes. The whistle of the wind in the high peaks, the lack of any response from the defenders, the bone-aching cold. It would have unnerved a man of far greater combat readiness than Skyt Hemloq.

‘Trust in the Masters,’ he murmured.

On the far side of the plateau, a lumen-bank winked out.

Hemloq stiffened.

‘Stand fast, men,’ he said, checking on his helm-display to see who was responsible for that section of perimeter.

Another one disappeared.

Shit.

‘They’re coming!’ he cried, uncaring of how shrill his voice had become. ‘Pick your targets!’

He hoisted his lasgun to his shoulder, sweeping it round as he peered out into the gloom. Dimly, he was aware of his men doing likewise. His proximity meter was blank. There was no chatter, no feedback.

They’re as terrified as I am.

Then, from over to his left, lines of retina-burning las-fire blazed out, followed by the whip-crack noise of their discharge. It was madly angled, fired in haste. Briefly, from the corner of his eye, Hemloq saw something huge and shadowy flit across the snow.

He whirled to face it, firing his lasgun indiscriminately at nothing. There were shouts of outrage as other beams lanced through the night, some of them striking the flanks of the drop-ship.

Hemloq dropped to a frightened crouch, feeling his heart hammer in his chest.

This is a farce. They've got us jumping at shadows.

Then, and from somewhere, from a place he'd never have guessed existed, Hemloq found resources of stubbornness. A defence had to be organised, some structure imposed. The Wolves had a reputation, but they were only men, just as the Masters had promised.

'To me!' he roared, leaping back to his feet, a new note of determination entering his voice. 'Form ranks, and get those—'

A face flashed across his field of vision, something out of a nightmare. He saw two glowing shards of red, a gunmetal-grey helm studded with teeth, hulking pauldrons daubed in blood.

'Shush,' came a wet growl, impossibly deep, sounding more like a leopard's than a human's.

In the instant before Ogrim Redpelt's gauntlet smashed in on Hemloq's vocal cords and ripped them out, the novice assault-captain had time for a realisation that might have been helpful if it had come earlier.

These are no men.

Helfist tore across the landing site, swaying between the flickering las-beams more skilfully than his armour-clad bulk would have suggested possible.

There was little in the arsenal of such mortals that could have hurt him, but he maintained the absolute stealth of the approach and kept his bolter silent. It was a matter of pride – a clean kill, a minimum of fuss. His helm's night-vision showed up the scene in clear lines. It was evident from the confused response of the enemy that they were using no such technology.

A lumen beam swept across him, briefly showing him up against the dark. His helm runes showed six beads locking on to his position, and he checked his barrelling run and turned to face them.

Six mortals, twenty metres off, all dressed in pale grey camouflaged armour, masked and helmeted, with lowered lasguns.

‘Fodder,’ spat Helfist under his breath, already running fluidly toward them, already relishing the splash of their blood against his armour, already bringing his power fist into the optimal swing-pattern.

One panicked beam got away before he crashed among them. It glanced from his sigil-carved vambraces harmlessly. His fist crunched into the face of one of the warriors, throwing him far into the night. The carry-through crushed the chest of the one behind him.

Helfist spun tautly on his left boot, using the grip of his bolt pistol to smash the visor of a retreating mortal. The air howled in and the man fell to his knees, gagging on a shattered jawline.

The others broke, scrabbling to get away.

‘Filth,’ Helfist growled, grabbing the closest and snapping his spine with a whiplash shake of his power fist.

His helm showed the position of his battle-brothers carving their way toward the drop-ship. There was las-fire everywhere, cracking and snapping in an ill-focused storm of fear. More of the mortal soldiers had taken up positions across the plateau, trying to organise the defence into something that had a hope of stopping the Wolves. It would do them little good. Helfist could see the incoming signals of gunships, and could sense the charging up of lascannons, but neither would change the odds much now.

Pitiful. It enraged him.

‘You come here,’ he snarled, decapitating a mortal with a contemptuous uppercut. ‘You defile this place.’ Disembowelled another with his power fist. The energy field wasn’t even activated. ‘You dare this.’ Ripped up

breathing gear, tore open breastplates, broke limbs. ‘You insult me with your weakness.’ Crushed skulls, blinded faces, ripped out spines, bathed in the blood of the invader. ‘This is making me *very angry*.’

A swooping shape rushed past him on his left flank. Redpelt had made a break for the drop-ship. Helfist shook the life out of the man he held in his grasp, cast him aside and joined his battle-brother in the chase. The wolf-spirit within, the avatar of the kill-urge, uncoiled and stretched its claws.

‘Fired your bolter yet?’ voxed Redpelt over the comm-link, gunning his chainsword and drawing a splatter-filled arc across the panicked mortals in his way.

‘No need,’ replied Helfist with disgust, shouldering up to a barrage of las-fire at full sprint and ploughing into the terrified snipers. ‘They just don’t deserve it.’

Redpelt laughed, punching the butt of his pistol heavily into his next target’s midriff. The man flew back in agony, stomach burst, blood spilling across the churned snow.

‘No argument, brother.’

By the time they reached the open maw of the drop-ship the slush beneath their boots was rose-red. Brokentoath was still some way behind, detained with tearing apart a row of semi-prepared lascannon batteries. Somewhere further back, Brakk was dealing out silent death in impressively brutal quantities. He’d maintained comm-silence since unleashing his pack on the landing site, content to let the Claws take out the principal target while he maximised devastation amongst the infantry.

Caught in mid-deployment, the pilots were trying to take off. Enemy troops were scrambling to get back into the false safety of the interior, driven to a state of blind terror by the armoured shades sweeping through them.

‘They sicken me,’ continued Helfist, leaping up into the huge loading bay and plunging into the terrified huddle of men within.

Redpelt jumped up after him, pausing only to let the blood slew from his chainsword before flicking it back into life.

‘The Wolves are among you!’ he roared in Gothic, laughing riotously with the pleasure of the murder-make.

Constricted and cramped, the enemy fell like wheat under the scythe, getting in each others’ way, frozen in herd-like horror. Some tried vainly to escape the slaughter and leap past the rampaging Blood Claws and onto the ice, but none made it through Redpelt’s gyrating blades. The rest retreated further back into the depths of the hold, postponing death by only few moments, letting loose their ineffective las-fire in panicked volleys.

Then there was a booming detonation, and a thudding, grinding vibration across the steel floor of the loading bay. The drop-ship had managed to take off.

‘Cockpit,’ snarled Helfist.

Redpelt was ahead of him, charging through the loading bay and racing up the first stairwell he came to. The bulky shoulder-guards of his armour scraped past the narrow walls, drawing huge gouges in the pressed metal.

Helfist blink-clicked a rune on his helm display and his power fist’s energy-field sparked into life, throwing an electric-blue discharge across the ship’s interior. He slammed the burning gauntlet into the swaying floor and ripped up a sheet of it. With a savage yank, he hauled it back, throwing the first rank of cowering soldiers from their feet and exposing the innards of the ship’s structure beneath. He crouched down and pulled out a length of wiring, snapping the connections and shaking the cords loose like entrails pulled from a wounded beast.

With a shudder, the lights died across the bay, plunging the space into utter darkness. High-pitched screams of terror echoed out from the press of troops ahead, suddenly flung back into a maelstrom of shadows and whirling helm-lumens.

‘Run while you can, little men,’ growled the Blood Claw, stowing his pistol and advancing into the dark, his power fist crackling lashes of disruptive force. ‘Now Hel is on your heels.’

Redpelt thundered up on the next level, his boots denting the meshed metal stairs with every heavy tread. There were armed guards waiting on the platform above, and a snap of las-fire cracked against his right shoulder as he emerged.

‘Brave,’ he snarled, righting himself and sweeping his gore-soaked chainsword into the retreating body of the nearest. ‘But unwise.’

He spun into the guards, flailing with his blade. The movements looked wild, but they were nothing of the sort – peerless conditioning had given his murder-strokes a deceptive efficiency.

The guards held their ground against the onslaught, and so they died. As he butchered the last of them, Redpelt’s helm showed Helfist slicing his way through the hold-level below. From its reeling pitch, it was clear the drop-ship was in the air and climbing.

At the end of the platform was a sealed door. Redpelt sprinted at it, loosing three rounds as he went, all hitting the intersection. The reactive bolts detonated as he crashed into the metal, cracking the doors open and sending the two panels tumbling inwards.

There were four men inside, all seated at consoles, two by two. Cockpit windows lined the far end, showing flashes of the firefight below as the drop-ship struggled to make headway with its loading bay doors open.

Redpelt laughed raucously in triumph, and the horrific sound echoed in the cramped space of the cockpit. Three of the flight-crew sprang up and tried clumsily to get out of the way of his rampage. There was nowhere for them to go. Redpelt’s chainsword whirred heavily. Two heavy swipes and all three mortals were hacked apart, scattering viscera across the metal-backed seats. Redpelt grabbed the remaining pilot from his flight position, ripping him out of his restraint harness by the nape of his neck. The man’s

spine broke from the force of it and the corpse went limp in Redpelt's gauntlet.

Snarling with disdain, the Blood Claw hurled the body aside. The control column swayed drunkenly in the absence of a guiding hand, and the drop-ship began to list violently.

'Hel,' he voxed. 'Time to go.'

He plucked a krak grenade from his belt, but then saw incoming danger runes flicker across his lens. Redpelt's head snapped up, just in time to see a wing of four Thousand Sons gunships home in on the plateau, a few hundred metres off and closing fast.

Interesting.

He flicked the grenade back to safety and grabbed the column. It was like a giant's fist closing over a child's toy, but the drop-ship instantly steadied under his touch. Instead of letting it crash to earth, Redpelt dragged it out of its dive and gunned the engines further. With a wail of protest, the tortured atmospheric drives blazed back into full throttle.

The gunships, their pilots looking for targets on the ground, saw the danger too late. The drop-ship rose up to meet them head-on, huge and sluggish.

Redpelt grinned and smashed the nearside window with his chainsword handle. He let go of the controls, crouched, then crashed headlong through the gap, tearing through the metal frame, spinning out into the night even as the swooping gunships veered to avoid the massive chunk of steel and promethium sent lurching into their path.

It was only then that he saw how high up he'd taken it. The plateau was over two hundred metres down, still lit up by sporadic las-fire.

'*Skítja*,' he spat. 'This is going to—'

He plummeted like a stone, barely registering the explosion above him as two of the gunships collided with the stricken drop-ship and the sky was lit with a vast, thundering ball of igniting fuel and ammunition.

‘—hurt.’

He hit the rock before rolling away from the impact and skidding across the ice. Both knees blazed with pain, even protected by his power armour, and he felt a sharp, hot whip-crack run up his compressed spine.

He lay immobile for a second, dazed from the heavy impact. Then his vision cleared. Grimacing, Redpelt hauled himself to his feet, ignoring the warning runes indicating muscle damage and a fractured tibia.

Dimly, he was aware he should be paying attention to something else.

‘Run, you stupid bastard!’ voxed Helfist from somewhere close by.

Then he realised what it was. He broke into an agonised sprint, tearing across the rock as the ball of fire in the sky swung down to his position. The broken drop-ship, directionless and ripped open by the gunship collisions, was slewing back to earth again, streaming flames like an earth-bound comet as its engines gave up the fight to stay airborne.

He ran. He ran like a raging *skeiskre*, pumping his damaged limbs, feeling endorphins pulse through his battered frame.

Russ, you’re slow.

There was a crunching, earth-shaking boom as the metal shell thudded into the rock behind him, crushing any residual survivors within and spraying slivers of red-hot metal across the whole battlefield. The ruined ship kept rolling, toppling like a downed beast on the plains, roaring in its death-throes and igniting fresh explosions within its bulbous carcass before it finally, grindingly, painfully, came to rest.

Only then did Redpelt stop and turn, looking over the devastation he’d triggered, aware that his second heart had kicked in and was hammering hard. Pain-deadeners had started work as his stressed bones began to knit, but the strongest drive within him was the inner wolf, raging and tearing. He felt the rush of the kill-urge sweep over him, a heady mix of adrenaline and gene-rage.

‘*Fenrys!*’ he roared, whirling his chainsword in a huge loop around his head, glorying in his triumph. ‘*Hjolda!*’

Then there was another presence at his side. Helfist slapped him hard on the back, laughing harshly over the comm.

‘Morkai’s arse, you’re as thick as an *ungur*,’ he said, giving away the wolf-rage within him too. Even through his armour, Redpelt could pick up the kill-pheromones spiking the air. ‘Tough as one, too.’

Then Brakk was there too, and the rest of the pack, looming against the burning shell. The las-fire had ceased. No Spireguard had lived to see the drop-ship come down, and the surviving gunships were still coming back round for another attack run.

‘Next time just use grenades,’ the Wolf Guard growled irritably. ‘Next target’s north, and they’ve established a bridgehead. Move out.’

The pack broke into a run instantly, loping across the shattered rock as one, sweeping over it like a grey fluid sliding into the shadows. Power fists were shut down and chainblades were stilled, and once more the Claws drifted into the ghost-like stealth that was the terrifying mirror of their battle-rage.

By the time the gunships came back, flying low over the dropsite, all that remained on it were the guttering flames, the twisted metal, and the already frozen corpses of those unwary enough to bring war to the world of the Wolves.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Auries Fuerza of the Pavoni cult-discipline leaned back against the bulkhead, flexing his pain-drenched limbs. He'd seen death staring at him, the final embrace of the flesh-change, and it had been horrifying. Even now, having finally thrown off the horrors of warp-delirium, he could feel his hearts labour, thumping against his ravaged ribcage like animals trying to claw their way out. How long had he been out cold? Minutes? Hours? Days? In the warp, it was always hard to tell.

Transportation through the malignant currents of the aether was physically demanding at the best of times, but to make a leap at such notice and under such conditions was both painful and dangerous. When he'd seen the Dog vessel hurtle toward his stricken ship, he'd only had seconds to make the decision. Thankfully, the preparations for evacuation had already been made due to the heavy fire the *Illusion of Certainty* had taken. Even so, scrying new warp vectors in the middle of a ferocious void-battle had been far from trivial.

Fuerza could take a certain level of pride that he'd not sent himself directly into the structure of the recipient ship. The fact he was breathing air and not metal struck him as more proof that the pattern of the universe had a design, and one that included him in it.

Only barely, though. His palms had been stripped of skin and now shone like glossy sides of meat in the dark. His breath came in sharp, rattling

gasps, and under his mask he could feel the damage done to his face.

There had been four Rubricae with him in the warp bubble, but only one had made it intact. Two must have been lost in the jump, ripped apart by the capricious currents of the Ocean. A third had materialised within a heavy adamantium strut, and black metal rods impaled the soulless creature fast. Flickers of warp residue ran across its broken breastplate, still trying to knit the form of the Thousand Sons warrior back together.

It was hopeless. A Rubricae was one of the toughest mobile structures in the galaxy, immune to pain and despair, able to keep operating even after massive structural damage, but being fused with the hull of a loyalist interceptor had destroyed the integrity of the Traitor Marine's armour-shell. As Fuerza watched, too weak to intervene, the pale light in the broken Rubricae's helm guttered and died. The spirit of the warrior, such as it was, had failed.

Fuerza felt a profound sadness, an echo of psychic pain within his physical agony.

So few. Now one fewer.

He turned, slowly and with spasms of torment shooting up his compressed spine, to face the survivor. It stood impassively, unmoving. It didn't betray the slightest interest in the fate of its comrades. Not for the first time, Fuerza wondered what kind of attenuated existence the Rubricae had. Did they see the runes running across their helm-displays like he did? Did speech register with them as it did with mortal men?

Impossible to tell. Ahriman, curse his black name, had made them as cold and unfeeling as the graven images of Neiumas Tertius.

For all that, it was an impressive statue. Huge and dominating in its sapphire and bronze battle plate, the Rubricae still held the ornate bolter it had carried into battle on Prospero as a living, breathing Space Marine. Its breastplate displayed the delicate images of serpents and dragons, of

constellations and astrological symbols, of obscure sigils and ancient glyphs of power, each a piece of stunning artistry.

The images changed. Fuerza didn't know how, or even notice when, but they were rarely constant for long. The only thing that remained was the Eye, the one symbol that they wore at all times.

'So, brother,' Fuerza croaked, looking around him warily, feeling the blood run down his chin and over his damaged chest. 'What shall we make of this?'

The two of them had rematerialised in a dark corridor that stretched into shadow in either direction, Fuerza slumped against the wall, the Rubricae standing. The walls were formed of exposed machinery and pipework, unadorned and brutal. The floor was a metal mesh, the ceiling a morass of power cables, coolant tubes and boxy life support modules. It was dark and almost freezing.

Fuerza guessed they were down in the lower levels, since the rumble of the engines felt close. The noise of the warp drives sounded healthy enough, but even in his critical state Fuerza was enough of an empath to detect the hurt the vessel's machine-spirit had suffered. From far above them, there were faint cries, and heavy, resounding crashes. The crew was doing its best to keep the ship from coming apart.

'We're in the warp,' mused Fuerza, licking his dry, cracked lips. 'For all we know, this is the only ship that escaped Aphael's blockade.'

He looked up at the helm of the Rubricae, watching the way the polished ceramite of its crest caught the faint interior light and turned it into a thing of beauty.

'A Wolves vessel,' he continued, trying to construct a mental picture of how the ship would be laid out. 'There may be many of them on board.'

He smiled, suppressing the coughing-up of more blood, and laid a trusting hand on the Rubricae's vambrace.

‘No matter, my brother,’ he said. ‘I can recover from these wounds. You will be my protector in the days to come. By the time this ship leaves the embrace of the Ocean, we will be the only living souls within it.’

For three days, the landings in the mountains of Asaheim continued. For three days, the hunting packs disrupted and burned them, launching attack after attack across the ice. For three days, they racked up victories, preventing permanent footholds, scouring the rock clean of the taint of the invader. Many drop ships were destroyed before landing by clusters of Long Fangs; more were knocked out soon afterwards by the roaming packs.

Despite all of this, the invaders succeeded in establishing bridgeheads. Time wore on, and the Wolves were faced with ever more of the enemy. They could not be everywhere at once, and the battles became fiercer and more protracted. The Thousand Sons established enduring positions at nine points in the mountain ranges around the Fang, landing ever more men and materiel, gradually constructing the stranglehold from which the main assault would be launched.

As dawn broke over the Fang on the fourth day, the fortress was ringed with fire. Oily black columns, generated by promethium spills that would burn even on the ice, formed a vast, kilometres-wide circle across the mountain chain. The leaguer was closing, forged by the sacrifice of thousands of invading soldiers, each one of their deaths buying space for another drop-ship to land, another lascannon to be unloaded, another tank to rumble down the embarkation ramps.

Greyloc’s Thunderhawk, the *Vragnek*, touched down in the Valgard, swooping hard under the umbrella of exploding plasma where the void shields still resisted the constant orbital bombardment. As it came to rest on the rock floor of the hangar, the crew bay doors slammed down and the Wolf Lord himself strode back into the Aett, followed by his Terminator-clad retinue. Wyrmlade was there to meet him.

Greyloc's armour was scorched black across one side and streaked with dried blood. A chunk had been knocked out of his right shoulder-guard, scarring the face of the rune Trysk. His wolfclaws were still fizzing with residual energy, and the crust of gore on his wrists showed that they'd been in heavy use.

'Good hunting?' asked Wyrmlblade, looking at the signs of battle with approval.

Greyloc removed his helm with a sucking hiss and locked it under his arm. His white eyes burned coldly.

'Too many of them,' he muttered, striding past Wyrmlblade, forcing the Wolf Priest to turn to keep up with him. 'We turn the ice red, but they keep landing.'

Wyrmlblade nodded.

'The first rank of drop-ships were to keep us busy. They've landed heavy carriers further out. Traitor Marine squads now march with the mortals.'

Greyloc spat a gobbet of blood-flecked saliva and shook his head.

'Bones of Russ, Thar,' he hissed. 'I wanted nothing more than to keep fighting. I could have stayed out on the ice until my claws were rending their cold, dead bones.'

He looked into the Wolf Priest's eyes, and there was ferocity in his lean face.

'I wanted nothing more. Do you understand?'

Wyrmlblade looked back carefully, his old eyes scanning for the tell-tale signs. He scrutinised long, paying particular attention to the white irises.

'Righteous rage, brother,' he said at last, clapping him firmly on the shoulder. 'As it should be.'

Greyloc grunted, hiding his relief badly, and shook himself from the Wolf Priest's grip.

'Then tell me.'

‘We’re surrounded,’ said Wyrmlblade. He spoke bluntly, factually. ‘The net’s closed. If you leave the packs out there, they’ll be picked off. There are sorcerers in the ranks of the enemy now, and we don’t have the Rune Priests to counter them.’

‘They won’t be called back easily.’

‘Then they’ll die. I can show you the auspex scans.’

Greyloc remained silent, grimly weighing up the options.

‘We’re hunters, Thar,’ he said eventually. The harsh edge had left his voice as the kill-urge receded. ‘We pursue. They’ve got us cornered. This fighting won’t suit the Claws.’

Wyrmlblade smiled, and his mouth hooked like a knife wound in his old, wrinkled face. ‘Then we’ll learn a new way. Isn’t that what you’re always saying?’

‘I had a vision for it. The Tempering is—’

‘They’ll learn. You have to lead them.’

Greyloc looked at Wyrmlblade coldly. His thoughts were evident across his lupine face, and he didn’t bother to hide them.

They do not trust me. I am the White Wolf, the ghost, the bloodless one. They sense what I wish to do, how I wish to transform us all.

‘Call the packs back,’ he growled, rolling his head wearily from side to side, stretching the muscles that had been combat-tense for days on end. ‘We’ll meet the attack here. If nothing else, the passage of the Gates will make them bleed.’

The open sky was streaked with the dirty trails of incoming shell fire. The enemy had managed to establish firing positions a few kilometres east of Rossek’s hold-out, and now spearheads had begun to advance out of them.

‘Rojk!’ he bellowed into the comm. ‘Where’s that damned heavy support?’

There was a fizz of static in his earpiece. Either short-range comms were being jammed, or Torgrim Rojk’s Long Fang squad had been forced out of

combat. In either case, things were getting difficult.

Rossek's squad had assaulted six dropsites during the night, destroying all of them utterly before moving on. In four days his ten Grey Hunters had yet to take a casualty despite slaughtering huge numbers of enemy troops. Only gradually had the truth become apparent. The first wave of landings had been fodder – poorly trained and badly equipped conscripts sent to absorb the fury of the Wolves while the real soldiers were landed further out. The mountains were now crawling with enemy squads. Hundreds of them.

Like the one they were closing in on now.

'Frar, Scarjaw,' he hissed over the mission channel. 'Go wide.'

The two Grey Hunters responded instantly, breaking left from the squad and sweeping up the slope of valley. Rossek's pack had pushed far down a long, narrow cleft in the mountains, using the impenetrable rock cliffs on either side to mask their approach. The broken boulders, some the size of Rhinos, gave excellent cover. At the far end of the valley, only a few hundred metres distant, the enemy was making its advance.

Two tanks were grinding their way toward Rossek's position, guarding a phalanx of marching troops in their wake. The incoming fire was heavy and accurate, shattering the boulders in front of them and sending shards spinning into the air. The vehicles had an unusual pattern. Leman Russ chassis, by the look of them, with autocannons and heavy bolters. They looked like the Chapter's own Exterminators. Infantry killers.

'Eriksson, Vre,' Rossek hissed.

Two more Grey Hunters peeled right, stooping low as they weaved between the shoulders of rock, leaving seven of the pack still in cover on the valley floor.

A huge boulder cracked open several metres to Rossek's right, blasted apart by a long range mortar. Heavy bolter-fire from the tanks ran along the valley floor in rows, creeping ever closer to the Wolves' position.

Rossek checked his helm locator, watching as his troops took up optimal positions.

‘Now,’ he snarled.

The Grey Hunters on the flanks broke cover and raced toward the enemy lines, sweeping across the broken terrain like bolting *konungur*. They moved incredibly quickly, bounding with assurance across the treacherous landscape. Their boltguns opened up, slamming into the flanks of the swaying tanks and exploding across the front ranks of the infantry beyond.

Rossek watched as the tank-mounted heavy bolters swivelled to meet the flank threats, holding for the few seconds needed to draw fire from the front aspect, then clenched his fist tight.

‘*Hjolda!*’ he roared, leaping from cover.

His Hunters burst out with him, roaring defiance and letting their pelts stream out from their armour. The time for stealth had passed, and now speed took its place.

Incoming bolter rounds flew past Rossek’s shoulder as he weaved toward his destination, his animal senses keeping him one step ahead of the mortals’ reactions. He fired back from the waist – short, sharp bursts of twin-streamed fire from the storm bolter held in his right hand. As he closed on the first tank, he thumbed his chainfist into whirring, snarling life.

The vehicles were powerful but slow, hindered by the uneven terrain. The Wolves leapt and ducked as they raced toward the enemy. Despite their huge suits of power armour, they went fluidly, fast and low.

Rossek reached the first tank, leaping high on to its roof, boosted by his armour-servos. The turret whirled to face him, but he jammed his chainfist into the metal, carving it open and sending sparks spinning.

Two Hunters pounced on to the other one, with the rest of the squad sweeping past and laying into the supporting infantry. The heavy bark of bolter-fire quickly drowned out the cracks of returning las-beams.

In a single movement, Rossek mag-locked his bolter, grabbed a krak grenade and hurled it into the gap he'd opened in the turret armour, before leaping from the roof through a hail of return fire. The tank's heavy bolters tracked after him, only to be ripped apart by the muffled boom of the exploding grenade. The tank rocked on its tracks, its armoured panels bulging from within as the explosions blossomed.

Then the other tank blew up, knocked from its tracks when its fuel tanks were breached. Black smoke boiled up from the twin cracked hulls, rolling out of the shattered innards.

The mortals broke then, hurrying back the way they'd come so confidently only moments before, some dropping their weapons in their haste to retreat. Rossek roared his scorn, grabbing his storm bolter again and prepared to reap vengeance.

It was only then that his proximity scanner picked up the new signals, masked by the infantry advance. Further down the valley floor, moving slowly but inexorably, a line of sapphire and bronze figures was marching up the valley. Rossek crouched down behind cover, checking the numbers. Eighteen. Two times nine.

'Comm signal from the Aett, Jarl,' reported Frar breathlessly, clattering heavily against the rock as he sank beside him, his voice heavy with kill-urge. 'Orders to fall back.'

Rossek kept low, magnifying his helm-view and watching the line of Traitor Marines advance through the retreating remnants of their mortal allies. They didn't hide their presence, made no effort to remain in cover. They came silently, arrogantly, as if they'd already conquered the world they walked on.

'Traitors,' he spat, feeling his murder-urge sharpen. The mortals were just meat for his boltgun; these were the real enemy.

'Jarl?' asked Frar. 'Will you respond?'

Rossek found the question irritating. He'd only now seen warriors who were worthy of his blades, ones who wouldn't run like cattle when their cover was broken. Involuntarily, he found himself giving in to a low, wet growl, his finger moving toward the trigger of his bolter.

'No, brother,' he snarled, noting the position of his pack as it clustered around him again, gauging the distance to the advancing Traitor Marines, estimating terrain cover and exposure to ordnance on the way in. 'I will not respond. I would not respond if the voice of the Allfather himself gave the order.'

He turned to the Grey Hunter, sensing the warrior's own readiness for the murder-make. The whole pack had been fighting for hours, and the kill-scent was heavy in his nostrils.

'Kill the comm,' he spat. 'We'll take them. On my mark, bring the wrath of Russ to those that dare trespass on his domain.'

The Hunters tensed, ready for the order, bolters and chainswords clutched fast.

'The wrath of Russ, Jarl,' acknowledged Frar, and as he spoke there was a brutal, guttural joy in the words.

Ramsez Hett strode through the slush, his pale robes already sodden at the fringes. His golden armour shielded him from the worst of the chill, but the severe cold had a way of penetrating even his atmosphere-sealed battle-plate.

The Heq'el Mahdi dropsite had grown from a few hundred square metres to over a kilometre, a miniature city draped across the ice-bound highlands. It had anti-aircraft batteries, void shield generators, prefabricated assault walls and hastily-dug trenches around the perimeter. Over two thousand Spireguard had been landed and more were disembarking every hour. Among them strode squads of Rubricae, each accompanied by a sorcerer and shadowed by a hundred more mortal troops. Prosperine tanks and mobile artillery ground their way through the

grey patches of lingering snow, their engines labouring and letting loose gouts of black smoke in the extreme conditions. Heq'el Mahdi housed a formidable army in its own right, but it was only one of nine secured dropsites. The scale of Aphael's ambition had never been more apparent.

We will never be able to do this again. On this strike, everything depends.

The Raptora sorcerer lord reached his destination. A Spireguard commander, wearing the heavy armour, full facemask and tactical battle-helm that had been denied to the first landers, approached and saluted.

'He's on time, commander?' asked Hett, his voice as rasping as ever. He'd not emerged entirely unscathed from the Rubric, and his vocal cords had stretched beyond mortal tolerances. If the Spireguard noticed the effect, he made no sign.

'Perfectly, lord,' he replied, looking up to the skies.

The two of them stood on the edge of a wide landing platform, cleared by meltas and with the irregular rock smoothed with plascrete. Rubricae stood on guard around the perimeter, as unmoving as the stone about them.

Hett followed the commander's eyeline, seeing Aphael's ship descending toward their position. It was a Stormbird, one out of many the Legion had once operated, gilded and decorated with images of fabulous mythical beasts. The cockpit was lost in a riot of baroque bronze symbols, geometric and mystical. Above them all was the Eye, picked out in a mosaic of garnet, ruby and beryllium.

Looking at the lander as it touched down on the platform, Hett found himself wondering if Temekh was right about the Legion's loss of taste. The vessel was gaudy. Outsized. Vulgar.

When we lose our judgement, our ability to discern, we lose everything.

The passenger ramp descended, touching gently on the slushy filth beneath it. Lord Aphael strode down it casually, flanked by six towering Terminator Rubricae. His bronze helm, carved with an elongated vox-

grille, looked self-satisfied. Every movement the commander made was smug, content, in control.

‘Congratulations, brother,’ Aphael said as he came up to Hett. ‘You have given us the platform we need.’

Hett bowed.

‘We lost many men, lord. More than I made allowances for. The Wolves responded quickly.’

Aphael shrugged.

‘It is their world. We should have been as eager to defend ours.’

‘Nonetheless,’ said Hett, turning to walk with Aphael. ‘Mortals cannot take on Space Marines. There have been sites of slaughter.’

Hett detected a flicker of irritation from Aphael. For all the commander’s surface equanimity, there was something underneath, something fragile. If Hett had been of the Athanaeans, he might have been able to tell what it was.

Not fear, but possibly something like it.

‘That is why the Rubricae go to war,’ Aphael replied. ‘Thanks to our Lord’s deception, there can be no more than a hundred Dogs left in their lair. We bring six hundred of our silent brothers. We have two million mortal troops against a few thousand. What numbers would make you more content, brother?’

Hett felt the urgency in the commander’s words.

Does he fear failure? Is that it? No. The unease is more subtle. It’s something else, something within him.

‘I did not presume—’

‘Yes, you did,’ said Aphael wearily. ‘As is your right. You’re a commander as much as I am.’

He stopped walking and looked over the expanse of the dropsite, teeming with massed ranks of infantry and the rumble of tank-groups. A wing of gunships flew low across them, some bearing the scars of recent

combat. It was an impressive vista, a show of force few adversaries in the galaxy would have been able to stand against.

‘If this were not Fenris, I would say that we already have what we need,’ Aphael said. ‘Complacency in this place, though, will get us all killed.’

He looked back at the Stormbird, where the dorsal loading bay doors had been lowered. Something was emerging down the ramp. Something huge.

‘So you’ll see, Ramsez, that all precautions that could have been taken, have been taken. We will go into this battle with every weapon the Legion still has in its possession.’

A massive structure lumbered out of the shadow of the loading bay. It stood twice as tall as the Rubricae around it, a mobile mountain of curved metal. Its head was placed directly in the centre of its vast barrel chest, surrounded by tracery of bronze. Outsized arms hefted a cannon on one side and a gigantic mining drill on the other. It moved with crushing, deliberate strides, compensating perfectly for the flex of the loading ramp. The gilded monster exuded a pungent aroma of heavy oils and coolant as it came, but nothing else. It had no soul. Even the Rubricae had more presence in the warp.

Hett gazed at it in shocked surprise.

‘Cataphracts,’ he breathed, seeing another follow the first down from the open hold. ‘I thought they’d all been—’

‘Destroyed? Not all. These are the last.’

Hett watched the enormous battle-robots, the product of ancient cybernetic tech-sorcery, reach the perimeter of the landing site and come to a mute standstill. They looked formidable, utterly unshakeable. More followed, a whole squad of death-dealing engines.

‘Of course, modifications have been made,’ explained Aphael, motioning toward the drill-arms. ‘If we have to dig the Dogs out, we will.’

‘You think it will come to that?’

‘I care not,’ said Aphael, and the vehemence of hatred in his voice was unfeigned. For a moment, the timbre was more like Hett’s own. ‘If they meet us on the ice, we will come for them. If they cower in their tunnels, we will come for them. If they bury themselves in stone, we will come for them. We will hunt them out, drag them into combat, and wound them until their blood stains this place so deep it will never be recovered.’



CHAPTER EIGHT

‘For Russ!’

Rossek flecked the visor of his helm with spittle, jabbing his chainfist, dragging the edge of its blade across the Traitor Marine’s breastplate as his body turned. At the edge of his vision he could see his brothers crash into combat, their bolters falling silent as they brought their close combat weapons to bear. The remnants of the mortal army were irrelevant now. All that mattered were the Traitors: eighteen Rubric Marines against an eleven-strong pack of Space Wolves with fire kindling in their clenched fists.

Fair odds.

The Rubric Marine facing Rossek moved as swiftly as he did. Though the sapphire behemoths walked into battle in stately, patient ranks, as soon as combat was joined their bodies sparked into action. Their reactions were those of the Legiones Astartes, swift and sure, poised by gene-forged mastery and that dreadful, arduous conditioning.

Ceramite crunched against ceramite, gunmetal-grey against sapphire and bronze. The whooping, bellowing pack of Wolves whirled their way into battle, bone-totems swinging wildly, their pelt-draped arms landing punches and hammer blows with crunching, precision guided force.

The Traitors responded silently, eerily matching every thrust with a counter-thrust. They spun on their heels as swiftly, traded upper-cuts and deadeners with equal skill, parried the incoming blade and returned the blow with shimmering crystal-bladed power swords.

Rossek towered over all the others, resplendent in his las-scorched Terminator battle-plate. He crashed his way through the guard of the Traitor before him, smashing it back through sheer momentum, swinging huge arcs of devastation with his whirring chainfist.

The Rubric Marine rocked on its heels, stoically fighting against the oncoming storm, driven back, pace by pace, as chunks of its ornate armour were hacked from its frame by the biting blades, never emitting so much as a whisper.

‘Death to the Traitor!’ bellowed Rossek, feeling fresh spikes of adrenaline pumping through his battle-primed body. The wolf within was foam-mouthed with battle frenzy, howling and slaving. The very silence of his enemy fuelled Rossek’s fury, driving the assault to new heights of savagery.

The Rubric Marine stumbled then, staggering over the rough ground. Rossek pounced, using the brief opening between them to unleash a hail of bolter rounds. As he closed for the kill, the shells impacted, shattering the beautiful armour and smashing the ornamental crests from the Traitor’s helm and pauldrons.

‘The wrath of Fenris!’ Rossek thundered, joining the massed howls and battle cries of his brothers.

This was *life*. This was *perfection* – to bring the battle to the enemy, to fight on the open ice as the Allfather had created him to do. Amid all the anger, the blind fury, the familiar rush of the kill-urge, there was this, too. *Pleasure*.

Rossek laughed under the heavy Terminator helm, barely noticing the rune-sigils on the lens display showing pack positions, kill signs and life

signs. The beleaguered Rubric Marine reeled under the Wolf Guard's onslaught, unable to answer the raw fury of the charge. What meagre existence it possessed was coming to an end.

Then, everything stopped.

Rossek saw Scarjaw bound across the rocks to his right, hurling himself against two Rubric Marines, his black pelts streaming behind him. The Grey Hunter slowed and froze, locked in an impossible, half-completed lunge.

The rest of the pack succumbed, first dragging as if wading through crude oil, then grinding to a halt.

Rossek whirled round, aghast, before feeling the heaviness pull on his own limbs.

'Fight it, brothers!' he bellowed, sensing the taint of maleficarum, tasting the unholy stench of sorcery as it sank into his limbs. The runes on his armour blazed red, flaring in defiance against the incoming waves of corruption. His vision wavered, going cloudy at the edges as if mists had rolled across the valley floor with unnatural suddenness. 'Fight it!'

The Rubric Marines suffered no ill-effects. They pressed on with remorseless efficiency, plunging their blades into the static Wolves emotionlessly, ripping open neck-guards to expose the pale flesh beneath, indifferent to the muffled cries of pain as the Hunters died.

Rossek could still move, though slowly. Every gesture was challenging, crushed by a dead weight of heaviness.

Too slow to save them.

'Hnnn-urgh!' he growled, forcing his body to keep fighting through strength of will alone. Perspiration burst out across his tattooed brow, running down his clenched cheeks. Just keeping his fists aloft was a mammoth effort; using them even more so.

Three Rubric Marines closed on him. The one he'd been fighting was among them, looking neither vengeful nor shaken despite its savaged

armour. Bringing its sword into a stabbing position, it advanced coolly for the kill.

Agonisingly, Rossek saw the pack-runes on his helm-display wink out, one after another. The warriors he'd led into battle were being butchered, not in the heat of honourable combat, but like cattle.

He clenched his chainfist, gritted his fangs, and raged against it. He felt as if his hearts would burst, his muscles prise from his bones, but he somehow forced his weapons into position.

Then, for the first time, he saw the master of the sorcery. Only metres away, his outline blurred and shimmering, a Thousand Sons magus emerged from cover. Rossek could smell him, feel the pungent sweetness of corruption in his nostrils. There was a flesh-and-blood warrior under those robes, a heart that beat and a mind that could feel malice.

The sorcerer held a golden staff, and pearlescent lightning quickened to its sigil-crowned head.

+As you die, Dog-warrior, know this,+ came a thin, hatred-distorted voice within his mind. The sorcerer lowered the point of the staff at him. +We will do this to every one of you.+

Then Rossek's world filled with pain and light. A vast force threw him from his feet, ripping him from the rocks and hurling him far into the air. He felt his body recoil from the explosion, shocked hard even under the protection of his armour. The impact when he hit the earth again was heavy, dull and crippling. He smelled the sharp tang of his own blood in his mouth, as well as the pungent aroma of burning krak-discharge.

He lifted his head painfully, his vision blurred and shaky, struggling to remain conscious.

Krak-discharge?

'Jarl, do not move.'

It was the voice of Rojk over the comm. Rossek's vision began to clear, just in time to see fresh heavy weapons fire slam into the Thousand Sons

squad. The standing Traitor Marines were thrown aside just as the others had been. Huge, rolling balls of fire flared up from the shattering boulders as krak missiles and heavy bolter rounds rained down on the Rubric Marines. He saw Traitors torn apart in the inferno, their armour spinning into shards as the hail of fire detonated across the ceramite. The survivors withdrew, falling back in disciplined silence to escape the torrent of incoming fire.

A few moments later there were sets of hands on Rossek's armour, dragging him from the scene, hauling him across the broken ground.

'My... pack...' grunted Rossek, his vision blurred and groggy.

The motion ceased. A familiar helmet loomed in front of him. Bone-white and carved into the gruesome image of a bear-skull, it was more like a Wolf Priest's than a Long Fang's.

'Only one other life-sign,' reported Torgrim Rojk. There was accusation in the old warrior's voice. 'We've got you both, and we're leaving.'

From somewhere close by, Rossek made out the thudding growl of a Land Raider engine. There was more bolter fire, and the rush of the Long Fangs' volleys streaking through the air.

Rossek shook the hands off him and staggered to his feet. He felt sick. Corrupted.

'The gene-seed,' he slurred, thinking of his fallen brothers. The world still swayed around him, rocking in a hail of contrails and echoing explosions.

Rojk ordered his men to fall back to the open maw of the waiting Land Raider. The veterans withdrew without panic, firing as they went. They carried Aunir Frar's body with them, unmoving and dripping with dark blood.

'We stay here, we die,' Rojk said coolly. 'Use your eyes.'

Rossek whirled round, nearly falling as he did so. A few hundred metres away, past the kill-zone where his slaughtered pack lay amid the stone, he

saw the surviving Rubric Marines begin to regroup. Behind them, further down the narrow valley, more troops were hurrying to join them, mortal and Traitor. Beyond that, hazy in the distance, were tank groups, far larger vehicles than the ones he'd destroyed, grinding up the boulders under massive treads.

The spearhead had been caught up by the main battalions; the Thousand Sons advance was now underway. He'd lingered too long. Above it all the stink of maleficarum was still strong in his nostrils, pungent and cloying. They couldn't fight that witchery.

Numbly, he let himself be half-led, half-dragged to the waiting transport. Thick smoke was pouring from the exhausts as it powered up for withdrawal. The Land Raider's bolters were already firing constantly, covering the retreat.

Rossek barely felt himself clang to the floor of the troop bay, barely felt the grinding thrust of the drives as they powered the transport back along the rubble-strewn valley floor. The lingering pall of corruption ran through his mind, merging his thoughts, jumbling his instincts.

The Land Raider pulled clear, riding out the storm of fire as it picked up speed. Rossek dragged himself to his knees, his ravaged body working hard against the damaged servos of his armour. Only then did clarity begin to return, some sense of what had just happened.

I killed them.

Then the amber-eyed wolf within him howled, not with battle-lust or glory, but with the horror of grief.

Crewman Reri Urfangborn liked the void. Even when the ship was in the strange hiatus of warp travel with all its sickness and nausea, being a crew member on an Adeptus Astartes vessel was a step up from the average life of a mortal within the Imperium. He knew this because he'd seen other worlds and witnessed the horrors and wonders of the galaxy first hand. He'd seen hive cities of metal and plascrete that reared their heads through acid atmospheres, enormous agri-combines plagued with dust and

ceaseless labour, forgeworlds covered in continent-sized manufactorums, choked with oily smoke and riddled with pollution and disease.

So, for all its trials, being stationed for a lifetime in the enginarium of the *Nauro* wasn't a bad result. It was dark and cold, but then Fenris was too. It smelled bad most of the time, but after a few years you stopped noticing it. The kaerls were rough-spoken and didn't think twice about landing a punch with a rifle-butt for sloppy work, but were humane enough beyond that – the current ship's Master had even ordered distribution of *demi-mjod*, the heavily alcoholic imitation of the Sky Warriors' sacred battle stimulant, after the escape from the orbital blockade. That had been good. It had made everybody happier, despite the accidents afterwards.

In the time since then, the workrate had been punishing. It was hard to tell how much time had passed – the internal chronos were unreliable in the warp, and only the Navigator had any real sense of how long it had been since they'd reached the jump-point and powered up the warp drives. Certainly days, at least as Reri's body measured it. The time had been filled more than was usual with work – he'd slept no more than a couple of hours in every cycle before being roused back for the next task. Something was making the commander drive the ship hard, squeezing out more speed even in the face of the damage they'd taken over Fenris.

As a lower deck worker, Reri had no real overview of the whole repair process, but he knew something about engines, and they were still in a bad way. There were leaks all over the place, and three of the four major fuel conduits leading from the tanks to the drives had been ruptured beyond repair. Seven decks were entirely sealed off, making travel between the various levels difficult and time consuming. That said, the faces of the senior crew had reverted from extreme anxiety to merely grim. Morkai was still hard on their heels, but perhaps not quite as close behind as he had been.

Which was good news for Reri Urfangborn. He liked life, even more so since Anjia in the quartermaster's section had finally shrugged off the

worst of her diffidence and seemed genuinely willing to spend some time behind the bulkheads with him. He didn't fool himself that there was much affection there – his hunched frame and grey skin, a product of his life's work, didn't exactly make him stand out as paragon of virility – but it was amazing what a near-death experience could do to soften a woman's resistance.

He slunk down the service tunnels expertly, conditioned by years of rattling around in the bowels of the *Nauro*. The light was weaker than normal. Whole sections were liable to be plunged into darkness when the powergrid took a sudden demand from the labouring engines, so he'd strapped two torches on either side of his rusty helmet. As he scuttled, he could hear his own breath, heavy and expectant. It had been a long time, and his palms were greasy with desire and engine lubricant.

He rounded a corner, bent double in the cramped interior, careful to avoid the protruding clumps of exposed wiring. The metal around him vibrated constantly, driven by the heartbeat of the titanic engines above.

Just as he reached his destination, a store-chamber buried deep within the labyrinth of service tunnels, the faint strip-lights fizzed out.

Reri grinned as he flicked his torches on. The twin beams were watery and flickering, but they exposed the way ahead well enough. He dropped down from the service tunnel into the chamber he'd picked, knocking aside a crate of worn-out bearings as he landed. He looked around, his torch-beams running over the chaotic pile of boxes on the metal grid floor.

Anjia was there already, slouched in front of a pile of old machine parts, waiting for him in the dark, her head lowered. Reri saw her red hair flash in the torchlight and felt a pang of excitement ripple through him.

'So you came,' he said greedily, scampering over to her.

She made no reply, and Reri hung back for a moment. Was she ill? Having second thoughts? He crouched down in front of her, gingerly

extending his scrawny hand to her fringe. He hesitated, fingers trembling. She was sitting awkwardly.

‘Anjia?’

He pulled the hair back, exposing her pale face. Where her eyes had been, there were black holes, running with lines of blood like tear-tracks.

Reri screamed, leaping up and away, blundering wildly into the wall at his back.

Except it wasn’t a wall. It was a metal giant, a monster with gilded power armour and a high, crested helm. The behemoth reached down and grabbed him by the shoulder, squeezing the flesh until the blood welled up.

Reri kept screaming until the other one emerged. The second monster had long flowing robes draped over similarly ornate armour curves, though he limped and stooped as if badly injured. His helm had been carved into the likeness of a cobra head, surmounted by a hood of gold. The one with the robes gestured casually and Reri found he could no longer scream. His open mouth made no sound at all, even through the screaming continued inside his head. He struggled, more out of instinct than anything else. He’d begun to recognise the figures for what they were – some kind of debased Space Marine. That told him all he needed to know about his survival prospects.

The one with the robe loomed up over him. Reri’s torchbeams flickered across the gold cobra-hood, sparkling from the jewels studded in the metal. Like some half-remembered nightmare, no sound would come out of his mouth. His facial muscles gradually relaxed, until his features took on an expression of mild boredom.

The one with the robes said something to the silent one, but it wasn’t in a language Reri could understand. Then the golden helm turned to Reri.

‘I am glad you came,’ said Cobra-mask, this time speaking in strangely accented Fenrisian. The voice was surprisingly soft. Kind, even. ‘Your

friend did not survive this process. I assume that you are made of stronger stuff.'

His two gauntlets rose. In one he carried a curved scalpel. In the other were two orbs, glistening with an unholy, pale-green light. Aside from the sheen of witchery, they looked a lot like eyes.

Reri kept screaming. He kept screaming as the torchlights were doused, and he kept screaming as Master Fuerza went to work, and he kept screaming until the Thousand Sons sorcerer-lord had finished. Indeed, though his features remained slack and emotionless, locked into surface equanimity by magicks more powerful than he'd ever be able to comprehend, there was a part of Reri Urfangborn that would never stop screaming again.

Helfist leaped high into the air, the dying light glinting from his armour, snow showering from his body in heavy slabs.

'The Wolves are among you!' he roared, breaking the long, patient silence.

Five metres below him, the column of marching mortals spun round, staring up in comical terror. It had been foolish of them to come so close to the ledge, so enticingly swathed in deep drifts and well situated for an ambush.

Two metres to Helfist's left, Redpelt burst from the snow, roaring with his own note of feral enthusiasm. The rest of the pack broke out with him, led by the bellowing shape of Sigrd Brakk, a looming nightmare of blade and armour in the gathering dusk. The Wolves dropped together like a landslide, crashing into the unprepared forces below.

Las-fire cracked up at them as the mortals raced to withdraw, out from the shadow of the ledge and over the broken, treacherous ground beyond. Many stumbled, breaking ankles and wrists as they fell among the knife-sharp rocks. There must have been over a hundred of them, all well armed, all well armoured. For mortals.

Helfist landed heavily, crushing the spine of a retreating trooper with his power fist, now crackling with its blistering disruption field. He swung round, taking another two clean off their feet, tearing open their masks and leaving them to choke on the thin air. With his free hand, he unleashed a stream of murderous bolter fire from his pistol, carving a corridor of blood through the close-packed soldiers, then bounded after it.

‘The wrath of Russ!’ Helfist whooped in kill-pleasure, picking his targets among the morass of turning, running figures.

By then Redpelt and the rest of the pack were in the midst of them too, hacking and chopping, releasing short, precise bursts of bolt-rounds. Muzzle-flares and energy fields lit up the gloom of the dusk, outshining the wayward las-beams as the enemy did its best to do more than expire under the onslaught.

‘Come to my blades, traitor scum!’ bellowed Redpelt, barrelling over the rocks as sure-footedly as a true wolf. ‘Feel my—’

A lucky las-beam hit him full in the chest, upending him and sending him sprawling on his back.

The Blood Claws roared with laughter as they swept past him, butchering the mortals beyond with a casual, chilling abandon.

‘Feel your *what*, brother?’ taunted Helfist, eviscerating a trooper with his bolt pistol before seizing another in his power fist to crush.

Brokentoath chortled even as he whirled his chainsword through a whole cluster of terrified, crawling soldiers, the monomolecular edges slicing apart the plate armour as if it were fabric.

Redpelt clambered back up heavily, emanating embarrassment and fury. Smoke rolled from the black burn on his breastplate.

‘Who in *fekke* was that?’ he roared, striding back into range, his booming voice rising above the screams and gasping sobs of the fleeing mortals. He sprayed bolt-pistol fire in vicious swathes, cutting down the soldiers by the dozen. ‘Try that again. *Try that again.*’

Helfist grinned as he punched a soldier's faceplate in and spun round to pick off more with his pistol.

'I wish someone would,' he said over the mission channel. 'We're running out of things to kill.'

It was true. Brakk had cut a swathe through the enemy, killing with a precision and skill that surpassed even that of his Blood Claws. As ever, the Wolf Guard had remained grimly silent during the butchery, letting the young bloods get the savagery out of their system while he ensured no escapees. By the time he'd swept round to close on Helfist's position, the terrain was strewn with quickly freezing bodies. The last of the standing enemy were cut down with disdain.

'Enough,' barked Brakk once the tide of murder-make had subsided. He slammed a fresh clip into his boltgun. 'That's completion. We're heading back to the Aett.'

Redpelt was still bristling.

'Why?' he spat, letting his chainsword continue to whirr. 'We could fight all night.'

Brakk snorted. Unlike the other packleaders he'd remained in standard format power armour rather than the bulkier Terminator plate, but somehow he still dominated the warriors around him.

'We're not staying out here for you to fall on your arse again,' he snarled. 'I've got recall orders from the Aett – we're going back.'

Helfist drew alongside Redpelt. His body was still flooded with endorphins. The blood-tally had been high, though the quality of kills had been low. There was still work to do, and being dragged back to the lair was insulting.

'We should stay,' he said, almost without meaning to.

The pack fell silent. Brakk slowly turned to face him.

'Really? And what piece of tactical genius makes you say that?'

Helfist was stung by the sarcasm. He felt retorts running through his mind, sentiments he'd been bursting to express for months.

Our Wolf Lord is too cautious. His blood does not run hot. He keeps us from glory, and makes us the whelps of the Chapter. It should have been Rossek. He would have thrown us at the enemy, unfurled our claws, given us the murder-make we need.

But no words came. Brakk was an old Wolf Guard, adamantium-hard and broken over the anvil of countless campaigns. He was the apex predator, the undisputed master of the pack. The Blood Claws were free to mock that power when their youthful passions drove them, but they would never defy it.

So Helfist bowed in submission, feeling his cheeks burn as he did so.

‘There are witches among the Traitors now,’ explained Brakk, addressing the whole pack. ‘So far from Sturmhart’s wards, we’re vulnerable. So we fall back to where we can fight them better. The Jarl knows what he’s doing.’

The pack stowed their weapons then, preparing for the loping run back to the Aett. One by one, keeping close together, they broke off, streaming across the terrain as the last of the dusk light faded.

As Helfist made to follow, Brakk came up to him. He laid a gauntlet on the Blood Claw’s arm. Not gently.

‘I know how you feel,’ he said over a closed channel. ‘Your fire commends you, Kyr Aesval. There will be more killing yet, and the glory you crave.’

The grip tightened.

‘But question an order again,’ he growled, ‘and I’ll tear your cocky throat out.’

Ahmuz Temekh looked over the chamber. He was deep in the heart of the *Herumon*, shielded from the void by kilometres of the ship’s structure. The room was nine metres in diameter and perfectly circular, its walls polished

to a mirror-sheen. Even Temekh's eyes, attuned to imperfection in all its forms, could see no flaw on the surface, the result of decades of labour by his neophytes before they'd even been told about the mission to Fenris. The floor was similarly smooth and reflective. The ceiling, some twenty metres distant, was decorated extensively. Zodiacal figures and the five Platonic Solids were picked out in lines of gold and amethyst, all arranged around the central device of the Eye.

The Eye. When did that become our emblem? Did any of us think about what it says, what it means?

Temekh looked upwards with his psi-sight, scrutinising the design. The images, though rendered beautifully, were not mere decoration – they were placed precisely at certain points in relation to the centre of the chamber, points determined by the harmonics they induced within the aether and the resonances that created.

It was sometimes assumed by practicae and other neophytes that the immaterium and the materium had no precise relationship, and that what happened in one was only imperfectly mirrored in the other. That wasn't true, despite how hazy those relations could appear to the uninitiated. The causal links were more constant and more concrete than any existing purely in the physical realm, though it took a lifetime of study to see how the infinite elements of the sundered universes harmonised with one another. Even master sorcerers needed symbols in order to make sense of those deep meanings; images were a part of that, as were names. So it was that the chamber also had words of power inscribed across the walls, scripted in atom-perfect lines by machinery long forgotten and forbidden in the mortal Imperium.

In themselves, the names had little significance. Placed in the proper order, and treated with the proper reverence, the significance could be terrifying. It was all about relationships, connections, cause and effect.

At the centre of the chamber was an altar, cast in bronze and gilded with more esoteric devices. Temekh stood before it then as he had done for the past twelve hours, motionless, hands clasped, head bowed, in an attitude of

silent contemplation. He was high in the Enumerations, as close to disembodiment as he dared to go, mindful of the dangers even as he relished the opportunities.

Above the altar, something was taking shape. Though his violet eyes were closed, Temekh could see the form of it growing. At present there was virtually nothing to take note of. A shimmer here, a flicker there. From time to time, the air would tremble, writhing as if in a heat-haze.

The task was difficult, despite the long preparation, the painstaking researches, the sacrifices made. Once certain states had been achieved, once a certain degree of physicality had been relinquished, reassuming it was an arduous process. The universe had learned over the aeons to resist the imposition of pure psychic essence. The materium had a soul of its own – this, too, was not widely known – a generalised ability to defer incursions from the other side of the veil. If it had not, then the power of the daemonic would long since have run riot across the mortal galaxy.

In order to do what his master wished, that power had to be neutralised, to be gently, carefully prised apart. Ahriman had once called it *singing the universe to sleep*. It was an apt description.

At the memory of his old friend, Temekh felt his heart slowing, his pulse dropping to a faint beat every hour. The recollection helped him. The procedure was working.

Above the altar, for a brief moment, a pupil flickered into being, deep as the pits of the void, ringed with red. Then it was gone, just an echo amid the other half-recognised shapes swimming above the bronze and gold.

They seek you on Gangava, my lord, thought Temekh, letting a part of his mind play over the irony of it. *As if you were any longer restricted to physical geometry. They do not know how powerful – and how weak – you have made yourself.*

There was a ripple in the warm air then, a backwash of something like irritation, the trivial inflection of some vast, magisterial being, still

capable of being offended, still able to have its wounded pride pricked.

Temekh reined his thoughts in. Concentration was required. It would be required for many days yet. Every material atom in the chamber would resist him, every law of physics would flex and struggle as it was violated. The materium could sense the enormous outrage he wished to perpetrate, and so it raged in still-potent fury.

Be still, commanded Temekh, exerting his subtle power across the chamber silently. *My voice is law in this place. My will is ascendant. I am here to do the bidding of my master. I am here to put you to sleep.*



CHAPTER NINE

Dawn broke over Asaheim, throwing weak golden beams through the mountains, gilding the long kilometres of unbroken snow with a faint sheen. The light ran down the flanks of the Fang as the shafts broke clear of the shoulder of Friemiaki.

It showed up a scene of desolation. The Thousand Sons leaguer was complete, a ring of steel around the isolated peak. The rain of plasma from the fleet in orbit continued without pause, smashing into the fortress's void shields and cascading through the empty air. All passes to and from the Fang were now sealed, blocked by the swollen host of infantry and mechanised units. Heavy artillery had been dug into the cliffs facing the Fang, and every barrel pointed at the lone profile of the Wolves' bastion. Ranks of men were still moving, taking up forward positions, covered by flanking columns of tanks and low-flying squadrons of gunships. Heavy ordnance had already been broken out, and a steady torrent of shells whined across the frozen sky to crash against the distant stone and ice of Russ's citadel.

From a viewing platform high above the Sunrising Gate, Greyloc, Sturmhart and Wyrmlblade watched the unfolding deployment of the enemy. From below came the sound of drilling and hammering, punctuated by the flares of arc-welders and las-burners. The huge batteries above and

alongside the gate were being augmented by extra troop-killing arrays dragged up from the armouries. The Gate itself, wide enough for a hundred men to walk through abreast, had been sanctified by the Rune Priests and painted with fresh signs of aversion. The colossal structure of adamantium, granite and ceramite bristled with linked boltgun turrets, rocket launchers and static plasma cannons. The firepower collected there was vast, the kind of arsenal more suited to a battle cruiser group than a land-bound citadel. Within the locked doors of the gates stood the defenders, housed in power armour or sealed within the holds of Land Raiders, waiting for the moment to be loosed from cover. Across the entire structure stretched the shields, glistening faintly as the oblique sunlight slanted through clouds of burning engine oil.

Greyloc augmented his scan of the enemy host, assessing the numbers, the distances, the power they could bring to bear.

We must make them pay for the passage of the gates.

He felt calm, alert, poised. The raids on the landing sites had given his warriors their haul of bodies and delayed the onslaught of the main mass of troops. There had been losses, but nothing like those suffered by the enemy.

‘How have they amassed such an army?’ asked Sturmhart, looking impressed. ‘The sagas say we crippled them.’

‘More of them to kill,’ observed Wyrmlade dryly. ‘Be glad of it.’

‘They have been planning this for centuries, Wolf Priest,’ said Greyloc. ‘Ironhelm should have seen this coming. We all should have seen this coming.’

Sturmhart’s nostrils flared under his helm. He had worked with incredible energy over the past three days to bolster the Fang’s wards against sorcery, and was still smarting from his failure to read the runes.

Recognising this, Greyloc turned to him. ‘I make no criticism of you, brother. Their power to corrupt the wyrd is their infamy.’

‘They do not corrupt the wyrd,’ Sturmhart insisted.

Wyrmblade laughed harshly.

‘You know what, brother? I really don’t give a damn where their witchery comes from. They can burn in the fires of Hel like mortal men well enough, and that’s all that matters.’

Sturmhart gave the Wolf Priest a long look, as if he wasn’t sure whether he was being mocked or praised.

‘They’ll burn,’ he muttered, turning his rune-engraved helm to face the distant enemy. ‘Oh, they’ll burn.’

Then there was a thud of fist against breastplate from behind them, and Hamnr Skrieya joined them on the viewing platform. Like all the Wolf Guard he bore the signs of recent conflict on his armour – his power fist was charred from energy field burn and the pelts on his Terminator suit were no more than scraps of tangled fur.

‘Skrieya,’ acknowledged Greyloc. ‘Is the recall complete?’

‘It is, Jarl.’

‘The tally of blood?’

‘We hurt them, Jarl. Casualties were minimal, but... not insignificant. One pack was lost.’

Greyloc raised an eyebrow. The recall order had been given before the advent of the sorcerers had made the field deadly for his kill-squads.

‘A pack? Whose?’

Skrieya hesitated for a heartbeat.

‘Tromm Rossek’s, Jarl.’

Greyloc felt as if Skrieya had kicked him in the stomach.

Rossek. Of all my elite, Rossek...

‘He was recovered, but his pack is gone.’

Greyloc suppressed the rush of conflicting emotion at the news. Even in armour, his pheromone state was still open to the others.

The true Son of Russ, the headstrong warrior, the unstoppable one. My brother, this is why you could never be Jarl.

‘He must be disciplined,’ said Wyrmlblade, coldly. ‘His pack would have fought alongside us.’

‘Not now,’ snarled Greyloc. ‘We will need his blades.’

For a moment Wyrmlblade looked like he would protest, but then bowed his head.

‘As you will it, Jarl.’

There was a frosty silence. In the distance, the marshalling of the enemy forces continued. With every passing moment, the valleys leading to the gate causeways were filling with the Traitor vanguard. They would be unleashed before the sun reached its zenith.

Greyloc looked back out across the battlefield to come. Under his helm, his pale face was fixed in a grim mask of bitterness.

‘I will nothing but for this fight to begin,’ he growled, and the hairs on his body rose in readiness. ‘Blood of Russ, let them come to me now, and I will show them the meaning of agony.’

Arfang had taken longer than expected to make the summons. For a while, Freija had begun to hope that he’d found someone else to guard his precious servitors, and had concentrated on her other huskaerl duties single-mindedly. There had been plenty of those, including weapons drills with her squad, many of whom weren’t nearly at the standard she’d have hoped for.

But the Iron Priest had not forgotten, and even as the Thousand Sons army began to close the stranglehold on the Aett, painfully establishing their forward positions in the surrounding peaks, he came back for her.

‘The time has come,’ he’d said, and that had been all. So she’d left the Valgard with her squad, asking no more questions, ready for wherever Arfang would take her. Soon enough it became clear. They were headed down. A long way down.

Mortals like Freija, for all their Fenris-born prowess, weren't able to plummet unaided down the vertical shafts that linked the levels of the Fang. Even if she could have done it, the servitors certainly couldn't – those plunging drops were only possible for the Sky Warriors. So the journey down the many hundred levels from the Valgard at the summit of the Fang to the lower reaches of the Hould took a long time. The motley company rode on more than a dozen clattering turbo-elevators, tramped down several long spiral staircases hewn from the stone and marched across countless rough-cut chambers glowing with the embers of old fires. With every level they passed, the decorations in the rock became less ornate, the glowglobes a little less close together, the voices a little more hushed.

They'd swept quickly through the Fangthane, now teeming with thralls. Freija knew her father had been charged with its defence, but there was no sign of him amongst the milling crowds when she and Arfang got there. Squads of mortals were busy installing gun turrets at the far end, and there were heavy lengths of waist-thick cables strung along the floors. That alone made her blood run a little more chill. The Fangthane was a sacred chamber, and if the Jarl expected to make war here then the carnage of the coming assault would surely be greater than anything unleashed on Fenris before.

Freija found herself wondering if the Sky Warriors felt even the smallest fragments of trepidation at that. They'd have to be inhuman not to.

But of course, they were inhuman. Not so much a different class as a different species.

Species. Sounds like I'm classifying beasts.

After the Fangthane, they'd kept going down, descending ever further into the deeper levels of the Aett. The Hould, the vast and teeming hive of tunnels where Freija had been born and spent her early life, was not the raucous, buzzing place she knew. The thralls went about their business

with looks of tight expectation, all of them hefting arms, most led by an experienced kaerl at their head. Barricades were being erected at strategic points in the tunnel network and mobile gun platforms installed at cross-ways. The warding runes, the Eyes of Aversion which guarded every major intersection, were being re-sanctified by the Rune Priests and their leather-masked wyrd-thralls. Munitions were piled high, kept under the watchful eyes of huskaerls as more cases arrived hourly from the huge armouries.

Every so often a Sky Warrior would stalk past them on some urgent errand, streaked with fresh blood on his charred armour. They never acknowledged her, but all nodded respectfully to Arfang before striding off into the shadows. Freija could sense the heightened level of tension in their gestures – they'd already been fighting for days, and were heavily primed for coming battle, their golden eyes blazing, and that made them even more terse and inscrutable than ever.

At the base of the Hould, buried kilometres down into the rock, was Borek's Seal, the largest of the Fang's innumerable chambers. Even more massive than the Fangthane, the enormous cavern was a gloomy and shadow-draped place. Just as the Fangthane guarded the approaches from the Hould to the Jarlheim, Borek's Seal warded passage to the levels below, the Hammerhold and the half-explored Underfang. It was colossal, the size of a battleship's hull, though almost empty of decoration and devoid of the pelts, bones and carvings that adorned most chambers of the Aett. The bare rock walls were unfinished and jagged, a reminder of the primal nature of the Wolves' ancient origins. A few fires burned low in vast circular pits, but their light was weak and the perma-chill was little disturbed by them.

Even as she marched across the yawning cavern in convoy with the chittering, limping servitors, Freija found herself gazing up at the huge columns supporting the far-off roof. Each was the width of a Rhino

chassis, a shaft of naked rock that glinted with points of red from the low flames.

She'd never come down this far before. No one she knew had. This was below the Gate level, the limit of the kaerls' patrol circuits, and beyond it none but the Iron Priests went.

'Frightened, huskaerl?' asked Arfang, his staff thudding against the stone as he strode.

Frightened wasn't a state that had much meaning on Fenris beyond a generic, abstract insult. 'Watchful, lord,' replied Freija, as curtly as she dared.

Arfang let slip a grating chuckle.

'Just so. I would not want whelps down here with me. That would not do.'

Freija looked at the Iron Priest carefully. In the dark, his armour was as black as scorched metal, lined with red from the fire-pits.

'Forgive me, lord,' she ventured. 'This is unusual. Kaerls do not travel to the Hammerhold.'

'They do not,' agreed Arfang.

They continued walking. The Iron Priest didn't seem to feel the need to offer any further explanation.

'So, if I may ask—'

'You wish to know why I summoned you, what possible use a mortal could be to me down here.'

'I cannot imagine you needing my help.'

Arfang stopped walking and turned to her. Behind the two of them, the trail of servitors clattered to a halt.

'You think there's no danger in the forges?'

'We are in the Aett, lord.'

'We are on Fenris, huskaerl. We do not eliminate the danger on this world, even though we could. We keep it close to us, learn to live with it,

use it to keep us strong. The Underfang has many perils. Some are not known even to the Great Wolf.'

'But we aren't going to the—'

'This is a time of danger, and there are ways from the dark places into the Hammerhold. If I could have chosen, I would have come here with a pack of Hunters. But they are all needed to cut threads, so mortals will have to do.'

He leaned forwards, and his eyes glowed like old stars.

'Waking the dead is difficult,' he growled, his voice low and rumbling. 'It will devour my attention for many hours. While I am engaged, the thralls will need guarding. Can you do that, huskaerl? Or are you afraid of the deeper dark?'

Freija glared back at him, stung by the implied weakness. She felt the flare of rebellion in her breast, the always present urge to lash out at the arrogance of the armoured demigods who dictated every aspect of her life. They only lacked fear because it had been bred out of them by the Helix, yet how quickly they learned to despise mortal emotion, the very core of the humanity they were charged with protecting.

'I fear nothing, lord,' she said, keeping the worst of the irritation from her voice.

The Iron Priest's helm-face was blank, but the subtle movement of his head told Freija that, somewhere under all that battered plate, he was smiling at her.

'We'll see, huskaerl,' he said, resuming his thudding stride. 'We'll see.'

Morek walked across the floor of the Fangthane, weaving his way between the incoming columns of wounded and returned. Most had been landed by the Thunderhawks higher up in the Valgard, but some had come in through the land gates. The massive hall was filled with sound and movement as kaerls hurried to install more gun platforms even as files of warriors brushed past them, hurrying to other deployment points.

Amid them all came the Sky Warriors. Some walked tall, bearing the mark of victory in their gold eyes, strutting and prowling among the mortals like demigods. Other packs had taken casualties, and prickled with shame and an evident desire to get back into the fray. They were all wound tight, the ones who'd suffered, burning with a sullen, dark resolve to make amends. Morek knew well enough to avoid close contact with them. When the beast was active within them, they sometimes had trouble remembering who the enemy was.

‘Rivenmaster!’ came a throaty, rattling voice.

Morek whirled round to face it, and his heart sank.

A Wolf Guard was limping toward him. The huge figure loomed out of the fire-lit dark in Terminator plate. The armour was cracked and battle-scarred, and the warrior within looked similarly damaged. He'd taken his helm off, revealing a heavily tattooed face ringed by a russet mane. Studs glinted from his temples, and his eyes betrayed a wild, destructive grief.

Beside him on a suspensor platform floated the body of a Grey Hunter, strapped to the mobile stretcher, lying totally motionless. His armour had been carved apart, and long trails of blood ran over the plate. Lights flickered along the suspensor chassis, etching out the shapes of sigils. Morek was no Apothecary, but he could understand the Rune of Ending as well as any other Fenrisian.

‘I serve, lord,’ he said, bowing.

‘Get this warrior to the Lord Wyrmlade,’ the Wolf Guard growled. ‘Do it now.’

Morek hesitated, just for a moment. He'd been ordered to oversee the preparations for the Fangthane defence. There were countless thralls who could escort a wounded Sky Warrior to the Wolf Priests.

He could have protested. It would have been pointless. The Wolf Guard before him was wounded and was clearly struggling to contain a furnace of sullen, frustrated fury.

‘I will, lord,’ he said, trying not to think about the many things that would remain undone in his absence.

The Wolf Guard grunted, and shoved the suspensor toward him. It bobbed lightly as it was touched. Morek could see the extensive trauma on the ruined body, the deep sword wounds and congealed blood. It looked like the Hunter was in what his kind called the Red Dream, the deep regenerative process triggered by the too-close embrace of Morkai.

‘Go swiftly, mortal,’ growled the Wolf Guard, turning to go back the way he’d come, then hesitating. ‘What are you called?’

Morek looked him in the eye. Long experience had taught him that you always had to look them in the eye.

‘Morek Karekborn, lord.’

‘Guard him well, Morek Karekborn. When this is over, I will seek you out. His name is Aunir Frar, Grey Hunter of my pack. His wyrd and yours are now one. Remember it.’

Morek maintained eye contact, though it was difficult. The Wolf Guard’s amber irises seemed strangely out of focus, as if some massive assault had damaged something within him. What could not be doubted was the urgency in the words.

‘I understand,’ Morek replied, already planning the route of his ascent to the home of the fleshmakers, a place that, before that hour, would have been death for him to even approach. ‘His wyrd is mine. My life for his.’

On the eighth day since the Thousand Sons had arrived in orbit around Fenris, the assault on the gates of the Fang began.

Though each of the two land portals, Bloodfire and Sunrising, were high up the sheer sides of the mountain, they stood at the termination of massive ridges between the peaks, allowing movement up towards them from the surrounding highlands. The ridges ran up to the citadel gates like huge causeways of stone, each kilometres wide and worn smooth by the endless gnawing of the winds. In the half-forgotten millennia past, the

Allfather and Leman Russ had walked on that same stone, planning the construction of the Aett together, seeing how the tortured landscape of Asaheim could be made to house the greatest fortress outside Terra. Russ had made it so that the two Gates overlooked entirely bare approaches, such that any massed advance on them would provoke a slaughter.

As Greyloc watched the massive forces under the command of the Thousand Sons begin to roll forwards, he gave silent thanks for that foresight. The host assembled by the invaders, revealed in the sharp glare of the late noon sun, was beyond anything he'd seen marching under a Traitor's banner. The Great Scouring had devastated the Legions of the Betrayers, and Magnus's own troops had been thinned out during the inferno on Prospero. In the intervening centuries, they had clearly been busy.

The encircling army had coalesced into two hosts, one for each Gate. In the vanguard came the heavy artillery, ranks of them rolling on heavy treads and churning up the snow. There were big mortar launchers among them, and vehicles bearing demolisher cannons, and still more with gigantic plasma weapons mounted high on their lumbering chassis. Further back came even heavier vehicles, swaying like drunkards as they ground into firing range. There were mobile launchers with whole frames of sleek missiles hoisted into firing angles, and vast superheavy assault tanks with siege cannons protruding from bloated turrets.

Between them came the troop carriers, the Chimeras of the mortal troopers and the Rhinos and Land Raiders of the Traitor Marines. There were hundreds of the former, only a handful of the latter. Even so, the first wave of the enemy boasted more manpower than Greyloc had left in the entire fortress, and he knew there were many thousands more held in reserve.

Above the advancing ranks swooped the wings of gunships, flying low and in tight formation. There were bigger atmospheric ships hovering

further out on whining engines, each packed with weaponry, poised and ready to sweep over the battlefield.

Somewhere amid that sprawling tide of men and vehicles were the sorcerers, the fallen Space Marines who commanded the whole edifice. They were the key, the handful of witches who held the corrupting power of the warp in their armoured hands.

It was an intimidating force, the last residue of one of the Emperor's own Legions of Death, an army capable of bringing a world to its knees.

But Fenris was no ordinary world, and its denizens were incapable of being intimidated.

'Unleash,' ordered Greyloc.

At the Wolf Lord's command, the flanks of the Fang erupted.

Bolts of plasma and heavy las-fire scythed out across the ice, crackling with enormous, terrible energies as they lanced to their destinations. Heavy bolters thundered out from a hundred positions on the slopes, hurling mass-reactive rounds over huge distances. Autocannons spooled up, spitting lines of armour-piercing shells deep into the enemy columns. Missiles screamed out of their silos, hurtling high into the frost-clear sky before plummeting down into the ranks of the invader.

The oncoming tanks responded as soon as they came into range, and a hail of fire returned, crashing into the walls of the mountain, showering it in an inferno of exploding promethium and detonating shells. The inferno kindled even as the rain of plasma from orbit, the steady column that had shaken the mountain for days, was intensified, and the entire summit of the Fang was bathed in a shifting curtain of flame.

Greyloc remained on the exposed platform, unmoving, watching calmly as the shields before his position absorbed the incoming punishment. An enemy missile spiralled up out of the sea of destruction, exploding only metres from him, sending rippling shockwaves across the void barrier. He

stayed motionless, focused on the unfolding barrage below, looking for any sign of weakness or unbalance.

The Thousand Sons advance was neither rash nor unprotected. Even as the Wolves emptied their fury at the oncoming army, the fire was met with the glistening discharge of shields. Something, some sorcery, was warding the tanks from harm. The barrier wasn't perfect – columns of armour were already smouldering and broken – but it was enough to prevent the annihilation of the vanguard. In their wake, the troop carriers were getting closer.

In a hail of flickering plasma-spikes and explosions, the gap between the Gates and the Thousand Sons closed. Every round of fire from the Fang destroyed a rank of heavy weaponry on the ground, but for every broken chassis another tank took its place, rolling over the burning, twisted metal. The causeways were gradually covered with a carpet of crawling ironwork, throwing fire back at the batteries mounted above them, gaining metres with each painful, wreck-strewn advance.

Then the aerial attack commenced. Wings of bombers and heavy gunships swooped in across the high faces of the Fang, strafing the gun emplacements, weaving between the lines of flak and anti-aircraft fire. With every pass, aircraft were downed by the defending guns, streaking back down to earth in trails of smoke, spinning into their own troops and carving ruin in their destruction. But with every pass, another defensive battery was reduced to ruins, or another void shield was put under critical strain, or another stream of shells was diverted from the onslaught on the land.

The air began to choke from the plumes of rolling, ink-black smoke. The view from the gates was gradually lost. The vista turned from one of cold, clear perfection into a vision of burning, charred desolation. The growing walls of smoke dimmed the light of the sun, locking the mountain in a pall of closing shadow.

Greyloc calmly checked his helm display, noting the positions of his Wolf Guard, the locations of the Rune Priests, the deployment of his key assets, the state of the defence he had designed and put in place.

And now comes the test. The Hand of Russ ward us.

Then the Wolf Lord turned from the platform, his claws bursting into whip-curling life, shimmering with twin disruptor fields, and made his descent to the Gate level, ready to meet the tide of fury as it broke.

The sound of hammers was everywhere. It ran through the chambers, resounding in the stone, vibrating in the deep shafts, echoing in the hidden vaults. Even over the aural compensators built into her helmet, Freija found the incessant, banging tumult disorientating.

‘I see why it was named this way,’ she said grimly.

The Iron Priest nodded.

‘It is glorious,’ he replied, and there was no trace of sarcasm in his vox-filtered voice.

They were standing on the edge of a precipice, far down into the Hammerhold. Ahead of them ran a single bridge of stone, flying out across the abyss, six metres wide and without a rail. It disappeared into the gloom and haze of the distance. Hundreds of metres down, in the huge cavern spanned by the bridge, a vision of Hel had unravelled. Gigantic, hulking furnaces, each the height of Warlord Titan and twice as wide, threw off clouds of blood-red light. Channels of heat-blackened stone carried rivers of fire from one inferno to the next, passing through wheels of iron and plunging pistons. The silhouettes of servitor-thralls, their wire-studded spines curled over from hunching, crept between the colossal machinery, checking flickering pict-readouts and tending brass-lined cogitator banks. The vast space hummed with a low, rumbling activity. Along clattering conveyor belts amid the forges, Freija could just make out the embryonic shells of vehicle plating, artillery barrels, even body-armour parts.

Then there were the hammers. They were borne by rows of muscle-enhanced, metal-ribbed, faceless servitors, chained to their adamantium anvils by segmented nerve-conduits, endlessly working, endlessly beating. There were ranks upon ranks of them, more machine than human, moulded into mindless golems by the uncaring arts of the fleshmakers. They were the perfect workers: tireless, uncomplaining, hugely strong, content to hammer away in the pits of fire until death from exhaustion gave them a final release.

Not much of a life.

‘We are wasting time,’ said Arfang, prompting his personal servitor retinue to limp across the bridge. The Iron Priest strode out after them, leaving Freija and the kaerls scurrying to match the pace.

‘Who supervises them?’ asked Freija, unable to take half an eye away from the toiling legions down in the haze of fire and heat below.

‘They need no supervision,’ replied Arfang coldly. ‘They only know one way to serve. Do not disdain that, huskaerl – without them our warriors go to war empty handed.’

‘I do not disdain them, lord. I just had no idea there were... so many.’

‘And that troubles you?’

It did. It troubled her more than she would ever admit to him. It troubled her that legions of half-dead, semi-mechanised slaves had been toiling under her feet for as long as she’d been alive. It troubled her that she didn’t know where they came from, nor why she’d ended up as a huskaerl and they’d ended up as forge-meat. It troubled her that she knew so little of such things, and that the ways of the Aett were so arbitrary and clouded in a fog of tradition that only the Sky Warriors had any access to.

‘I am merely curious,’ she said.

‘A dangerous instinct. Be careful where it takes you.’

It took nearly ten minutes of solid walking to traverse the yawning forge-halls. Arfang set a punishing pace, one that the servitors struggled to

match. Even Freija found her battle trained muscles aching by the time the far side neared.

The bridge terminated as it reached a cliff of rough-hewn rock. An iron-lined door had been carved into it, crested with the sign of the two-headed wolf Morkai, the guardian of the dead. The image looked old, far older than anything in the Hould, and the edges were smooth from the hot, wearing winds. The doorway was open and there were no guards. A single, isolated green light winked at the base of the heavy frame.

Disruptor field.

Arfang gave a flick of his finger and the light switched to red. He strode on. The tunnel beyond was pitch-dark, unlit by torches, glowglobes or fire-pits.

Freija adjusted her night-vision visor, and the walls were picked out in a grainy pale green. Though well-used to the cold and dark, she gave an involuntary shudder as she passed the threshold. The chill seemed deeper somehow, more permanent and invasive. As they walked, the sound of hammers receded, replaced by a dead, frigid silence.

They went down. A long way down. Freija saw holes loom up in the walls of the tunnel; tributary corridors, from which the air sighed in frozen gusts. Soon the way forward became a choice from many options, and the path began to twist back on itself, writhing through the deep roots of the mountain. At all times the tunnel remained wide and tall, and a Rhino could have been driven along its length with ease.

She began to lose track of time, and certainly of how far they'd come. The utter dark, and the cold that sank into her bones, gave a strange sense of dislocation to that forsaken place. It was temptingly easy to imagine the rest of the galaxy simply ceasing to exist beside that eternal, primordial darkness.

When the first noise came, it had her scrabbling for her *skjoldtar* and her heart hammering. It was unearthly, a low, purring growl that ran down her

spine like mercury on glass. She saw her kaerls tense up, sweeping the muzzles of their weapons across the walls.

‘What was that?’ she hissed.

The Iron Priest kept walking, untroubled.

‘I told you, huskaerl,’ he said. His booming voice rang from the walls. ‘There are dangers in the dark. Keep your weapons primed, and let no harm come to my thralls.’

Freija swallowed down her expletive. The Iron Priest was annoying her more than ever.

‘Worry not, lord,’ she said, her jaw tight. ‘We are here to serve.’

‘I am glad that is how you feel.’

Freija took a quick look over her shoulder. In the far distance, far up the snaking tunnel, she saw two points of light. She blinked, and they were gone. The chill in her bones intensified.

What has been done down here?

And then they were walking again, down and down, further into the deep dark, an island of heart-warmth in an infinite ocean of utter, endless emptiness.

Morek worked his way up through the Jarlheim levels, keeping his head down as he went. Most of those he passed were heading in the other direction, hurrying to where the fighting was fiercest. The few going his way were mostly gunnery crews heading for their rotations on the anti-aircraft batteries.

The vibration of the outgoing fire patterns made the elevator shaft shake as he ascended.

How is that even possible? We are hundreds of metres within the mountain. What forces are being unleashed out there?

The suspensor floated behind him in the steel cage, carrying the prone body of the Grey Hunter. Though it seemed disrespectful, Morek had failed to resist the urge to look at the fallen Sky Warrior.

Aunir Frar's face had been exposed when the Long Fangs had removed his helm in the Land Raider. It was proud, severe, sharp-edged. Mature fangs glinted from his open mouth, and the jawline was extended into the lupine profile of a veteran warrior. Perhaps he'd been angling for elevation to the Wolf Guard. The Red Dream still had him in its grasp, and his breathing was shallow, almost non-existent. Parts of his plate had been ripped away, revealing over a dozen deep stab-wounds, including a horrifying, artery-severing gash across the neck. If Frar had been a mortal, there would have been no life left in him to save.

The elevator rattled to a halt. Morek hauled open the doors and exited, pulling the suspensor along behind. Ahead of him were the chambers of the fleshmakers. There were signs of aversion etched into the stone lintels. A caustic, antiseptic smell stung his nostrils. Ahead, the dull red firelight of the Aett was replaced with harsh white lumen-strips. There were tiles on the wall and metal tables covered in instruments of surgery. Unlike the rest of the Wolves' lair, which was littered with totems and bleached animal skulls, the Wolf Priest's dwellings were pristine, cold and unadorned.

Morek entered, squinting against the bright lights, keeping the suspensor close. There was noise from further in, but no immediate sign of anyone about. He kept walking, passing more rows of metal tables, walking through more rooms full of equipment he could barely guess the purpose of. Alongside the machinery of surgery and physical augmentation, there were long banks of ancient looking cogitators, lined with bronze cases, humming gently.

The noises grew. He was getting closer to activity. As he turned a corner, he entered a larger chamber, dome-roofed and even brighter than the others. There were huge, heavy tables there too, and some were occupied. Two Sky Warriors lay on them, both conscious, both being operated on by teams of leather-masked thralls. The mortals worked quickly and deftly,

slicing open flesh, pinning back muscle, working at the wounds with needle probes and pain-suppressants. They all wore iron visors with bottle-green lenses, each of them flickering with points of light.

‘Mortal,’ came a deep voice, and Morek turned to face it. A Wolf Priest, one of Wyrmlade’s acolytes by his look, strode up to him in night-black armour, his exposed hands covered in blood. ‘State your business.’

Morek bowed. ‘I was charged to bring this warrior, Aunir Frar, into the care of the Lord Wyrmlade.’

The Wolf Priest snorted.

‘You think he’d be here? When the Aett is under assault?’ He shook his head. ‘We’ll take him. Go back to your station, rivenmaster.’

Even as the Priest spoke, thralls flocked around the suspensor, dragging it alongside one of the metal tables. Steel threads were inserted into the prone body and scanning devices angled over the wounds. The Wolf Priest turned to his new charge and began to direct the operation.

Morek bowed. He turned and withdrew, walking back through the empty chambers of the fleshmaker’s domain as quickly as he could. Something about the place unnerved him. The aromas were foreign, utterly unlike the smells of hide and embers he’d been born into.

Too much light.

He went through another room, then turned left, passing between open doors. He went several more paces before realising he’d come the wrong way. The chamber he’d entered was smaller than the others, though still lined with clinical white tiles. There were three huge tanks in the centre of it, each filled with a translucent fluid. The vessels were cylindrical, no more than a metre wide but running the whole height of the room.

Machinery clustered at the base of them, ticking and rattling rhythmically.

He knew he should look away, but the contents of the tanks held him. There were bodies floating in them, dark outlines of men suspended in the liquid. Huge ribcages, bunched-muscle arms, thick necks. The profile was

that of a Space Marine, heavy and powerful. They didn't move, just hung, swaying slightly. Dimly, Morek could make out snaking coils of respirator tubes hanging down and covering their lower faces.

He turned away, knowing he'd come too far, suppressing his curiosity.

The curious mind opens the door to damnation.

It was as he did so that he saw the metal table, over to the left, away from the main beams of the strip-lumens. His eyes locked on what was on it, and stayed there.

Slowly, almost unconsciously, Morek felt his feet propelling him towards the table. He passed the tanks by, their contents forgotten. He couldn't look away then, couldn't turn back.

On the metal slab was a body, or perhaps a corpse. There was no breath in its gigantic lungs – at least, not one he could discern. It was like the others, naked, stretched out on its back, arms straight by its sides.

Morek felt the sense of wrongness immediately. For a moment, he couldn't work out what, precisely, was so troubling about the corpse – he'd seen many before – but then he paid more attention.

The forearms were smooth, almost hair-free. The fingernails were no longer than his own. The jawline was square-cut and blunt, but with no signs of lupine distension. There was no room in that mouth for fangs, just mortal dentition.

Morek moved closer, feeling his breathing quicken slightly. The corpse had its eyes open, blank and unseeing.

They were grey like his, with a pupil like a mortal's. There was no extraneous facial hair across the thick-set face, no heavy bone-ridge across the brow. The musculature was still there, rigid and heavy-set across an outsize skeletal frame, but it was blank and featureless.

Whatever this thing was, it was no Space Wolf. It was a sham, a simulacrum, a mockery.

Morek felt sickness well in the back of his throat. The Sky Warriors were sacred to him, as sacred as the world-soul, as the spirits of the ice, as the life of his daughter. This was an abomination, some dreadful meddling in the changeless order of things.

He took a step back. From behind him, back in the operating theatre, he heard the movement of thralls as they struggled to save the life of Aunir Frar.

This is forbidden. I should not be here.

His sickness was replaced by fear. He'd seen the look in the eyes of the leather-masked thralls, and knew the reputation of the fleshmakers. They did not forgive trespasses.

Morek turned and hurried back the way he'd come, averting his eyes from the floating figures in the tanks, ignoring the banks of strange equipment that lined the walls beyond them, hardly seeing the rows of tiny vials arranged in careful order under the controlled lights.

There were heavy footsteps somewhere behind him, and his heart jumped. He kept going, kept his head down, hoping whoever owned them was headed somewhere else. The linked chambers were confusing, hard to find one's way around, and the sound could have come from anywhere.

The footsteps faded. Morek was back in the reception chambers, the ones with the empty metal tables. Ahead of him was the exit, and the corridor to the elevator shaft.

His heart was beating hard.

The curious mind opens the door to damnation.

He looked down at his hands. They were rough, calloused, hardened by a lifetime of service to the Sky Warriors. They were trembling. For a moment he paused, uncaring if the thralls saw him now.

What was that thing?

He stood still for a few more heartbeats, rendered indecisive by what he had witnessed. The Wolf Priests were the guardians of the Aett, the

keepers of the traditions of the *Vlka Fenryka*. If they had sanctioned it, then it must be permitted.

It was an abomination.

He looked back over his shoulder. The tile-lined chambers stretched away from him, each one leading to the next, each stinking of antiseptic and blood. He felt the nausea rise up again, catching in his gullet.

In the Hall of the Fangthane, he had shouted himself hoarse with devotion to the Sky Warriors, the embodiment of the divine savagery of Fenris. As hard as he tried, he couldn't summon that spirit back up.

Shakily, with none of the purpose that had brought him to that place, he walked back to the elevator shaft. Across his open, loyal face the certainty had gone.

In its place, and for the first time in Morek's life, there was doubt.



CHAPTER TEN

Blackwing sat slumped at the metal conference table, ignoring the dozen figures seated around him, running his hands through his matted hair. He ignored the flickering strip-lights, the dozen or so kaerls standing to attention by the walls in their dirty uniforms and the sclerotic grind of the damaged engines from below.

He felt cramped, dirty, cooped up. Each day since the escape from Fenris had been a wearying round of emergencies and repairs, all in the cause of keeping the *Nauro* from breaking open and spinning into the void.

It was demeaning work, fit perhaps for mortals, but not for him. He was bred for higher things, for expert slaying in the shadows, for glorying in the contests of void-war. Having to listen to the counsel of greasy enginarium workers and the doom-laden pronouncements of the ship's tactical crew bored him supremely.

Not that the situation wasn't dire. He knew enough of starship mechanics to recognise when things were about to fall apart. Frankly, they ought to have done so already – the ship was still at least twelve days out from Gangava, and that schedule was only possible because he'd continued to thrash the warp drives over the protests of the ship's Master. A few days ago, he'd made the mistake of asking the *Nauro*'s Enginarius, a

mortal who'd had extensive training from Adeptus Mechanicus tech-adepts, what the machine-spirit was doing during all of this.

'Screaming, sir,' he'd replied in his gruff, practical voice. 'Screaming like an *ungor* with its throat cut.'

Blackwing had given thanks then that he was insensitive to such things.

Then again, he was insensitive to most things. He'd never gelled with his battle-brothers, had never forged the friendships that tied squads together. He'd despised his superior officers, chafing against the discipline they'd imposed. Even in the Space Wolves Chapter, famous across the Imperium for its loose attitude toward the Codex Astartes, that discipline was severe.

Blackwing had always been different, subject to dark moods and bouts of a manic, dangerous over-confidence. The Scout corps had been perfect for him, allowing him to perfect the arts of lone killing far from the raucous brotherhood of the Aett. It was in such isolation that he'd found a kind of contentment.

Now, however, he began to wonder whether that choice had always been such a good one. None of the mortals on the *Nauro* were capable of making the command choices he had to, of taking the difficult decisions on which their lives all depended. It might have been preferable, perhaps, to have had a brother warrior to consult, someone to share the burden with for a short while.

Not that any of his battle-brothers would have willingly come with him on a mission. Blackwing had created a near-perfect bubble of solitude around him, alienating even those who had no prior dislike of the Scouts.

So be it. That was the path he'd chosen, and it had suited him well enough before now. Not all of Russ's sons could be hollering berserkers.

'Lord?'

The voice was that of the ship's Master, a grey-haired man called Georyth. Blackwing looked up to face him. Even out of armour, the Space

Marine dominated the chamber. As his yellow eyes, sunk into their dark-ringed sockets, clamped on to the mortal, Georyth swallowed.

‘You asked for a report on the fires.’

‘So I did, Master. Tell me the latest good news.’

‘I have none to give. Three levels are still out of bounds, even to thrall-servitors. The burning has spread to the drive chambers. As supplies run low, our ability to contain it will diminish.’

‘And I know what you recommend.’

Georyth took a deep breath.

‘It hasn’t changed, lord.’

‘You wish us to drop out of the warp, open the levels to the void, flush out the area and make repairs.’

‘I do.’

‘And how long would such a manoeuvre take, assuming optimal performance?’

‘A week, lord. Perhaps less.’

Blackwing shot him a cold, superior smile. There was no humour in it, just a kind of knowing disdain.

‘Too long.’

‘Lord, if the promethium lines are—’

Blackwing sighed and pushed himself back in his chair.

‘If they’re breached? Then we die, Master. Even I, an ignorant warmongering savage with zero enginarium training, know that.’

He fixed his pin-pupil gaze on the man.

‘But reflect on this,’ he said. ‘Without the Great Wolf’s forces to relieve it, the Aett will fall. Lord Ironhelm’s ships must still be in the warp. If we keep travelling at our current pace, with no pauses or slowdowns, we will arrive at Gangava many days after them. And then, even if I can pass on Lord Greyloc’s message swiftly and persuade Ironhelm to return to Fenris, it will be another twenty days before he can possibly do so. Which means

that Lord Greyloc, whom I know is held in such unflinching esteem by all this Chapter, will have to hold the citadel, with a single depleted Great Company, for at least forty days. You saw the forces in orbit, Master. You saw what they did to our defences there. Now tell me, speaking honestly, if you really think that army can be defied on land for forty days.'

The Master's face went grey.

'If Russ wills it...' he began dutifully, but his voice lost its certainty, and he trailed off.

'Precisely. So perhaps you will now understand my insistence that we reach Gangava as soon as we can. We have cheated Morkai already on this voyage, and we will have to cheat him for a little longer. Count yourself lucky you're commanded by a Scout, Master. That's what we do. Cheat.'

The Master didn't reply, but slumped in his chair, his expression hollow. Blackwing could see his mind working, already trying to figure out some way of keeping the raging fires from reaching anything explosive. He didn't look confident.

Blackwing turned to look at the rest of the command crew.

'Anything else we need to discuss?' he asked dryly.

The Tacticus said nothing. The man had been driven hard, and his eyes were red-rimmed from fatigue. The Enginarius had already given his assessment of repair work needed in the hold, and the Armourer was dead, killed by an exploding bulkhead hours after translation from Fenris.

Neiman, the Navigator, was the only one still looking calm. He was also the only non-Fenrisian on the crew, a Belisarian from Terra, and was as slim and cold as his crewmates were stocky and vigorous. It was rare for him to leave his work of guiding the ship through the perils of the immaterium. In the presence of non-mutants, his pineal eye was covered in a wrap of silk over a steel patch.

He didn't speak. He was staring intently away from the table, toward the kaerls standing to attention around the walls of the council chamber. His

natural eyes were unwavering.

Blackwing found this annoying. He'd not summoned the man to this meeting to have him daydream.

'Is there something you wished to contribute, Navigator?' he asked. Neiman didn't flinch.

'Who is that man?' he demanded, his gaze locked on a particularly scruffy kaerl. Blackwing shot a glance at the man. He was shorter than the others, a little more hunched, with greasy hair and bruised skin around the eyes. He was a good deal filthier than the rest of them too, but the endless demands of survival had taken their toll on everyone. Strange, though – he didn't look like a soldier.

At all.

'Is this particularly important?' asked Georyth irritably. 'We have other things to resolve.'

The man in question didn't respond. He kept staring blankly, his expression totally vacant. On either side of him, the kaerls suddenly seemed to notice his presence. One of them looked at his sergeant in alarm, as if the man had been functionally invisible until that moment.

Blackwing felt the hairs on his back rise. His mood shifted instantly from boredom to high alertness. Why hadn't he noticed this man before? What had the Navigator sensed?

'Seize him,' he ordered, rising from his chair.

The kaerls grabbed the man by the shoulders. As if a switch had been flipped, the vacant-faced man went crazy. He backhanded the kaerl to his left, slamming him into the wall, then grabbed the neck of the other and launched into a vicious headbutt. Still without uttering a sound, the man spun round, making for the exit doors, knocking aside another kaerl who rushed to intercept him.

He moved with astonishing speed. But, for all that, it was mortal speed. Blackwing was quicker, leaping across the table in a lithe pounce and

careering into the man as he raced for the door. Together they skidded along the pressed-metal floor. Blackwing seized the man's hair and crunched his face into the wall, stunning him. He regained his feet quickly, dragging the man up with him.

‘Take care, lord!’ warned Neiman. ‘I sense—’

The injured man turned his bloody face toward Blackwing's. His eyes suddenly blazed a pale, sickly green.

Blackwing felt the build-up of maleficarum. In a single movement he hurled the man away, sending him cartwheeling through space toward the empty far end of the council chamber. Before the kaerl had landed, Blackwing pulled his bolt pistol from its holster and squeezed off a single round. The slug punched through the flailing man's head and detonated, spraying bone and glistening grey matter across the wall.

The ruined, headless body hit the metal with a wet thud. It twitched for a moment, then fell still.

‘Teeth of Russ!’ swore Georyth, superfluously training his own sidearm on the corpse. ‘What in Hel—’

‘It knew how to remain hidden,’ said Neiman, looking at Blackwing in alarm. ‘This is witchery – he was in plain view of all of us.’

Blackwing stooped to pick up something on the floor. A sphere the size of an eyeball had rolled across the metal. It glowed green, and flickered with a ghostly witchlight.

He rose, gazing at the bloodstained ball in his palm. It felt hot to the touch, almost painfully so. As he looked at it, a dull ache broke out behind his eyes.

Blackwing crushed it with a clench of his clawed fingers.

‘It seems we have a new problem,’ he said grimly, turning slowly to face the startled ship's council. ‘Something else is on the ship. Something that no doubt wishes us harm. And whatever it is, it now knows how weak we are.’

The Iron Priest had gone. In his absence, the dark seemed even colder, even more remote. The concept of daylight was already proving hard to reconstruct, as was the passage of time. Freija had lost track of both. Perhaps the assault had started, or perhaps the Sky Warriors still held the enemy in the mountains. If the battle came to the Aett, would any sign of it penetrate so far down?

She swept her gaze across the chamber. It was big, though hard to say how big – even her night-vision visor didn't pick much out in the far recesses. One wall, the wall her squad had clustered around, had been extensively worked. There were huge doors in the centre of it, once more crested with the twin faces of Morkai. The space around the doors was studded with arcane machinery – coils of coolant piping, statuesque clusters of power transformers, lattices of ironwork covering unidentifiable workings within. Incredibly, given the oppressive cold and distance from maintenance crews, the low hum from the machines sounded healthy.

The thrall-servitors had certainly known what to do with it. After their master had passed through the doors, they'd got to work, attaching themselves to input valves and initiating obscure sets of protocols. Whatever they were doing, it was noisy and repetitive. Lights flickered across the wall of machines from time to time, glinting painfully in the otherwise perfect dark. The servitors not directly attached to the devices had started performing a series of rites in front of the major machine-nodes – anointing the moving parts with pungent oils, reading long lists of benedictions in flat, metal-dry voices, bowing before the inert iron and steel as if it were an altar of long-dormant gods.

They worked methodically, tirelessly, soullessly. There was no communication between them and the Iron Priest within. Arfang was alone, presumably in a place where only the Sky Warriors were permitted. There was no indication of how long his work would take, whether it was going well, or even what he was planning.

Freija fought against a growing weight of boredom. The oppressive dark combined with the dreary intonations of the servitors made it hard to stay sharp.

‘Keep your focus,’ she warned over the vox-link, speaking to herself as much as her troops.

Four of the six-kaerl squad stood alongside her, facing outward from the machine-wall, the muzzles of their rifles pointing into the dark. Two more were resting, slumped uneasily between their comrades and the unnerving rites of the half-human servitors.

Then she heard the noise again. Instantly all thoughts of boredom were banished, and she felt the prick of sweat under her gloves.

The other kaerls heard it too, and she saw them stiffening. The two on rest-rotation climbed their feet, grasping their sidearms clumsily in the gloom.

It was a low, rumbling growl, glottal and damp, vibrating in the stone of the floor.

‘Hold your ground,’ she hissed over the comm, trying to see something definite in the grainy feed her visor was giving her.

Behind her, the servitors carried on their work. The guns of the kaerls swept the far end of the chamber, moving slowly and uncertainly. She could sense their tension in the tight, nervous movements.

Suddenly, the distinctive rasping bark of a *skjoldtar* burst out of nowhere, its muzzle flare dazzling in intensity. Despite herself, Freija nearly pulled her own trigger in reflexive shock.

‘Cease fire!’ she shouted, peering into the shadows. Her proximity meter was empty, save for the group of friendly signals around her.

The echoes of the gunfire took a long time to die. The culprit, probably Lyr – she couldn’t tell – shook his head. By now Freija’s heart was properly beating. There was something out there, something she couldn’t see, something that sounded – *felt* – utterly terrifying.

‘Hold your ground,’ she said again, feeling her stomach twisting.

Get a grip, woman. You are a daughter of Russ, a child of the storm.

‘We’re not getting a good feed from the visors,’ she said. ‘I’m walking out.’

None of her troops responded. They stayed where they were, locked in a semi-circle around the oblivious servitors.

Freija took a deep breath, and began to advance. She went slowly, feeling her heavy breathing quicken. Ahead of her, she could see nothing but static.

Then it came again, nearer this time, thrumming and resonant. It wasn’t emanating from one of the tunnels beyond. It was in the chamber, there with them, watching. Somewhere.

Freija had gone ten metres by the time she stopped. She looked over her shoulder briefly, checking for the presence of her squad. They were still there, still surrounding the wall of machines, still guarding the doors.

She turned back.

Less than a metre away, a pair of golden eyes, pinned with black, liquid and massive, gazed back at her.

Freija froze.

Skítja.

The siege-fire was horrifying, vaporising ice and snow and shattering rock, tearing up ancient outcrops of granite and dissolving them into clouds of scree. The superheavy guns had been dragged into range, and the Fang reeled under the dense volume of ordnance. Its flanks were wreathed in both smoke and steam as the snow was boiled away from the rock and the gun emplacements were picked off, one by one. The entire peak was clothed in raging tongues of flame, blazing as if the magma at the planet’s core had been released and flung into the permafrost of Asaheim’s summit.

The defenders waited within the walls, letting the fortress defences do their work for as long as possible. Static gun emplacements thundered

with lethal force, chewing their way through whole loops of ammunition in moments, cutting down oncoming armour and leaving the tilting wrecks blocking the advance. Teams of kaerls worked ceaselessly to keep the death-dealers fed and operative.

It would not last forever. The Thousand Sons were advancing, claiming each metre of land in blood and fire. Only when the doors were broken would the Wolves take to the field again, welcoming the invaders with the embrace of Morkai.

Until then, there were other powers in play.

Odain Sturmhart was angry. His habitual bluster had gone, shaken by his inability to predict the attack of the Thousand Sons, rocked by his failure to see the deception as it unfolded. He no longer laughed with the savage glee of the coming battle, but glowered under his arcane psychic hood, his eyes blazing. To make matters worse, he had failed to watch Wyrmlade as he had been commanded to do, and knew the Tempering was still proceeding behind closed blast-doors. He had failed in everything that mattered, and the trust the Great Wolf had placed in him had gone unrewarded.

So far.

Sturmhart had worked with fanaticism since the revelation of failure, driving himself close to the limits of even his battle-hardened frame. The wards throughout the Aett had been reinforced. He had worked until his hands were raw, rubbing the stone figures with his own vital blood, instilling the power of the world-soul within them. Now that the enemy was here, the time for such preparation was passed.

He stood encased in his runic armour high up in an observation chamber of the Fang, watching as the fire rebounded from the void shields before him. No missile would survive passage through that curtain of immolation, but there were other weapons to wield.

Sturmhart slammed his staff on the floor, and the iron shaft shivered from the impact. The soul of the storm began to quicken around him. He felt the air race, felt it grow colder and keener. His rage at himself fuelled the brewing tumult. He could use that anger, turn it into something of terrible, terrible potency.

The winds ran round the horned summit of the mountain, whining through the plasma-boiling air, whipping against the red-hot rocks. The sky, which had been pure blue and empty, began to pucker with clouds. A low rumble echoed between the encircling peaks.

Feel this. Feel the coming of the world-soul. This is power the like of which no witch will ever wield.

Sturmhart screwed his eyes shut, clutching the staff tight. His second heart broke into a steady rhythm. The summoning was painful. He relished the pain. Like the searing irons, it cauterised the deeper pain within.

More clouds rolled into being, tumbling from the crown of the mountains to the north, their skirts flickering with lightning. In their shadow came the hail, a sweeping wall of ruin, slamming and bouncing into the ground below.

Raise your eyes to the heavens, Traitors.

He saw the sorcerers amid the hosts of the enemy like stars, their psychic essences standing out even through the noise and confusion. They were powerful, steeped in sickening energies. He could see their arrogance, their confidence. Some were physically corrupted, giving in to the terrible flesh-changes that blighted all their kind. One of them, the brightest star of all, was far down the roads of ruin.

You are many, and we are few. But this is our world, and we wield its power.

The storm spread, breaking across the summits, sweeping toward the Fang in a howling, screaming gale. The sky darkened, making the

explosions around the mountain look like embers in a fire pit. The hail hammered down, cracking and bouncing on the stone.

You think you come to fight mortals, like yourselves.

The wind picked up speed and power, growing to a crescendo of whirling, horrific destruction. The pinions of the blizzard closed, fed by the surging energy of the storm. Tanks were upended, knocked from their tracks. Flanking columns of troops were swept away, dragged to the precipices at the edges of the causeways and thrown to their deaths.

You think we will succumb to witchery as you did.

Sturmhart felt blood well in his mouth, trickling down to the mass of his slicked-down beard. He ignored it. The sharp pain was lost in the whirlwind of psychic power flooding his body. He was nothing more than the conduit, the vessel through which the untamed fury of the maelstrom passed. The raw howl of the wind became a bellowing roar. The flames around the Fang were lashed and pulled into dazzling flares of energy, ripped across the air by the scouring gales.

You are wrong.

The sorcerers responded, guarding what vehicles they could, sending flickering lightning and translucent kine-shields of their own to combat the danger from the skies. They were mighty, and there were dozens of them. Even so, they struggled against the elements, and the assault faltered. Gunships blazed to the ground like comets, torn apart by the electric sky. The screams of the dying and the terrified echoed through the rippling currents of the storm.

Sturmhart relished the cries. They fed his power. They fed the planet's power. The invaders had brought maleficarum with them, and righteous punishment was the consequence.

Even as they bled and scrambled for cover, the witches were learning a lesson; the same lesson that had been learned by every Rune Priest since

the Allfather had first brought the way of the wyrd to the frozen death world.

Sturmhart knew it. He had known it for centuries, and took delight in making it as clear as the ice itself to those who dared defy him.

We do not defend Fenris. Fenris defends us. The world, the people, are one. We share a soul, a soul of hatred, and now it comes to you, dark on the wings of the storm.

Learn it well, for soon this truth will kill you.

The shadow in the dark reared, and the dreadful eyes disappeared. Freija scrambled backwards, snatching her rifle up clumsily, letting fly with a burst of eye-watering gunfire. *Skjoldtar* rounds did more damage than Imperial Guard autoguns when handled right, and a howl of inhuman pain echoed around the chamber.

‘Huskaerl!’ came a cry to her left.

There were fresh muzzle-flares from her left as her men ran forwards, firing from the waist and spraying rounds at the space recently occupied by the... *animal* that had been in front of her.

‘Get back!’ she roared, ceasing fire and trying to make sense of the signals on her visor display. There had been nothing on the proximity scan. Nothing.

Her troops withdrew alongside her, still firing. The bursts were poorly controlled, driven by fear.

Russ, where is our courage?

‘Get a grip!’ she shouted, cuffing the nearest trooper. ‘Fire when you *have a target.*’

He kept firing, his finger clamped to the trigger. Beneath his mask, Freija could see a pair of eyes, wide with fear.

‘It’s coming!’ he screamed. ‘It’s coming back!’

Then Freija saw it, a huge, bounding shape eating up the ground, bursting out of the gloom like a nightmare. The guns kept firing, lighting

up its hunched, powerful body in a tracery of lightning-white. She only had time for impressions – yellow eyes, incredibly powerful shoulders, blood-red jaws – and then she was firing back too, retreating until she felt the metal limbs of the servitors at her back.

There were more of them, more terrible forms leaping out of the dark, slinking along the ground, limping into range. They were all different, all horrifying, like the dreams of fleshmakers taken apart and reassembled into jumbles of canine horror.

‘Hold the line!’ she bellowed, emptying her magazine and scrabbling to load a replacement. ‘Keep them back!’

She saw one of the monsters recoil as multiple streams of gunfire slammed into it, knocking it into a pain-clenched crouch. It screamed in a mix of fury and pain, then made another lunge toward them.

Blood of Russ – it’s still not dead.

Then another beast broke into the open, bursting through a torrent of fire, shrugging off the impacts like they were a light rain. It was gigantic, a hulking brute of muscle and thick, wiry fur. A long, grinning face leered up, lined with fangs and containing a glistening, lolling tongue. It went on four legs, but had reared on its huge haunches in a bizarre mockery of a man.

Freija whirled round with her reloaded weapon, got her shot and fired.

The gun coughed and jammed.

Cursing, she fumbled in the dark to fix it, hearing the screams of her men as the horror got among them. It picked one up and threw him across the chamber. There was a sloppy crunch as the trooper slammed into the rock wall and slithered down. As fast as thought, other creatures bounded over to him, slaving and wheezing.

Freija crouched low as she slammed the clip back in place, risking a quick look at the servitors. They were working as if nothing were going on

around them, polishing and tending, bowing and chanting. The doors to the chamber beyond remained shut.

Curse him.

Then she was back on her feet, firing wildly. She heard another of her men being dragged back into the dark, and her fear dissolved in the face of impotent rage.

‘Damn you!’ she screamed, keeping the trigger depressed, hurling her abuse half at the creatures of the Underfang, half at the Iron Priest who’d dragged them down to their deaths.

Dead for nothing. I could have fought alongside my father.

One of the monsters, a gigantic brute looking like some tortured cross between a wolf and a grizzly bear, towered in front of her, bellowing a spittle-flailing blast of fury and challenge. The stink of animal breath washed over her, making her gag even over the rebreather.

She fired at point blank range, loosing everything she had left in a thudding stream of bullets. The beast recoiled, flinching from every hit, but did not withdraw. When the *skjoldtar* was empty, it came back at her, jaws open, eyes wide with alien hatred.

Freija shrunk back, more out of instinct than anything else, reaching for the knife strapped to her boot.

Look it in the eye.

She forced herself to keep her head up, the knife held shivering in her fists, as the horrific creature leapt at her.

Look it in the eye.

But the impact never came. It was only then that she realised her eyes had screwed shut after all. She opened them.

The creature was hanging, suspended by the neck, writhing in some kind of lock under its jaws. The gunfire fell silent, plunging the chamber back into utter darkness.

Then, slowly, a red light bled into the shadow. From somewhere, illumination had come back. There were echoing yelps and growls. The creatures were all still there – they just weren't attacking.

Freija looked up at the beast in front of her, following the curve of its ribcage to the stretched sinews of its neck. A vast, clawed, metal fist held it tight between curving talons. Incredibly, something more powerful had emerged. She realised then that the doors had opened. Whatever was in the chamber beyond, the things Arfang had come to rouse, they had broken the threshold.

You disturb my slumber for this, Iron Priest?

The voice was resounding, a deep bass, and it came from over her shoulder. It reverberated through the rock around her, running down her spine and making her hair stand on end. It was far deeper than Jarl Greyloc's, far deeper than Ironhelm's. In that voice was an ancient dignity, a magisterial self-assurance, a profound melancholy edged with eternal bitterness. Even mediated by coils of inert machinery, it was the most powerful, most disturbing voice Freija had ever heard.

'You were long in the waking, lord,' came Arfang's reply. It was uncharacteristically apologetic.

Moving slowly, driven by the curiosity that was always her undoing, Freija turned her head to look at what had come through the doors.

Long indeed, came the voice of Bjorn, called the Fell-Handed by the skjalds when declaiming the sagas, the last of the Chapter to have walked the ice with Russ, the mightiest of all the Wolves, a living link to the Time of Wonder.

The dead had been woken.

Bjorn cast the wolf-creature aside as if it were a pup, and the mass of fur and fang tumbled, yelping, into the shadows. With a grind of servos and a hiss of pneumatics, the huge mass of metal and weaponry took a single,

heavy step into the chamber. Freija felt her jaw sagging, and snapped it shut.

But now that I am restored, I remember what my purpose has become.

The venerable Dreadnought strode past Freija, seemingly unaware she was there. Before his massive profile, the beasts withdrew, lowering their heads in submission. Even Arfang seemed little more than a whelp beside that figure of legend.

I am here to kill. Show me to the enemy.

PART III:
THE CLOSING NOOSE



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Aphael looked up. The storm-fury hammered at the kine-shield above him. The translucent barrier buckled, flexing like fabric under the repeated impacts. The power of the Dogs' priests was impressive, but then this was their world, and who knew what crude powers existed here, ready to be dragged up by the savages in half-understood rites. The maelstrom could cause the fringes of his army some harm, but it would do no more than slow the advance on the gates.

A fresh wave of burning hail slammed into the shield, stressing the protective sorcery further. Aphael glanced at the position locators on his helm display. His sorcerers were evenly spaced throughout the host, feeding power to the wards across the army. Hett, the most powerful of the Raptora, was nearby, working with calm expertise, maintaining the domes of warding magicks that kept the command clusters of troops safe as they crawled into range.

Aphael turned his attention to the tactical situation. He stood deep within the ranks of his Legion, surrounded by his Terminator retinue. On either side of him were Land Raiders, each with a full complement of Rubricae and grinding forwards at little more than a walking pace. Beyond them were the Chimera troop carriers, rocking from the impacts as Dog shells tore through the weaker parts of the barrier and exploded among them. Ahead were the mobile artillery pieces, still moving closer to the

mountain. Larger units had settled into static ranks behind them, locking bracing arms to extend their reach and swinging their gigantic barrels into firing angles. They shuddered with every detonation, sending gouts of black smoke into the already darkening air.

Ahead of him, the pinnacle of the Fang filled his vision. After another day of heavy, grinding battery, the high cone was now entirely covered in fire, ripped into curling fronds of plasma by the racing winds. The defensive barrage had remained strong for longer than he'd expected, sending death in raking columns from a hundred gun positions around the towering gates, but now the torrent was finally thinning out as emplacements were destroyed.

The rest would follow, one by one. The damage they were doing had been allowed for, estimated by the Corvidae months ago and put into the battle ledgers. Tanks would burn, mortals would die, but the advance would not be halted. Within hours, the gate-breakers would be in range of their target and the portals, those graceless hunks of stone and ice, would be breached.

Then the real work would begin.

+What progress, brother?+ Aphael sent, knowing the inquiry would irritate Temekh, hundreds of kilometres above in the *Herumon*.

There was a long pause before a reply came.

+You have just set it back. I cannot remain in communication with you, not in this state.+

+My apologies. But you should know the assault on the gates is nigh.+

+What for? It means nothing until the wards are down.+

Aphael found himself stung by Temekh's tone. The Corvidae was safe from harm, surrounded by the comfort of the *Herumon*'s vast hold. Out on the ice, things were rather less comfortable.

+They will be down shortly. I need to know that your work is proceeding with equal speed to mine.+

+I will send when I am ready. Until then, do not make contact again.+

The link between the sorcerers broke off. The severance was almost painful, causing Aphael's eyes to water.

Why is he so hostile?

He felt a prick of anger then, a tremor of frustration at the Corvidae's superior manner. As he did so, the itching in his neck broke out again, rippling across the skin.

He tensed, pausing in the march toward the gates. Soundlessly, his Terminators matched the altered pace.

The contagion was growing.

He knows.

Irritation was replaced by the cold vice of unease. Since Ahriman's rubric, the threat of mutation had become the ultimate stigma, the final taboo. In a Legion that had sacrificed everything to avoid the clutches of the Changer of Ways, any sign that the magicks had been less than totally successful was something akin to heresy.

'Increase speed,' he barked over the mission channel.

On either side of him, the Land Raiders gunned their engines and picked up the pace. More artillery pieces reached firing position and were dug into the steel-hard rock.

So why now? Why, when my hour of victory draws close, does this... flesh-change return?

He looked up at the gates, running his gaze over the burning stone. There were sigils carved into it, protective symbols designed to shun the mutating power of sorcery. Those were the things he had to destroy, to pave the way for the greater power to come.

For what reason am I damned to this?

As Aphael looked at the mighty runes carved across the towering cliffs ahead, his mood darkened further. The mystical shapes simply reminded him of what he already knew – that there was no escape from the pattern

of fate. If there was salvation for him, it would not lie in the fortress of the Emperor's Dogs.

So be it. I will embrace it, and turn this corruption into strength.

He resumed his march, barely noticing the Terminators shadowing him. He could feel the mutation quicken within him, boiling under his skin like a swarm of trapped insects. For a while more, his armour would hide the effects.

Above him, fresh plasma explosions rippled across the kine-shields. A troop carrier was carved open by a hail of projectile fire, and its red-hot shell was toppled by the stormwind. Men were dying every moment, hundreds of them, all fuel for a fire that had been burning for centuries already. Their fates meant very little to him, and even less so now that his own prospects were narrowing.

'Lord, gate-breakers are coming into position before both targets,' came a Spireguard's voice over the comm. 'They await your orders.'

Aphael felt his lip curl, though the movement wasn't voluntary. The infection had reached his face.

'Tell them to fire when ready,' he replied, working hard to maintain his usual voice over the channel. Sweat broke out across his twitching skin. 'Get us in there fast, captain. This idleness plays badly with me, and I thirst to spill blood.'

Blackwing strode down the corridor with two dozen fully armoured kaerls marching in his wake. He was wearing his carapace armour and carried a bolt pistol out of its holster. His men went warily, their weapons poised to fire, their eyes wide behind their face-masks. Even after so many hours of searching, he still felt alert. Now that the task had moved from engine maintenance to a kill mission, his weariness had fallen from him.

Neiman had examined the corpse of the crewman in the council chamber and told the rest of them what they knew already. The man had been a spy, altered to blend into the background, silently feeding information from his

unnatural eyeballs to whomever or whatever was controlling him. Since then, Blackwing had ransacked the entire ship, moving through the decks with remorseless efficiency. Other spies had been found during the search, all with the same transplanted eyeballs. Now they were all dead, their bodies hurled into the fires of the enginarium.

Blackwing looked around him carefully. They were low in the ship, passing through regions where the light was bad and few crewmen had reason to go. The perfect place to hide.

The Wolf Scout knew how vulnerable he was. Whatever intelligence had controlled those puppets was a master of sorcery. Blackwing had no weapons to combat such powers and his crew were even less able to defend themselves. Even if he managed to find where the stowaway was hiding, the chances were that he'd come up against something he couldn't hope to kill.

The prospect didn't scare him, but it was definitely annoying. At the very least, he'd hoped to survive long enough to get his manoeuvre above Fenris into the sagas. The thought that it might all be for nothing was an irritant.

Of course, there was the matter of the Fang's survival. That was important too.

'Where the Hel are we?' he voxed, looking at the dirty, dark tunnels ahead with distaste.

'Beneath the aft fuel tanks, lord,' came the voice of Raekborn, the huskaerl. His voice sounded tight. Not scared either, but definitely stressed. Blackwing occasionally forgot that mortals required a few hours' sleep in every cycle. If they didn't strike gold soon, he'd have to tell them to stand down for a while.

So weak. So tediously weak.

He glanced at his helm display. Scouts rarely wore helms into combat, which was a habit Blackwing had never understood. Risking losing your

head to a stray las-beam seemed less a case of bravado and more a case of stupidity. His clear-visored unit gave him a tactical display that showed up life signs within a range of thirty metres, as well as reporting on the status of his unit. Not as comprehensive as the Mk VII helm he'd worn as a Hunter, but not far off.

All his visor-runes showed at the present time were the increasingly disrespectful recall requests from Neiman. The Navigator had wanted him back on the bridge for the past six hours to sign off the course vectors before he retired to his observation chamber.

Blackwing grinned. There was no chance of him calling off the search for such mundanity. Even if the need to uncover the infiltrator hadn't been so pressing, he enjoyed irritating the three-eyed mutant by keeping him waiting.

'You getting anything down here?' he voxed to his squad, in the probably vain hope that his men's equipment had picked up a signal that his hadn't.

'Negative.'

Blackwing let his photo-reactive lenses do the visual work for him. Like all his kind, he had astonishing sensitivity to movement even in near pitch dark conditions. His nostrils could differentiate the subtlest aroma lingering under the fug of engine oil and general bilge-grime. His tactile senses could detect movement on the floor a hundred metres away and his hearing would pick up a kaerl coughing on the command bridge.

Still nothing.

'Let's move,' he growled, motioning forwards. Ahead of him the tunnel narrowed, sweeping around a damaged bulkhead draped in wiring. Lights flickered erratically in the distance, briefly illuminating the outline of meshed metal barriers.

Blackwing swerved around the bulkhead. The footfalls of the troops behind were stealthy for mortals, but still announced their presence to one

who knew how to listen. The squad went forwards for about twenty metres before reaching a T-junction. The corridor running right-left was in a bad way. Clusters of cables hung from the ceiling like tufts of wild grass, fizzing and sparking. There were cracks in the floor where something had pushed the struts up, and the headroom was minimal. Even the kaerls had to duck, and Blackwing hunched down uncomfortably. The only remaining lighting was at floor-level. It seemed to be running at about quarter-intensity.

‘Left, or right?’ mused Blackwing, training his pistol at the shadows and sweeping it round. As he did so, he felt a slight pricking sensation in his palms. An indefinable sense of expectation caught hold of him, and he narrowed his eyes.

A few metres down the corridor to the left was an open service hatch, its covering grate swinging lazily from a single intact bearing.

There were times when the preternatural senses engendered by the *Canis Helix* trumped any technology. Blackwing looked at the hole and felt his muscles tense up of their own accord.

‘On my mark,’ he voxed, preparing to advance. ‘Stay—’

That was the last word he got out before the wall exploded. A vast armoured figure with a sapphire battle-helm burst through whirling slivers of metal, its boltgun lowered and already firing.

Blackwing hurled himself face down to the floor, feeling the rounds whistle across his back and detonate amongst his men. The corridor behind was suddenly filled with screams, punctuated with erratic return volleys that zinged off his carapace plate.

Ignoring the projectiles, Blackwing rolled on to his back, trying to draw a bead while avoiding the hail of incoming bolt slugs. It was then that he saw the second figure loom up out of the shadows, limping under a cobra-hood crest and wheezing like a burst bladder.

‘Oh, not good,’ he growled, cursing his stupidity and scrabbling backwards. ‘Not good *at all*.’

The boom of the detonations ran along the ground, shaking the roots of the mountains, shivering veins of rock that ran kilometres down. Gate-breakers, vast engines of destruction, settled into their firing formation. Single gun-barrels, mounted on immense armoured tracks, two hundred metres long, dark as the shadows of the Underfang and streaked with the smoking patina of war. They’d been hauled into position under the barrage of the lesser artillery and were now unleashed.

Each engine was a piece of tech-sorcery in itself, a fusion of forbidden devices and proscribed mechanics from across a dozen lost worlds. Strange energies slewed across the surface of the barrels like quicksilver, shimmering with ghostly, half-seen witchlight. A low-pitched howling came from within the cavernous firing maws, a shadowy sound that echoed like the fractured sobs of great, nameless crowds. The muzzles of the cannons were ringed with the esoteric bronze shapes so favoured by their creators, each one different, each drawing on some significance long forgotten by the darkening mortal galaxy.

They had names, those monsters. When they’d been assembled over the centuries in daemon-stalked foundries deep within the Eye of Terror, the Thousand Sons had insisted on that. So there was *Pakhet*, and *Talamemnon*, and *Maahex*, and the damaged *Gnosis*, rocked by heavy fire from the defending batteries. That last one was smoking heavily, leaking rolling columns of death-black soot as it shuddered from incoming impacts.

They fired. They all kept firing. The detonations were tremendous, scattering the ranks of troops around them, scrambling auspex readings, overloading auditory feeds, atomising the very air as huge neon-yellow beams of energy lanced to their targets. The explosions of impact were like tidal waves – huge, thundering walls of rippling flame that sluiced down the already tortured flanks of the Fang.

Again and again the gate-breakers loosed their power, drowning out the sounds of all else, blocking the incessant rain of plasma from the orbital blockade, masking the screams of the dying and the wounded across the approaches to the gates.

They were not subtle weapons. They relied on vast numbers of supporting troops for protection, drank whole reservoirs of promethium in moments, and were operated by hundreds of shackled mortal crew, many hard-wired into the chassis in a grotesque fusion of man and weapon.

Their only purpose was to break the portals of the Fang, to disintegrate the protection over Russ's fortress and render it as broken as the scoured wastelands of Prospero. Thousands had died to create them, their souls welded into the structures to bind the infernal powers within. The Legion had exhausted itself on them, poured every resource it still had into them, knowing full well that they would only be used once.

They were statements, those devices.

We will ruin ourselves, starve ourselves, cripple our future viability and leave ourselves destitute, all so long as we can destroy the gates that guard your citadel.

So they fired again, vomiting beams of destructive essence like shards of a supernova, venting the hatred that had seethed for over a thousand years, focusing it on the gates.

Those massive arches, each carved from the cold rock by ancient machines no less powerful, began to glow red from the impact, wavering in the heat-shimmer. The void shields were strengthened by desperate kaerls, fed with more power from the inexhaustible wells below the Fang until the unseen barriers screamed. The stone cracked and buckled, rocked by the torrent of fire and energy.

Above the lintel of the Sunrising Gate, the rune Gmorl had been graven. It signified Defiance.

When it was broken open at last, a vast sigh shuddered through the stone. There was a snap in the air, and a bow-wave of force rushed out from the citadel. Piers of granite and adamantium collapsed, breaking the symmetry of the buttresses. Cracks opened beneath the doors, running over the ground like rivulets of dark lava.

The remaining void shields shivered, and those at ground level went out. A hail of fire immediately poured through the gaps, slamming into the mountain beyond. The gate-breakers recalibrated, aiming for the weakest point. Their enormous barrels loosed columns of immolation, and Sunrising disappeared behind a wall of plasma.

When the fireballs cleared, the mighty doors were broken open, swinging crazily on hinges the size of Thunderhawks, buoyed by nothing more than the continuing explosions around them.

For a moment, no one moved. As if suddenly horrified by what they'd done, the entire Thousand Sons host held back, gazing up at the hole in the side of the mountain. The howl of the wind raced across the battlefield, its note of fury replaced by a whine of anguish.

Then the paralysis passed. Men began to run forwards, flanked by rows of tanks and troop carriers. The artillery resumed its crushing onslaught. The horde of vanguard warriors, thousands strong, rank upon rank of them, surged towards the gates, suddenly filled with the hope of victory.

Behind the climate-masks, they had all begun to realise what they'd done, what no one had done before them. In the face of that knowledge, even the fear of the Wolves shrank back slightly.

Every trooper, from the lowliest gun-servitor to the mightiest sorcerer knew the truth, a truth that would now never be erased from the annals of galactic history.

They had come to the Citadel of Russ, the mightiest human fortress outside Terra, and they had broken it.

Blackwing ducked and ran, weaving between the bolt-rounds that tore gashes in the tunnel walls. Electrical cables were ripped open, causing showers of sparks to sluice across the floor. His men had either been killed or were fleeing back down the corridor ahead of him. It was a shambles.

Blackwing veered around the T-junction corner and crouched down against the near wall, turning back to face his pursuers. The body of one of his kaerls was flung across his field of vision, limbs cartwheeling, before the Rubric Marine careered into view.

Blackwing opened fire, loosing a dozen rounds at point blank range before leaping back to his feet and hurtling down the corridor. From over his shoulder he could hear the crack of his bolts' detonation, and risked a glance back.

The Traitor Marine had been rocked, its armour dented and smoking, but was already recovering its feet. Its boltgun barked, and Blackwing slammed himself into the cover of the broken bulkhead. Six slugs thunked into the structure and exploded, obliterating it, forcing Blackwing to scramble further back, covered in a rain of broken metal.

+Just one of you,+ came a voice in his mind. Its sending was halting, as if the speaker was in terrible pain. +I didn't quite believe it until now.+

Blackwing had no way of replying, and concentrated on staying alive for a few moments longer. Leaping and ducking, relying on his gene-enhanced agility, he scampered away from the Rubric Marine, firing blindly behind him as he went.

The corridor opened out into a larger chamber, one he'd patrolled through just moments earlier. His men had set up a bulwark there, overturning tables and crates for barricades. They opened fire as Blackwing burst into the room, just managing to avoid hitting him as they aimed for the leviathan hard on his tail.

Blackwing pounced behind one of upturned tables. He drew his power sword, a short stabbing blade, and flicked on the disruptor field. A heartbeat later and the Rubric Marine had followed him in.

It shrugged off *skjoldtar* fire as if it were a hail of pebbles. The Traitor Marine moved incredibly quickly for its huge size, hurling barricades against the wall and pumping bolt-rounds into the exposed troops before whirling round to smash apart more flimsy pieces of cover.

+A mere Scout, too. It seems I am in luck.+

Blackwing pushed his barricade aside and launched a stream of bolts directly at the Rubric Marine. It evaded some of them, swaying back with astonishing agility. The rest hit, exploding against the armour and shattering the ornamentation from the helm and shoulder-guards.

Then Blackwing pounced, swinging his blade into the contact zone and aiming for the cables at the neck. The Traitor's Mk IV armour only had a few weaknesses, but that was one of them. His blade whistled towards its destination.

It never arrived. The Traitor sidestepped the swipe, pulled its fist back and punched out. Blackwing jerked his head away but the gauntlet still connected, crunching under his jaw and throwing him into the air on the follow-through.

+Not much of a contest, is it?+

Blackwing swivelled in mid-flight and crashed face-down to the ground. His visor shattered on impact, turning his vision into a crazy patchwork of angular lens fractures.

That's why they don't wear helms.

Groggily, he dragged himself back around. He heard sporadic gunfire as the few remaining kaerls launched a desperate assault on the rampaging Rubric Marine.

Blood ran down his temple. The gilded monster was busy finishing off the kaerls, breaking limbs with casual flicks before blasting men apart with single shots.

And in the background, limping up the corridor beyond, was the sorcerer.

+We will take this ship when you are dead, Dog,+ the cobra-masked figure wheezed. +Right into the middle of your fleet.+

Blackwing cleared his head, curling his fist around the grip of his sword, judging the distance. The last of his kaerls was dispatched contemptuously, and the Rubric Marine turned back to him.

+Then I'll detonate the warp drive. What do you think of that?+

Blackwing sprang to his feet. Moving with all the explosive power he could muster, he fired his pistol straight at the Traitor Marine while simultaneously sending his power sword spinning towards the sorcerer. It glittered as it travelled, the biting edge whirling dead-eyed towards its target.

It was the most perfect manoeuvre Blackwing had ever executed, a stunning double-handed attack launched at unstoppable speed. The aim was perfect. His bolter rounds hammered home, thudding into the Rubric Marine's armoured shell and tearing off plates.

The cartwheeling blade flew to its target too, blazing with ceramite-cleaving energies as it span. Even in the midst of everything, poised to leap at the sorcerer to finish the job, Blackwing felt a burst of pride. Not many of his battle-brothers could have done what he'd just done. It was magnificent.

Then the blade hit the sorcerer's kine-shield and broke into fragments. The Rubric Marine reeled, its right arm blasted off, exposing a gaping hole at the shoulder. Then it righted itself, and started to advance again.

At that point, Blackwing knew he was dead. There was nothing further he could do to halt them.

I'll scar you, though, you bastards.

'Fenrys!' he roared, charging towards the sorcerer, emptying his clip at the hunched figure, feeling the weapon kick back against his palm as it unloaded its mass-reactive contents.

An explosion of wild, writhing, multi-coloured light boomed out from the sorcerer, followed by a deafening crash of something terrible breaking open. The stink of the immaterium bloomed out, and Blackwing was thrown on his back again, landing crushingly hard amid the ruined barricades and corpses. Something heavy hit his head, knocking open the damaged visor further. The world reeled around him, punched off its axis by the unholy release of warp-energy.

For a moment he lay still, stunned. There were more crashes, more blasts of eye-watering warp-power. They passed.

Then, slowly, something occurred to him.

I'm not dead.

He lifted his head painfully, feeling the compression in his neck. The Rubric Marine stood immobile three metres away, locked in a half-completed stride forwards. The sorcerer had crumpled to the floor, his robes burning with lurid flames and his armour prised open. The flesh within was... horrible.

‘Do not look yet,’ came a familiar voice.

Ignoring the advice, Blackwing craned his head round to see where it had come from.

Neiman was there, rebinding his warp-eye. The Navigator looked shaky, and his face was pale.

‘I came to get you,’ he said, furiously. ‘And thank the bloody Emperor I did, you stupid bastard.’

Greyloc surged towards the breach, his retinue a pace behind him, his twin claws shimmering in the dark from their disruption fields.

‘For Russ!’ he bellowed, and the sound echoed from the walls of the Fang’s cavernous entrance chambers.

Ahead of him were the shattered gates, still burning from the explosions that had destroyed them. Beyond the crushed pillars, partially masked by sheets of smoke and hammering hail, was the advancing enemy. The first

lines of invaders were already closing on the opening, emboldened by the devastating power of the gate-breakers. Greyloc's helm display flickered with signals as his armour's machine-spirit rapidly made sense of the thousands of life signs ahead and prioritised them into target-runes.

Roaring with defiance, he burst out into the open, shrugging off the lines of incoming las-fire, revelling in the cold, sharp air of Fenris once more. Though polluted with engine oil and the acrid tang of spent ordnance, it was still better than being cooped up behind the walls.

We are predators. This is where we belong.

As he charged, his squad swept alongside him, their massive Terminator suits ploughing through clusters of smoking metal and ruined stonework. Volleys of armour-piercing fire streaked over their heads, sent by the Long Fangs still in the shadows of the mountain. Kaerls came out in their wake, mortals clad in carapace armour and loosing their heavy projectile guns in controlled bursts. They struggled to keep pace with the Wolves in the vanguard, but Greyloc knew they were just as eager to make contact. Many were knocked from their feet by the rain of las-fire spitting across the storm-whipped earth, but most made ground, rushing to secure terrain before it was seized by the oncoming horde.

Buoyed by Sturmhart's ferocious storm whirling about him, Greyloc thundered into the first ranks of the invaders. They were mortals, decked out like his own kaerls in environment suits and shouldering lasguns. He'd already killed hundreds of such warriors since their drop-ships had first defiled his home world. Before they could loose a massed shot at him, he was amongst them, carving his way deeper into the ranks.

'Slay them!' he roared, feeling the kill-urge distort his voice with its intensity. 'Slay them all!'

He barely heard the thud and crash of impact as his retinue slammed into battle beside him, each bellowing his own oath of combat, each

tearing a channel through the Thousands Sons vanguard. Bodies were hurled into the air, limbs severed, armour ripped apart.

Grey Land Raiders lumbered from the ruined gates then, grinding over the broken terrain, laying down heavy bolter fire and sending lascannon beams scything into the sweeping tide of men and armour. More Wolves loped alongside them, Grey Hunters and Blood Claws, their armour draped with gruesome totems of death and vengeance. In the face of their sudden assault, the Thousand Sons' charge on the gates faltered.

Greyloc remained at the spear-tip. The wolf within him slavered, hungry for more killing, taking keen pleasure from the men falling beneath his talons. He kept bellowing oaths of hatred and damnation as he slew, each syllable amplified by his armour into a crescendo of savage elation.

The roars of defiance and anger were not idly made. They were part of the projection of intimidation, the wall of sound that drove lesser men mad with fear. Every blow was aimed to aching perfection, every blade-plunge was judged with accuracy, every bolter discharge was aimed with exacting precision. These Wolves hunted the way their Jarl had taught them to – fast, deadly, efficient. At their head, the White Wolf cut his way through walls of living flesh, his claws drenched in the blood of his prey, energy sluicing from his claws and crackling with cold fury.

We must make them pay for the passage of the gates.

Greyloc punched a warrior aside, breaking him in two, before launching himself at the flanks of a troop carrier trying to turn in the churned-up slush and gravel. He was in constant motion, swivelling and scything like a whole pack of predators combined into a single, terrible amalgam. He felt Sturmhart's powerful wards protect him as he went, a barrier against the flickering spells of the sorcerers. He knew the value of that protection: for this short time he was free to kill unimpeded, to bathe in the blood of those who had come to his domain to bring death.

He would use that time well.

Beneath the shadow of the gates, the two armies crunched together, one massive and ponderous, the other swift and feral. As the Fang burned, tortured by the remorseless volleys of long range fire, its slopes echoed from the sound of close combat killing at last. As men died and vehicles smouldered, as the gunships came in low for renewed attack runs, amid all the carnage of the ground assault, every warrior on the field knew the cold reality of the situation.

The noose had closed, and had begun to tighten.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Freija felt like she'd stumbled into some drug-induced trance. Her body ached from the brief firefight, and she could still feel blood trickling down her ribs. Coming down here had been insane. Three of her men had died, all to protect a bunch of scuttling half-breeds while their master did whatever he had to do in that vault. Even the awesome sight of Bjorn, a figure she'd never been quite sure was more than a myth, had only partially assuaged the sense of futility.

The Fell-Handed was just one of the Dreadnoughts roused by Arfang. Others had emerged in the time since then, marching in a procession of stately, grinding majesty. Hours had passed as more of the venerable warriors were awakened. All the while, the pack of beasts hung back in the shadows, growling and pacing. It was unclear how many there were – maybe a dozen, perhaps many more.

Freija didn't know which to be more wary of, the malshaped horrors of the Underfang or the grim, sepulchral structures of the walking dead. As the Dreadnoughts passed through the doors to the vault, they flexed giant fists and spooled up huge autocannon barrels. Even by the standards of a savage Chapter, they were fearsome in aspect. They hissed and steamed as they moved, throwing up clouds of smoke from exhausts mounted behind layers of thick armour. All were scored with old runes and draped in ancient skins, black from age and as dry as stone. As each one entered the

chamber, the air vibrated a little more from the growling judder of their engines.

Bjorn had said nothing since his arrival, and brooded alone. Every so often he'd raise his vast lightning claw and rotate the blades, as if reminding himself of something from the distant past. None of the mortals dared approach him, though the beasts did. They slunk up to him, heads low, jaws drooling. They were submissive before him, like whelps of the pack paying homage to the alpha predator.

As they crawled into the scant light of the open vault doors, Freija began to make out more of their outlines. They were a motley assortment of bestial forms, all hunched and awkward. There were glints of metal amid the fur and sinew as they moved. One wolf-shape had no visible eyes in its sleek face at all, another had steel claws, and a third had an almost human smile on its tooth-crammed jaws. All of them were gigantic, as big as the Fenrisian wolves that stalked the high places, though with none of their savage grace.

Do not watch them. They take it as a challenge.

The voice rumbled from over her shoulder, almost as deep and machine-thick as Bjorn's. Freija spun round, seeing the profile of another Dreadnought in the dark. As far as she could see, it looked much the same as the others – hulking, angular, humming with coiled menace. Perhaps this one was a little less battle scarred, a little cleaner looking, but only slightly. She could make out the rune Jner, Pride, on its massive armoured leg.

‘Thank you, lord,’ she said humbly, keeping the bitterness out of her voice. It might have been better to have been told that before she'd been asked to guard this place. The Wolves' love of exuberant danger was maddening. Why, in the name of all the Hels, were such horrors tolerated within the Aett?

The Dreadnought clumped alongside her. It stood motionless for a moment, inscrutable behind its blank fascia of ceramite. It stank of oils and exhaust fumes.

You are mortal. Why are there no Sky Warriors here?

A good question.

‘They are fully engaged, lord. The Aett is under assault.’

The Dreadnought didn’t respond immediately. Its speech was sluggish and halting.

Under assault, it repeated, as if the concept were hard to understand.

The Dreadnought sank into contemplation. A row of lights flickered along its flanks. Perhaps they were some age-slowed systems finally coming online. Every movement it made was heavy, hesitant and cumbersome.

And I thought I was bad in the morning.

An Underfang beast slunk up to them then, belly low. Freija stiffened, bringing her sidearm up.

Leave it.

Freija kept the muzzle pointed at the mass of fur and tooth. It had pale amber eyes, shining in the dark. She felt her jaw tighten.

I said, leave it.

Slowly, she lowered her weapon. The beast paid her no attention, but performed the same abasement before the Dreadnought as the others had done before Bjorn.

‘What are these things?’ she asked, staring at the bizarre scene.

You are curious.

Freija winced inwardly.

‘I am told so, lord. It is a weakness, and I will work to correct it.’

So you should.

The beast shot a single, unreadable glance at Freija, then crawled back into the gloom. As it went, she saw bands of dull metal around its foreleg.

There were steel tendons there, pistons moving smoothly as the beast walked.

They are weapons, mortal. We are all weapons. Even you, in your own way, are a weapon. Let that be enough for you.

‘Yes, lord,’ said Freija, bowing. She could feel her cheeks flushing with irritation at the evasion.

My men have died for your damned mysteries!

I am called Aldr. In life I was a Blood Claw, though the Long Sleep has... changed that.

That admission came as a surprise. Freija didn’t know what to say in reply. Making small talk with a Dreadnought was not something she’d been trained for. Russ, it was hard enough speaking to regular Space Marines.

This is my first awakening. The process is difficult. Tell me of the world of the living. That will help.

‘What do you wish to know, lord?’

There was a pause. Deep in the vaults, Arfang was still busy. Freija had no idea how many of the Revered Fallen were kept down here, nor how many more he planned to awaken. The process might nearly be over, or there might be hours still to go.

Everything, said Aldr, his ponderous voice touched with a note of eagerness. Or perhaps it was desperation. The yearning was almost childlike.

Tell me everything.

‘Fenrys hjammar koldt!’

Odain Sturmhjart bellowed out the curses until his mighty lungs were raw. He stood before the ruined Bloodfire Gate, his staff clutched in both fists, marshalling the fury of the maelstrom. The battlefield was darkening as the Fenrisian sun, that old ball of blood that gave the portal its name, sank slowly to the sawtooth horizon. The sky was already a dark wine-red,

streaked with trails of smoke and the flickering illumination of promethium fires. Hail continued to hammer down in a blur, whipped into deadly eddies by the mastery of the Rune Priest.

‘*Hjolda!*’ he roared, fangs bared, feeling the awesome power of his calling answer the summons. Lightning, ice-white and blazing with spectral energy, lanced down in the wake of the hail, ripping through enemy formations and tearing up whole columns of men and vehicles where it landed.

Ahead of him, the Wolves infantry had charged into the foremost formations of the invaders, hurling them back from the breach. Grey Hunters hacked and punched their way through whole regiments of Prosperine mortal troops, backed up by the ranged fire of the Long Fangs and the kaerl heavy weapon squads. Blood Claws raced into battle alongside them, howling in a frenzy of distilled kill-urge, flanked by growling Land Raider formations and whole rivens of kaerls. Protected and warded by Sturmhart’s peerless control of the storm, the Wolves had room to kill, and they did so eagerly. The magicks of the sorcerers in the Thousand Sons had failed to do anything to answer the Rune Priest’s onslaught in the hours since the gates had gone down, tied up as it was defending their own troops from the elemental fury.

For all that, the Fenrisian position was precarious. The Wolves fought like the demigods they were, laying waste to whole companies of mortals, but there were thousands upon thousands of troops in the enemy vanguard alone. Every so often, a massed thicket of las-beams would down a Hunter in his tracks, or a tank shell would find its mark with armour-cracking force. Each time a Sky Warrior fell, a pang of frustrated anger swelled within Sturmhart’s breast, and the swirling majesty of the storm was raised to an ever higher level of lethality.

They were losing ground. They would lose ground through the night and they would lose ground for as long as they fought into the dawn. Traitor

Marines had made their way to the front ranks and joined the battle. They were mirror opposites of the *Vlka Fenryka*, equal in deadliness but utterly different in method. Whereas the Wolves fought with an exuberant, flamboyant skill, exulting in their raw prowess, the Thousand Sons came to the battlefield silently, marching like strangely animated bronze-crested ghosts. There were already too many of them to hold back, dozens more than the defenders could bring to bear in response, and additional troops were coming into the contact zone with every hour.

Faced with such odds, the warriors of the Twelfth fought with a zeal that made Sturmhart's hearts swell with savage pride. No quarter was given, asked for or contemplated. The Wolves hurled themselves into combat with an utter disregard for anything other than the pain they could inflict on a foe they hated more than there were words to express. As the sun finally sank below the horizon, Sturmhart saw a lone Grey Hunter barrel into a whole squad of Rubric Marines, his power axe blazing in the dark before disappearing into a forest of sapphire amour. The manoeuvre cost him his life, but it gave an entire company of kaerls time to withdraw to higher ground and establish new firing positions.

It was bitter, as bitter as gall, to lose brother warriors in such a cause. Full retreat would come in time, and then the ground would be yielded to the enemy.

But they all knew the score. Every metre of stone, every rock, every patch of blackened ice, would be fought over until the blood of the enemy ran in rivers across it. Such was the way of Fenris, just as it had been since the dawn of the Imperium, just as it ever would be.

Sturmhart stole a quick glance over his shoulder, back toward the gaping gate-ruins. The proud arches slumped into rubble, studded with gigantic fallen lintel-stones like megaliths. In the light of the fires he could see squads of kaerls hurrying to the front, many carrying fresh

ammunition crates. Some of those contained boltgun magazines. Those carriers would sell their lives to get them to the Wolves on the frontline.

Sturmhart saw the look of fierce determination in their mortal eyes.

No fear. Blood of Russ, they have no fear.

Further back, under the sagging arch of the Bloodfire portal, more kaerls were working furiously in the halls beyond. Sturmhart knew what they were doing, and it chilled his heart.

It was worth it. The sacrifices were worth it. These were the fires in which faith was forged.

He turned his attention back to the battlefield. For as far as he could see, the vast causeway swarmed with the enemy. His entire visual field was filled with ranks of infantry, studded with the hulking formations of mobile armour.

Inexorably, inevitably, the enemy was driving them back to the gates.

‘You’re not here yet, you faithless bastards,’ growled Sturmhart, spinning his staff round and drawing down more power from the storm. Lightning arced through the air, tearing apart a column of lumbering troop carriers and throwing the vehicle shells high into the hail-wracked wind.

For the first time since the orbital war, Sturmhart began to feel himself again. For too long, he’d been mired in guilt and the need to atone. The failure to predict the attack had hit him hard, driving his ebullient wolf-spirit into an unfamiliar realm of doubt.

Enough. My soul lives for this.

It was cathartic, this exercise of power. As he governed the elements in the cause of righteous murder, his blood ran as hot as *mjod*. He felt the avatar of the Helix, the grey-flanked beast that prowled the corridors of his mind, flex its claws in savage pleasure.

He looked up. From out of the darkening night, a formation of enemy gunships was swooping low, engines burning and weapons spooling up to

fire. They'd failed to take him out by sorcery, and now more conventional weapons were being employed.

'Bring it on,' growled Sturmhart, summoning up the inferno that would rip the squadron out of the skies. His staff erupted in wyrdfire, possessed by power of such raw savagery it made him grin just to feel it.

By the time the gunships were in range to fire, Odain Sturmhart, High Rune Priest of the Space Wolves Chapter, was laughing with all his old, battle-tempered might.

Twelve Dreadnoughts had emerged by the time Arfang had finished his rites. They lurked in the dark, their engines drumming. The servitors fussed around them, adjusting bearings and oiling exposed metalwork. The massive machines waited patiently, like giant plains-beasts tolerating the attentions of parasite-cleaners.

'I can do no more, lord,' announced Arfang, bowing to the mightiest profile of them all. 'Both gates are now broken and under attack. Jarl Greyloc summons me to the surface again.'

Bjorn turned his torso section to face the Iron Priest.

Greyloc? Your Great Wolf?

'Jarl of the Twelfth. Only a single company remains within the Aett. The Chapter has been called to Gangava, where Magnus the Red has been located.'

There was a low growl from Bjorn at that name, a rumbling mechanical noise that emanated from his very core.

Brief me as we ascend. Your tidings anger me, Iron Priest. I should have been consulted before this was done.

The venerable Dreadnought's voice had lost its undertow of sluggishness. Gradually, painfully, the ancient intelligence within was rising to a full pitch of awareness. There was an unfamiliarity in the accent it employed, even filtered through layers of vox-generators. Each syllable

Bjorn uttered was somehow archaic, the embodiment of an age that had passed.

Freija found herself marvelling at that speech. It made her skin prickle with anticipation. It was irascible and severe, as hard as the granite roots of the mountain. But there was something else. The same quality Aldr's voice had.

They are crippled with grief. The darkness, the cold. It has entered their souls.

Arfang bowed to Bjorn in apology and took up his staff again. There was a faint click as something in his armour's mechanisms communicated a signal to the servitors. They fell into line. All of those half-human horrors had survived intact.

Not like Freija's troops. Three of them would lie in the dark at least until the surface battle was over, uncremated and without the rites being said.

Arfang shot a glance toward Freija then.

'We are heading back now, huskaerl,' he said. His voice was as metallic and clipped as ever, but there was an unhideable exhaustion there.

Whatever he'd been doing in that vault, it had tested him to his limits.

'You have come through the deep dark. My servitors are intact.'

Freija felt a surge of bitterness at that bald statement. She was surrounded by warped monsters and ghosts from the past, all of whom were utterly indifferent to anything but their own arcane concerns. Looking for the right words, she almost replied too curtly, which would, of course, have been a big mistake.

Luckily for her, Arfang's next words stopped her in her tracks. He fixed her with a direct stare, though what thoughts passed behind that scarred helm-plate were, as ever, impossible to read.

'Thank you,' he rasped curtly.

Then he turned away and stalked across the antechamber toward the tunnels. In his wake, the procession of Dreadnoughts rocked on their

servos and primed to march. With a grind of long-static gears, the giant armoured hulls swayed into line. The beasts of the Underfang, still cowed by their presence, remained in the shadows, watching the ungainly progress as it unfolded.

One of Freija's men came close to her.

‘What now, huskaerl?’ he whispered over the mission channel.

For a moment, Freija had no idea how to reply. Then she shook off her surprise at Arfang's brief concession to courtesy and snapped her *skjoldtar* into position.

‘Stay close, kaerl,’ she said. ‘Keep away from the beasts, but do not hinder them if they follow.’

Freija grimaced as she recalled what they were capable of. This whole situation was too insane for words, but there was little to do but cope with it. Above all, her squad still needed leadership.

‘They will march, as we all do,’ she said, watching Aldr's angular bulk fall into line amongst the other Dreadnoughts. ‘To war.’

The Blood Claws swept back into the attack, leaping over boulders and tearing across the broken terrain. Brakk was in the forefront, his body low, weaving between incoming las-fire. Though dawn was close, it was still dark, and the slopes leading to the Sunrising Gate were lit only by the plasma fires still streaming across the shoulders of the Fang.

‘Tired, brother?’ inquired Helfist, coming into contact range and smashing a Prosperine soldier three metres back into his terrified comrades.

‘Of you, yes,’ replied Redpelt, swinging round to gun down a line of mortals before triggering his chainsword into throaty life. ‘Otherwise, fine.’

Helfist laughed, plunging through the wavering ranks and laying about him with his crackling power fist.

‘You’d miss me,’ he said, seizing a retreating trooper and slamming him into the ground with spine-breaking momentum, ‘if I wasn’t here.’

‘Like a bolt in the arse, brother,’ grunted Redpelt, dragging his blade through the torso of one victim before whirling round to take the head off another.

Though neither would have admitted it, they were strung out. The battle had raged for hours, a terrible, meat-grinding conflict in which the Wolves had gone steadily backwards, forced towards their own ruined gates with a grim inevitability. Though the Claws had launched charge after charge, breaking the enemy with every surge, the ground could not be held. There were too many artillery columns laying down hammering curtains of fire, too many troops ready to fill the gaps.

And too many Rubric Marines. Even as Brakk’s pack surged through their mortal opposition, more sapphire giants loomed up to meet them from the dark, their power weapons glistening in the shadows.

‘Traitor filth!’ roared Helfist, powering towards them as soon he saw the hated armour-profile, lacing his voice with the vitriol reserved only for fallen brothers.

Redpelt was at his shoulder in an instant, and the two warriors crunched into the lead Rubric Marine together, slamming him back and off-balance. There was a ripple of crashes and sharp cracks as more Blood Claws launched themselves into combat, bellowing their fury with a tidal wave of fervour.

Then Brakk was among them, heaving his power sword in huge, crushing curves. The Wolf Guard remained comm-silent as ever, but his presence was immense. He squared up to a Rubric Marine and their blades came together with a heavy, resounding clang. The twin lengths of metal danced, both of them blurred with speed, hacking and parrying with astonishing control and weight.

Helfist and Redpelt maintained their own attack, driving the Rubric Marine back another pace. Redpelt thrust his chainsword low even as Helfist lunged high with his disruptor-field. If their adversary had been mortal, he'd have been dead in an instant. As it was, the Traitor swung his sword down to knock aside the buzzing chainblade before veering expertly away from Helfist's heavy punch. Righting himself, the Rubric Marine then loosed a burst of bolter fire at Redpelt, hurling the Blood Claw back and out of combat.

Helfist suddenly stood alone. For a split second he saw the face of his foe lit up by the storm. The helm-mask was ancient. Pale green witchlight bled from the lenses.

The warrior within had fought for centuries, just as passionlessly, just as skilfully. There was something horrifying about that silent visage – the irreversible corruption of what had once been the apotheosis of humanity.

For an instant, Helfist froze, stricken by the vision of what the Adeptus Astartes could become. His own reflection was visible in those terrible lenses.

‘Maleficarum!’ came a voice from close by, urgent and desperate.

A new figure slammed into the Rubric Marine, sending it tumbling out of contact. Helfist shook his head as he recovered, burning with shame.

It would have killed me.

He powered back into action. Brakk had been the one who'd saved him. Isolated and out of position, the Wolf Guard now took on three Rubric Marines single-handedly, including the one who'd frozen Helfist. The old warrior fought like a berserker of old, laying about him with the dread blade Dausvjer, his charred pelts flailing. His free fist punched out, shattering the snake-mask of a Traitor as his sword carved deep into another's armour.

‘Blood of Russ!’ yelled Helfist, rushing to his aid, feeling the force in his power fist explode again into roaring life.

He arrived in time to see Brakk cut apart, his helm-plate blasted into pieces by close-range bolter-fire as the third Rubric Marine stabbed his blade in deep below the breastplate. More Traitors piled in soundlessly, hacking and slicing like butchers, as impassive in victory as they were in defeat.

‘Morkai!’

Helfist burst amongst them, overcome with a flood of horror and grief. The wolf within him screamed, its jaws wide and eyes rolling. His vision went red, ringed with black, spiked stars. He forgot his training, forgot his technique, forgot everything but madness. He only felt his limbs moving, striking out with horrible, unnatural speed. He saw Rubric Marines scatter under his blows, ripped into dust-blown husks by his crushing strikes.

Somewhere deep within, lips were pulled back from yellow teeth.

‘Kyr!’

It might have been seconds, it might have been minutes. The combat claimed him, warping him into a maniacal engine of death. He killed, and killed, and killed.

‘Kyr!’

The sounds of battle disappeared into a single roar of insanity, a continuum of bestial rage. He was the Wolf. The Wolf was him. The barrier had fallen.

‘*Kyr!*’

A new opponent loomed up in front of him, vast as a mountain, its eyes blazing red. Helfist tensed to spring, ready to rip the monster’s throat out with his teeth, to bathe in hot blood, to drink it down and quench the burning pain...

A vast gauntlet clamped on to his bolter-arm, holding it steady. For a second, Helfist still pressed forwards, consumed by kill-rage, lost in the frenzy of bloodletting.

‘Kyr. Brother. Come back.’

The voice was firm, unyielding.

Helfist's vision cleared. He was restrained by a hulking Wolf Guard in gunmetal-grey Terminator plate. Tromm Rossek, his helm-lenses as red as heart-blood, his chainfist ready to end him. All around the pair of them were the destroyed shells of Rubric Marines. Their armour-plates were scattered as if a hurricane had cut through the squad.

Helfist's blood was still pumping. The horror was still raw. The Wolf still called him back, still beckoned him into the embrace of sweet madness.

'He is gone, Blood Claw. Now we withdraw. I will not see more warriors wasted under my watch.'

The voice was thick with grief. It brooked no defiance.

How much time had passed in that mad rage? Helfist glanced at his helm-display. His squad had been mauled. Even now, more enemy signals were closing on their position, drawn by the carnage.

'If you stay, the Wolf will claim you.'

Helfist knew it was true. He'd never been so close. Redpelt and he had laughed about the Wulfen before, cracked coarse jokes about the mad howlers when out of earshot of the Priests.

Now he'd seen it. Now he'd seen what he could become.

Helfist released the disruption field around his fist, and the energy crackled out. Brakk's body lay, broken, at his feet. He had stood over it, lost in a mania of kill-urge. The frenzy had passed now, and he felt drained.

Sick.

He stooped and retrieved the blade Dausvjer from the Wolf Guard's stiff grasp. It was bloodless, used only against the empty shells of Traitor Marines. This, at least, would be recovered.

Rossek nodded in approval, then stomped away, back to the gates. All around them, the Wolves were falling back. The causeways were lost.

Shakily, his soul harrowed with shock and misery, Helfist turned to follow the Wolf Guard. As he did so, Redpelt limped up to him. The Blood Claw's breastplate was cracked open and punched with bolter holes. His breath was wet and rattling, as if blood still bubbled up into his mouth.

He laid his gauntlet clumsily on Helfist's shoulder.

'Brother,' he said.

In the past, after conflict, the two Blood Claws had always made light of what they'd seen. It was their way, their homage to the vital energy that pulsed through their gene-enhanced veins.

Not this time. When Redpelt spoke, the only emotion there was awe – a horrified, wary awe.

The retreat had been well planned, and there was no panic when it came. The kaerls broke first, streaming back to the uncertain shelter of the ruined gates, plagued by constant fire slamming into their backs. The Wolves came after them, faces turned to the enemy, firing from the waist and ready to punish any overeager attempt to rush them. Wyrdblade's Wolf Priests, only four in number including the old dog himself, lingered the longest, retrieving all the gene-seed they could before falling back. Long Fang squads stepped up the volume of covering ordnance, but it was painfully insufficient. The emplacements on the cliffs around the gates had mostly gone, shot out by the volume of incoming shells and las-beams from enemy artillery positions.

Though the vanguard of the Thousand Sons had been badly mutilated by the ferocity of the disruptive sortie, sheer pressure of numbers meant it retained cohesion. As the approaches to the massive gates were finally overrun, troop carriers ground their way to the front, disgorging yet more companies of mortal soldiers into the battlezone. In their midst strode the Rubric Marines, now in their hundreds, guided by the hidden sorcerers at their backs. With Sturmhart and Cloudbreaker's withdrawal, the field was clear for them once more, and glittering kine-shields arced over the

advancing ranks. The storm that had done so much damage began to ebb and gust out.

Greyloc watched as the last of his forces made the cover of the Sunrising Gate and disappeared within the Fang. He stood on an outcrop of piled stonework just under the lee of the breach. His claws still hummed with energy. Both hearts thumped, and his breath was ragged. He'd fought hard, perhaps more so than any of his warriors. As ever, the temptation had been to give in to the joy of it, to forget the strategic demands of the battle and glory in the immediate thrill of the hunt.

I am Jarl. Such things should be beneath me now.

Perhaps he overcompensated. He knew his reputation among the Blood Claws, and possibly strove too hard to correct the image of cold bloodedness. If so, that was unworthy too.

In any case, he'd given the order at last. The causeways had been emptied of his troops, and now the enemy swarmed toward the open doors of the Fang. The closest of them were only a few hundred metres distant. A price had been extracted for their assault up the slopes, but only fate would tell whether it had been enough.

'How stands Bloodfire?' Greyloc voxed calmly, watching the front ranks of the enemy sweep towards him.

'Clear, Jarl,' came Skrieya's reply from the far side of the mountain.

'Good. You have command there.'

With a final gesture of defiance, he withdrew at last from his position and loped down into the vast maw of the gates.

Once in cover again, he went swiftly, running from the ruined areas into the vaulted spaces of the entrance halls. Massive statues passed by in the flickering dark, stern-faced warriors of old lining the passage into the mountain. Runes of intimidation and destruction had been carved deep into the living rock above them. Never had a living foe seen those figures, nor set foot on the hallowed portals. In moments, though, hundreds of the

enemy would surge past the graven images, racing to complete what they'd started on the causeways.

No defenders would oppose them there. The halls were empty. No barricades had been raised, no fire pits dug, no gun-emplacements mounted. As Greyloc sped into the heart of the mountain, only his heavy treads resounded from the rough floor.

After a kilometre, the tunnel ended and Greyloc burst into a high vaulted chamber lit with roaring hearthfires. This was the division of the ways, where the single entry route running into the Fang branched off into other corridors and elevator shafts. The great seal of Russ hung from a gigantic chain in the centre of it.

Here the defenders waited. There were Rossek, Cloudbreaker, Rojk and Wyrmlade. All stood defiant, waiting for the arrival of their lord. The surviving Wolves were there too, reloading weapons and making hasty repairs to their armour. Further back, mortal troops bustled back and forth, doing their best to meet the expectations of the unforgiving huskaerls. Stretcher-bearers went among them, hauling the wounded away from the front and deep into the heart of the citadel. Box-guns rotated into firing positions, their squat barrels locked on the arch Greyloc had just come through.

None of those things caught Greyloc's attention as he entered the chamber. One figure alone dominated the massive space, reducing even the Terminator-clad warriors around him to pale, childlike shadows. In the centre of the hall, directly under Russ's seal, was the legend.

As he laid eyes on Bjorn, Greyloc felt hope leap in his heart again.

With no thought of honour or entitlement, he fell to his knees.

'You answered the call, lord,' he said, and there was joy in that weary voice.

The Dreadnought lowered its claw and ponderously beckoned him to rise.

You are Jarl Greyloc?

‘I am,’ said the Wolf Lord, getting to his feet.

And you plan to make your stand here?

As Bjorn spoke, the first sounds of pursuit began to come down the corridor behind Greyloc, distorted by the echoing chambers beyond. There were thousands of footfalls in the distance, a crescendo of aggressive battle cries, all from troops intent on resuming the slaughter they’d been denied by the Wolves’ retreat.

‘I do not.’

Bjorn said nothing, but inclined his torso fractionally in an almost-human gesture of questioning. Greyloc smiled, and nodded to Wyrmlblade.

‘Now, Thar,’ he said.

The Wolf Priest took up a detonator and depressed the control rune.

The explosions boomed out instantly. Fireballs erupted all along the kilometre-long tunnels, breaking the rock shells around them and caving them in. The sharp bang of detonation was quickly replaced by the rolling roar of the heavy roof sections falling in, burying any invaders that had made it inside.

A bow-wave of rubble flew into the chamber of the seal, carrying the last screams of the crushed on its wings. Outside the Fang, huge columns of black dust rose from the collapsed Bloodfire and Sunrising Gates. Loosened rocks around the portal entrances rolled down the slopes, causing havoc in the companies of soldiers preparing to follow their comrades in.

The flanks of the mountain shook. There were a few last, grudging booms from deep within. Then the dustclouds drifted into the night, ripped into shreds by the dying stormwind.

The Fang was sealed.

Bjorn looked down at Greyloc. The Wolf Lord looked back.

Nicely done, said Bjorn.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gangava Prime. A dark world, far from its giant red star. As the solar terminator swept across the rust-red planetscape, the night-side sank deep into occlusion. There were pinpricks of artificial light all across the shadowed hemisphere, but they concentrated into a bright cluster towards the high northern latitude. Swirls of sulphur-yellow picked out a city. A vast, sprawling city.

From the bridge of the *Russvangum*, Ironhelm watched the lights wink on far below. The inhabitants of that place knew that the Wolves had arrived. They had detectors, sensor-arrays and void shields raised. The entire Chapter fleet, minus the few guard-ships left on Fenris, was now in high orbit. The firepower assembled there was immense, as great as anything pulled together during the Great Scouring. Gangava had no orbital defences, but they would have been an irrelevance anyway. Lean strike cruisers and ploughshare-bowed destroyers now prowled across the void with impunity, poised to unleash Hel on the world below them.

The Great Wolf felt a mix of emotions, looking down on the city he was about to destroy. He'd slept badly during the twenty-one days in the warp. Magnus had come to him in his dreams regularly, goading him, taunting his failure to catch up with him over the decades. Ironhelm hadn't seen the face of the primarch, just as he hadn't seen it over the many years of prior visitations.

But he had heard the voice. An unforgettable voice. Proud, powerful, cultivated, but with a touch of petulance that wasn't quite under control. For all his primarch's qualities, he now came across as a diminished, querulous presence.

My gene-father broke your back, monster.

Magnus had smirked at such defiance, but there was a residue of pain there. Real, mortal pain.

Brooding over the real space viewers in his private chambers, Ironhelm felt his fingers itch within their gauntlets. The journey had been too long. Only hours now remained before the drop pods would begin to fall, accelerating into a hail of dark seeds from the void, all aimed beyond the cover of the city's shields.

Ironhelm saw the ingress routes in his mind's eye. They were available at any time from his helm-display, but he knew he'd not have to use that. He could visualise all aspects of the battle as it would unfold. If he closed his eyes, the tactical outline would still be there, a pattern of hololith lines and deployment runes overlaid on the streets of the vast city.

Many in the galaxy believed that the Space Wolves were simply feral barbarians, brutes who charged headlong into battle yelling incomprehensible curses. Only later, when they found their supply lines severed, their comms jammed and their allies breaking out in rebellion behind them did they discover the weakness of that interpretation. Planning was everything, the coordination of pack movements, the encirclement of the prey, the cleanliness of the kill.

The Wolves were savage, but not savages. Gangava would be destroyed swiftly and without indulgence. Primarch or no, Magnus would come to regret his decision to establish himself within strike distance of Fenris.

There was a chime from the wall-unit behind him.

'Come,' Ironhelm said, without turning.

He heard the heavy treads of Kjarlskar, together with the marginally lighter ones of Rune Priest Frei. The two armoured giants came to stand alongside the Great Wolf.

‘All is prepared?’ asked Ironhelm, his gaze still fixed on the planet below.

‘As you commanded,’ said Kjarlskar. ‘Nine Great Companies are primed for first-wave assaults; the reserves are ready when needed.’

‘And word from Fenris?’

‘Scheduled astropathic updates,’ said Frei. ‘No news. I think they’re bored.’

Ironhelm laughed harshly.

‘Too bad. We’ll bring back trophies for them.’

Kjarlskar took a step closer to the viewers. His forces had been in orbit above the city for twenty-eight days. Ironhelm knew the Wolf Lord had been desperate to launch an attack during that time, but he’d followed his orders to maintain the blockade. Until the entire fleet had been mustered, not so much as a single bolter had been fired in anger.

‘You still sense him, Frei?’ Kjarlskar asked.

The Rune Priest nodded.

‘He’s down there. Just as he has been for weeks.’

Kjarlskar frowned.

‘Why so passive? This I will never understand.’

‘It was the same on Prospero,’ said Ironhelm calmly. ‘He trusts in sorcery to protect him, that we’ll be daunted by a few spells. It is inconceivable to him that anything, even the Rout, could threaten him in a citadel of his own making.’

‘And can we?’

Ironhelm turned to face the Jarl of the Fourth.

‘You sound doubtful, Arvek. I do not like that, not on the eve of battle.’

Kjarlskar wasn't intimidated by Ironhelm's tone. He was too old, too battle-wily, to care much about prestige or reputation.

'Don't intimate fear to me, lord, or even unwillingness – I would fight alongside you beyond the doors of Hel, and you know it. I just make explicit the question we all leave unsaid.' He returned his master's gaze evenly. 'Have mortals ever killed a primarch in battle? Can it even be done?'

Ironhelm didn't waver in his response.

'I do not know, my friend,' he replied. 'Though before this is done, one way or another, the question will be answered.'

Another day dawned across the frigid wastes of Asaheim. The exterior of the Fang presented a charred, diminished aspect. The barrage of plasma from orbit had ceased, its work done. The rain of offensive artillery had also given out, as no defensive batteries still remained on the surface of the mountain to trouble them.

Smoke rose in dreary columns from the blackened rock walls. With the passing of the wyrd-summoned storm, the full extent of the devastation was illuminated by crisp morning sunlight.

The Thousand Sons now controlled both causeways. Their troops moved at will across the wide expanses of stone. Broken companies recovered their shape. Supplies were brought up to the battlefield and casualties taken away from it. More tanks crawled up the slopes, now free of interference from the defenders. The mountain stood alone, surrounded by a carpet of besiegers, its inhabitants buried deep in its interior. Except for the landing platforms still visible at the very summit, it could have been any other peak of Asaheim, lifeless and desolate.

As the sun climbed into the sky, Aphael made his way to an observation platform a kilometre from the scorched citadel. The cold was getting to him. His constitution should have made him functionally immune to such

climatic extremes, especially when sealed in his armour, but still he shivered.

He knew the cause of it. The flesh-change was gaining speed. Aphael doubted whether he could take his helm off now even if he wanted to. The muscles in his fingers pressed painfully against the inside of his gauntlets. He was being altered. The initial response – disbelief – had given way to a fearful kind of resignation.

There would be some purpose behind the transformation. There was always some purpose. He just didn't know what it was yet.

The platform was ringed by Rubric Marines. Few of them had died in the assault on the gates, though hundreds of mortals had perished. The savagery of the Wolves had been expected, and Aphael had used the vast forces at his command to blunt their peerless martial prowess. An individual Space Wolf was arguably the finest exponent of close combat in the galaxy, but even he could only kill a finite number of foes before being brought down.

Hett was waiting for him on the platform. His robes were ripped and charred from where his Rubric Marine squad had run into trouble. Aphael had heard stories of some of the Wolves descending into berserk rages and slaughtering dozens before they could be finished off. If so, that was all good. He had the troops to spare, and the lapses indicated the mental stress the Dogs were under.

‘A good night's work, eh, Ramsez?’

The Raptora inclined his head in greeting.

‘For you, perhaps. I lost my Rubricae. Some crazed boy-Dog, going mad at the death of his mentor.’

‘Then you'll have to take responsibility for some more, my friend.’

Aphael cast his gaze over to the smoking mountain. The once pristine cliffs were now a dirty brown. Fires still burned across the causeways

where promethium had ignited. The stunning vista had already been turned into a cauldron of devastation.

We have achieved so much already, Dogs. Now watch as we defile your world some more.

‘It astonishes me,’ mused Hett, looking at the same view, ‘how quickly the Dogs are able to kill. I have never seen fighting like it. Any other force in the galaxy would have hidden behind those walls, waiting for us to come to them. Yet they met us in the open, fighting like daemons. What drives them? What makes them the way they are?’

Aphael shrugged.

‘Do I detect admiration, brother?’ he asked. ‘If so, it is misplaced. They were made to do the dirty work no other Legion would do. They are the exterminators, the vermin control of the Imperium. They cannot change, and they cannot improve. Just like us, they are imprisoned in the image of their primarch.’

At the mention of Russ, Hett made a warding gesture. Aphael laughed harshly.

‘Do not fear – he cannot come to their aid now, as you well know.’

Both sorcerers fell silent. Far below the platform, more heavily armoured vehicles were crawling their way through the ranks. They were of an ancient and obscure design, though a historian of the Imperial military would have been able to detect the faint emblem of the Legio Cybernetica on their flanks.

‘So what now?’ asked Hett.

‘It is as I said before, brother,’ replied Aphael, watching the vehicles with distracted interest. The feathers at his neck were irritating him. ‘The Cataphracts will be deployed. The Dogs have chosen to go to ground.’

Aphael took a deep, combat weary breath then, feeling the sharpness of the air even through the filters.

‘And we, my friend, have chosen to drill them out.’

Blackwing had resumed his place on the command throne of the *Nauro*. Neiman was back navigating the ship in his isolated chambers, and the remaining kaerls were at their stations. The course had been maintained, still at full speed despite the engines haemorrhaging fuel and coolant.

A standard Terran day had passed since the encounter with the Thousand Sons sorcerer and his mute bodyguard. It was a meaningless period of time, neither corresponding to the Fenrisian diurnal cycle nor the natural rhythm of a starship, but the crewmen clung to it nonetheless, perhaps thinking that something of their essential humanity was reflected in it.

Whatever the reason, twenty-four hours had still not been long enough for the *Nauro* to recover its equilibrium. Blackwing's command reputation had taken a hit. All the kaerls he'd taken with him on the hunt had died, and the whole crew was aware that it had only been the fortuitous use of the Navigator's deadly warp eye that had saved his hide. In the normal run of things, perhaps even that wouldn't have damaged Blackwing's standing much with the ratings, but everyone was exhausted, run ragged by the endless demands placed on them. So it was that the muttering had begun, quiet enough for the whisperers to feel secure, but loud enough for Blackwing's animal-sharp hearing to catch what was being said.

The gossip and moaning didn't bother him. What did was the fact that he'd been so comprehensively out-fought by a badly wounded spellcaster and a single warrior in power armour. The encounter should have gone better. He had been in his element, stalking in the shadows like a Wolf Scout should. He should have detected the intruders sooner, laid some ambush for them and caught them just as he'd been caught.

The fact he'd stumbled into the firefight so brazenly was worse than sloppy. It was embarrassing.

At the least, Allfather be thanked, it had not ended worse for him. The Rubric Marine had been half-destroyed by the Navigator's baleful gaze. When the sorcerer had been killed in turn, the last of its animating genius had been removed and the lumbering warrior-drone had slumped into

inaction. The engines had consumed their remains, turning the corrupted metal and broken flesh into just one more piece of fuel for the hungry furnaces.

Blackwing had spent a lot of time thinking about the two stowaways since then. The sorcerer's body, though crippled by a botched transport, was much the same as his – extended physiology, a broad, stocky frame with overdeveloped musculature and enhanced organs. In many ways, the sorcerer's corpse had been closer to the Adeptus Astartes ideal than Blackwing's own, with his rangy, loping frame and Helix-derived peculiarities.

But the Rubric Marine... that had been strange. Underneath the shattered armour, there was nothing. No flesh, no bones, just a smattering of grey dust. Blackwing had heard the stories, of course. The Wolf Priests had declaimed sagas of the bloodless remnants of Magnus's Legion, cursed by the dark sorcery of the faithless Ahriman to march to war forever with their souls destroyed, so he shouldn't have been surprised. He should have found it routine, just another quirk of the galaxy's tortuous, tragic history.

But he couldn't stop thinking about it. For some reason, the notion that Space Marines could mutilate themselves so completely, just to avoid an inexorable flaw in their constitution, was abhorrent to him. There were some things that just had to be dealt with. For the Sons of Russ, it was the Wulfen, the dark spectre of the Wolf that hunted in all of them.

Perhaps the Thousand Sons had suffered from some similar flaw. If so, they hadn't stood up to it like men, but had turned themselves into monsters. The longer Blackwing contemplated it, the more it horrified him.

That's the difference. We are all corrupted, the old Legions, but the Wolves didn't run away. We face it, every day. We keep the danger close to us, use it to make us strong. Whatever else we do, we must remember that.

‘Lord.’

Blackwing shook himself out of his introspection. Georyth was standing before him on the command platform. Like all the ship's mortals, he looked terrible. His uniform was crumpled, and there were dark rings under his eyes.

'Speak,' drawled Blackwing, feeling hollow himself. He'd been awake for days.

'Secondary search has been completed. No further anomalies detected on any decks.'

'Good. And the engines?'

Georyth let out a long breath.

'I've got crews on triple rotation. We're keeping the worst of the fires back, but I don't know for how much longer.'

'We need six days.'

'I know. If we had more men...' he trailed off. 'But we don't.'

Was that a dig at him? Would Georyth have asked for those dead kaerls to be pressed into engine duty? Blackwing felt his hairs prickle with annoyance.

'That's right, Master,' he said. 'We don't have enough men. We don't have enough anti-flamm, we don't have enough parts for the damaged plasma drive, and we've got a cracking Geller generator. All these things I know, so I don't need to hear them repeated. I need you to tell me things I don't know. Have you anything further to say?'

The Master let a rare flash of belligerence pass across his face. In his state of fatigue, he was ready to lash out at almost anything.

'You know my advice, lord,' he said coldly.

So he was still advocating the void-flush. The fact he'd offered it up twice was itself proof of Blackwing's flagging authority.

Suddenly, Blackwing realised that the thralls manning the bridge below the command platform were listening intently. Georyth was speaking for all of them. This was something they'd planned.

A cold sensation passed through him. The implications of that were serious.

‘I do know your advice,’ he answered. He spoke clearly, knowing he could be heard all across the bridge, and let a low, snagging growl undercut the speech. He fixed his pin-pupil eyes on Georyth and pulled his scarred lips back to reveal his fangs. ‘Perhaps my earlier guidance on the matter was not sufficiently clear. This ship has one purpose: to deliver the message to Wolf Lord Harek Ironhelm on Gangava and recall his forces to Fenris. I do not care whether it does so with all the daemons of Hel crawling through the pipework, or if we have to feed our thralls to the furnace to maintain the current speed. Hel, I don’t even care anymore if it’s me that hands over the message. But we will get there, and we will get there on time.’

Blackwing leaned forwards in his throne, raising a claw to point directly at Georyth. The look of menace on the Scout’s face made the Master visibly blench.

‘And know this. I am lord of this vessel. It exists by my will. Its wyrd is in my hands, as are all of yours. If I detect any effort to subvert that will, to turn this ship against its ordained purpose, then I will not hesitate to bring down the full quotient of pain upon you. We will maintain speed. We will maintain the repair programme. We will not fall out of the warp. Is that clear?’

The Master nodded hurriedly, his face white with fear. The tentative measures he’d taken to transmit some indication of crew dissatisfaction had backfired badly.

Blackwing smiled, but it was not a kindly gesture.

‘Good,’ he said, letting his voice fall to a level only the two of them could hear. The growl of threat still reverberated in his voice, a mere echo of the savagery he could bring to bear if he chose. ‘Between the two of us, we may speak even more plainly. Perhaps you will pass the sentiment on

to the rest of the crew. The first mortal to consider mutiny on this ship will find a close welcome under my claws. I will tear his skin from his body and use the hide to plug the gaps in our hull. It won't help our integrity much, but it will make me feel better.'

He leaned back against the hard steel of the throne.

'Now go,' he snarled, 'and find a way to keep us alive for another six days.'

A figure had formed over the altar. It was not entirely substantial; Temekh could see the far side of the summoning chamber through translucent skin. More troublingly, it was not quite what he'd been anticipating. It was not the icon of a flaming eye that his dreams had promised, nor was it the mammoth profile of a primarch, clad in red and gold with a towering helm.

It was a child. A red-haired boy, wearing a white shift, looking painfully immature.

'Lord,' said Temekh, descending through the Enumerations gracefully.

His work was not over, and there were many days of trial still to come, but the hardest part was over. In the absence of Aphael's interruptions, much progress had been made.

'My son,' replied the child.

'You do not look quite as I expected.'

'How did you expect me to look?'

Temekh found comfort in the familiar dialectical speech. He'd learned a long time ago not to place much faith in visual appearances. The way a man spoke, however, was hard to imitate.

'Much like you appear in the Tower. I'm not sure the Wolves will find this aspect... threatening.'

The boy smiled, and the skin around his closed eye creased.

'And what makes you think my image on the Planet of Sorcerers has any special veridicality? You are Corvidae, Ahmuz. You know that what we see

depends, in large part, on what we want to see.'

'Maybe. In that case, I wanted to see some reflection of your true power.'

'Look harder.'

Temekh concentrated. Perhaps this was some kind of test. If it was, he didn't understand it. The child looked as unassuming as milk, though the steady, single eye and adult mode of expression were disconcerting.

'I think you are only a fragment, lord,' he said at last. 'A possibility. Despite my work, you represent only the first steps on a journey.'

'Very good,' said the child. 'Much of me remains on Gangava. It must be so, or the illusion will fracture.'

Temekh frowned.

'I do not understand this, lord. I have tried, but the fundamentals elude me.'

The child didn't look perturbed by that.

'Ahriman was the same. For all his gifts, he chose the wrong solution. There is no succour in remaining static, in trying to fight the power of the Ocean with spells. What has he brought us? Empty husks, slaved to sorcerers. There is a higher truth about our transformation, one that we need to learn to embrace.'

'To be everywhere, and nowhere.'

'I'm glad you remember.'

'I remember the terms you use. I still don't understand them.'

The child shrugged.

'There is time for you to learn, and for Hett, and Czamine, and the others. Once the distractions of this episode are over, we shall have the leisure to begin again.'

Temekh paused then, struck by an unwelcome thought.

'You do not mention Aphael.'

'Why should I?'

‘He is the greatest of us, the most powerful of those who refused Ahriman.’

‘And he will become more powerful still, more than he can possibly imagine, but I did not reach this level of emergence to discuss his fate.’

‘No. I didn’t think so.’

‘I came to encourage you. I have invested much in you, Ahmuz Temekh. The fleet and army we have assembled will wither away soon enough – this is its only purpose, and after that our goals will be different.’

The child smiled. The gesture was simple, but it conveyed a whole host of subtle emotion. Pride, perhaps, and recrimination, but mostly regret.

‘Do not fail me, Ahmuz,’ said Magnus softly. ‘It is a grave matter, for a son to fail the father.’

‘I will not, lord,’ said Temekh, knowing to what his primarch referred and speaking earnestly in his turn. ‘That lesson, at least, has been well learned.’

Over Gangava, the hour finally came, and comm-signals were sent throughout the fleet. Seamlessly, without fuss or fanfare, the shields over the launch portals of the warships flickered out. Waves of drop pods flew out of the launch tubes, hurtling down into the atmosphere and blazing like comets. Thunderhawk gunships followed in arrow-shaped squadrons, spiralling down at phenomenal speeds, their angular prows dipped steeply as they plunged through the ever-thickening air. Behind them came heavier drop-ships, falling fast and manoeuvring with the aid of jetting thrusters. All were decked in the grey of the Space Wolves, bearing black-and-yellow banding and the crest of the snarling muzzle on their flanks.

There were dozens of deployment zones, all beyond the shielded perimeter of the city. Ironhelm had overwhelming force at his command and had allocated his troops accordingly. There were three principal targets. Massive power generating facilities had been detected in the north-west quarter of the urban sprawl, and two Great Companies had been assigned to their destruction. Another two Companies had been deployed

to strike at the city's void shield projectors, situated in the south-west and surrounded by heavy defensive formations.

The centre of the giant city, though, was the main prize. A whole district, many tens of kilometres across, had been constructed in the image of Tizca, with pyramids rising high into the dust-thick air. They weren't the gleaming silver edifices that had glittered under the pale skies of Prospero, though. On Gangava, the industrial filth clung to their sides, turning the surfaces the same dirty red as the rest of the planet. From space they looked almost organic, like strangely geometric mountains looming above the chaotic tangle of hab-blocks and manufactoria around them.

Magnus was in those pyramids. Frei had confirmed it again. All the Chapter's Rune Priests could sense it, could feel the terrible presence lurking under the greatest of the structures, polluting the wyrd like a slick of oil on water. Ironhelm led the assault on that central target, taking five whole Great Companies and the majority of the Chapter's Rune Priests in a spearhead of colossal firepower. Their landfall was directly to the east of the void shield fringes, a hundred-kilometre slog away from the heavily defended heart of the city.

The fleet Tacticae had estimated that hundreds of thousands of troops, possibly millions if the civilians had all been armed, were hunkered down behind extensive fortifications and protected by gun emplacements. Augurs had picked up the movement of mobile artillery pieces moving through the streets in convoy, clogging choke-points and blocking passage along the main highways. Whatever forces Magnus had been assembling were clearly well-armed and ready for action, despite their lack of orbital cover.

Intercepted comms traffic had given some idea of the defensive strategy. The orders had been encoded, but many of the ciphers had been cracked during Kjarlskar's blockade and little remained unknown to the attacking commanders. From the interceptions, it was clear that the Gangavans knew

full well the fury that awaited them. Their only response lay in numbers. Huge numbers. They couldn't hope to take on the Wolves in combat, but instead planned to wear the invaders down through sheer inertia, dragging them into tar-pits where thousands of dug-in mortars and lasguns would present – so they hoped – a whole series of killing-zones.

The Gangavans also talked, in hushed tones of horror and fear, of what was in the pyramids. Over and over again, the vox-chatter had referred to the Bane of the Wolves. The expression had brought a wry grin to Ironhelm's battered face the first time he'd heard it.

'Bane of the Wolves? He's gone in for melodrama in his old age.'

That had brought a laugh when he'd said it, up on the command bridge of the *Russvangum* surrounded by his Jarls, but the time for laughing had now passed. Every warrior in the first wave had gone about his purpose with a cold, clear attention to detail. Rites of hatred were performed with close attention, manes of unruly hair were lacquered down ready to take battle-helms, bolters were carefully checked and reverently stowed. There were no smiles, no raucous banter from the Blood Claws, no casual joking from the Long Fangs. All of them knew what this prey was worth.

Then the drop pods had begun to fall, scything down through atmospheric turbulence and sporadic anti-aircraft fire from the glittering suburbs beneath.

Ironhelm's own drop pod, christened *Hekjarr*, was one of the first to come down in the eastern landing zone. It threw up a giant cloud of red muck as it made planetfall, the adamantium structure still furnace-hot from the atmospheric descent. With a hiss, the hatch bolts blew, sending the outer shell-segments slamming down against the impact-crater sides. Bolters descended from the roof-space and barked into action even as the restraint harnesses flew up and cracked back into their cradles.

As the bands of metal that held Ironhelm were withdrawn, the Great Wolf thundered down the ramp and on to the soil of Gangava. The night

sky was the colour of old blood, striated with the dark tracks of his Chapter's vehicles plummeting into range. There were buildings all around him, huge black spires of iron that jutted upwards, linked with bridges and mass transit tubes. Spotter lights whirled, trying valiantly to give the defensive gunners something to aim at, and there were wailing klaxons somewhere far off. Already the broken hammering of heavy weapons fire had started up close to his position, echoing from the precipitous flanks of the structures around him.

Ironhelm breathed deeply, enjoying the familiar sounds and aromas of war as they filtered through his helm. Kill-urge was already pumping around his system, priming him for the extreme and sustained violence to come.

‘So we come to it at last, brothers,’ he growled, hefting his frostblade and thumbing the energy field into life. ‘Let the killing begin.’



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Fangthane rang with activity. The sacred space was filled with the hoarse cries of thralls as they hurried to do their masters' bidding. Ever more crates of armour-piercing shells were unloaded from rattling transports and stacked neatly behind the heavy bolter turrets and box-guns. The barricade across the western end of the gigantic hall edged closer to completion.

Morek looked at it grimly. He'd heard the reports of the enemy, and had a rough idea of their powers. Such barricades and gun-lines would do little but slow them down. In the past he'd have trusted the Sky Warriors to hold almost anything back, but they'd already been bloodied twice. In the light of that, he wasn't sure what he knew any more.

Morek shook his head, trying to rid himself of the depressive emotions that had clutched at him since the journey to the fleshmakers. All around him, a makeshift field hospital had been organised. At the east end of the hall, under the gaze of the huge statue of Russ, lines of metal beds had been laid out in rows.

Just like the vials on Wyrmlade's table.

The beds were reserved for mortals; the Space Marines were taken into the dedicated surgeries high up in the Jarlheim. As he walked down the aisles, Morek saw the twisted expressions of agony on the faces of the wounded. Fleshmaker thralls worked quickly and expertly, stitching and

cauterising. Their methods were effective, but made few concessions to pain relief. Morek saw ice-tough Fenrisians, hardened to trial and deprivation, weeping in agony as they were carved open by the steel blades.

One man was in the process of losing a leg just below the hip. If he survived it he'd have a basic augmetic limb attached in time, but he'd play no further part in the battle. Morek watched the man grimace as the knives went in. The patient was groggy with numbing agents, but still conscious enough to know what was happening. His jaw was clenched tight, the muscles strung out. As the fleshmakers did their work, he gripped the sides of the bed, knuckles bone-white and shivering.

Morek looked away. There were moans and low, wracking sobs everywhere. Hundreds had been prepped for the knives. Hundreds more still lay out on the causeways, their bodies already frozen. For the first time since the battle had started, Morek found himself glad that Freija had been taken down into the Underfang by the Iron Priest rather than thrown into the first rank of the battlefront.

The two of them had only spoken once since her return from the lower levels. Duty had called them both away after that, so the time together was short.

Morek recalled the embrace they'd shared. He'd clutched her tight, feeling her stocky body safe in his arms again. He'd been unwilling to let her go.

Did she need me then? Or did I need her?

'Are you well, father?' she'd asked, looking into his eyes with concern.

'As ever, daughter,' he'd replied.

'Something has happened?'

Morek laughed.

'War has happened.'

They'd exchanged a few words after that, a mere handful before she was called back by the Dreadnought that shadowed her.

'I'm assigned to him now, father.'

It almost sounded like she was proud of that. She'd never been proud before, not to work for a Sky Warrior.

'What need can he have of mortals?'

Freija shook her head.

'I don't know. But he does. They are strange. Some things they remember like a skjald does. Other things they forget. I help him with those.'

Morek looked into her earnest, blunt face. Her blonde hair had fallen over her eyes, just as it used to do when she was a girl. He had to stop himself smoothing it back. Her mother had always told him not to. He found words tumbling, unbidden, into his mind.

You are all I have now! My only link to her, who was so beautiful and fierce. Be careful, my daughter – watch what you say, watch what you do. Preserve yourself. Let the Aett and all its chambers be consumed by fire, if only you are preserved!

But he didn't say that. He kissed her on the forehead.

'Stay in vox-contact, when you can.'

'I will, father. The Hand of Russ ward you.'

'May it ward us all.'

Then she'd gone, trotting after that Dreadnought, the one they called Aldr Forkblade.

Morek sighed and looked up at the statue rearing above him, trying to banish the memory. The massive image of Russ was there as it had been before, feet braced, face contorted into a snarl. His features were those of a true wolf – distended jawline, pronounced fangs, pinned pupils.

It had been ten days since Jarl Greyloc had stood beneath that mighty frame and roused the Aett into defiant fury. Above it all, Leman Russ had

stood, his spirit watching over them.

Do you know? Do you know, lord, what is being done here to your sons? Does your gaze penetrate to the halls of the Priests? And do you condone it?

The stone gave no answer. There was nothing but a grimace of kill-urge on those immobile features.

Then, from the far end of the hospital, a commotion. A huge warrior in coal-black plate had returned from the front. His armour was scorched and dented, the pelts ripped from it. He stormed past the rows of beds, and a gaggle of thralls struggled to keep pace with him.

Wyrmlblade had returned. He was bare-headed, and his golden eyes blazed in their sunken sockets. He strode toward the elevator shafts, back to his lair in the Valgard, the place where his work was done.

Morek's eyes followed him. He didn't dare move. He didn't know whether he was looking at the guardian of all he held dear or the destroyer of it.

Suddenly, Wyrmlblade seemed to sense something. He stiffened, and stopped walking. His mournful face, marked by that severe, hooked nose, swept round.

The eyes, those predator's eyes, locked on Morek. For a moment the two men were looking at one another.

Morek felt his heart hammering. He couldn't turn away.

He knows! How can he know?

Then Wyrmlblade grunted, and resumed his course. His retinue swept after him.

Morek felt light-headed, and leaned against a bed. He stared around him guiltily. The hospital orderlies carried on working as if nothing had happened. No one had noticed. Why should they have done? He was just a kaerl, a mortal, an expendable.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. He was beginning to jump at shadows. Morek pushed himself away from the metal frame and resumed his patrol. There was much work to do, and he had a whole riven of kaerls to keep in line. Trying to ignore the screams and moans, he picked up the pace.

He needed to keep busy.

It was then that he found himself wishing the invaders would breach the defences and come quickly. At least they were enemies he knew how to fight.

Twenty-four days after Ironhelm had called the Council of War that had authorised the mission to Gangava, the Chamber of the Annulus was opened once again. It was as grim and shadowy as ever, though the torches burned a little lower in their iron grates this time, and the mood of the gathered commanders was sombre rather than anticipatory.

Only seven figures stood around the huge stone circle, heads bare but otherwise in full armour. Greyloc was there, as were Sturmhjart, Arfang and Wyrmlblade. Of the Wolf Guard, Skrieya and Rossek were present. The flame-haired warrior looked half-wild still, and his mane was tangled and unkempt.

At the head of the circle, the position of honour, stood Bjorn. When he'd entered the hallowed place nearly an hour ago, he had remained unmoving for a long time, staring at the floor-mounted stone plaques in silence. None had dared disturb him while he reminisced on the past, and none had taken their place until he had recovered himself.

As the Council got underway, Greyloc looked up at the massive facade of the Dreadnought carefully. The ceramite sarcophagus was decorated with extraordinary care. Gold-plated images of wolves and snarling beasts' heads were embossed on the heavy front panels. An iron skull with crossed bones had been mounted on the long face-plate. Runes had been

engraved everywhere, each of them placed in the proper position by long-dead Rune Priests and bound with complex rites of warding.

Bjorn was magnificent, more so than any living Space Wolf, and more so than most of those who had died.

Do you know how much care has been lavished on your living coffin? Do you care?

Bjorn stirred himself then, as if Greyloc's thoughts had somehow transmitted themselves to him.

So now we plan our survival. Jarl, your assessment.

'All accessible entrances to the Aett have been collapsed,' reported Greyloc. 'The explosives were a mix of melta and fragmentation devices. Some were placed to remain intact, ready to detonate when further disturbed. Allfather willing, that will slow the excavators.'

'How long have we got?' asked Skriea.

Greyloc shook his head.

'Depends on what toys they have. A week. Perhaps less.'

A low, grinding noise came from Bjorn's innards.

Sealed in, he growled. Not a noble way to conduct war.

Greyloc bristled a little. He had made the choices he'd had to, faced with an invading army over twenty times the size of his defending force.

'You are right, lord,' said Greyloc. 'It is not noble. But the portents are against us. We have eighty-seven brothers of my company still capable of fighting, not counting the twelve Revered Fallen. We have a few thousand kaerls – enough to man the defences, but little more. We need a period of time to recover what strength we can. When the enemy enters the Aett again, we will have to fight continuously until completion, however long that takes.'

Bjorn grunted again. Even the smallest of his gestures produced some rumbling sound from deep within the arcane machine-body.

What strength does the enemy possess?

‘Many Traitor Marines. Perhaps six hundred, although we killed several squads during the first landings and the approaches. Their mortal troops are, to all intents and purposes, inexhaustible. The armoured divisions far exceed anything we can field, though that will not avail them in the tunnels.’

And there is no communication beyond Fenris?

‘None, lord,’ said Sturmhart. ‘Our astropaths were killed by remote means. Local space comms are jammed, and attempts to penetrate the barrier above us have failed.’

What could do that?

Sturmhart looked uncomfortable.

‘The witches have many dark powers, lord,’ he said, unconvincingly. ‘Whatever the cause of it, we do not have the power to defeat it. Anything short of a full battle fleet would be annihilated by the blockade above us. We are alone.’

And the Great Wolf?

‘His thoughts are concentrated on Magnus, lord,’ said Wyrmlade. ‘If it occurs to him to make contact, it will not be beyond the powers of our enemy to make it seem as if all is well here. They drew him away by design, and would not have neglected to consider all the ways of keeping him away.’

At that, Bjorn sank into thought. The Chamber fell silent, save for the distant, muffled sounds of clanging from far below. In the Jarlheim, preparations for invasion continued unabated.

All eyes remained fixed on the Dreadnought. The veneration he was held in remained absolute, and none would speak until he did.

They will make for the reactors, Bjorn said at last. The greater number of troops must be stationed at Borek’s Seal.

‘And what of the Hould?’ asked Wyrmlade.

It cannot be defended. Too many tunnels. The Jarlheim must be held from the Fangthane.

‘That means dividing our forces,’ said Greyloc.

Indeed. But we can cede neither objective. If the reactors are taken, then the Aett will be destroyed. If the Fangthane is breached, then no other part of the upper citadel can be defended. They are the two choke-points, the two places where a small army can stand against a larger one.

‘There are other considerations, lord,’ said Sturmhjart. ‘There are wards across this place. The mightiest were at the gates, but they are gone. For as long as even the lesser runes are defended, the power of the sorcerers within the mountain will be limited. If the sacred places are defiled, then their power will wax.’

You need not instruct me on their power, said Bjorn, and there was a sudden note of fervour in his rumbling voice. His claw twitched as if in memory of some ancient pain. **The wards will be protected where we can. But there must be sacrifices. If we attempt to salvage everything, we will lose everything.**

‘It will be as you command,’ said Greyloc, bowing his head. ‘We will make the bulwarks into killing-grounds. But there will be resistance at the places where they must emerge. I would not have their first steps inside the Aett to be blood-free.’

Bjorn gave a cumbersome nod of approval.

Then we are agreed. I will stand at Borek’s Seal with my Fallen brothers. Combat will come there the swiftest, and it has been too long since I felt the kill-urge in anything other than dreams.

The Dreadnought inclined his massive profile to gaze at the central device on the Annulus, the rearing wolf amid a field of stars.

I was on Prospero, brothers, he said. I was there when we burned their heresy from the galaxy. I saw Leman Russ lay waste to their

cherished places. I saw Traitors weep from corrupted eyes as we turned their pyramids of glass into barren wasteland.

The council listened intently. Bjorn's fragmentary accounts of distant days were seized on whenever he chose to offer them.

That will not happen here. They were made weak by the knowledge of their treachery. We are made strong by the knowledge of our fidelity. Where Tizca fell, the Aett will stand.

The Dreadnought's voice was growing stronger. As the days passed, he was remembering himself, becoming once more the god of war the skjalds spoke of in their hushed voices. Amid all the desperation, that was cause for hope.

Though it may cost the lives of us all, Bjorn growled, the words made machine-harsh by the vox-generators within him, **the Aett *will* stand.**

After the Council had ended, Rossek watched Bjorn clump down the corridor outside the Annulus with Greyloc and the other senior commanders in tow. He hung back, staying in the shadows, eager to avoid contact. He hadn't spoken during the deliberations. Indeed, he'd barely shared two words with Greyloc since the withdrawal from the landing sites. Several times he'd tried to approach his old friend, but the Jarl had avoided anything other than routine exchanges.

Perhaps that was for the best. Rossek didn't even know what he'd say if he had the chance.

That he was sorry? Apologies were not for the Wolf Guard.

That he saw the faces of the warriors he'd killed every night in his tortured dreams? That was true, but would change nothing.

Contrition did not come easily to a son of Russ. For a few blessed moments, while Rossek had had the blood of enemies flowing across his claws, he'd shaken off the cloud of torpor and remembered his savage inheritance. He'd willed the assault on the gates to last for much, much longer. For as long as he fought, the guilt was less acute.

But it always came back.

‘Wolf Guard Rossek.’

The voice was iron-dry and sardonic. Rossek knew who it was without having to turn. Wyrmlade must have stayed behind, waiting for the rest to leave.

‘Lord Hraldir,’ acknowledged Rossek. His voice sounded surly, even to him.

Wyrmlade emerged from the gloom of the Chamber’s apse and into a pool of firelight. His black armour was perfect for blending into the shadows of the sparsely-lit places. The bone devices across his battle-plate were chipped and scarred by plasma-burns, and the ragged pelts he’d once draped over the ceramite had been ripped away. His golden eyes still glowed as they ever had done, locked within that desiccated old face like amber jewels beaten into leather.

‘You are not yourself, Tromm,’ said the Wolf Priest, his mouth breaking into a crooked, mirthless smile.

Rossek towered over Wyrmlade in his Terminator plate, but somehow still seemed the lesser figure of the two. That was always the way. The Wolf Priests had a grip of authority over the entire Chapter, one that transcended the normal patterns of command.

‘I long for combat,’ replied Rossek, which was truthful enough.

‘So do we all,’ said Wyrmlade. ‘There isn’t a Blood Claw in the Aett who doesn’t. What makes your mood special, Wolf Guard?’

Rossek narrowed his eyes. Was the old man goading him? Trying to provoke some kind of furious response?

‘I claim no special privilege. Just a desire to do what I was bred for.’

Wyrmlade nodded.

‘So it has ever been with you. I remember when I brought you off the ice. You were a monster back then, a bear of a man. We marked you for greatness from the beginning.’

Rossek listened wearily. He wasn't in the mood for a prepared homily. Any reference to his potential, to his destiny within the Chapter, had become loathsome to hear. He'd coveted the Wolf Lord position for years, however much he'd tried not to, and had always resented Greyloc's elevation at his expense, but now the proof of his inadequacy had been painfully exposed.

'Well, perhaps you were wrong,' he said, casually.

Wyrmlblade shot him a look of contempt.

'Do I hear self-pity? That's for mortals. Whatever guilt you're carrying with you, shed it. You cannot bring your brothers back, but you can remember how to fight.'

Rossek started to reply, so missed the uppercut.

Sharp as a jaw-snap, Wyrmlblade had let fly with his left fist, connecting cleanly and sending the Wolf Guard crashing to the floor. An instant later and the Wolf Priest had him pinned, his gauntlet fixed on the exposed flesh of Rossek's neck, his curved fangs bared.

'I wanted to have you disciplined for what you did,' hissed Wyrmlblade, his face only centimetres from Rossek's. 'Greyloc prevented it. He said your blades would be needed. Blood of Russ, you'd better prove him right about that.'

By instinct, Rossek primed himself to throw the Priest off. He was capable of doing it. His armour was more than twice as powerful as Wyrmlblade's, and the Wolf Priest was old.

Even so, he couldn't do it. The sacred power of the Priesthood was too strong. Wyrmlblade's face had been the first one he'd seen on entering the Aett as a daunted aspirant. It was likely to be the last face he saw before leaving for the Halls of Morkai, too.

'So what do you want, lord?' Rossek growled, tasting his own blood in his mouth. 'For me to fight you? You would not like the result.'

Wyrmlade shook his ragged head in disgust, and released his grip. He hauled himself to his feet, leaving Rossek slumped against the wall.

‘I wanted to kindle some *spirit* in you, lad,’ he muttered. ‘To remind you of the fire you’ve had in your blood since you first came here. Maybe I’m too late for that. Maybe you have let failure quench it.’

Rossek clambered to his feet, feeling the stressed servos in his battered suit whine.

‘This melancholy makes you useless to us,’ said Wyrmlade. ‘You think you’re the first Wolf Guard to lead a squad to defeat?’

‘I am coming to terms with that.’

‘I see no sign of it.’

‘Then maybe you should look harder.’

‘At what?’

‘At the warriors I saved,’ snarled Rossek, feeling anger surge up at last. ‘At the Blood Claws I pulled from under the hammer when Brakk was felled. At the Traitors I killed then and after. At the whelp who was taken by the Wolf, who I brought back from the edge.’

Wyrmlade hesitated, and looked at him carefully.

‘You did that? Without a Priest?’

‘I did. And now, with Brakk gone, I will lead the remains of his pack. They need guidance.’ The haunted look returned to his eyes briefly. ‘From one who has learned a lesson in command.’

Wyrmlade still watched Rossek’s face intently.

‘Do so, then,’ he said at last, and his voice had lost its edge of condemnation. ‘But snap out of this melancholy. At the end of all this, I would have Greyloc’s verdict on you proved right.’

Rossek grunted, eager to push past the Wolf Priest and end the lesson. The practice cages beckoned, and he had frustrations to work out in them.

‘One final thing,’ said Wyrmlade, clamping a gauntlet on Rossek’s breastplate to prevent him walking away. ‘The Hunter who lies in my

chambers. Aunir Frar. He will live.'

Despite himself, Rossek felt relief flood through his body at that, and had to struggle not to show it. 'Thank you for telling me.'

'But you did not bring him to the fleshmakers.'

Rossek shook his head. 'A rivenmaster brought him.'

'So I gather. What was his name?'

Rossek recalled it instantly. The mortal in the Fangthane, the one with the honest, tired face.

'Morek. Morek Karekborn. Why do you wish to know?'

Wyrmblade looked evasive then.

'For completeness,' said the Wolf Priest, letting his hand fall to allow Rossek to pass. 'It's nothing important. Go now. Remember my words. The Hand of Russ be with you, Tromm.'

'And with us all,' replied Rossek, before lumbering off into the dark, back into the Jarlheim, back to where the Wolves were preparing for war.

The beasts prowled in the recessed darkness of Borek's Seal, hugging the pools of obscurity behind the vast pillars. They went silently, slinking on huge pads and keeping their distorted muzzles low to the ground. Only when they wished to announce their presence did they break cover, with a sudden flash of wide, liquid eyes, or a deep, rumbling growl from within those massive ribcages.

It was impossible to know how many had gathered there. At times it seemed like only a few dozen had emerged from the Underfang; at others, like there were hundreds. Something had attracted them to the living sections of the Aett, and whatever it was, it continued to work its magic. Since Bjorn himself had emerged from the Hammerhold with the retinue of snarling horrors in tow, none could deny that they had some kind of bizarre claim to be there. But that didn't mean that the kaerls liked seeing them, nor that they didn't make the sign of the spear whenever they were forced to go anywhere near them.

So the mortal troops stayed far away at the fire-lit end of the cavernous chamber as much as possible. The stairways and elevator shafts leading both up and down were all placed at the western extremity of that space, and so the defences were built there, lit by roaring blazes. As at the Fangthane, gun-lines had been drawn up and barricades erected across the access points. More ammunition, building supplies and armour were delivered with every passing hour, some freshly forged in the angry red depths of the Hammerhold and still hot to the touch.

Freija did her part in the carrying and lifting, though she spent most of her time with Aldr. Like most of the Dreadnoughts, he'd been stationed at Borek's Seal and now waited grumpily for action. When the enemy came, his guns would be at the forefront, thrust into the inferno again with those of his battle-brothers.

The Dreadnought had become steadily less strange as the memory of his incarceration faded. The maudlin expressions of discomfort and loss had been replaced by a more reassuring resolve. Freija could tell he was looking forward to the combat. To be awakened from the Long Dark only to face days of preparation and waiting was difficult for him – he'd have preferred to have walked out of the vault straight into a firestorm. Instead, he'd had to wait patiently as servitor-thralls had fussed over him, conducting impenetrable rites and preparing his adamantium sarcophagus for war.

'So what's it like?' Freija asked him, chewing on a tough ribbon of dried meat during a rest period.

What's what like?

'Having your armour fussed over,' she said. 'Can you feel a touch on it, like skin?'

Freija could sense when she'd irritated him. She didn't know how – there were no facial cues, after all – but the impression was definite enough.

This curiosity. This lack of respect. Where does it come from?

Freija grinned at the Dreadnought's annoyance. She felt no aura of intimidation from Aldr. Despite his vast killing potential, far in excess of even the Jarl, his moods were strangely immature, and she'd become intrigued by him in a way that she could never have done with a living Blood Claw.

‘My mother. She came from the ice, and passed on its crude ways.’

As she spoke, Freija recalled her face. Heavy-set like hers, blonde hair in messy curls, a tight mouth that rarely smiled, features made harsh by unrelenting labour and hardship. But the eyes, the dark, sparkling eyes – they had exposed the bright intellect within, the questioning, rebellious soul that had never quite been ground down. Even at the end, when the punishing demands of the Sky Warriors had exacerbated the illness that would kill her, those eyes had remained alive and inquiring.

You should learn to control it.

‘I know,’ she said wearily. ‘It leads to damnation.’

Indeed it does.

Freija shook her head resignedly, and fell silent. The Wolves' obsession with ritual, tradition, saga and secrecy was something she'd never understand. It was as if the world they inhabited was frozen in some half-forgotten moment, when all the forces of progress and enlightenment had suddenly been snuffed out and replaced by a numb rehearsal of old, tired routines.

After a while, Aldr shifted heavily on his central drive-column.

It feels like being alive, and yet not alive. When something touches my armour, I sense it more closely than I could when a living warrior. My eyesight is sharper, my hearing more acute, my muscles more powerful for being plasfibre and ceramite. Everything is more immediate. And yet...

Freija looked at the Dreadnought's face-plate. The slit in the armour was dark, an opaque well into the ruined corpse within. Though there were no visual signals, no possibility of facial expression, she could feel his misery as acutely as if he'd been weeping. For an instant, she caught the image of a Blood Claw racing across the wind-blasted ice, his blades whirling, long hair streaming, caught up in the feral joy of his calling.

It will never be like that again.

'I'm sorr—'

Enough questions. There is work to be done.

Freija dutifully shut up. Already she could see a new delivery of medical supplies and field-rations arriving on the back of a transport, all of which would need to be stowed somewhere. She bowed to the Dreadnought and made her way toward the huskaerl in charge of the consignment. As she did so, she stole a look back at the hulking shape of Aldr, motionless in the shadows.

She didn't look long. She felt like she'd violated his privacy enough. In any case, she didn't like the emotions their conversations were engendering in her. For years, stung by what had happened to her blood-family under the harsh regime of the Aett, she had resented the Sky Warriors almost as much as she had been awed by them. Now that war had come to Fenris, those old feelings were being tested, and in ways that she found surprising.

She had learned to live with disliking them. She could, perhaps, have learned to live with loving them, as Morek did, or even despising them, as did the Thousand Sons. What she couldn't resign herself to was the way she felt then. She knew she had to shake those feelings off, or they would compromise her role in the fighting to come. They were alien to her, un-Fenrisian, weak and foolish.

But it was no good. Try as she might, Freija couldn't help it.

Now I see into their souls, see what lives they lead, what choices they've made... This is what I have come to.

Blood of Russ, I pity them.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'Fenrys hjolda!'

Harek Ironhelm charged down the ruined street, uncaring of the small arms fire clattering off his battle-plate. His retinue came with him, a whole score of elite warriors in Terminator armour. As they thundered onwards, their huge footfalls cracked the rockcrete under them. Their pauldrons had been slathered in blood; some of it ritually applied before combat, some of it the result of the heavy killing over the past four local days. None of them had slept during that time; indeed, they'd barely paused in the slaughter. Inexorably, irresistibly, the Wolves' spearhead had crunched, sliced, shot and hammered its way into the heart of the city.

Ironhelm had fought with all the vigour of his youth during that time, swinging his frostblade two-handed in massive, body-breaking arcs. He'd not even bothered to mag-lock a ranged weapon, preferring to keep the fighting at close range. Most of his guard went similarly, kitted out with claws, blades and axes, whooping and baying as they used the killing edges against the fragile armour of those who dared to stand against them.

'The tower,' Ironhelm snarled, nodding to his right as he tore down the roadway. Instantly, his pack adjusted trajectory. 'Incoming, high up.'

The hunting pack had broken out on to a long, straight highway overlooked by rows of towering hab-blocks. Once there had been mass-

transit rails running down the central reservation and elevated walkways criss-crossing the road below. Now, thanks to heavy aerial bombardment, the entire street had been turned into a smouldering valley of tortured metal struts and melted plascrete craters. Rolling clouds of smoke obscured everything, acrid and tart from heavy bolter-round discharge. The precipitous walls on either side of the burning chasm were eyeless, the windows having been smashed even before the current assault had properly launched. Huge swathes of the city were like this now, a wasteland of broken hopes and balustrades, all after just four days' intense, brutal activity by the Wolves.

The highway ran straight towards the central pyramid cluster. The huge multi-laned arterial conduit had once reverberated with civilian transports and semi-grav flyers, though now only echoed to the crackle of flames and the distant rumble of tank tracks. The Wolves tore across the broken terrain like molten metal, swaying fluidly around obstacles, disdaining cover and relying on speed and agility to evade incoming fire.

Ahead of them, on the right-hand side of the highway, a single blunt-faced tower was still occupied by defenders. As the pack neared it, heavy projectile rounds slammed into the rockcrete around them, tearing up what remained of the road surface and ripping it to spinning shreds. There were deeper explosions amongst the barking chatter of the man-mounted cannons – artillery pieces were clearly lodged there, all aimed at the fleeting wolf shapes tearing towards the tower.

The rate of fire was high. Too high. They were squeezing their triggers in a panic, terrified of what the Wolves would do when they reached them.

You are right to be terrified, traitors. And we are thankful for it – your fear draws us to you quickly.

‘Time to silence those guns,’ growled Ironhelm, loping fast toward the tower’s base. Acting purely on instinct, he bounded to one side. A second

later, the ground he'd been occupying disappeared in a blast of cordite and promethium. 'Level Six.'

The Wolves sped up to the base without hesitating, all at full speed. The entrance level must once have been grand, clad in glass and steel and adorned with the Eye emblem that had been daubed all across Gangava Prime. Now it was just a shell, a gaping hole laced with broken panes and charred plascrete pillars.

The Wolves broke inside, racing around piles of rubble and still-burning heaps of refuse. Ironhelm remained at the blade-tip, crashing his way toward the elevator shafts clustered at the centre of the structure.

'Can we use these?' he barked over the mission channel.

A Wolf Guard named Rangr snapped open a remote auspex, took a look at it and shook his head.

'Rigged to blow.'

'Then take them out,' commanded Ironhelm, gesturing to Brother Aesgrek, who carried a heavy bolter in his gigantic armoured fists.

The mammoth weapon thundered out, spraying shells into the waiting elevator cages. They exploded in a hail of crashing, tumbling beams and plates. Aesgrek destroyed them all, sending six cages plummeting down the shafts and into oblivion below. By the time he was finished, the rectangular wells gaped like wounds, black and naked.

Without waiting for the flames to die away, Ironhelm ran and launched himself across the nearest shaft, clutching the metalwork on the far side of it and clinging on. The steel beams bowed under his weight and began to peel away from the plascrete walls, but he was already moving, clambering up the levels like a giant armoured insect.

The rest of the pack did likewise, throwing themselves into the gaping pits, latching on to other parts of the steel struts and braces, using all the remaining five shafts to distribute the weight better across the damaged structure. Like sewer rats, the Wolves raced up the elevator columns,

clamping their gauntlets unerringly to the metal handholds, powering up the sheer paths with contemptuous ease.

As they rose, gunfire began to strafe down from above. The defenders, realising the destruction of the elevator cages had done nothing to slow the closing assault, were belatedly trying to prevent the pack from reaching their position.

Ironhelm laughed rakishly as the first las-beams hit his armoured shoulders.

‘This is warming my arms!’ he cackled, hauling himself over a protruding ledge and thrusting ever higher.

‘Multiple signals approaching,’ voxed Rangr, betraying urgent kill-urge in his voice. ‘Next level is Six.’

The Wolf Guard’s eagerness infected the entire squad, and they tore upwards even faster, gouging huge rents in the walls of the shaft in their determination to reach the murder-ground first.

For all his age, for all his ancient war-tempering, the Great Wolf got there in front, hurling himself over the lip of the floor platform and crashing through the outer doors of the elevator shaft. The ruined panels were shouldered aside, and he waded straight into a torrent of las-fire. The beams cracked against his armour and burned off harmlessly. A whole level of the tower beckoned, open-plan, stripped of civilian trappings and with nowhere to hide.

‘Feel the wrath of the Wolves, traitors!’ Ironhelm bellowed, spittle flying against his vox-grille, plunging straight into the ranks of horrified troopers beyond the broken doors. The booming echo of his challenge shattered what was left of the glass in the windows around the edges of the tower-level. More Wolves emerged from the shafts and charged into the contact zone, smoothly withdrawing power weapons from where they’d been mag-locked and gunning them into life.

The fight was short, brutal, terrifying. There were a few hundred mortal troopers deployed on the level, many with heavy weapons. Some were refugees from earlier fighting who'd survived and fallen back; others were fresh troops from the centre with gleaming armour and fresh lasguns. There were emplacements among them, including the artillery pieces the Gangavans had been using to snipe at the hunting packs' approach. They were busy turning them inwards in an attempt to halt the advance of the horrors coming to kill them.

It did them no good. As Ironhelm crashed in among them, his blade whistling, he began to laugh again. Still amplified by the vox-units in his armour, the horrific sound echoed around the entire level. Rangr joined in, chuckling in a strange, chilling fashion as he mowed down whole swathes of wavering enemy soldiers.

'Face me, filth!' roared Ironhelm, ripping a man open with the backswing of his blade even as his free hand punched the chest in of another. 'Fight like the men you once were!'

At the far side of the level, open to the elements where the shattered windows had once been, an autocannon crew were trying to swing their weapon round to target the rampaging Wolves. Ironhelm caught sight of that, and roared with pleasure.

'Well done, lads!' he bellowed, hurling the broken-backed corpse of a Gangavan defender into a pillar and lurching towards the gun-crew. 'Now try to get a shot!'

The frantic troopers almost did it. The heavy barrel swung round on its cumbersome pintle-mount, swaying into range and spooling up to fire. The ammo belt was sucked into the slot and the safety indicator blinked off. With an agonised look on his face, the gunner pulled the trigger, wincing as the gigantic form of the Wolf Lord thundered into swing range.

As fast as death on the ice, Ironhelm hammered into them, ripping the autocannon barrel from its mount one-handed. He swung it round like a

club, knocking three of the crew clean through the empty window-frames. Even before their trailing screams had died away, he'd cut open the rest of them with the frostblade. Then, with a savage kick, he sent the autocannon mount plunging into the chasm of the highway below.

'Hjolda!' he roared, throwing his arms into the air, frostblade in one fist, autocannon barrel in the other.

From that high vantage, right on the edge of the tower, Ironhelm could see out across the city. In every direction, fires were burning out of control. He saw other towers reel on their foundations, stricken with explosions. The sky was tattooed with the contrails of his gunships. The boom of ordnance made the ground drum, punctuated by the unmistakable growl of advancing Land Raiders.

The city was being destroyed, block by block, district by district. No matter how many troops were thrown into the meat-grinder, the end was coming swiftly now.

He glanced at the mission schematic overlay on his helm display. Objectives were being captured in every theatre. Like a giant pair of claws, the Wolves were closing in on the principal targets. The void shield generators would be down before dawn, and the power stations wouldn't be far behind.

His brothers had excelled themselves. Never had their perfection in war been quite so brazenly on display. Ironhelm grinned, feeling his curved fangs scrape the inside of his helm.

It was then that the curtains of smog and fuel-smoke cleared to the west, exposing the vast, hunched outlines of the pyramids on the horizon. They were much closer now, dark and massive, ringed by the heaviest defences left in the city.

'They won't help you,' growled Ironhelm, lowering his frostblade in the direction he knew he must travel. *'Nothing can help you now, faithless ones. You have played fire with the Wolves of Fenris.'*

His lupine grin returned. Kill-pleasure surged through his body.
'And now they are biting at your heels.'

The Cataphracts were awesome machines, fusions of cybernetic technology and weapons research from a more capable age. The huge figures, vaguely humanoid but far broader and heavier, worked tirelessly, hacking and drilling at the rockface of the tunnels, hammering away with their enormous drill-arms without pause or complaint. Their heavy segmented legs braced against the recoil, shrugging off the storm of emerging rock-fragments and wading through the piles of rubble created. In their wake came hundreds of Prosperine engineers, hauling away the broken stone, shoring up the tunnel roof, adding bracing pillars and knocking the jagged stone walls smooth. The work progressed like everything else did in the Thousand Sons fleet – calmly, efficiently, expertly.

It wasn't fast enough. Aphael found himself increasingly unable to control his frustration at the pace of excavation. Already days had passed, days he could not afford to lose. The tunnels had not just been filled with loose rockfall, but had been cemented closed with melta blasts. At times the residue was as hard to dig out as the living rock would have been. The crust of Fenris, as might have been expected, was as unyielding as iron. To make matters worse, the Dogs had placed mines and unexploded fragmentation bombs within the fused stone, and several priceless Cataphracts had been lost as their drill-arms had set off the residual traps.

The delays infuriated him. Aphael knew that Temekh was drawing closer to his goal. If the Fang was not compromised and its wards of aversion destroyed by the time he did so, then Aphael's position as commander of the army would be under threat. All of them, the sorcerers in charge of the invasion fleet, knew the stakes.

From his position inside the tunnel, Aphael watched as a trio of Cataphracts carved their way further into the heart of the mountain. Glowglobes hovered around them, bathing the robots in a dull orange

light. The roof of the tunnel was barely above their massive shoulders as they worked. They were already knee-deep in broken stone, and the scurrying lines of mortal workers struggled to keep up with the task of removing it.

Aphael's neck began to itch again. The sensation was maddening, as if tiny clawed hands had lodged themselves under his skin and were scraping to get out. When he turned his head, he could feel the fingers and spurs of the feathers rustle against the inside of his armour. Something else had been growing on his face for some time, pressing against the plate of his helm. Soon, he knew, the cracks would begin to show. Already his right gauntlet wouldn't close.

Aphael turned away from the rockface and stalked back the way he'd come, past the waiting rows of haulage transports, their hopper doors open and load-cranes extended. As he went, the men in the tunnels were quick to get out of his way. They'd grown wary of his erratic moods since the assault had ground into the sand.

He ignored them. As he got nearer the tunnel exit, the marks of excavation gave way to a rough roadway and permanent lighting. The tunnel roof and walls had been carved wide enough to allow Rhinos and Land Raiders to enter, which was one of the reasons hollowing it out had taken so long. Light armaments were already being shipped into the enclosed space. As the Cataphracts drew closer to their goal, they would be augmented with heavier weaponry. By the time the final walls were breached, whole companies of Rubricae would be waiting to pile in.

Aphael reached the tunnel entrance and stepped into the bright, harsh light of the Fenris morning. His eyes seemed to have lost their usual photo-reactive speed, and for a moment he was half-blinded by the glare. Fresh snowfalls had covered over much of the devastation, but the causeways were still jammed with men and materiel. Plumes of smoke

were everywhere, either from labouring vehicle engines or from fires lit by the troops to banish the worst of the chill.

A Prosperine captain hurried up to him. The man's face was hidden behind his environment mask, but Aphael could already sense his fear. This would not be good news.

'Lord,' the man said, bowing clumsily.

'Make it quick,' snapped Aphael, wishing he could scratch his flesh for just a moment.

'Captain Eirreq has voxed from the flagship.'

'If the Lord Temekh wishes to speak to me, then he can do so himself.'

'It's not that.' The man swallowed. 'Lord Fuerza. His life-signature has departed from the aether.'

Aphael felt his primary heart jump a beat.

'Out of range?'

'I do not believe so, lord. I was told to inform you that, as far as the scryers can ascertain, he is dead.'

Aphael felt the dam of his pent-up fury break then. The frustration, the irritation, the fear of what he was becoming, all came to a head. Without thinking, he grabbed the warrior by his chestplate, holding him aloft in one hand.

'Dead!' he roared, uncaring who heard him. At the edge of his vision, he could see soldiers putting down their weapons and staring. 'Dead!'

Let them stare.

'Lord!' cried the captain, struggling ineffectively against the power-armoured grip. 'I—'

He never had the chance to finish. Aphael swung round, hurling the fragile body against the near wall of the tunnel entrance. It impacted with a thick, sickening thud, and slid down into the slush. Once there, it didn't move again.

Aphael whirled round to face the rest of his men. There were hundreds of them close by, all staring at him. For a moment, a single, terrible moment, Aphael felt like launching into them too. His gauntlets crackled with the first sparks of his sorcerous fire, the deadly trade of the Pyrae.

Slowly, with difficulty, he reined himself in.

What is happening to me?

He knew the answer. Every sorcerer in the Legion was schooled to know the answer to that. In time, the Changer of Ways always extracted the price for the gifts he bestowed, and even the Rubric was no guarantee of escaping it.

I am being turned into the thing that I hate.

‘Get back to work!’ he bellowed at the men.

They hurried to comply. None of them made any move towards the prone body of the captain. Perhaps they would later, when Aphael was gone, moving furtively and in fear of what the Masters would do to them.

Aphael looked up. Far, far into the hazy distance, the pinnacle of the Fang soared into the icy air. Even after being blackened by days of bombardment, it was still magnificent. It rose defiant, as immovable and gigantic as the Obsidian Tower on the Planet of the Sorcerers. For the first time, Aphael noticed the similarities in the structures. It was just one more mockery.

‘I *will* break it,’ he muttered, uncaring that he spoke out loud. His left hand clenched into a fist, and he hammered it against his helm. The pain of the impact helped to dull the incessant itching.

So he did it again. And again.

It was only when he felt the warm trickle of blood down his neck that he stopped. The sensation was strangely calming, as if the crude medicines of the old leeches had been applied, relieving the pressure within his tortured body.

The respite was fleeting. Even as he turned away from the mountain, ready to walk back to the command platform above the causeway, he could feel the burning start to return. It would never leave him alone. It would plague him, torment him and goad him until it got what it wanted.

‘I *will* break it,’ he mumbled again, hanging on to the thought as he limped away from the Fang.

As he passed from the front, the mortal soldiers looked at one another, startled. Then, slowly, they returned to their duties, readying the army for the assault to come, trying not to think too hard about the behaviour of the warrior they had been taught to revere as a god.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The pyramid reared, vast and dark, into the fire-torn sky. Its flanks were dull, caked in the red dust that covered all of Gangava. Huge holes had been punched in its sides by heavy weapons, and the edges of the rents were still licked with flame.

What resistance there was had been swept aside by the Wolves, wiped out with sharp-edged disdain. The entire city was burning, and those few defenders who had not perished in the assault now faced a lingering death by fire. The scale of the violence was overwhelming. There had been no respite, no quarter, no mercy. Another Chapter, the Salamanders perhaps, might have made some provision for civilian evacuation, or paused in the attack to assess the possibility of asset recovery for the greater good of the Imperium.

Not the Wolves of Fenris. The task had been set before them, and they had brought it to completion. Gangava was destroyed, rendered down to ash and molten iron. Nothing was left to preserve, nothing to remember. The city had been scoured from the face of the galaxy as completely as Prospero had been.

Almost.

The pyramids still remained, insolently defiant, still free of the horrifying presence of the *Vlka Fenryka*. Ironhelm had insisted on that. No

battle-brother would assault the central bastions until the ruin of the city had been compassed.

I want you to see the failure of your dreams, Traitor, before I come for you. I want to hear you weep, just as you wept before.

Now the time had come. The spearhead had assembled in a huge courtyard before the main pyramid, out in the open, careless of the lack of cover, bristling with desire to go for the throat. Fully three hundred battle-brothers were there: all of Harek Ironhelm's Great Company, other packs who'd arrived at the muster ahead of their brothers, plus the twelve Rune Priests who'd accompanied the forward assault squads. The wyrd-masters stood with Ironhelm's command brotherhood, their glyph-inscribed armour blazing arterial red.

Ironhelm turned to Frei, the one who'd brought them to Gangava in the first place.

'There is no doubt?' he asked a final time.

By way of answer, the Rune Priest drew a bag of bone-fragments from a capsule at his belt. The pieces looked insignificantly small as he tipped the contents into the palm of his gauntlet. Reverently, he cast them on the ground, and they clattered against the broken stone.

For a moment, Frei said nothing, gazing at the patterns on the bones. Each piece was inscribed with a single rune. Trysk, Gmorl, Adjarr, Ragnarok, Ymir. The sigils had an individual meaning – Ice, Fate, Blood, Ending – as well as a collective one. For a master of scrying the mysterious power of Fenris, they could reveal hidden facets of the present, or secrets of the past, or portents of the future. In their presence, all brutal laughter was silenced, all weapons lowered. The Wolves venerated the runes, just as their gene-father had done.

It was long before Frei spoke. When he did, his voice was hoarse from days of shouted orders and storm-summoning.

‘The runes tell me he is in there,’ Frei said. ‘His spoor reeks, trapped in the heart of the pyramid. But there is something else.’

Ironhelm waited patiently. All around him, his battle-brothers did the same.

‘I see another presence. The Bane of the Wolves.’

Ironhelm snorted.

‘That’s what he’s calling himself. This we already know.’

Frei shook his head.

‘No, lord. That is not his name. It is another power, locked in the walls with him. If we enter, we will face it.’

‘And that troubles you, priest? You think any power in the galaxy can face our fury? Even a primarch cannot stand against our combined blades.’

Frei stooped to collect the bone fragments. As his fingers reached for the oldest device – Fengr, the Wolf Within – the piece broke cleanly, separating into two down the middle.

Frei froze for a second, staring at the broken rune. Ironhelm could sense his shock. He hadn’t touched the bone fragment – it had just shattered.

From the pyramid ahead of them, a faint boom like distant rolling thunder rocked the ground. The sky above them shuddered, and the flames around them guttered.

Then the moment passed. Ironhelm shook his head, shaking off the flicker of dread that had briefly latched on to his soul. Uncertainty was replaced by anger.

Still you taunt me. Even now, you cannot resist the cheap trick.

‘Arvek,’ he voxed. ‘Are the voids down?’

‘They are, lord,’ came the rolling voice of Kjarlskar over the comm.

‘The fleet has a firing solution and awaits your orders.’

Ironhelm looked up at the pyramid before him. Its very vastness was like an invitation. It could be atomised from orbit whenever he chose.

The retinue around him waited for his response. He sensed their eagerness. Like hounds straining at the leash, their kill-urge tugged at them. From all over the city, more Wolves were arriving every moment, their claws dripping with the blood of recent slaying, ready to make the push to completion.

‘Lord...’ came the voice of Frei, oddly shaken.

Ironhelm gestured for him to remain silent.

‘This is the moment the wyrd turns, brothers,’ he announced, speaking softly but firmly over the mission channel. ‘This is what we came to do. There will be no bombardment from orbit. We will enter the den of the Traitor, and kill him as we look into his eye.’

He unlocked his frostblade and thumbed the power weapon into activation.

‘That is the way of us. We keep the danger close. Take up your weapons, and stay hard on my heels.’

The fires had reached the service levels below the command bridge of the *Nauro*. They now raged out of control across eighty per cent of the ship, and had long since made the task of salvaging her impossible. Georyth had given up trying to fight the blaze conventionally and had resorted to constructing two-metre-thick firebreaks at the major intersections, surrendering huge areas of the warship to immolation.

Now those bulwarks had failed. The temperature on the habitable levels had reached the upper limits of survivability, even in the environment suits that all the remaining crew now wore. The ship was in the final stages of collapse, its engines ready to explode, its Geller field near cracking, its void shields unable to activate.

We did well to get this far. Russ’s teeth, just a little further.

Blackwing sat on the command throne, overlooking the bustling bridge below impassively. All the survivors, two hundred or so, milled about on

the platforms and gantries, getting in each others' way and gumming up the necessary business of running the ship's few remaining functions.

They had nowhere else to go. Barely three hundred metres down, the corridors were red-hot from the fires and the air was unbreathable. Only the bridge and some other ancillary chambers remained, pockets of habitation amid a hurtling mountain of burning space junk. How long those pockets would remain intact was hard to predict. Minutes, certainly. Hours, hopefully.

'In range yet, Navigator?' Blackwing asked over the comm.

Neiman was a dead man. His observatory cell was cut off, separated from the command bridge by corridors of slowly melting metal. He'd had the chance to withdraw to safety but had chosen not to take it. That action alone had given the *Nauro* her best chance of reaching its destination, since the Navigator could only make the difficult transition to real space accurately from within his sanctum.

'The more you keep asking, lord,' he replied irritably, 'the longer it will take to make the calculations.'

For someone doomed to an agonising death under the flames, Neiman sounded remarkably phlegmatic. Blackwing had noticed this trait in Navigators before. Something in their mutant genetic makeup seemed to invoke a kind of fatalism. Perhaps they saw things in the warp, things that made them somehow less concerned about their own particular fate. Or maybe they were just cold fish.

'We don't have long, Djulian,' Blackwing replied, watching on the auspex read-out as another bulkhead failed. He used the Navigator's first name as a courtesy, which seemed the least he could do. 'Give me an estimate.'

'An hour, perhaps. Less, if you let me get on with things.'

'Thank you. Report as soon as you can.'

Blackwing shut off the comm-link. There was a commotion ahead of him. One of the real space viewers over the command bridge, a huge dome of plexiglass a metre thick and several wide, was cracking. The line of stress snaked its way from the adamantium frame, breaking into rivulets at it reached the centre of the curve.

There were no void shields active. When the physical hull went, the whole bridge would be open to space.

Blackwing stood up.

‘That’s enough,’ he announced over the ship’s open channel. ‘We’ve done all we can. To the saviour pods. Now.’

Some of the crew looked up at him, hope suddenly kindling on their faces. Others, the kaerls mostly, looked appalled.

‘We have not yet translated, lord,’ came Georyth’s voice.

The Master was standing on the stairway immediately below Blackwing, slumped with fatigue. His voice was thick and slow, betraying the liberal use of stimms to keep him on his feet.

Blackwing had to smile. Georyth had been a pain in the arse – a pernicky, officious pain in the arse – but he’d also been a fine Master and had earned himself a place in any sagas that came out of this sorry episode.

‘I had noticed that, Master,’ said Blackwing. ‘Our trajectory is fixed, and only Neiman can pull us out of the warp. As soon as the Geller field’s down, I’ve triggered the saviour pods to eject. Much as I find each and every one of you personally objectionable, it seems a waste to let them go empty.’

Georyth swallowed.

‘And you, lord?’

Blackwing picked up a helm from the floor beside him. He was in Scout-pattern void-armour, the last suit he’d managed to salvage from the ship’s armoury before the fires had engulfed it. An extension of his usual

carapace plate, it did little more than keep the vacuum out and the temperature at survivable levels. Not for the first time on this mission, he missed his old Hunter plate.

‘Your concern is touching,’ he said, clamping the helm in place and feeling the seals hiss closed. ‘Patronise me with it again and I’ll shoot your pod down myself.’

Georyth nodded, responding to the sarcasm with a weary resignation. He’d learned how to cope with it over the past seventeen days.

Seventeen days. Four fewer than the estimate. Blood of Russ, I love this ship. When she’s gone, I shall weep for her.

‘Very well, lord,’ said Georyth, clenching his fist against his breastplate in the Fenrisian style and making to leave. ‘The hand of Russ ward you.’

‘That would be nice,’ agreed Blackwing.

Already, the mortals were streaming down from their stations and making for the service corridors leading to the saviour pod bays. The bridge emptied quickly. All the crew knew how precarious the situation was, and getting out of the path of the breaking real space viewer was simply good sense.

With their departure, the bridge looked huge. Huge and fragile. The cracks in the viewers continued to grow. They looked out on to nothing but blackness, but it wasn’t the dark of the void. If the chromo filters were removed from the plexiglass, the view would be of the immaterium, a mad whirl of colour and movement. No human wished to look out onto that, and so the viewers were made permanently blank while in warp-transit.

For a moment, Blackwing pondered opening them, revealing the true substance of the matter through which the doomed ship plunged. It was a tempting prospect, and one he’d never indulged before. Would he go mad, just by looking at it? Or would it leave him indifferent, just as so much else in the galaxy did?

His thoughts were interrupted by a crack far below him. Something big and heavy had given way. Despite himself, despite all his conditioning, Blackwing felt a tremor of alarm pass through him. Standing on the bridge of a ship that was literally falling to pieces as it hurtled out of the warp and into a planetary war-zone was about as insane as it got.

And once he thought about it in those terms, the situation made a whole lot more sense.

I am a son of Russ. Not a good example, to be sure, but one of his mad progeny nonetheless, and this is the kind of thing the Blood Claws dream of doing.

He strode forwards to the railing around the command platform, as if by getting closer to the prow he could ride the coming inferno better.

Something else broke then, a strut or a bracing rod, far back in the spine of the vessel. The echoes of its demise filtered through the burning corridors, prompting more muffled crashes from down below.

The *Nauro* was dying under his feet, component by component, rivet by rivet.

‘Come on, Neiman,’ Blackwing hissed, his pulse pumping, watching the cracks in the plexiglass above him grow. ‘*Come on...*’

The Long Fangs unleashed their cargo of destruction and the gates to the pyramid dissolved into piles of smoking slag. Huge bronze lintels crashed to the ground, brought down by toppling pillars. Images of zodiacal beasts were blasted apart, masterpieces of depiction destroyed in a few moments of concentrated fire.

The Eye was the last to go. The beaten metal, hung over the main entrance gates, took more punishment than the rest before it finally caved in, raining broken chunks on to the burning detritus below. As it broke open, a sigh seemed to pass through the air, as if some warding presence had been withdrawn. The giant pyramid shuddered, and fragments of iron

and stone tumbled down its sheer sides. The mighty gates had been reduced to a gaping, jagged-edged mouth, utterly dark and forbidding.

Ironhelm didn't hesitate. He was first in, leaping over the tangled ruins at the base of the breach and barging aside metal struts the size of a Rhino's flank. The Wolf Guard came with him, crashing through the devastation in their Terminator plate, loping fast and low across the uneven terrain. In their wake came the rest of the Great Company, a whole host of gunmetal-grey warriors thirsting for combat.

'The vengeance of Russ,' hissed Ironhelm over the mission channel.

Every pore in his body oozed with kill-urge. He could feel the Wolf within uncurl again, stretching its limbs in the dark, stirred by the prospect of fresh blood. Yellow eyes opened in his mind, red-rimmed and intense.

The breach opened out into an inner hall. Its roof disappeared into the gloom above, supported by gigantic pillars of obsidian. The air was hot and dusty, thick with red motes thrown up by the explosions. Giant sigils of the Thousand Sons had been engraved into the stone, dim and half-seen in the shadows. The place was thick with the sweet smell of corruption, as if some ancient wrong had sunk into the stone and remained there, dormant and deadly.

The Wolves swept onwards, surging through the echoing hall, their armour black in the darkness and their helm lenses glowing. All carried their weapons ready, some with bolters, others with blades. There was no whooping or bellowing, just a low, murmured snarling. The Great Company had been unleashed on the pursuit, and every mind within it was focused with remorseless purpose on the task at hand. Like blood running down an axe-edge, the Wolves raced straight into the heart of the pyramid.

They were met by no enemies. The first hall led to another, even vaster, laid out in the same fashion. The Wolves' footfalls echoed into the shadows, rebounding back from the dark.

Ironhelm felt no lessening of his vengeful fury in the eerie silence. Mortal enemies would have been an irrelevance in such a place – they would simply have delayed the encounter that he yearned for, the one that he'd yearned for ever since the dreams had started.

As he ran, he found he recognised the stonework around him. He recalled the sigils, looming out of the gloom and passing in the shadows. Their patterns had walked in his mind for decades. He had run this path before, over and over again.

I am meant to be here. This place, this kill, has been ordained for me, locked in the wyrd. I am ready for it. By the Allfather, I am ready for it.

The second hall gave way to a third, then a fourth, each one larger than the last. The sheer scale of the pyramid began to become apparent. In its sullen, shrouded majesty it was the equal at least of those glass-faced edifices destroyed in Tizca. There were no libraries here, though, no repositories of learning and scholarship. This was a poor imitation, an empty copy of that which had once existed, for the original was impossible to replicate. What was destroyed by the Wolves remained destroyed.

The packs passed through a final gateway, soaring high beyond imagining. A central chamber yawned away from them in all directions, gigantic under the apex of the pyramid. The air felt even thicker, as if something massive pressed down heavily on it. Great braziers, each the size of Imperial Guard Sentinel walkers, sent sapphire light bleeding across the marble floor. Banners, hundreds of metres long, hung heavily from chains suspended in the distant roof, all inscribed with dimly-lit devices.

They were company emblems. Ironhelm didn't look at them. He had no wish to be reminded of what the Thousand Sons had once been.

In the centre of the chamber was a raised platform reached by steep stairways extending in four directions. It was the pyramid in miniature, crowned by a flat space little more than a hundred metres across.

On the platform was an altar.

Before the altar stood a man.

Ironhelm increased his pace as he saw his target. His helm display didn't pick up anything, but his eyes didn't deceive him. A hunched figure was there, slightly under standard mortal human height, waiting for them. Even from far away, Ironhelm's keen vision picked out the details on the man's face.

The skin was lined and ancient, puckered like leather and festooned with age-spots. He wore wine-red robes that clung to a slender frame, and leaned against a long wooden staff. His hands were like claws, scrawny with uncut nails. His hair must once have been long and full, but now hung from a balding pate in silvery straggles.

As the Wolves closed in, the figure looked up to watch them approach. The man saw Ironhelm approach, and shot the Great Wolf a strange look. It was a mixture of many things.

Contempt. Pity. Pride. Sorrow. Self-hatred. Hatred for them.

Perhaps the expression was hard to read because the man's face was unusual in one important respect.

Ironhelm bounded up the steps, leaving his retinue a few paces behind as ever, letting the disruption field across the frostblade flare into life.

'Now let the galaxy witness your second death!' he roared, hauling his blade back as he crested the final steps, tensing to leap into contact.

The man lifted a withered finger.

Ironhelm froze in mid-stride. Behind him, his pack was similarly locked into stasis. The entire Great Company ground to a halt, imprisoned in their gestures of impending murder.

Ironhelm roared soundlessly with frustration, flexing his steel-hard muscle-bundles against the maleficarum. His power-armour servos whined, straining at the unnatural bonds that constrained them. He felt

sweat burst out across his brow, trickling down his temples. The vice remained, though it yielded a little.

I can fight this.

The Great Wolf clenched his jaw, feeling his fangs scrape across his flesh, battling the sorcery that clamped down on his limbs with every sinew.

‘You are powerful, Harek Eireik Eireiksson,’ said the old man. His voice was thin, dry, and tinged with an oddly paternal-sounding regret. ‘That should not surprise me. I have watched you grow over many centuries.’

Ironhelm felt his lungs labouring, his hearts pumping. If he could have shouted, he would have screamed his defiance. One of his arms shifted a fraction. The deadening power over his body trembled.

‘All that you wish for is to kill me,’ remarked the old man, looking through a single rheumy eye at his assassin. ‘You may succeed. Even now I feel your vital spirit overcoming the bonds I have placed on it.’

He shook his head in grudging respect.

‘So strong! You Wolves were always my father’s most potent weapons. What could I ever do to withstand that? Even at the height of my powers, what could I ever have done?’

Ironhelm felt his lips pull back in a snarl. Control over his muscles was returning. He sensed his warriors all doing the same thing. The frostblade inched closer to its target.

The man made no effort to get out of the way.

‘Time is short,’ he said. ‘So let me tell you why I brought you to Gangava. It was to give you a choice. That is the way of my kind. You think us without honour or scruple, but that verdict obscures many truths. We have standards of conduct, though they differ from the ones you still cherish. I myself make a point of observing them.’

Ironhelm felt the bonds crack further. His arms moved a whole centimetre before the restraining clamps reasserted themselves. If he

could have smiled, he would have broken into a wolfish grin.

Your sorcery will fail you soon. Then my blade will finish your babbling.

‘I was once told the truth, and failed to heed it. Mindful of that, I offer you the truth now. I have passed beyond your comprehension, son of Russ. Even now, my soul is split. Only a fragment remains here. It was enough to bring you, to keep you from the greater battle as it unfolds. If you kill me, I shall be free to go to the other place, and my presence there will be terrible. But if you stay your hand, your future may yet be different. That is the choice.’

The old man looked at Ironhelm keenly, his single eye unwavering.

‘Consider this the honour of my calling. A path of ruin awaits you, and I show you the way to avoid it. If you do what your primarch could not, and stay your hand, then the Bane of the Wolves will never come to light.’

Ironhelm managed to grind out a guttural snarl, though static flecks of blood burst from his lips with the effort. His arms shifted again. The bounds set on his limbs felt suddenly fragile, as if one more push would shatter them.

I feel you weakening now.

The old man remained rigidly in place, though he winced. His wasted hands clutched the staff more tightly, and he leaned against it with effort. His control was being dragged to its limits.

‘And so the moment comes. I can hold you no longer. This is the choice, Harek Eireik Eireiksson. You can walk away, and you will never see me again.’

Then he lowered his voice, and the wizened face took on an expression of dreadful warning.

‘But slay me, Dog of the Emperor, and we shall meet again very soon.’

The real space viewer buckled outwards, torn between the forces raging against it. It had been well designed and made, a peerless example of Imperial craftsmanship from the era when mankind had truly aspired to

unmatched mastery of the stars. Blackwing watched the material flex horribly, trying to hold itself together. It had lasted longer than he'd expected, but still looked ready to blow at any moment.

'Neiman...' he voxed, bracing himself for whatever came next.

'Calm yourself,' grunted the Navigator over the comm. 'We're coming out now.'

The mutant's voice was cracked and gasping. Flames crackled in the background.

Blackwing felt a surge of relief. Below him, fires were now running riot through the servitor pits. The semi-human automata just kept working, even as their skin flaked and rolled back. From far back in the bowels of the ship, Blackwing heard massive warp-coils begin to wind down. They made a strange grinding noise, as if huge iron bearings had been placed out of sync with one another and were trying to negotiate some kind of priority.

'That's what I wanted to hear. You've done well.'

'You have no idea, Space Wolf.'

Blackwing bristled at the term. It was what offworlders called the *Vlka Fenryka*, ignorant of the ways and language of Fenris. Like all his breed, he thought it was a stupid name.

But Neiman was hardly ignorant of any of their ways. He spoke with all the precision of his profession, and now he was dying. So Blackwing replied carefully too, honouring him as he would a pack-brother.

'Until next winter, Djulian,' he said.

There was no further response from the comm, just a snap and a hail of static. Blackwing tried it again, with the same result. The Navigator had gone.

Then the floor of the bridge buckled, as if the ship had hit a sudden burst of turbulence. Blackwing braced himself awkwardly in his void-suit, clambering back toward the throne. A gantry collapsed close to where he'd just been, hitting the rail around the command platform and crashing into

the pits below. The rest of the bridge groaned as the metal was twisted and stressed by the forces of real space re-entry.

Blackwing achieved the throne again and sat heavily on the burnished seat. There was a shudder, and more explosions. Klaxons began to blare out across the upper decks.

No one is left to hear you. No one but me.

Blackwing felt the effects of translation before the instruments reported it. His whole body lurched, as if his organs had been sucked out into the open, re-arranged and put back again. The fabric of reality seemed to slur, to drag, before reasserting itself. A powerful wave of nausea rushed across him, nearly blinding him with its intensity.

Then it passed. The *Nauro* had dropped out of the warp.

Blackwing depressed a control rune, and the snapping sound of saviour pods blasting free of their support cages echoed up through the burning corridors. Then he withdrew the chromo on the real space viewers. The true black of space replaced the false black of the warp-guards. The long range augurs picked up signals. Ship-signs. Dozens of them.

And far off, past the cordon of battleships, was the planetary signature he'd keyed into the cogitators himself seventeen days ago.

Gangava Prime.

The floor began to ripple like breaking pack-ice. The cracked real space lenses trembled, spawning new snaking hairlines. More booming explosions ran through the ship, shaking the backbone of it. Every warning rune on the tactical console was red and flashing.

Blackwing got up from the throne, running his gauntlet finger across the armrest as he did so.

‘Glad I insisted on getting you, girl,’ he said aloud, watching as the structure of the bridge began to fold in on itself. ‘Arfang was right. Oirreisson is a man of poor taste.’

Then he tensed, watching for the first viewer to erupt outwards. There was no hope of getting to the saviour pods now, much less the shuttle hangars. What remained was luck.

Or, as the Rune Priests had it, *wyrd*.

The first dome shattered, blowing up in a coronet of twinkling points. The gale of atmospheric expulsion clutched at him, and a maelstrom of debris flew out of the breach in the hull, whirling into space. Then another one went, pulling more loose matter into the void. As more viewers exploded open, Blackwing saw a servitor pulled free of its harness, tumbling out through the open viewers, still on fire until the frigid void extinguished it.

Blackwing hung on to the throne, making full use of his enhanced strength to pick his moment, watching the lattice of transparent lenses above him disintegrate.

Now.

He pushed himself away from the throne and swept upwards.

As soon as he left the floor of the bridge, he lost control, spinning like the rest of the jetsam toward the void-sucked real space viewers. He had an impression of whirling chaos, of the whole ruined bridge sliding in front of his eyes, before he was sucked out, ripped into the void, and everything got very, very cold.

His breath became deafening in the enclosed space of his helm, ragged and quick. For a moment, his disorientation was almost complete. Stars, as vivid as he'd ever seen them, swept by as he rotated, out of control and flailing.

As he spun round again he saw the broken flanks of the *Nauro* drift across his vision, retreating fast into the distance. The damage was worse than he'd dared to imagine. The entire engine level was open to space, blazing away in defiance of the vacuum around it, shedding components in a spinning cloud of burn-black metal. It was a shadow of the ship he'd

commandeered on Fenris, a shattered, hopeless wreck. Saviour pods spiralled away from it like seeds falling from an *ekka* pine.

Something about the silence of space made everything seem to take place in a weird kind of silent slow motion. Blackwing actually saw the plasma drives explode before he felt anything of it. Bright yellow light flowered out from the darkened hull-carcass, rushing into the void in an utterly gorgeous sphere of monumentally impressive destruction. The vessel snapped clean in two, its components flying apart like a snapped femur, each spur lit up by subsidiary detonations.

Then the impact caught up. Blackwing went from spinning aimlessly in space to being tossed around like an ice-skiff in a Hel-gale. He felt a sharp blow as something hard and metal hit his void-armour shell, then another, then many more.

He tried, fruitlessly, to right himself, or at least to cradle himself against the rain of debris, all of it moving with incredible speed through the frictionless void. It was as he was doing this that an ancillary drive-shaft, a piece of solid metal the length of a Thunderhawk, rushed up to meet him with the remorseless inevitability of basic physics.

Blackwing had time for three thoughts. The first was that, after all he'd survived over the past two weeks, this was a poor way to go. The second was that, when it hit, it was going to really, *really* hurt.

Then the shaft slammed into him at full speed, cracking against his armour with the full momentum of the plasma-drive explosion, shattering his helm-visor and bursting the shell of his breastplate open. The void raced in, sucking both air and consciousness out.

As he tumbled away from the impact, trailing droplets of blood and oxygen from his wounds, his eyesight blurred and slipping away, he had the third thought. A familiar shape had intruded on to the edge of his waning awareness, grey and blunt-edged, bigger by far than the *Nauro* and in much better shape.

Blessed Allfather, he realised, before blood ran across his eyes and blinded him. *That's the Gotthammar*.

The bonds snapped. The old man staggered back, his staff falling from his grasp and clattering on the floor.

Fast as a throat-cut, Ironhelm was on him. The frostblade whistled through the air, resuming its course as if no interruption had taken place. The Great Wolf adjusted the trajectory subtly, compensating instantly for the movement of his target.

The man made no attempt to protect himself, nor to run from the blade. Freed from the crushing weight on them, Ironhelm's muscles sprang back to life instantly, propelling the crackling edge into the kill-zone. The frostblade bit true, cleaving the man's chest open diagonally from shoulder to waist.

The old man looked at Ironhelm a final time, somehow hanging on to a sliver of life. His single eye remained open, staring inscrutably.

Then he was down, his blood running across the stone freely. Ironhelm towered over him, poised to strike again, mindful of the ways of the Traitor. His newly released Wolf Guard leapt up to join him on the platform, all eager to defend their master against the awesome power of the fallen primarch and his daemonic allies.

But none appeared. A sigh passed through the heavy air of the chamber, making the banners rustle. The only sound was the heavy thud of power-armoured boots on the stairs, and the constant, thrumming growl of the packs.

The man was dead. He stayed dead.

Ironhelm looked down at the corpse, still panting from his exertion against the maleficarum. He knew he should feel elation. He knew should feel something. Instead, his entire frame felt hollow. Within him, he could sense a thin, mournful howling.

Frei drew alongside. Like the Great Wolf, the Rune Priest emanated none of the feral exuberance he ought to have done.

‘What just happened?’ asked Ironhelm, as bewildered as a child. He began to feel a sickness well up within him. The quest of decades had been achieved, and there was nothing but a faint confusion and nausea to show for it.

‘The primarch was here,’ confirmed Frei, looking down at the body before the altar. ‘Now, he is not.’

‘Then I have killed him?’

Ironhelm’s voice betrayed his desperation. He knew he hadn’t.

‘Something died,’ said Frei. Like his master, his voice had none of the earthy certainty it normally carried. ‘But I do not under—’

‘Lord!’

The voice was Rangr’s, and it was full of alarm.

The braziers were growing in intensity. The sapphire flames lashed up, creating columns of writhing, fluorescent energy. The light was powerful, throwing back even the darkest of the shadows in the chamber’s recesses. The banners were illuminated fully, exposing the company emblems. Ironhelm turned to look at them, finally sensing their importance. He had been wrong. They were not Thousand Sons devices. They never had been.

‘Adgr’s pack,’ he muttered, recognising the crossed fangs over the sickle moon. ‘And Gramm’s. And Beor’s...’

Frei’s gaze swept across the newly lit-up emblems. Beyond them, carved into the walls of the chamber, were stone reliefs. They depicted familiar events in an angular, stylised fashion. On one frieze there were pyramids within a city, the exact dimensions of those on Gangava. The *Gotthammar* arriving in orbit was on another. The reinforcements from Fenris translating in-system, the destruction of the void shield generator, all the events were there. There was even a depiction of the Great Wolf hurling an autocannon mount from a burning tower.

This has all been foreseen.

Rangr kept his chainsword poised in the attack position. Like all the Wolves in the chamber, he was on high alert, his hackles high and his hearts beating solidly.

‘What is the meaning of those emblems, lord?’ the Wolf Guard asked. ‘They’re *Fenryka*, but no Great Companies that I know.’

Ironhelm began to move away from the platform, lumbering down the steps heavily. Like his troops, he kept his frostblade activated. The worst of the nausea subsided, to be replaced by the cold hand of dread.

‘They are our cousins,’ he growled, his voice shot through with loathing. ‘The Wolf Brothers. The lost ones.’

Frei joined the Great Wolf, and the pair of them descended the last steps from the pyramid quickly. The retinue followed in their wake.

‘The Brothers have been disbanded for over two hundred years,’ said Frei. ‘I do not understand—’

‘So you have already said, Rune Priest,’ snarled Ironhelm, losing patience. All his fury, all his kill-urge, had been suddenly blunted, and the result was an almost physical pain. ‘Enough uncertainty. This place is a mockery of us. We will return to the fleet and destroy it from orbit.’

As he neared the far side of the chamber, close to where a gilded archway marked the exit out to the halls beyond, the braziers suddenly changed colour. From blazing sapphire they switched to a sickly green, intense and overbearing. The Wolf Brothers emblems became distorted and grotesque in the shifting light.

With the sharp sound of metal grating against metal, massive blast-doors withdrew from the walls of the chamber. In every direction, huge vaults opened up, each of them bleeding more emerald sickness into the central chamber. Dark shapes emerged from the fog of green, twisted and diseased. They were Space Marine in profile, but horribly altered. Some had trailing tentacles in place of limbs, others had misshapen heads

crowned with thorns. Their armour was warped and uprooted, the plate ripped by growths from below and fused with unholy flesh where it spilled into the open. Helm-lenses glowed with more sickly witchlight, piercing even the shifting miasma roiling from the vaults. They didn't march cleanly, but limped, dragged or scuttled, hauling their broken bodies into the open, tottering on cloven hooves and clawed crow's feet.

As they emerged into the light of the braziers, their origins became clearer. Their battle-plate had once been grey, adorned with the totems and fetishes of the hunt. There were pelts still clinging to the corrupted ceramite, as botched and altered as the armour beneath. Images of fangs and runes were still graven into breastplates and greaves, though stretched into new and blasphemous patterns by some dark and subtle artistry. As they lumbered into view, the mutated warriors began to howl in a mockery of the battle cries they had once roared so proudly. The sound was horrific, a chorus of fluted misery and distortion that resounded from the high walls around them and filled the chamber with perverted hatred.

'The Bane of the Wolves,' breathed Frei, finally understanding. 'Not him. Not us. *Them.*'

Rangr and the other Wolf Guard hesitated. Normally they'd have rushed into combat at the first sight of such corruption, but this time none of them moved. They could all see the runes on the armour, the withered pelts and the beast-mask helms.

They all knew, without needing to be told, that the gene-seed in each one of those horrors was the same as the Helix that animated them.

'Orders, lord?' asked Frei, seizing his staff in both hands, as riven by indecision as those about him.

Ironhelm raised himself to his full, terrible height then, watching the oncoming mutants with a grim horror. They were brothers in more than name. They were the only successors the Space Wolves had ever permitted

to be made, the only other scions of the primarch Leman Russ that remained in the galaxy.

They shared blood. They shared gene-memory. They shared everything.

‘Remember yourself, priest,’ Ironhelm growled, picking out the first of his targets from the hundreds that presented themselves. ‘These are no longer Wolf Brothers. Kill them. Kill them all, and do not cease until their abomination has been cleansed from the universe forever.’

Jarl Arvek Kjarlskar turned away from the slab in the *Gotthammar*’s medibay. The Wolf Scout he’d dragged out of the void, Blackwing, lay on the metal, more dead than alive, though somehow still capable of disagreeable amounts of sarcasm. The ship he’d arrived in was now nothing more than a ball of spinning ash, though the *Gotthammar*’s reclamators were still picking up saviour pods.

‘Do we have a comm-link?’ Kjarlskar asked. The great voice was as deep and resonant as ever, though there was a note of unusual urgency in it.

‘Not yet, lord,’ replied Anjarm, the ship’s Iron Priest. ‘Ironhelm is in the central pyramid, heavily engaged. There’s jamming down there.’

Kjarlskar’s eyes blazed dangerously.

‘How can there be jamming? We destroyed everything.’

He clenched his giant fists, bunching them as if he wanted to punch his way through the tiled walls of the apothecarium. Controlling his rage with difficulty, he whirled back to face Blackwing.

‘You’re *sure*, Wolf Scout?’ he asked. ‘We’ve had comms from Fenris – all of them routine.’

Blackwing managed a weak, hacking laugh. More blood bubbled up from his throat.

‘Sure? No, not really, Jarl. Maybe the *Skraemar* wasn’t torn apart by a battleship twice its size. Maybe we didn’t lose our orbital batteries in a

few hours. And maybe Jarl Greyloc didn't really order me out here, at the expense of my ship and most of my crew. I just *can't be sure...*'

Kjarlskar swooped down on Blackwing, grabbing him by his broken void-armour and hauling him up to his face.

'No more games,' he hissed, his fangs fully exposed. 'You ask for the recall of the entire Chapter. This is Ironhelm's moment of triumph.'

Blackwing's head lolled as the Wolf Lord shook him. His eyes went glassy, and the sardonic smile left his lips.

'I nearly died to bring you this message, lord,' he drawled, on the edge of consciousness and loquacious from medication. 'In itself, that matters not. But the fact you're hesitating over this is now massively pissing me off. There are Thousand Sons on Fenris, a whole bloody Legion of them. Even if the fleet returns now, the odds are the Aett will still fall. So what else do you want me to say? *Please?*'

Kjarlskar glared at him for another moment, as if his eyes could somehow bore into the Scout's soul and uncover the truth. Then, with as much disgust as despair, he threw Blackwing back against the hard metal slab.

'Get me a comm-link,' he snarled to the Iron Priest. 'Get it now. Then organise landers, and send a message to the other ships to prepare for re-translation. We're going back.'

Anjarm nodded.

'It will be done. But we've had reports of Traitor Marines in the pyramid – Ironhelm will not come away from that fight easily.'

Kjarlskar spat on the floor.

'That is why they're there. Blood of Russ, how easily we've been led.' He started to stride across the medi-bay, thrusting aside the fleshmaker-thralls who got in his way. 'I'll make planetfall myself. By the Allfather, he'll listen to *me*.'

It was as the massive Wolf Lord neared the exit that Blackwing lifted his battered head a final time. The encounter with the drive-shaft had left him uglier and more misshapen than ever. His nose and cheekbones had been shattered, his chest driven in and both arms badly broken. Even for a Space Marine, those were serious wounds. The huge amounts of sedative in his bloodstream seemed to have finally got to him, and his bruised eyelids drooped half-closed.

‘You do that, Jarl,’ he slurred, drifting back into forgetfulness. ‘And don’t think I’ll hold any of this against you. I’m a generous sort, so you can thank me properly when we get back.’

PART IV:
THE CRIMSON KING



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The lights were low in Greyloc's chamber. None of the Jarls had ostentatious private quarters, and they were all arranged in much the same way: bare rock walls, racks of weapons taken from past encounters, totems gifted by the Wolf Priests, a hard bed layered with tough hides. Greyloc's was perhaps a little more sparse than most, but not by much. The only item that marked his territory was the old axe Frengir, hanging over the whetstone like an amulet.

The Wolf Lord was seated on a low three-legged wooden stool, the kind the men of the ice used for tribal councils. It was built to mortal scale, and even out of armour Greyloc looked awkward on it, all limbs and hands.

His eyes were closed, the pale skin of his face relaxed. The sounds of the Aett – the hammering, the shouting, the grind of machinery – were muted. A fire glowed in the corner of the chamber, now little more than embers. A mortal would have struggled to see much in the gloom and would have found the cold crushing. The extremity of the chamber's conditions were testament to the majesty of the Adeptus Astartes, even if the contents were not.

Alone with his thoughts, Greyloc let his mind wander across possibilities, soaring like a *gyrhawk* across an open sky. He could sense the vast tide of hatred closing in on his citadel, pressing against the stone, burrowing into its roots, determined to break inside and destroy the life

within. A lesser warrior might have been intimidated by that. Even a great leader might have felt a tremor of frustration, a burning sense of injustice that his time in command had been rendered so cruelly short.

Greyloc felt none of that. His humours were balanced, and the inner wolf was at ease. It was unusual for one of his kin to be in such a state prior to the outbreak of battle, and it was a trait he never revealed. There were times, he knew, when his battle-brothers felt he had lost something essential, that he had become too much like a mortal, and there was no point in fuelling the rumours further.

He understood why they thought such things. Greyloc was as much a gene-child of Russ as they were, but he had command of a quality that they often lacked, for all their bluster and outward confidence.

Certainty.

That had never wavered, not since the first implants had taken, not since he'd learned to use the new, powerful body given to him by the Helix, not since he'd risen through the orders to become Hunter, then Guard, then Lord. At every stage, he'd known what his destiny was.

In another soul, that might have constituted arrogance. Greyloc, though, had never gloried in it, or even taken satisfaction. It was merely the way of the universe, as sacred as the balance between hunter and prey, between cause and effect.

At every stage, I chose the path I had to. Every note of the wyrd then was true. It will be no different now. The runes guide, and they never lie.

By the doorway, a red light briefly winked on. Greyloc's eyelids flickered open. His pin-pupils were dilated, as if he'd been hunting. They shrunk quickly, returning to their normal state.

'Come,' he said quietly.

The iron doors to his chamber slid open, and a hunched figure strode in. Wyrmlblade was in his armour, as ever. As he walked, it hummed

arrhythmically, breaking the peace of the chamber. The doors slid closed again, sealing the two of them in.

Greyloc did not rise. Seated, he looked diminished. More so than most of his battle-brothers, he could control his aura of intimidation. A warrior like Rossek would always be terrifying; Greyloc was only terrifying when he chose to be.

‘I’m sorry, lord,’ said Wyrmlade, looking at the embers, the axe, and the simple robes worn by the Jarl. ‘I can come another time.’

Greyloc waved a hand dismissively.

‘You may come and go when you please,’ he said. ‘Or have the Wolf Priests given up that right?’

‘Not yet,’ Wyrmlade acknowledged. ‘And not likely to.’

He did not sit. His armoured weight would have crushed a stool like Greyloc’s, and there were no other chairs.

‘You’ve been in seclusion long,’ he said, leaning against the stone walls.

‘There’s been much to reflect on,’ said Greyloc. ‘Much to plan.’

‘You’re content with what has been done?’

Greyloc snorted.

‘I’d be content if we had another three Companies and a battle-fleet. But, as we haven’t, then yes. I am. The tunnel collapse has given us precious days. They’ll break through soon, and we’ll be ready. Bjorn is with us, so they’ll get a fight.’

Wyrmlade looked at the Jarl cryptically. ‘One we can win?’

Greyloc shrugged. ‘What use is that thought, Thar? We’ll do what we’re bred to. After that, it’s in the lap of the Allfather.’

‘You know why I ask. There are things... *secrets* within the Aett. There is knowledge here that must never leave. Ironhelm knows it, and a handful of others, but no more. If we are defeated, then...’

Wyrmlade left the sentence hanging.

‘You speak as if you were the only one who’s thought about such things,’ said Greyloc. ‘It’s been in my mind too. But what do you propose? That we destroy the Tempering? Ironhelm would have to sanction it.’

‘He’s not, as you may have noticed, here.’

‘So is that what you want?’

Wyrmlblade looked pained.

‘You know it isn’t. My life has been devoted to it. Yours too, since you were taken into confidence. But we must have a plan. This battle has already made it hard to retain the secrecy we need, and it will only get worse. If the time comes, I need to know I have your authority to act.’

Greyloc met Wyrmlblade’s gaze. The two of them were so physically different – one cold, white and vital, the other battered, dark and cynical – and yet there was a kinship there, a shared understanding.

For several heartbeats they remained silent.

‘You do,’ said Greyloc at last. ‘But do not act until the very last moment, and then only if the Aett must be lost beyond recovery. Until then, preserve what you have. Lives may be sacrificed. Relics may be lost. But I would not see the work ended here, unless all else must be ended.’

As he spoke, his pale hands closed into fists.

‘This is our future, Thar,’ he said. ‘This is our chance to grow. Should we lose it now, it will never come again.’

Wyrmlblade nodded.

‘Then you feel as I do,’ he said. ‘I’m glad, and it will be as you command. But I make one more request: keep Sturmhart away from the Valgard. He has been given orders to interfere, and would not understand the need for further secrecy.’

‘Sturmhart is already taken care of. He will stand beside Bjorn and me at Borek’s Seal. You will have the services of Cloudbreaker at the Fangthane. So do not worry – the need to divide our forces has rid you of your gadfly.’

The old Wolf Priest smiled.

‘You would have made a formidable Great Wolf, Vaer,’ he said, and his crooked smile was wistful.

‘*Would* have?’ replied Greyloc. ‘You have so little faith in our chances?’

Wyrmlblade shrugged, and looked down.

‘It’s in the lap of the Allfather,’ he repeated, though the words sounded empty a second time.

Two days later, and the Fangthane was finally made ready. All clustered there knew that the tunnels would be breached imminently. Their demolition had given the Aett a much needed respite from assault, and it had been now been a full ten days since the gates had been lost. Now the fighting would begin again. There would be further retreats, further fighting withdrawals, all aimed at inflicting the maximum pain for the minimum of ground. But now the space to shrink into was finite. The Aett was massive, but even its network of tunnels ran out eventually.

Redpelt knelt low on the stone steps leading up to the Fangthane. His helm lay beside him as he carefully lacquered his russet hair down, ready to put it on. As ever, his armour was covered in layers of blood, and the lower jaw of his helm had its row of teeth embedded. Many of them had been knocked out, but enough remained to mark him. His breastplate was new, a replacement for the one cracked apart by the Rubric Marine’s bolter rounds. Despite several days of acclimatisation, it felt awkward against his black carapace interface, and the input nodes still chafed.

His work done, he looked up. His pack-brothers were arranged around him, all fourteen of them. The combat squad was an amalgam of other Blood Claw packs, cobbled together from those who’d survived the gate assaults. As ever, the Claws’ casualties had been high during the fighting, a testament to their headstrong way of war.

Brokentoorth had been killed on the retreat, his back punched open by a lascannon beam even as he raced for the cover of the gates. A terrible way to cut the thread, that.

Of course, Brakk was gone too. The one who'd trained them for so long, who'd knocked as much fight-sense into them as had been possible, and who'd led them with such calm, controlled skill. The Wolf Guard had never said much, and almost nothing at all when in the thick of the fighting, but now he was dead the Aett somehow seemed a quieter, emptier place.

His replacement, the glowering giant Rossek, had changed the nature of the pack more than the arrivals from other squads. Whereas Brakk had been gruff and direct, Rossek looked like he'd been teetering on the edge of some bout of madness and barely survived. He too said very little, but Redpelt guessed the reasons for that were different. Brakk had always had the self-confident gait of a predator – controlled, taut, efficient. Rossek, by contrast, massive in his Terminator plate, looked haunted and grim. Something had got to him, had driven out the ebullient, belligerent spirit that had once made him the favourite to lead the Twelfth. In his torporific presence much of the old banter that had once animated the Claws was gone, replaced with a grim sense of expectation.

And then there was Helfist. He crouched a few paces away from Redpelt, his horsehair crest hanging from his helm, his plate still adorned with the figures of Ymir and Gann. On the surface, he'd not changed at all. Despite his brush with the Wolf, he'd retained his juvenile humour and coarse love of the hunt. Alone in the pack, Helfist generated that sense of unpredictable energy that made the Wolves what they were.

Helfist sensed he was being looked at, and his blood-eyed visage turned to Redpelt.

'Put your damn helm on, brother,' he voxed. 'Using that face against them really isn't fair.'

Redpelt would have grinned at that in the past. Not now. Helfist's levity was too forced, too conscious. The young Blood Claw had been deeply

wounded by the death of Brakk and his brush with the Wolf; he just didn't have the tools to deal with it.

Redpelt twisted his helm round and lowered it over his slicked-down scalp, slotting the bearings in place and hearing the faint lock of the atmospheric seals as they clamped down. Battle-runes flashed up across the display, indicating defensive formations throughout the Aett.

The principal Fangthane fortifications had been constructed on the broad, two hundred-metre long stairway leading up from the tunnels of the Aett into the main chamber at the top. The defences were arranged in a series of storied barricades, running from the base of the stairs to the summit where Freki and Geri stood guard. The forty-seven Wolves assigned to the Fangthane stairs were reinforced by hundreds of kaerls, all protected by heavy adamantium bunkers and barricade walls. The Sky Warriors were led by Wyrmlade; the mortals by a rivenmaster with an honest-looking face and hollow eyes.

In the very centre of the defensive perimeter, half-way up the stairway, were the mightiest death-machines of all: six Dreadnoughts. The Revered Fallen were huge, towering over Wyrmlade and Cloudbreaker as the commanders stood alongside them. Skrieya led the three packs of Grey Hunters at the base of the slope, lined up with Rossek's Blood Claws, and Rojk stood with his Long Fangs near the top of the stairway, exuding calm solidity as always.

There were more fortifications beyond at the summit, dug into the floor and walls of the chamber itself, refuges where the defenders could retreat to in stages if needed. All along the gigantic flanks of the Fangthane chamber, fixed guns had been mounted, each capable of throwing bolt-rounds at the enemy far faster than even the Long Fangs could.

It was a devastating collection of firepower, all looked over by the distant statue of Russ himself. The field hospital at his feet had been cleared days ago, moved higher up into the Hould. Now there was only

room for the tools of war in the Fangthane. All barrels, muzzles and blades pointed toward the huge, silent gates at the very base of the stairway, the portals through which the enemy would have to come.

It was a space less than a hundred metres wide. The killing ground.

‘Watch yourself, when they’re here,’ said Redpelt, speaking over a closed channel to Helfist.

Helfist laughed.

‘Going soft on me, Ogrim?’ he asked.

‘The Wolf is close behind you.’

‘He’s close behind us all, brother.’

Helfist drew his bolt pistol and checked the magazine for the twelfth time. As the wait dragged on, they all looked for displacement activity.

‘And you shouldn’t worry about me,’ he added casually. ‘Worry about yourself. Being so damn slow, and all.’

Redpelt tried to think of a reply, some suitable put-down. Nothing came to mind.

Then, from far below, came the sound of huge, resonating crashes. There were stronger booms after that, echoing up the tunnels. They were distant, clouded by kilometres of snaking corridors, but distinct enough. They didn’t stop.

‘Warriors of the Aett!’ came Wyrmlade’s dry old voice. He’d drawn the mighty power sword with the dragon device on its blade, and the energy field shimmered in the semi-dark. ‘Now fate falls a final time! The tunnels are opened. Steel yourselves, stand firm, and kindle your hate!’

He took a great stride forwards, raising the glowing edge of his weapon high.

‘For Russ! For the Allfather! For Fenris!’

The defenders replied as one.

‘For Fenris!’

The echo of the massed roar ran around the empty shell of the Fangthane approaches, gradually sinking into the stone.

Redpelt drew his own pistol, gripping his chainsword in his other hand. The kill-urge began to cradle in him. As soon as the first of the Traitors came through the gates, he'd become the snarling, slavering exemplar of war he'd been bred to be.

'Russ be with you, brother,' he said to Helfist.

'And with you,' replied Helfist, a little too quickly.

And it was then, for the first time ever, that Redpelt heard trepidation in his comrade's voice. The bravado, as impressive as it seemed, was only armour-deep.

Helfist was deeply troubled by something, and it wasn't the coming enemy.

The rock wall glowed red, then orange, then harsh white. On the far side of the collapsed tunnel, enormous energies were being applied. The barrier held for a little longer, bowed out, then exploded.

Huge chunks of semi-molten stone were hurled across the Chamber of the Seal, smashing into the far wall a hundred metres distant. In their wake, las-beams the width of a man's arm lanced through the air. Massive shapes lumbered through the gap, hacking at the edges of the breach with steaming drill-arms.

More cracks appeared, and a huge section of melta-fused stone toppled, crashing to the ground and sending rubble skidding across the floor. More las-fire flickered through the clouds of dust, flying harmlessly into the far walls of the chamber, hitting nothing.

There was nothing to hit. When the Thousand Sons broke into the heart of the Fang, there were no gun-lines to meet them, no ranks of kaerls ready to sell their lives in a desperate defence. The Cataphracts, still operating according to their simple machine-spirit instructions, lumbered into the

open, shaking off their mantles of dust and charging up plasma cannon arms to fire.

‘Cease!’ roared a voice from the tunnel beyond.

Flanked by Terminator Rubricae, Aphael clambered through the breach. Kine-shields shimmered around him, distorting his image behind shifting curtains of warp-energy.

More Rubricae emerged, striding out into the chamber and hefting boltguns. Among them was Hett, flanked by his own retinue and similarly cocooned in heavy shielding.

‘Send them forwards!’ he urged, letting his sorcerer’s staff blaze with eldritch power.

Aphael shook his head.

‘They know we’re coming,’ he said, looking out across the chamber warily.

He crouched down and picked up a chunk of rock the size of a man’s head. Lifting it as easily as a mortal might lift a pebble, he threw it across the chamber towards the tunnel on the far side. As it sailed into the dark, the space was rocked by massive explosions. The rock was blasted apart in an instant. From somewhere hidden deep in the recesses of the tunnels, autoguns thundered, sending a storm of ammunition screaming toward the Thousand Sons vanguard.

Aphael flicked a finger and the kine-shield bloomed outwards, enclosing the Cataphracts in a web of energy. The autogun assault detonated against the barrier in a rippling wave of fire.

‘They’ll need to do better than that, though,’ he said, lifting his staff aloft.

With a single word, the kine-barrier suddenly hurtled forwards, sweeping across the chamber and transmuting into a wall of consuming electricity. Lightning flared out and snaked into the shadows, tearing up stone and blasting it open. The surge of energy slammed into the fixed

guns, knocking them from their positions in a series of thumping detonations.

The explosions gradually gave out, and the lightning crackled into nothing, leaving a score of burned-out gun carcasses. Smoke drifted across the tunnels.

‘Now we advance,’ said Aphael coolly.

The Rubricae began to march. In silence, their eyes glowing softly in the dark, the last warriors of the XV Legion stalked forwards, clad in lash-curling trails of aetheric protection. In their wake came the Cataphracts, their massive claws cracking the stone beneath them as they moved.

From behind the vanguard, still in the tunnel leading to the gates, there was a vast, nebulous sound. It was the thud of thousands of boots striking the earth in unison, the sound of thousands of weapons being made ready, the sound of thousands of whispered prayers to the Masters of Sorcery.

It was the sound of the doom of Fenris drawing closer.

From the Chamber of Borek’s Seal, dozens of corridors branched off into the interior of the mountain. All were as dark as oil, kept in shadow, their hearth-fires long since kicked over. They curved and doubled back, leading the unwary a dance into choked dead-ends or taking them directly to the vast shafts that led to other levels. Even the kaerls didn’t know all the myriad ways of travel through the Aett, and stuck to the ancient paths, hugging the light of the fires and avoiding the deeper dark. They knew, as all knew, that the Fang would kill you quicker than a crevasse if you crossed it.

The Rubricae swept through the shadowed paths, their preternatural sight guiding them in the utter occlusion. They moved fluidly, sweeping gun muzzles across junctions with a calm, focused efficiency. The sorcerers came behind them, many metres back, herding them like distant, bronze-armoured shepherds.

They didn’t go unwarily. They knew the extreme danger. But they also knew they were the elite servants of the Red Primarch, warriors almost

without peer. They were stealthy, whisper-quiet and eerie. Many a mortal force had been taken by surprise by them before, expecting raving hordes of fanatics only to be ambushed by the terrifying, dust-dry approach of the soulless ones.

But the defenders were no mortals.

Crouched against the stone of the corridor wall, his Helix-enhanced senses making him sensitive to the slightest variation in air-density, Greyloc heard the first squad coming from hundreds of metres away. He narrowed his eyes, gauging their numbers and formation, pressing his fingers against the sheaths of his wolfclaws, feeling the ancient devices respond to his touch. The talons were dormant, invisible in the gloom, but would ignite with a thought.

Behind him, his troops did the same. Four warriors, all that was left of his original Terminator retinue, all equipped with close combat weapons, their armour powered down and as black as the air around them. In their midst was Sturmhart, his head bowed. Though his helm masked his features, Greyloc could sense the Rune Priest's concentration. Sturmhart kept the whole pack shrouded, safe from the prying psychic eyes of the sorcerers. The runes on his armour were sunken and dull, like lines of onyx set in the ceramite, but they were burning inside.

The long corridor ahead of them was empty, free of the booby traps and fire pits that rigged the higher levels. Greyloc watched intently, hearing the muted boot impacts of the Rubric Marine squads grow closer, waiting for the first sight of the enemy.

When it came, it was like a vision of a mortal's nightmare. Lime-green points of light bobbed into view at the end of the tunnel, the gleam of the Rubricae's unholy helm lenses. There were many of them, marching in close formation, coming confidently but carefully.

Greyloc felt the first stabs of hatred spike into his hearts.

You come here. To my realm. To despoil my people.

More green lights emerged. The squad was drawing closer, completely unaware of the welcome that awaited them at the far end of the corridor. Sturmhart gave out a low growl, below the hearing of any but the Wolves, working hard to maintain the protective shroud about them.

I will shatter you. I will drive your corrupted souls into damnation. I will break you open and throw the dust of your souls to the dirt.

The last of the Rubricae entered the tunnel. Greyloc's helm-display indicated eighteen targets, plus a slower-moving signal at the rear. That was the sorcerer, the one Sturmhart would have to deal with.

Because to me you are one thing, and one thing only.

Behind him, he could sense the power weapons of his battle-brothers pre-spike. Their pheromone kill-urge became apparent, thick and pungent. After days of inactivity and sparring, the glory of war had come to them again. Greyloc felt a fierce surge of elation as the endorphins rushed into his bloodstream.

Prey.

The moment came.

‘For Russ!’

His wolfclaws blazed, sending harsh shadows leaping back along the corridor, and then he was charging, hurtling towards the lead Rubric Marine, bathed in streams of storm-fury kindled by Sturmhart. His guard tore into battle beside him, bellowing with feral abandon, the very image of the maelstrom itself. Sturmhart was with them too, his armour-runes exploding into angry red life, drenching the tunnel walls with the glowing stain of blood.

‘*Hjolda!*’ roared Greyloc, slamming into contact, scything his claws through the armour of his first victim, watching the empty plate buckle as the talons bit deep. The corridor was soon filled with the sharp crack, thud and crunch of close combat.

It had begun. The final assault. From that point on, they all knew, the fighting would not cease until the last of the Thousand Sons were killed, or the Fang was taken in flames.

First, the firestorm.

From behind his barricade, Morek watched through a handheld augur as the Thousand Sons' attack arrived at the Fangthane stair. The volume of fire was both blinding and deafening, a mix of plasma and solid-round weaponry that leapt out of the approach tunnels and slammed into the heavy buttresses at the base of the stairway. He couldn't see the source of it, as the invaders were still hidden by the low ceiling and curving walls of the tunnel beyond the stairs. They stayed back, remaining in cover, hurling ranged fire at the barricades from afar.

Morek slid down against the cool bulk of the three metre-high, four metre-thick adamantium bulwark he'd been stationed to hold, final-checking his *skjoldtar*. Around him, crouching low in cover, were the men of his riven. All of them had seen action before, and none had any problem dealing with the barrage of incoming fire. The shielding warding them had been erected over many days, constructed out of siege-grade materials, and was capable of absorbing huge amounts of punishment before failing.

But this was just the prelude, and there was a long way to go before the real fighting took place.

'Heads down,' he voxed automatically. It was a superfluous command – his men mostly had their helmets between their knees and were hunched at the base of the giant barricades. The rain of plasma and bolt-shells either slammed into the barriers or flew harmlessly over their heads, impacting against the roof of the huge tunnel.

The noise was the worst thing – a disorientating, devastating chorus of hammering and burning that echoed out of the enclosed corridors and bounced off into the massive space beyond. It made thinking difficult, let alone hearing orders over the vox.

Morek blink-clicked a rune on his helm display to augment his auditory feed and compensate for the thundering noise outside. It improved the situation, but only by a little.

From his tactical display, he could see the Wolves crouching down in forward positions, also using the cover of the barricades at the base of the stairway. They were the best equipped troops to deal with the volume of devastation, but even they didn't just walk blindly out into the torrent. Wyrmlblade held them back, keeping the leash on the Blood Claws short, waiting until there were targets suited to their close combat mastery.

Rojk and the Long Fangs remained similarly unused, perched high up at the rear of the defensive lines, surrounded by heavy shielding. They endured the firestorm, letting the barriers take the strain, waiting for the real enemy to emerge.

Only Cloudbreaker was fully active. The Rune Priest, the most potent of Sturmhjart's acolytes, had summoned up a swirling, missile-devouring storm of turbulence over the portals, using it to misdirect incoming projectiles and explode shells before they hit their target. It was far from perfect, but it spared the barricades from the full, unadulterated force of the enemy's bombardment.

Morek took a deep breath, tasting the metallic edge of his rebreather filter, letting his heart-rate fall as the initial aural shock of the assault wore off. He'd seen action many times, and knew how to handle himself on a battlefield. Even so, there was no escaping the initial, stomach-twisting lurch of adrenaline when the shooting started.

Then, as he always did, he saw Freija in his mind. He knew she was stationed in Borek's Seal with the other defensive forces. It was better that way. If they'd been placed together, he'd have been distracted by the need to keep half an eye on her. As it was, he didn't even have vox-contact. The two theatres of war were almost entirely separated, blocked by kilometres of solid rock and the comm-jamming devices of the enemy.

‘The Hand of Russ, daughter,’ he breathed, forgetting his helm-vox was still active.

‘What?’ asked the kaerl nearest him, raising his head as if he expected to be ordered over the top.

Morek smiled bleakly.

‘Not yet, lad,’ he said, feeling the tremors against the barricade as it absorbed a staccato run of heavy bolter-rounds. ‘But soon enough.’

Greyloc spun on the ball of his foot, smashing aside the Rubric Marine and jarring its sapphire armour against the tunnel wall. The Traitor slumped down the stone and the witchlight in its eyes flickered out.

Greyloc turned to his retinue, knowing the pack needed to fall back. The approach tunnels were crawling with the enemy now, and his squad had to withdraw to Borek’s Seal before it was cut off.

‘Broth—’ he started, before feeling a sharp pain in his right leg.

The Rubric Marine hadn’t been finished off. It had dragged itself to its knees and stabbed its short combat blade into Greyloc’s greaves.

Still not dead! Skitja – what do I have to do?

He raised both wolfclaws and rammed them point-down, shredding the prone Rubric Marine from shoulder to waist. The disruptor-charged talons sliced through the empty battle-plate, breaking open the carapace and exposing the empty space inside. There was a sharp hiss, like air escaping from a void-lock, and the components rocked apart. The Traitor’s helm dropped heavily on to the floor, lenses dark, and stayed motionless.

That was enough.

‘Now,’ Greyloc snarled over the mission channel, angered by the wound he’d taken, angered that his guard hadn’t been tighter. ‘Back to the Seal.’

His retinue turned instantly, cutting their way out of combat and bludgeoning their way free. The six of them, Sturmhart included, broke out of the melee and tore down the winding corridors, leaving a brace of disabled or destroyed Traitors in their wake. As he went, Greyloc felt a

dragging sensation on his limbs. For a moment, he thought it was the wound. Then he recognised the true source.

‘Rune Priest,’ he ordered, giving the hand signal for maleficarum.

Sturmhart nodded, still running, and clenched his fist tight. The runes on his armour suddenly blazed crimson. There was a thin cry of anguish from further up the tunnels, and the dragging ceased. The Wolves sped on, running hard through the utter darkness of the corridors, flawlessly negotiating the uneven ground, navigating as much by memory as by the senses.

They went down sharply, easily leaving behind the slower moving Rubric Marines. Streams of bolter fire followed them while the pursuers were in range, but it was either evaded or flew off the heavy Terminator armour and soon died out. Greyloc’s leg muscles had begun to knit before he’d gone more than a few hundred metres, testament to the astonishing recuperative power of his gene-heritage.

‘Signals ahead,’ voxed Sturmhart as they headed toward a junction in the tunnels where several routes coincided.

‘Mortals,’ spat Greyloc contemptuously. His kill-urge hadn’t abated, and such easy targets would do nothing to assuage it. ‘Make this quick.’

Seconds later, and a hapless Prosperine assault squad, ranging ahead of the slower moving Rubricae vanguard, blundered into the vengeful Wolves. Greyloc tore through them like a tornado, throwing bodies against the stone with spine-ripping force before carving them open and moving on. Las-beams and screams flickered in the eternal night of the underground, utterly hopeless against Greyloc’s momentum and fury.

‘We need to move,’ warned Sturmhart, grabbing a panicked trooper and breaking his neck with a single shake of his wrist. ‘More signals closing in.’

Greyloc growled in annoyance, plunging into a fresh cluster of retreating bodies and laying about them with his whip-crackling claws.

‘Let them,’ he snapped, impaling two mortals at once, one on each claw, before hurling them loose in a spray of blood. ‘I’m just getting started.’

‘There’ll be plenty of fighting at the Seal,’ insisted the Rune Priest, backhanding a mortal into the roof of the tunnel and unloading a single bolter round into the stomach of his terrified comrade. ‘Jarl, we need to *move*.’

Then came the familiar barking snap of bolter rounds from further up the tunnels. Only Space Marines used such weapons, and they were very close.

‘Damn them,’ cursed Greyloc, watching the few surviving mortals limp and scamper back up the way they’d come, heading for the protection of the closing Rubric Marine squads. His voice was ragged and panting, not from exhaustion, but from the fearful, murderous energy only the Wolves of Fenris could unleash.

He stayed standing for a moment longer, unwilling to cede more ground. His pack stayed with him, their massive armour humming with a latent menace. They would stand and fight, if he ordered them to.

Teeth of Russ, they’d stand against Magnus himself if I ordered them to.

‘Let’s go,’ he snarled, hearing the heavy tread of a hundred boots on the tunnel floors above. If they stayed, they’d be overwhelmed, just as Rossek had been.

The pack swept downwards again, following the swiftest route towards Borek’s Seal. As they went, they passed wards against sorcery, freshly consecrated by the Rune Priests only days earlier. There were thousands of them in the warrens of the Aett, all serving to damp down and dilute the powers of the Sons’ sorcerers. Until they were dismantled, the Fang would be a hostile, draining place for them.

As it should be, faithless witches.

The pack thundered down a long, shallow incline. Greyloc recognised the approach tunnels to the Seal as they widened. They were nearing the

final chamber before the bulwark itself, a junction of several other routes running down through the mountain. As the walls opened out, he heard noises from the space ahead.

‘Targets,’ he snarled, torn between irritation at the delay and pleasure at the chance to resume killing. ‘Lots of them.’

‘What in Hel are these signals?’ asked Sturmhart, before the pack burst out from the tunnel and into the chamber.

The space was huge after the confines of the mountain routes, a hundred metres wide and roughly circular. Fires burned, but they were not the wholesome flames of hearth fires. Prosperine troops were there ahead of them, dozens preparing for the assault on Borek’s Seal – the bulwark itself was now only a few hundred metres away, down another long, straight corridor carved into the rock.

For a moment Greyloc couldn’t see any reason for the Rune Priest’s confusion.

Then he did.

Among the mortal troops hurrying away from them, desperately trying to organise some kind of defence against the Terminators suddenly arriving in their midst, were two gigantic war machines. They had the look of ancient, proscribed tech-sorcery and stood more than a head higher than even Sturmhart. They had fearsome drills mounted on one arm and plasma cannons affixed to the other. Their movements were deliberate and methodical, yet nearly as fast as his.

As Greyloc tore into the chamber, a bolt of plasma arced toward him from one of the machines. He ducked left, evading the worst of it, though the ball of energy still caught his right arm and hurled him back against the stone.

‘*Fenrys!*’ roared Sturmhart, kindling energy along the length of his staff, whirling it round and throwing ball-lightning of his own into the face of the machine.

‘*Hjolda!*’ answered the rest of the pack, charging headlong against the other war-engine. The Prosperine mortals began to lay down a curtain of las-fire, but the flickering beams were more an annoyance than a threat.

The machines, though, were serious opponents. Greyloc, leaping back to his feet, saw one of his warriors torn apart by a plasma blast and another one thrown bodily to the ground by a punch from the drill-arm.

Thrown to the ground. In Tactical Dreadnought Armour.

Greyloc powered back towards the nearest leviathan, ignoring the second machine, now swathed in Sturmhart’s lightning strands.

‘Cataphracts,’ growled the Rune Priest over the vox, understanding what the signals had been telling him. ‘Soulless machines.’

Greyloc leapt into contact, evading another plasma bolt in mid-air and sweeping his claws into the Cataphract’s bronze shoulder-guards.

‘They all fall the same way,’ he grunted, jabbing the talons into metal, using his falling weight to drag the Cataphract off balance.

The massive war-engine staggered, pulled away from centre by Greyloc’s weight. As it tottered, the Wolf Lord punched up with his claws, tearing the armour-plating open and revealing intricate circuitry within. His arm reached back, ready to rip out the wiring, when a colossal blow from the drill-arm floored him.

Greyloc hit the stone hard and sprawled on his back. The Cataphract loomed over him and levelled the plasma cannon at his head. Greyloc rolled away as the sunburst blazed out, shattering the rock below.

Then he was back on his feet with a fluid, twisting movement, already anticipating the next blow from the Cataphract. He veered away, dodging a crushing blow from the drill-arm, before plunging back in close, his talons shimmering from the disruptors.

‘Bite on this,’ he hissed, jabbing the edges up toward the exposed rent in the Cataphract’s armour.

As the talons connected, the war machine was lifted high and thrown through the air, its massive limbs flailing. It crashed down amid a cluster of mortal troops. Its entire breastplate had been driven in, and the ancient metal was broken and smoking.

Greyloc spun round, perfectly aware he hadn't hit it that hard.

Bjorn was there.

The gigantic Dreadnought rose up in front of him, dominating the chamber as he dominated every chamber he entered, his massive plasma cannon arm still radiating heat from the discharge.

Feel the wrath of the ancients, abomination.

The aura of intimidation was astonishing. Even Greyloc, hardened by centuries of combat against the direst enemies of mankind, found himself awestruck in the face of that hatred. It was as if a fragment of Russ's own destructive power had been dragged back into the world of the living, as all-consuming and devastating as it had been when first unleashed on the galaxy two thousand years ago.

The Fell-Handed is among us! Blood of Russ, I would have faced a hundred deaths just to see this.

More Rubric Marines were entering the chamber by then, lumbering down the many tunnels and opening fire as they did so. Cataphracts were among them, and sorcerers, and mortal assault squads wearing heavy blast-armour.

Bjorn waded into battle, as imperious and uncaring of the odds as he'd ever been. His lightning claw blazed with thrashing, curling energy, trailing electrostatic barbs along the stone as it flexed open. His plasma cannon pounded a stream of bolts into the reeling enemy, hurling even the Rubricae aside as the blazing energy pulses exploded into them.

Be unleashed! boomed the venerable Dreadnought, his growling, resonant voice rising above the growing tide of explosions and war cries.

And in his wake came the beasts. Like a rolling wave, they leapt from his shadow and into the open. Huge, loping monsters, yellow-eyed, ribbed with metal plates and carrying outsized jaws lined with needle-sharp fangs, they tore forwards, devouring the ground between them and the enemy.

If the mortal invaders had been scared before, they panicked then. Thin pitched screams echoed from the chamber roof as the horrors of the Underfang pounced, slamming into the enemy lines and rolling across the stone with their prey.

More Dreadnoughts strode into the chamber, their autocannons spooling up to fire. In their wake came more racing bands of Underfang creatures, and squads of Grey Hunters, their war cries massive and echoing, and ravening packs of Blood Claws. Bolters barked out in response, and power-blades were kindled. The dark of the mountain was banished, replaced by the whirling, flashing light of muzzle-flares and plasma-bolts.

All this Greyloc saw in a single sweep of his helm. It was all the time he needed. He leapt to his feet, his claws still incandescent with killing energy.

‘For Russ!’ he roared, and the sound of the challenge shook the earth beneath his feet.

‘For Russ!’ roared the Wolves of the Fang, sweeping into combat, glorying in the savage thrust of arms.

For Russ! thundered Bjorn, the words amplified by his war-vox relays, drowning out all other sounds, rocking the walls of the chamber and cracking the stone under which he trod.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Temekh had to work hard not to give in to an unseemly excitement. He knew, as all the sorcerers did, that his emotions were entirely transparent to his gene-father. Just as they'd always been.

‘Welcome to Fenris, lord,’ he said, bowing low.

‘None of that,’ remonstrated the newcomer, waving away the ceremonial gesture. ‘You’re being misled by appearance. As I’ve surely demonstrated to you by now, that is the least important aspect of my presence here.’

Temekh let his head rise, and smiled.

‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘But it makes my hearts glad to see you restored.’

The two figures stood in Temekh’s sanctum aboard the *Herumon*. The Corvidae sorcerer-lord was wearing his usual robes, helmless and with his violet eyes shining.

Before him stood a primarch, one of the Emperor’s twenty favoured sons, the forgemasters of the Imperium, the demigods who had carved out the realms of men from the uncaring vastness of the void. He no longer wore the image of a child, or of an old man, but had unveiled the form that he’d taken during the long years of the Great Crusade. Tall, broad-shouldered, bronze-skinned and bronze-armoured, draped in a golden mantle stitched from shimmering feathers. He wore a golden helm crested with crimson horsehair. His own hair was thick and long, stained the deep

red of cochineal. One hand rested on a leather-bound tome at his waist, chained to his immense frame by an iron chain, though not the one he'd carried before the Heresy. The other clasped the hilt of his sheathed sword.

Magnus the Red, the Crimson King, the Cyclops of Prospero.

The blessed, he was called, and the learned.

The cursed, he was called, and the fool.

Now he stood again within the ambit of real space, fully embodied, glittering in the diffuse candlelight of the sanctum. For the coming battle he had assumed the appearance he had once worn by default, just another part of the symmetry of revenge. There was a weary, thin smile on his flawed face.

‘How does it feel?’ asked Temekh, emboldened by the humour his master seemed to be in.

‘To wear physical form again? Different to last time I did so. I will never be truly flesh and bone again. But it is good, nonetheless.’ The primarch raised a giant hand and flexed the fingers, one by one. ‘Very good.’

‘And do you have orders for me, lord?’

Magnus turned away from admiring his own presence and gazed fondly at Temekh.

‘You have done all that has been asked, my son. The Wolves’ lair is not for you. Only I will descend, though I will hold my nose as I do so.’

‘Lord Aphael has penetrated the lower levels. His troops are removing the wards to allow your translation, and have penned the Dogs back to separate bulwarks within the Fang. It may still be several days before conditions permit you to enter.’

‘They’re still fighting? Impressive. Though perhaps I should not be surprised. It is their expertise, after all.’

‘They are desperate, and as savage as beasts.’

Magnus lost his smile.

‘I no longer think of them as animals, Ahmuz, though I once did. I now think of them as the purest of us all. Incorruptible. Single-minded. The perfection of my father’s vision.’

Temekh looked up at his primarch, taken aback.

‘You admire them.’

‘Admire them? Of course I do. They are unique. And even in an infinite universe, that quality is rarer than you might suppose.’

Temekh paused before replying, weighing up whether he still risked saying something capable of damning him.

‘If that is so, lord, then why are we pursuing this war? The others – the Raptora, the Pyrae – they prosecute it for vengeance, to inflict the hurt that they inflicted on us. I cannot share that sentiment. It seems... unworthy of us. We are better than that.’

Magnus walked up to the sorcerer-lord and placed a heavy hand on Temekh’s shoulder.

‘We are,’ he said. ‘We are much better than that. Let the drive for vengeance motivate the others – it will make them fight harder. This battle is about far more than the settling of scores.’

His single eye was unwavering then, a circle of gold flecked with the full spectrum of visible light. Temekh found it impossible to look into, impossible to look away from.

‘We fight to prevent a possible future. A future that, even now, gestates within the mountain below us. If we succeed, the hurt we will inflict on the Wolves of Fenris will rival what they did to us. If we fail, then all we have accomplished since our arrival on the Planet of the Sorcerers will be as nothing.’

The intensity of the first ranged attack was absorbed, contained, and blunted. There was an ebb in the pattern of gunfire from the tunnels below the Fangthane, and then the Rubric Marines stormed the lower slopes of the stairway. The Wolves leapt out to meet them, and the narrow killing

ground was instantly clogged. Taking advantage of the higher ground and more established heavy fire support, the defenders initially had the better of it. The Blood Claws fought with all their customary abandon, only barely reined in by the monstrous form of Rossek. They were complemented by the more methodical Hunters under Skrieya, who'd learned over many years how to make the most of the confined spaces under the mountain.

Even so, there were casualties. The Traitor Marines doled out pain with both hands, their killing no less effective for all its unsettling silence. When the attackers broke away at last, pulling back to regroup from their mauling on the stairway approaches, there were grey-armoured bodies lying on the stone too, shattered and bleeding.

And so it went on. There was no sudden breakthrough, no decisive shift in the balance of power. The attacks came in waves, the Traitor Marines in the vanguard, each time attempting to bludgeon the Wolves higher up the stairway and seize the barricades. Every assault got slightly further before the unseen sorcerers called their soul-slaves back, leaving heat-reddened rock and cooling blood behind them.

Hours passed, punctuated by an unreliable rhythm of attack and repulsion. Mortal troops were rotated from the barricades, replaced with fresh kaerls held in reserve. Magazines were replaced, armour patched up, blast-walls repaired, fresh supplies brought down from the Fangthane. Bodies were hauled away from the frontline. The mortals were taken one way, the Wolves another. The Sky Warriors didn't die easily, but with every attack from the Thousand Sons, another brace of corpses were retrieved, every one a testament to some heroic stand against the overwhelming numbers of the attacking host.

At the forefront of every assault, and the last to withdraw to the barricades at the end of every action, was Tromm Rossek. He'd lost none of his brooding, terrifying intensity. With every defender's death, he seemed to withdraw further inside himself, transmuting deeper into a grim leviathan of the murder-make rather than the laughing, ebullient warrior-

god he'd been of old. His movements were tighter, his orders sharper, his blows heavier when they hit. The loss of his pack had done more than drive the old fire from his soul; it had made him darker, and it had made him deadlier.

His new pack, the battle-ravaged dregs of others' commands, had responded to that new spirit. They'd lost some of their swagger too, and there was less chat over the vox as they indulged their raw-edge talent for killing, but they hadn't forgotten how to do it. The Blood Claws spun, kicked, punched and blasted their way into contact with their more orthodox opposite numbers, taking their lead from the glowering giant in their midst, feeding off the raw loathing that hung over him like the stench of death.

They still died. The Claws always died, thrust as they were into the jaws of Morkai by their reckless, selfless way of war. But when they fell, there were always more broken armour-shells around them, more sighing corpses of soulless, shattered Rubric Marines, freed from their unknowable life of emptiness. Brakk would have been proud, seeing the seeds he'd planted bearing fruit at last.

So the attacks continued, growing in ferocity as the hours, then days, blurred into one another. The Thousand Sons had the troops, and the time, and the patience. The Hunters would take over the burden, giving the Blood Claws a few hours' rest. Then the process was reversed. And again, over and over until the blood-drenched stairway looked like a vision of Hel's gateway.

The line held. Every assault was repulsed at enormous cost and with terrible sacrifice, but for as long as the barricades remained intact and the Wolves remained on their feet, the Fangthane remained unconquered.

Bjorn waded further into combat, watching through banks of optical implants as his enemies were cut down under his blades. He barely registered the steady rain of projectiles against his armoured outline. His

visual field was thick with targets, blinking red runes set against a flickering backdrop.

He ignored them. He fought then as he always had done – on instinct. The animal-sharp reflexes he'd once enjoyed were gone, as distant a memory as his natural limbs, but he still moved far faster than looked possible from his heavy, blocky shell.

There were privileges to being the oldest Dreadnought in the Underfang. His chassis was of incredibly ancient design, incorporating technologies that had been rare even before the conflagration of the Heresy. The centuries since then had seen further refinements by successive Iron Priests, each desperate to outdo one another in the glory they could add to the sarcophagus of the Fell-Handed.

They think I do not know what they have done to my tomb.

Bjorn cared nothing for the finery. He would happily have lost all the gold emblems embossed on his living coffin, would have lost every silver rune-pattern traced across the ceramite, just for the chance to come *face to face* with his prey again.

He would never feel the hot splash of blood across his flesh again, the moment the blade went in and cut the thread of his prey. His nerve-lattice relays were good – much better than those fitted to any other Dreadnought in the Imperium – but they would never get the sensation quite right.

So, to assuage their guilt, they drape my tomb with skulls and totems. Trinkets. I loathe them.

He lowered his plasma cannon, barely registering as the orbs of sunburst-energy punched off into the dark. The screams of those he downed were just so much background static. Bjorn alone had terminated the life-signs of more enemies than some whole Chapters. With such a record, death had ceased to have much meaning. The pleasure had long gone. All that remained was the need.

And I need to kill. By Russ, I need to share my pain.

It had always been painful, ever since Russ had gone. There had been no explanation, no words of comfort.

One night, one midwinter's night of storm-fury, the primarch had gone.

Leman Russ had left without saying why, charging into the void as he always did, heedless of the danger, heedless of those he left behind.

Bjorn whirled on his axis, crunching a Rubric Marine in his claw and throwing it into the air. When the body landed the beasts got to work, slicing into the hollow armour with their rending claws. By then Bjorn had taken on another two targets, blasting holes in ceramite and slicing through ribs of banded steel.

Did you know how angry that made me, that you never said why?

He had fought differently when he'd been alive. Back then, many lifetimes ago, he'd raced into battle with Godsmote, and Oje, and Two-Blade, and their wyrds had been coiled together tighter than throttle-twine. The Wolves around him now cut threads with the same peerless majesty as those of old, but it wasn't the same. Bjorn knew the galaxy had aged, and he had not. He had no place here, not with the hot-blooded whelps who had inherited the mantle of the Aett.

I think you knew. You knew I would hate this. You knew every moment would be torture for me.

A sorcerer came into cast-range, half-obsured by ranks of Traitor Marines. He began to kindle maleficarum in the palms of his hands, conjuring balls of flame, ready to hurl into combat.

Bjorn registered the witch with contempt. Or, at least, his mind felt contempt. It was possible that the emotion translated into some physical pattern on his ruined face, submerged in fluid and withered by the pitiless weight of ages, but such subtlety certainly didn't register on his face-guard.

And that, above all, makes me believe you kept the truth from me for a reason.

He took a single, bracing stride, rocked back and detonated his cannon. The sorcerer disappeared beneath a tidal wave of explosions, burning and ripping up. Bjorn kept firing, kept funnelling all his hatred and weariness and anguish at the crippled Traitor. When he finally stopped, finally turning to find more prey, his victim's armour was little more than a super-hot puddle of sizzling hydrocarbons.

This anger, this betrayal. It keeps me alive.

The beasts stayed at his heels, tearing the head off any enemy who got too near, but allowing Bjorn to bring his close combat weapon to bear if needed. They darted and raced through the melee as they'd been designed to, matching the supernatural agility of the Wolves beside them. Bjorn knew how they were capable of such things, and why they'd been made. Very few others did.

I loved you as none of your sons loved you. You knew this.

Absently, Bjorn noticed one of his fellow Dreadnoughts, Hrothgar, suffering under a concerted onslaught from a whole squad of Rubric Marines, backed up by the indomitable presence of a Cataphract. Irritated by the distraction, he spun round, got a firing solution and took the war machine's head off. Even before the bronze skull had hit the ground he was back into the attack, plunging his claw-blades into fresh meat.

My thanks, lord, voxed Hrothgar.

Bjorn didn't reply. He was busy killing. That was all he ever did. It was either stasis, or killing. Unconsciousness, or fury.

You knew I would hate you. You, who left me to this fate. I would have pierced the veils of reality with you, marched with you to destiny, stood beside you against the enemy you knew was waiting.

His cannon bellowed out, laying waste to rows of the enemy. He was invincible, titanic, massive, far superior to any foe before him. Nothing the Thousand Sons had brought to face him had even remotely troubled him. Just as on Prospero, Bjorn was unmatched.

Perhaps – *perhaps* – this was how a primarch felt in combat.

And I know what you were doing. You birthed this hate in me, as potent as the love I still cannot shake.

If he'd possessed tear-glands, he would have wept. If he'd possessed a jawline, it would have been clenched into an eternal grimace of horror. If he'd possessed vocal cords, they would have trembled in a howl of utter, soul-burning anguish.

For hate is the most powerful drive in the universe, and you needed to give me such power that the Wolves would never be without a defender.

But Bjorn had none of these things. All he had was the fury of the favoured son rejected by his father. And, as the galaxy knew from bitter experience, that fury held nothing but the promise of death, and devastation, and a rain of blood.

Another attack had been repelled. Wearily, the defenders at the Fangthane let their guns fall silent, preparing to count the dead and wounded and haul them from the frontline. Though the fighting had stopped for a short while, there was no pause in their labour. Squads of kaerls were rotated in the brief respite, with those having taken the brunt of the assault for longest being withdrawn and replaced by fresher troops. As the assault had ground on, a murderous procession of attack and counter-attack, all the mortals had gone without sleep, and even those being newly drafted to take up position had the heavy-limbed gaits of weary men. The habitual swagger of the Fenrisian kaerls had long gone, replaced with a blank, dogged defiance.

Morek had been on shift for thirteen hours by the time he was called back. A Wolf Guard gave him his orders. His armour was dented and scorched as if he'd waded through a lake of magma.

'Rivenmaster,' he'd barked, his booming voice distorted by a broken vox-unit. 'What are you still doing on station?'

'My duty,' Morek had said, his voice trembling with fatigue, unable to think of anything else to say.

Then the Wolf Guard had pushed him roughly up the slope of the stairway toward the rear positions, past the lines of barricades and gun emplacements towards the open hall of the Fangthane.

‘Your duty is to obey the rotation patterns,’ he snarled. ‘Ensure your replacement is here before the next wave hits.’

So Morek had stumbled away from the frontlines at last, hardly able to lift his head from his armour’s neck-guard, hardly able to hold his rifle in his hands.

He’d lost any awareness of how long the carnage had been going on for. The hours had bled into days, which had extended into a long train of horrifyingly brutal engagements and tense, exhausting waiting periods. He’d snatched some sleep where he could, but it had never been enough. He’d woken abruptly at one point during a lull in the fighting, screaming something about a horror lurking in the fleshmakers’ labs. Thankfully, fighting broke out almost immediately afterwards, dragging the exhausted kaerls’ attention to more pressing matters. Despite the lucky escape, his lack of control scared him.

As Morek passed through the rear defences, walking in the shadow of four massive gun turrets, he was only dimly aware of the movement all around him. Kaerls were everywhere, hauling crates of ammunition, armour or rations, dragging themselves back from the front like him or preparing to take up their positions in his place. Some still moved with a steady, dependable resolve. Others staggered as they marched, exhaustion evident in their movements.

None of them looked remotely likely to shirk their duty and seek a less dangerous station. Fenrisian rivens had no equivalent of the Imperial Guard Commissars. They weren’t needed. The very idea of trying to evade combat in order to achieve some short lived safety was as alien to the death world’s psyche as charity.

As Morek emerged from the gun-lines and into the greater space of the hall beyond, he nearly stumbled into a heavy weapons squad hurrying to the front. Mumbling a curt apology, he backpedalled away from them, only to crash into a stack of dried meat cases waiting to be doled out to the defenders. He fell clumsily to the floor, his legs giving out just as he tried to right himself.

For a moment, he stayed there, feeling the hard stone beneath his back, letting the temptation to rest – for a moment – sink into his bones.

Just for a minute. Just for two minutes. Then back on my feet.

The world reeled around him, losing focus, and he felt his tired lids flicker towards closing.

Then there was a massive presence looming over him. Some instinct told him that giving in to unconsciousness in front of it would be a terrible mistake, and he forced himself up on to his knees.

‘Your pardon, lord,’ he mumbled, trying not to scatter the cases around him any further as he rose.

To his astonishment, the giant before him extended a massive gauntlet. As he considered grasping it to haul himself up, Morek noticed that the ceramite wasn’t grey, but black.

His eyes lifted, passing over a scarred breastplate, festooned with the bones of animals. The helm face-mask was a skull, cracked open by a blade-impact and as coal-black as the rest of the battle-plate. The lenses glowed angrily, staining the cheek-guards like bloody tears.

‘Morek Karekborn?’ came the dry, age-tempered voice of Thar Ariak Hraldir, the one they called Wyrmlblade, the fleshmaker. ‘It is time, I think, that we spoke together.’

Morek gazed up into the skull-visage of the Wolf Priest. His fatigue seemed to fall away from him then. It was replaced, as he’d known it would be for so long, with the cold grip of fear.

‘As you command, lord,’ he replied, but his voice was as dry as embers.

Aphael stalked through the empty tunnels of the Hould. The battles at the two choke-points had been raging for days already, with no immediate sign of a breakthrough. He expected them to burn for many more days to come. The Dogs would be tenacious in defence. They had to be – there was nowhere for them to go.

That suited him fine. The purpose of the first wave assault was not just to inflict pain, but to clear the defenders from the heart of the Fang for long enough to destroy more of the wards against sorcery. That work was difficult and tiring, especially in his fevered state.

Aphael had continued to suffer from the flesh-change. Combat was only a partial release. In its absence, he'd become erratic, prone to violent mood swings, incapable of making decisions calmly. He knew it was happening. As if observing himself from afar, he could see his mental processes disintegrating with every passing hour.

And now, a new presence had started to press on him, crowding out what control he still possessed. Something conscious was stirring, deep within his own mind. A sentience not his own had taken root within his thoughts and was gradually accruing more strength. Even as his body rebelled against him, his mind had begun to slip away too.

Once the inevitability of his destruction became clear, Aphael had passed through the familiar response pattern. Disbelief. Rage. Misery. Now he'd ended up in a dull kind of acceptance. There was nothing he could do to fight the process. Already his body and armour were intimately fused together, such that he knew he'd never be able to remove it. The only task remaining was to carry out his duties for as long as he could.

I will see the Dogs burn. After that, do whatever you wish with me. But I will not pass into oblivion until our retribution is complete. I will not.

Such bravado, he knew, was pointless. The Changer of Ways was not a power to be threatened or cajoled. And yet, the words brought a grain of comfort to him. He was still capable of defiance, at least verbally.

Aphael came to stand before another one of the wards. It had been placed at the intersection of four tunnels. The junction was a circular chamber with an empty fire pit in the centre of it. The ward had been created on a stone pillar that rose from next to the pit. It was in the shape of an eye, scratched into the stone, with a jagged incision scored across it. There was human blood in the scratch, and a few runes carved underneath.

So simple. A child could have made something similar. Yet the raw power bleeding from the symbols clamped down on his sorcery like a fist locked over a mouth. The Rune Priests, for all their clumsy misunderstanding of the warp, were adept at manipulating its signs. Somehow, as untutored and ignorant as they were, they had learned how to focus the parallel energies of the aether through the use of names, sigils and gestures. Created in such numbers, the wards of the Fang acted as a powerful dampener of sorcerous energy, such that even summoning the mildest of magicks was difficult and dangerous.

That had to end.

Aphael stood before the ward, wearily preparing for the rite that would destroy it. Around him, his guard of six Rubricae took up stations in the chamber. The last slivers of flame in the fire pit rippled out, plunging the space into complete darkness. Absently, Aphael blinked to adjust his helm lens filters.

It was only then that he saw the children. There were seven of them, huddled in the dark, rubbing up against one another like rats.

Despite everything, despite all his inner turmoil, despite the need for swift clearance of the wards, Aphael smiled.

He turned his bronze head toward them. In the perfect dark, his helm picked out the childrens' outlines in the fuzzy green of night-vision. He saw their terrified faces, their tiny fingers scrabbling at the rock walls.

How had they been left behind in the Hould? Did the barbarians of Fenris care so little for their own young that they abandoned them to the

enemy? Or had some terrible mistake been made?

In either case, it gave Aphael a rare chance to exercise his skills in the cause of genuine pleasure. Their deaths would be lingering, a fitting punishment for all the hurt inflicted on his Legion by the Dogs of Fenris.

‘Feel free to scream, little ones,’ purred Aphael, withdrawing his blade and picking his first victim. ‘There’s plenty of ti–’

Something hit him hard in the helmet, thrown with astonishing accuracy and poise. Then it exploded, rocking him back on his heels.

‘*Fekke-hofud!*’ yelled one of the whelps, darting past him and scampering into the dark.

Aphael roared with rage, and swung his sword down quickly, aiming to scythe the little horror down as he ran. The stroke was knocked off-course by another grenade going off, this time hurled at his midriff.

They’re armed! They were left here – with weapons!

‘Kill them all!’ shouted Aphael, whirling round and reaching to grasp one of the fast-moving brats. He grabbed the bolt pistol at his waist and pulled it free. By then the Rubricae had swung into action, grasping for the children as ineffectually as he did.

They were as fast as rats, and just as at home in the tunnels. More grenades were discharged, including one that actually took down a Rubric Marine, detonating a flurry of frag-discharge into his face and dumping him on to the ground.

Then they were gone, darting down the corridor beyond like whelp-ghosts, leaping and laughing into the echoing dark.

Aphael swept his pistol up and released a torrent of rounds into the tunnel entrance. None of them connected. The urchins of the Fang, bred to a lifetime of darkness and survival expertise, were too fast, too wily, and too well prepared.

The laughter died away. The downed Rubricae regained its feet, looking all the more ridiculous for its very lack of embarrassment. It took up

position again, as silent and serious as before.

There was no real harm done. For all their stealth and speed, the tunnel-rats had no means of hurting a Space Marine.

But it was humiliating. Deeply humiliating.

‘I *loathe* this world!’ roared Aphael, whirling round to the ward-pillar and letting his anger ignite his staff.

The shaft of iron exploded into ruinous, terrible light, banishing the darkness and sending flickering beams of aetheric electricity shooting in all directions. The blazing inferno crackled against the ward, sucked towards it as if by magnetism. The symbol resisted for a moment, glowing an angry red, soaking up the horrific amount of energy pouring from the sorcerer’s staff.

Then, inevitably, it broke. A hairline crack ran down the image, shattering the unity of the device and interrupting the runic text beneath. The frigid air rippled with a sudden, searing heat, and then sank back into cold darkness.

Aphael let the power drain back into his staff, panting heavily. All around him, the Rubricae looked on inscrutably.

The ward was broken, and Aphael felt his power instantly magnify. The sense of relief was fleeting. He was humbled, angry and frustrated. There were kilometres of tunnels still to work through, all of them riddled with traps for the unwary.

This was menial work, fit for acolytes, not for commanders. If any of his subordinate Pyrae had been skilled enough to take his place, he’d happily have drafted them into ward-destruction instead of him.

But they weren’t, and in any case the greater mass of sorcerers were needed to shepherd the Rubric Marines into combat.

Damn Ahriman. He’s made us into a Legion of fools, stumbling around with our puppets in tow.

‘Follow,’ he muttered, striding out of the chamber and into the next tunnel. The Rubricae smoothly moved to comply. As he went, Aphael could feel the flesh-change accelerating, encouraged by his outburst of anger.

Time was running out, slipping like sand through his fingers, racing towards the horror he knew was waiting. It would not be long now. Not long at all.

Wyrmlblade led Morek far away from the stairway, across the broad floor of the Fangthane and under the feet of the Russ statue. As they went, the air was filled with the trundle of supply transports, the cries of huskaerls ordering their troops back into position, the distant thud of fighting elsewhere in the massive expanse of the Aett. No one gave the Wolf Priest and his mortal hanger-on a second glance.

Morek felt slightly aggrieved about that. If he was going to his death, it would have been nice for someone, just one person, to have cast a sympathetic look in his direction. But, of course, they had no way of knowing what Wyrmlblade’s business with Morek was. And even if they had, would it have changed anything? Was the power of the Wolf Priests so absolute that there were no sanctions, at all, on what they did with their mortal charges?

That was what I thought, too, and not long ago. Back when my faith was unconditional. The way it ought to be.

The two of them went beyond the statue, out of the Fangthane and into the dark, cold corridors beyond. The noise of fighting at the defensive barricades died away, leaving the chill and isolation of the Jarlheim in its place. Wyrmlblade strode powerfully, and Morek had to trot to keep up. As he did so, he felt his exhaustion begin to return – there was only so much fear could do to keep it at bay.

Eventually, Wyrmlblade paused before a slide-door in the tunnel wall. He gestured to open it, and ushered Morek inside. Once the door had closed

on them, they were alone and entirely sealed off. They stood in a narrow, high-roofed chamber, unfurnished aside from a single wooden stool and a small fire pit. A collection of bones was suspended on a length of rope hung over the flames, twisting gently in the heat. Though modest, the place had the look and feel of a fleshmaker's abode. Perhaps a rite-chamber of some sort. Or maybe an executioner's.

'Sit,' ordered Wyrmlade, motioning toward the stool.

Morek did so, instantly feeling even smaller and more insignificant. The Wolf Priest remained standing, gigantic and threatening, less than two metres away. He kept his helm on, making his voice, if possible, drier and more unearthly than usual.

For a moment, Wyrmlade simply looked at him, saying nothing. Morek did his best not to betray his trepidation. In normal circumstances, he'd probably have managed it, but after so many days of constant fighting the task was difficult.

And he was old. Too old, perhaps. That in itself was a cause for shame. Not many Fenrisians died from their age, and it had never been something he'd aspired to.

'Do you know why you're here?' asked Wyrmlade at last.

The voice wasn't kind, but neither was it unduly harsh. It was matter-of-fact, stern, authoritative.

'I believe so, lord,' replied Morek.

There was no point in evasion. Wyrmlade nodded, as if satisfied.

'Then we need not rehearse what brought you to my chambers. I know why you were there, and what you saw. Since I discovered your name, I have been watching you. Perhaps you have noticed. I did not feel the need to hide it.'

Of course not. The Sky Warriors never had the need to worry what a mortal might think of them.

‘It has taken me many days to decide what to do with the name Tromm Rossek gave me. As the enemy wears us down to our limits, I can no longer delay. And yet, even now, my mind is still undecided. Your fate has become a burden to me, Morek Karekborn.’

Morek said nothing, but tried to keep his eyes on the skull-mask above him. He’d always told Freija the same thing.

Look them in the eyes. You must always, always look them in the eyes.

That was still the case when the eyes in question were hidden behind the long ivory skull of a slain beast and locked within blood-red, glowing lenses.

‘So,’ said Wyrmlade, still adopting his chilling, rather prosaic tone of voice. ‘What did you think of what you saw?’

‘I was shocked, lord.’

Tell the truth. That is your only chance.

‘Appalled.’

Wyrmlade nodded again.

‘You have been raised in the Aett. Everything you believe in is here. We have made you in our image, lesser versions of ourselves. You were not schooled to question the order of things, nor should you have been.’

Morek listened, still working hard to control his breathing. He could feel his pulse, heavy in his veins. The fire behind him was uncomfortably hot after the privations of the barricades.

‘What you saw was forbidden. In different circumstances, your very presence in that room would have been death. The Lord Sturmhjart has been trying to get in there for weeks and without success. If events had not conspired to make the watch laxer than it should have been, the contents of the room would still be secret. So now I have to decide what to do with you.’

Though it was impossible to tell, Morek felt as if the terrible old face behind the mask was smiling – a hooked grin, exposing yellow teeth.

‘And as you have been truthful with me, I will be truthful with you, Morek Karekborn,’ said Wyrmlade. ‘I had resolved to cut your thread. The danger of the work we are doing leaking out has always been so great, and that, you must understand, will never be allowed to happen.’

The prospect of the Wolf Priest ending his life had strangely little effect on Morek. He had already prepared for it. He had been prepared for it every night since the mission to the fleshmakers’ chambers. Only the Wolf Priest’s strange indecision had postponed the moment longer than it had needed to be.

‘If that is my wyrd,’ said Morek, even managing to sound half-convinced by it.

‘I believe you mean that. You have commendable faith, Karekborn. Though I sense your devotion has been diminished in recent days, which is also not something to be surprised about.’

The Wolf Priest let out a long, whistling sigh.

‘Do not think that I have somehow lost my resolve for killing, mortal,’ he said. ‘I have killed for this work before, and, Allfather providing, will do so again. But I will not kill you. Your wyrd does not end here, locked in this room. That, at least, I can see clearly.’

Morek knew he should feel some kind of relief at that. He didn’t. Perhaps it was the fatigue, perhaps it was the loss of faith. Whatever the cause, he found himself wishing for nothing more than sleep, for respite from the endless dark, the endless cold, the endless combat. For as long as he could remember, the Wolf Priests had been an inspiration to him, a tangible link between the mass of humanity and the awesome example of the eternal Allfather. Now, towered over by this near three-metre high behemoth, so close he could see the blade-bites on the ravaged armour and hear the rattle of the breathing through the helm filters, he could summon up none of that lifelong awe. The spell had been broken.

I am not afraid of you. Now, at last, I understand what Freija has been telling me for so long. Daughter, forgive me. You were right.

‘But you must be punished, mortal,’ Wyrmlade continued. ‘If the Heresy taught us anything, it is that transgression must always be met with reprisal. And so I will give you the most terrible gift in my possession.’

The Wolf Priest’s helm lowered slightly, bringing the red eyes more on a level with Morek’s. They shone dully amid the scorched bone, like rubies set in old stone.

‘What you witnessed is called the Tempering. It will change the face of the Chapter forever. Listen, and I will explain how it will destroy and remake all that you have ever been taught to hold sacred.’



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Borek's Seal rang with the sound of barking gunfire, the thunder of war-engine treads and the spit of oil-furnaces. The Thousand Sons pushed forwards again, ranks of them moving in unison, laying down a close wall of bolter-fire.

Thanks to Bjorn and Greyloc, the enemy had been held at the portals. None of them had yet crossed into the Seal chamber itself, and the many fixed gun positions there were silent and still. The battle raged, as it had done since Bjorn had met up with Greyloc, in the entrance arches, where the Dreadnoughts and Long Fangs had dug in. Just as at the Fangthane, barricades and trenches of adamantium provided cover for the defending infantry. The pattern of battle was simple – endless, repeated attempts by the invaders to storm the perimeter and break into the space beyond, shattering the advantage given to the defending forces by the narrow choke-point.

They had been unsuccessful in that objective so far, but the cost had been high. The kaerls stationed in the barricade zone had suffered under bolter fire, and whole squads had been wiped out in single thrusts. The Sky Warriors weren't immune either, despite their superior armour and weaponry. Aside from the command group, who looked almost invulnerable in their Terminator battle-plate and power weapons, the

Hunters and Claws had taken serious casualties going up against the Rubric Marines.

Freija had done her part during the repeated actions, leading her squad of kaerls in support operations, laying down covering fire to allow the Wolves to enter close combat. It had been the hardest, toughest fighting she'd ever been part of. At a given signal from a Sky Warrior, she and her troops would dart from the relative safety of the barricades and lock sights on any Prosperine infantry within range. The *skjoldtar* rifles were more powerful than the enemy's lasguns and inflicted heavy damage, but the kaerls were still vulnerable once out of cover. Dozens had been brought down in previous sorties, caught by las-beams or ripped apart by Rubric Marines before the Wolves could race to assist. Freija had almost had her own thread cut more than once, only saved by her reflexes, her armour, or a good slice of luck.

As the battle had progressed through the days, her fatigue had begun to grow, slowing her down and making her aim less sure. Casualties rose as the lack of sleep and constant rotation ground the defenders down. The Prosperine infantry suffered too. After so long locked in a state of semi-constant fighting, the stone floor became ankle-deep in blood, gore and weapon coolant.

Freija had expected the Sky Warriors to look after the sharp end of business and let the kaerls take care of themselves. It would have been in character for them, she thought, to let the mortal support troops suffer the brunt of the firestorm, so long as they were free to close in on the hand-to-hand combat they lived for.

That didn't happen. Once the real fighting began, the Wolves seemed to treat the kaerls almost as equals. It was as if the very act of combat brought them on to the same level. In the normal run of things, a Blood Claw would barely notice a thrall, let alone speak to him. And yet, once

the bolter rounds started flying, the distinctions between them suddenly, strangely, ceased to matter.

As Freija had fought on, willing her body to resist the exhaustion that dragged at her muscles, she had found her attitude toward her masters begin to change. She'd seen a Grey Hunter charge headlong into a whole rank of Rubric Marines, his axe whirring, his bolter spitting out a hail of shells. He'd taken down three of them, barrelling one bodily to the ground once his ammo was gone, fighting with his fists once his axe had been knocked out of his hands. He'd kept attacking to the end, expert and brutal, never giving up until a glowing blade was shoved straight into the gap between helm and breastplate, nearly taking his head off.

No fear. No fear at all. He'd been magnificent, the perfect predator, living up to his breeding as the finest warrior archetype in the galaxy. Freija had found the single-minded arrogance of the Sky Warriors maddening in the past, but in combat she saw why it had to be that way.

They cannot doubt. Not even for a second. They must believe they are the Allfather's keenest blades, his most potent weapons.

Now I see them in their pure state, I am awed by them.

The example had made Freija fight all the harder. She'd been stationed close to Aldr's position, and the Dreadnought had been as immense in defence as his battle-brothers. The strange, almost childlike confusion that had made him seem so vulnerable after awakening had evaporated. Now, no doubt inspired by the peerless example of Bjorn the Fell-Handed close by, Aldr thundered into combat with all the extravagant assurance of his gene-heritage.

He was astonishing, a twin-handed dealer of death, and wherever he came the invaders fell back in disarray. Bolt-rounds clattered harmlessly across his heavy shielding like hailstones, and even the Rubric Marines had no answer to the mammoth claw blades he sent crushing into them. As with the other five Dreadnoughts in the defensive perimeter, Aldr had

created islands of stability within the roar and rush of the assaults, islands that lesser warriors could crowd around and use to push out from.

Freija might have imagined it, but the Dreadnought seemed to pay particular attention to her pack. Once, when they'd been caught out of position and lacking in cover, he'd lumbered right between her and the advancing enemy, using his bulk to soak up the incoming fire and launch a vicious, whirling counter-assault single-handedly.

Once safely back under the lee of the barricades, her squad mauled, but still cohesive, Freija had looked back at the rampaging war machine in mute admiration, watching as his fire-swathed shell barged into harm's way with all the swagger of a new aspirant flexing his stone-hard muscles.

Freija kept watching, her gaze held by the thoughtless heroism on display. It thrilled her. For the first time, she felt proud. Proud of her heritage, proud that such gods of war were part of the fabric of her home world. Proud that the Sky Warriors stood alongside her in the trenches, fighting to preserve everything they'd built together on Fenris.

I am not afraid of you.

Freija slammed a replacement magazine into her rifle and prepared to lay down supporting fire. That was her role, her loyal part in the glorious defence of the Aett.

Now, at last, I understand what my father has been telling me for so long.

She looked round to check her squad was with her, then slammed the *skjoldtar* into the firing slot on the barricade crest. She rested her chin against the sights, watching with satisfaction as a line of charging Prosperine infantry came into range.

Father, forgive me.

The recoil of the hammering shoulder-stock bored into her armour plate, slamming against the bruised skin. A rain of covering fire screamed past

Aldr, warding him in a mantle of ripping, tearing projectiles, augmenting his already devastating assault potential.

You were right.

When Wyrmlblade spoke of the past, his voice took on a different rhythm and timbre. It was akin to the declaiming tone used by the skjalds. The Aett's saga-tellers were all mortals, however, and the Wolf Priest's gigantic frame lent his speech a resonance none of them possessed.

‘You know of the Allfather, the Master of Mankind, whom the ignorant venerate as a god, and whom we revere as the mightiest of us all and the guardian of the wyrd. In these darkened days, he dwells in Terra, watching over the vastness of the Imperium from his Golden Throne and contesting the measureless powers that seek to extinguish light and hope from the galaxy. In the past, it was not so. He walked among us, gifting his subjects a fraction of his power, marching to war with the primarchs and ridding the stars of the terror that plagued them.

‘It was the Allfather who created Leman Russ, the primogenitor of the *Vlka Fenryka*, and the Allfather who fashioned the Legion that served under his name. For every Legion he created, there was a purpose. Some were blessed with the power to build, or the skill to administer, or the capacity for stealth. Our gift was different. We were made to destroy. Our whole being is destruction. Such was the will of the Allfather. He made us not to construct empires, but to murder them. We were bred to perform the tasks that no other Legion could, to fight with such extravagance that even our brother warriors would shrink from treachery in the knowledge of what we, the Rout, would do to them.

‘That power was exercised more than once. Most famously, as you know, against the enemy who now hammers at our doors. But, for all our zeal, we failed in the task of protection. Treachery came, falling like lightning from heaven, and the galaxy was consumed by the fire of betrayal. Though the blackest evil was staunch, much that was great and good was lost. The

Imperium is a bleaker place now, and the visions of its founders languish, stillborn and unrealised. We know this, we who preserve the sagas of old. Though many others who rely on the uncertain transmission of the written word and the recorded vox-pattern have forgotten those days, we who live by the recitation of the skjalds remember them all. We know what we were. We know what we were intended to be.

‘Now, a new age has dawned. The Age of the Imperium, they call it. The needs of mankind have changed. Instead of twenty Legions, there are many hundreds of Chapters. There are no primarchs to guide them. Instead, the Adeptus Astartes fight in the image of their gene-fathers, rehearsing the capabilities designed for a different future. That is the way of things now, a vision made reality not by the Allfather, but by one of his sons. Chapters no longer march in ranks of tens of thousands or more. They create successors, off-shoots governed by the same gene-seed, so that their primarch’s legacy is maintained across the stars. The more successors, the greater the legacy. The sons of Guilliman are the ancestors of hundreds, as are the sons of Dorn, and so it is that the Imperium is modelled in their image.’

Wyrmlblade paused. There was an edge of distaste to his words.

‘This is what has become important. Not prowess. Not danger. Stability. Reliability. Fidelity. Without these things, no Chapter lives to exert influence. *Successors* – these are what our brothers aspire to create, to ensure that warriors of their temper flourish and endure, and to exclude those forged from different metal.

‘And do you suppose, Morek Karekborn, that the *Vlka Fenryka* have followed this path? Have we let ourselves be divided into successor Chapters as the Ultramarines, the Angels, or the Fists have done?’

‘No,’ said Morek confidently. ‘We are different.’

Wyrmlblade shook his head.

‘Not that different. We had a successor: the Wolf Brothers, led by Beor Arjac Grimmaesson. They were to have been as numerous as we were, and as powerful. They were gifted a home world, Kaeriol, a planet of ice and fire, just as Fenris is. They had half our fleet, half our armouries, half our Priests. They were to have been the first of many, a whole line of descendant Fenrisian Chapters – the Sons of Russ, capable of carving out a star empire the size of Ultramar. That was the vision: to be powerful enough to encircle the Eye of Terror completely, to prevent the Traitors from daring to leave it ever again. Thus, it was hoped, we would fulfil our destiny and find a new purpose in the Age of the Imperium.’

Morek looked up at the skull-mask of the Rune Priest. The visions he was being asked to absorb were coming too quickly. A glimpse of the galaxy was unfolding in his mind, radically different from the one he knew. Though he’d been off-world many times and seen many wonders, this version of reality was the strangest of them all.

‘What happened to them? The Wolf Brothers?’

‘They are gone.’

‘Destroyed?’

‘Not all. Some may yet live, though their wyrd is unknown. They were disbanded, scattered to the six points of the compass.’

‘Why?’

Wyrmblade drew in a deep, grating breath.

‘For the same reason there can be no further successors to the Rout. The Wolf within. We are too dangerous to be copied. The heritage that makes us powerful also makes us unstable. The Brothers, located far from Fenris, fell quickly into the state of beasts. So it must be with any attempt to splice new growth from the gene-seed of Russ.’

Wyrmblade bowed his head. But then his eyes flashed in the dark, catching a stray flicker of light from the fire.

‘Until now.’

Redpelt was on his knees, firing from the waist, watching as the bolt pistol ammo-counter clicked down. His aim was precise, no shot was wasted. Bolts slammed into the oncoming ranks of Rubric Marines, taking down some, exploding against the armour of others.

Then they'd come again, just as they always did, in remorseless waves, selling their empty souls to break the deadlock at the Fangthane stairway. There were more of them each time, some clad in the shimmering kine-shields of the witches, most relying on the protection of their sapphire battle-plate.

Redpelt exhausted the clip. He calmly knocked the empty container to the ground, grabbed a replacement and slammed it home. By the time he'd resumed firing, the enemy had come no more than two paces closer.

Heavy weapons fire streaked over his head from the Long Fangs, impacting amid the oncoming Traitor Marines. Much of it exploded against the kine-shields in glittering cascades of sparks and plasma-bursts, but some found a weak link and crashed amongst the armoured warriors, causing devastation.

Into those paths of ruin leapt the Wolves, chainswords thrumming, bellowing their litanies of hatred and defiance. Helfist was in the vanguard this time, his power fist rippling, the retrieved blade Dausvjer singing as it arced.

'Contact close, brother!' voxed Redpelt, powering into a sprint and racing after him.

Helfist dropped sharply, evading the stab of an oncoming Rubric Marine, before leaping back up and bringing his own blade to bear. The disruptor-laced edges clashed, sending an explosion of tortured energy out before the swords were withdrawn.

'Fodder,' spat Helfist contemptuously.

There was a strange undertow to his voice, rasping and blood-wet.

By then Redpelt was close at hand, his chainsword juddering and bolt-pistol pumping. Everything was moving at staggering speed. There were

no mortals in this fight. Rossek's Blood Claws did what they always did, fighting with abandon, relishing the unfettered exercise of their kill-urge, keeping Morkai a jaw-snap away and no more. The Traitors met them fearlessly, blocking and thrusting, waiting for the opening, seizing it with cold expertise, moving on to the next task. Both sides were fully committed, locked into a struggle that they knew would preserve or break the deadlock.

The Traitor managed to sweep his fist into Helfist's face, knocking him heavily to the ground. Redpelt let fly with his pistol, throwing the Rubric Marine back several paces in a cloud of detonating rounds.

'Careless, brother,' he jibed over the comm, whirling round to meet the next threat. 'Losing your touch?'

There was no reply from Helfist. Redpelt was soon occupied in hand-to-hand combat with another Traitor, and couldn't look round to check on him.

Helfist hadn't been hit that hard. What was wrong?

The next Rubric Marine slammed into contact, just one of the dozens that crowded into the narrow choke-point.

'Traitor filth!' roared Redpelt, punching out with his chainsword, aiming for the gap under the right shoulder-guard.

The Rubric Marine swung back, letting the whirring blades pass by before jabbing back with his own blade. The movements of both warriors were dazzlingly quick, each one weighted to perfection, each one capable of breaking through adamantium on connection. Redpelt pressed forwards, the kill-urge pulsing in his bloodstream. The blows rained fast, clanging from ceramite and rebounding back.

He had the momentum now. The Traitor fought well, but its weight had been pushed on to the back foot. Redpelt feinted left, then swept his blades up and across, aiming to catch the Rubric Marine under the thick breastplate.

He would have made it. The chainsword would have bit deep, tearing through the plate and into the hollow shell beyond. He would have had another kill, and his helm display would have registered another completion rune alongside the dozens that already lodged there.

He was prevented, not by the enemy, nor by the explosion of a long-range weapon, but by Helfist. The Blood Claw threw himself between the two duelling warriors, slamming into the Rubric Marine and rolling across the ground with it. There was something strange and unsettling about the speed of the manoeuvre. Before Redpelt had even reacted, Helfist had sprung to his feet, slammed Dausvjer into his victim's neck-guard, pulled the blade free, grabbed the stricken Traitor's helm with his power fist and wrenched it off.

His movements were terrifying, like the accelerated gestures of a nightmare. Helfist no longer spoke, no longer joked over the comm. As Redpelt backed away, watched warily for closing targets, he heard a thick, guttural wheezing coming over the comm.

‘Brother—’ Redpelt started, feeling cold.

Helfist wasn't listening. He was fighting. Fighting like he'd never been able to fight before, not even on the causeways. Rubric Marines charged up to him, and were torn apart. Literally, torn apart. Helfist's limbs passed into a blur of grey, a flailing pattern of devastation, tearing through battle-plate as if it were leather, punching it open and throwing it aside. He plunged into the oncoming ranks of the enemy like a predator let loose amid a herd of slow-moving herbivores, consumed with no thought other than downing as many of them as he could.

‘Kyr!’ shouted Redpelt, watching his brother move further out of formation.

None of the other Claws could follow him so far out. If they did, they'd be picked off by the Rubric Marines, unable to benefit from the cover of the fixed guns and supporting kaerl squads. Helfist was going to his death.

Redpelt charged toward him. He wouldn't stand by and watch it. He crunched into an oncoming Rubric Marine, putting as much strength as he could into every blow, feeling frustration mount that he couldn't just shoulder it aside like Helfist could. He fought with all the skill of his long conditioning, but it wasn't enough.

They were isolated. Helfist had damned himself.

It was then, and only then, that words came over the comm. They were badly slurred, like a drunkard trying to remember how to speak. Some of Helfist's old voice-pattern was in there, but it was almost gone. The phlegmy tones were more like beast than man, distorted by a mess of growling and slaving.

'Go, brother,' came the snarling, panting voice. 'I cannot protect you.'

Protect me?

Then Redpelt understood. Helfist was killing everything that came close to him. He'd passed too far, and there was no way back. Even Rossek wouldn't have been able to stop him then. The Wolf had taken Helfist, drawn him into its dark embrace and consumed what remained of his old humanity.

Redpelt finally dispatched his foe, but more were coming to take its place. Helfist was now deep within the ranks of the enemy, still fighting like a daemon, still carving them apart like a berserker of legend.

He couldn't follow. No one could follow that path unless the Wolf chose them too. Helfist was doomed, though in his death throes he'd slay more than many of his brothers would do in their whole lives.

Tears of rage started in Redpelt's eyes. They'd fought together since the beginning, since the half-forgotten days on the ice, since the Wolf Priests had first come for them to turn them into immortals. They'd passed through the trials together, learning the way of the Wolves together, gloried in the murder-make together. For a short time, such a short time, it

had seemed as if no force in the galaxy could match the raw potency of their combined blades.

I cannot follow. Too slow. Blood of Russ, I was too slow.

Then Redpelt *howled*, a howl of rage and loss, an all-consuming, skirling torrent of pure anger and misery. For a brief moment the bark and echo of the guns were overmastered, and his horrifying cry resounded down the long tunnels of the Aett. Prosperine soldiers looked up from their fighting, thinking some devil of the Fang had come alive to drag them into the dark. Even the kaerls, steeped in the rituals and ways of the mountain, felt their blood run cold.

They knew what the cry meant. The Wolf had come, and claimed one of them for its own.

Wyrmlblade paused before speaking again.

‘The Wolf,’ he said at last. ‘The curse and the glory of our kind. For a generation of mortals, I have worked on a cure for it. No fleshmaker has ever discovered more than I of the ways of the Canis Helix, perhaps not even those who arrived on Fenris with the Allfather himself. It became clear to me the curse could be eradicated while preserving the glory. This work has been my calling.’

‘The Tempering,’ breathed Morek.

‘Indeed. I have refined the Helix, altered it to deliver the supernatural strength of the Adeptus Astartes without the ravages of the beast within. The products are as powerful as I am, as quick in the hunt and as skilled with a blade, but they do not degenerate, nor do they fall prey to the Wolf. They take the qualities that make us superb, and purge the factors that prevent us from creating successors.’

Morek began to understand. The sickness he’d felt ever since stumbling across the bodies in the laboratorium came rushing back to him.

‘The bodies...’

‘The ones who came closest to my ideal. They lived for a short time. As of yet, none have survived for more than a matter of hours. Their deaths are... difficult. Yet I have demonstrated that the goal is within grasp. Given more time, just a little more time, I will have set us on a new path, one that promises domination over the stars, the domination of the Sons of Russ.’

Wyrmlade lifted his head proudly.

‘Do you see this future, Morek Karekborn?’

Morek struggled to find the words to answer with. Images of Space Marines in gunmetal-grey armour were flitting through his mind, thousands of them, each Great Company drawn from a different Chapter. They fought the same way, killed the same way, swept their enemies before them in a tide of tightly-controlled murder-make. Fenris became just one world at the heart of a sprawling confederation, a temporal power within the greater circuit of the galactic Imperium, a power so mighty that even the Gods of Ruin hesitated as they saw its potential.

And then the vision was gone. The chamber endured, as dark and cold as all the chambers were under the mountain. The Wolf Priest stood before him, waiting.

‘It horrifies me, lord.’

Wyrmlade nodded.

‘Of course. You are a good Fenrisian. You do not see the alternatives, nor indulge your curiosity about what *might be*. All that matters to you is what *is*, what you can hold in your hands now. The horizon of the future is very close for you. You might die today, or tomorrow, or in a single season, so why spend time worrying about the passage of centuries?’

Morek remained impassive. Wyrmlade wasn’t mocking him, just stating the facts of the matter. Until very recently, he’d have taken such a litany as a source of pride.

‘But I cannot indulge those comforts,’ said the Wolf Priest. ‘We are the keepers of the flame, charged with ensuring there are always executioners for the Imperium to call on, always warriors capable of meeting the brutality of our enemies with an equal brutality.’

‘And, as I look over the runes with the scryers, as I listen to the pronouncements of Sturmhart and the other Priests, I have no confidence in that future. I see a dark time ahead, an age when the *Vlka Fenryka* are too few to contain the legions of darkness, when we are mistrusted by the masters of the Imperium and feared by its citizens. I see a time when mortals will issue the words “Space Wolf” not as the embodiment of an ideal, but as a byword for backwardness and mystery. I see a time when the institutions of the Imperium will turn against us in their ignorance, believing us to be little more than the beasts we draw our sacred images from.’

‘Mark these words, rivenmaster: should we survive now, but fail to complete our apotheosis, this is not the last time Fenris will be besieged.’

Wyrmlade looked away from Morek, and gazed at the *crozius arcanum* at his belt. It hung next to his power sword, the symbol of his office, the mark of his stewardship of the ancient traditions of the Chapter.

‘That is why we dare this thing. We can grow. We can change. We can escape the curse of the past. We can move from the margins of the Imperium to become the power at its centre.’

Morek felt the nausea swelling in his stomach, poisoning him and making him dizzy. He’d seen heretics before on other worlds, and always despised them. Now the madness came from the mouth of a Wolf Priest, the very guardian of sanctity.

‘And this troubles you, Morek?’ asked Wyrmlade.

Tell the truth.

‘It makes me sick,’ said Morek. ‘It is wrong. Russ – honour to his name – would never have allowed it.’

Wyrmlade chuckled, an iron-hard rasping sound that limped out of the helm-grille.

‘So you speak for the primarch now, eh? You’re a brave man. I’d never presume to guess what he’d have made of this.’

Morek did his best to maintain a steady gaze, but the fatigue and the stress were getting to him. He felt faint, even while seated. For a fleeting moment, he saw the skull on the Wolf Priest’s armour leer into a broken, toothy snarl.

He blinked, and the vision faded.

‘Why are you telling me this, lord?’ Morek asked, knowing he could not stand more revelations. His world had already been destroyed.

‘As I said,’ replied Wyrmlade calmly. ‘To punish you. You have trespassed, thinking yourself equal to the secrets held in the fleshmakers’ chambers. Now that arrogance is exposed, and you have tasted just a sip of the terrible knowledge that I bear daily. If I served you the whole cup, you would drown in it.’

‘So is that what you wish for me?’

‘I do not. I wish you to rest, as you have been ordered. Then I wish you to fight, to hold the line against the Traitor, to sell your position in blood if it comes to that. You will do this in the full knowledge of what has been done in the Valgard.’

The Wolf Priest gestured with a finger, and the fire behind Morek flickered out. Absolute darkness filled the chamber, and the rivenmaster felt his consciousness begin to slip away almost immediately.

I welcome it. I wish never to wake up.

‘We demand that you die for us, mortal,’ said Wyrmlade, and his receding voice was as cold as the grave. ‘We will always demand that you die for us. It is as well, then, that you know what you’re dying for.’



CHAPTER TWENTY

Temekh looked into the eye of his primarch. Magnus had a strange expression on his face, part expectant, part resigned.

‘The Fang is open to me,’ he announced.

Temekh felt a sudden spike of eagerness, quickly suppressed. ‘Aphael has been working hard.’

‘Yes. He has done well.’

Magnus turned away. In the flickering light of the sanctum, Temekh could sense the raw power bleeding from his image. So much, it was hard to contain. Since casting aside his mortal flesh, the primarch required colossal amounts of energy merely to exist on the physical plane. It was like trying to squeeze a sun into a wineglass.

‘I’ll protest again,’ said Temekh, knowing it was useless. ‘I could be of help down there. The Wolves are still fighting, and you could use another sorcerer.’

Magnus shook his head.

‘I’ll not tell you a third time, Ahmuz. You have a different fate.’

He looked back at the sorcerer-lord.

‘You have your orders for the fleet. Do not deviate from them, whatever happens on Fenris.’

As he spoke, Magnus’s outline was curling into nothingness like smoke.

‘Of course,’ said Temekh. ‘But be careful – we have roused a nest of hornets down there.’

Magnus laughed, and the sound rang around the chamber like pealing bells. His body was rapidly extinguishing, sighing out of view and falling into the shadows.

‘Careful? I’ll take that as a joke. That’s good. There was a time when there was more than gallows humour in the galaxy.’

Temekh watched the final shreds of Magnus’s visible form slide away. The last element to fade out was the eye, ringed with scarlet and alive with amusement.

As soon as the apparition was gone, Temekh turned away.

+Lord Aphael+, he sent.

+Good to hear from you+, came the reply, sarcastic and weary. +The wards are much weakened. Tell him he may—+

+He knows. He’s on his way. Get into position. You don’t have long.+

Aphael didn’t respond at once. Temekh could tell he was stung by the tone in his sending. Even now, the Pyrae still thought he was in charge of the operation. That was pitiable, though Temekh didn’t feel much like pitying.

+I am close to the bulwark they call the Fangthane+, sent Aphael eventually. +I can be there in moments. It will be good to witness our father in the material universe once again.+

Not for you, I fear, brother.

+He commended you on your labour+, sent Temekh.

He had the faint impression of a bitter laugh, and then the link between them broke.

Sighing, Temekh withdrew from the altar. The air within the chamber felt cold and thin in the primarch’s absence. It resembled his own state. He was exhausted by the work of so many days, and his fingers trembled from a long, low level tiredness.

He gestured to the doors, and they slid open smoothly. In the corridor beyond, a silhouette waited for him, a mortal wearing the uniform of a Spireguard captain.

‘Have you been waiting long?’ asked Temekh, stepping out of the sanctum.

‘No, lord,’ came the reply.

You wouldn’t have told me even if you had.

The man looked strangely nervous, and handed Temekh a data-slate.

‘These are reports from the ship-seers,’ he said. ‘I thought you should see them as soon as possible.’

Temekh glanced at the runes, taking in their import in an instant. The ship-seers had powers beyond those of any loyalist Navigator to see the approaching bow-waves of starships powering through the warp. The signals recorded on the slate, however, could have been picked up by any Navigator at the start of their training. The fleet coming towards them was approaching fast. Recklessly fast.

‘Thank you, captain,’ said Temekh calmly. ‘Impressive. I didn’t believe the interceptor could possibly have made it to Gangava.’

He handed the slate back, and rolled his head stiffly to relieve the ache in his shoulders.

‘Very well. Prepare the fleet to break orbit.’

The captain started.

‘You cannot mean—’

Temekh’s glare silenced him.

‘I am tired, captain; you really do not want to test my patience further. Prepare the fleet to break orbit, and wait for my command.’

He flicked a finger, and the doors to the empty sanctum slid shut.

‘This game is coming to an end.’

Aphael strode toward the Fangthane, his bitterness fuelling him as powerfully as any chem-stimulant. The tone in Temekh’s voice had been

unmistakable. While the Corvidae sheltered on the bridge of the *Herumon* in safety, he was once more being thrust into the position of danger.

He didn't mind the danger. He relished combat, as all the Pyrae did. What bothered him was the peremptory manner of his assignment, the assumption that Temekh was in charge now.

Of course, Magnus had always had a soft spot for the Corvidae – the seers and mystics. The more belligerent cult-disciplines had always been the ones that had been reined in and curtailed. Much good it had done. The Corvidae were wayward. If the Thousand Sons had trusted more in the straightforward application of warp-power, perhaps they would have prevailed on Prospero rather than being hamstrung by doubts and visions.

He arrived at the chamber leading to the battle-front. Ahead of him, squads of Rubricae were waiting to enter combat, interspersed with larger formations of mortal infantry. Sorcerers, some of them limping from terrible wounds, walked among them. Far off, hundreds of metres down the tunnels leading to the stairway, came the sound of crashing explosions. The Wolves were being hit hard, but they evidently still held the Fangthane approaches.

'Greetings, lord,' came the reedy voice of Orfeo Czamine, the Pavoni commander of operations.

Aphael felt his face distort into an expression of contempt. It was entirely involuntary – his facial muscles were now wholly fused with the internal workings of his helm and had a mind of their own. Possibly literally.

'How goes the assault?' asked Aphael, gesturing for his retinue to stand down.

Aphael knew his own voice now resembled a whole choir of speakers, each fractionally out of sync with one another. There was no hiding it, and no hope of the condition improving.

'We are grinding them down, as instructed,' replied Czamine, sounding unsurprised by the bizarre inflections.

‘They should have been cleared out of their hole by now,’ Aphael said.
‘You’ve had days to wipe them out. I may—’

He broke off. Czamine looked at him quizzically.

‘Are you all right, lord?’

Aphael found he couldn’t reply. The words formed in his mind, but his mouth no longer obeyed him. He felt the frustration of weeks burn up inside him. Furiously, he clutched his staff with both hands, not yet knowing what to do with it. As his armoured fingers closed over the shaft, witchfire sparked along its length, blazing with a painful, searing light.

Czamine fell back, radiating alarm.

‘Lord, you are amongst brothers!’

By then Aphael’s movements were no longer his own. The staff began to spin, hand-over-hand, picking up speed with every revolution. The iron whirled, shimmering in the dark from a nimbus of racing witchfire.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to explain.

This isn’t me! Help me! Sweet Magnus, help—

But then his thoughts were taken over by another. The presence in his mind that had been growing for days suddenly asserted itself.

+Why should I help you, my son? This is what you were born for. In what time remains to you, relish the moment.+

The staff spun quicker, generating a vortex of rotating energy in its centre. Aphael’s hands became a blur, turning over like engine pistons, driving the staff into a whirlwind of dizzying momentum.

Aphael’s awareness was now almost gone. What remained of him spied Czamine hurrying backwards, saw squads of mortals running from him in horror. He watched as the rock walls of the Fang glowed white, before realising that he was lighting them up himself. He was on fire, a caustic, dry fire that drenched the chamber in brightness. Warp-energy was bursting from his eyes, from his mouth, from the chinks in his armour. The flesh-change snarled into overdrive, warping his body into impossible

contortions, breaking open the hard shell of his battle-plate and shedding it in rattling slivers.

With all the power that he still had, Aphael somehow dragged three words up from his receding consciousness.

Punish them, lord.

+Oh, I will+, came the response.

Then he was gone. The blaze of light and movement was no longer Herume Aphael. For a few moments, it was nothing at all, just a disparate collection of aether-born energies, wild and inchoate.

Then there was a massive bang, causing the air to ripple and dust to rain down from the chamber roof. Cracks snaked along the floor, radiating out from the rapidly transforming cocoon of light and noise.

From that point, the whirling gradually wound down. The light faded, burning into a single point of brilliance. As it slowly died, a figure was revealed within it, taller than Aphael had been and far more beautiful. With the final diminishment of the portal, the newcomer stepped clear of the flickering tendrils of illumination.

As soon as he emerged, all those closest fell to their knees in awe. Czamine bowed low, letting his staff scrape along the ground in submission.

‘Father,’ he said, and his voice was choked with joy.

‘Son,’ acknowledged Magnus the Red, flexing his muscles and smiling. ‘You have been held up in this stinking place for too long.’

He turned toward the Fangthane stair, and there was a greedy light in his eye.

‘Time, I think, to show the Wolves the true meaning of pain.’

Odain Sturmhjart roared his defiance again, his voice cracking under the strain. He’d been summoning the power of the storm for days, using it to divide and demoralise the forces besieging Borek’s Seal, and the pressure

was beginning to show. His lips were cracked and calloused under his armour, and his throat was raw.

There was no let-up. The sorcerers were powerful, even more so since so many of the wards against maleficarum in the Hould had been taken down. Sturmhart had little support, and carried almost all the burden of protecting the defending troops from sorcery. A lesser Rune Priest would have given up days ago, overwhelmed by the need to maintain the steady rain of wyrd-sourced power. Only one such as he, steeped in the bottomless reserves of energy gifted by the strange ways of Fenris, could have maintained his position for so long. While he stood, the devices of the enemy were blunted, allowing the warriors of the Aett to charge into battle unhindered. If he fell, their witchery would come into play, turning the tide irrevocably.

And so he stayed on his feet, hurling invective at the silent Rubric Marines as they marched into view, maintaining the flurry of lightning into their ranks, countering the varied powers of the enemy spell-casters and taking the bite out of their aether-born attacks.

It made him proud. After his failure to predict the coming of the enemy, he was able to reflect with satisfaction on what he had done since. The Aett would have fallen already without his untiring efforts. Even if it was still overwhelmed, he had given it precious extra days of life. To fall in battle after inflicting such pain on the enemy was honourable; only an easy, fragile death was a cause for shame.

Sturmhart stood in the centre of the defensive lines, partially sheltered by the barricades. On either side of him were the gun-lines, still manned by mortal kill-squads. The Wolves' packs roamed ahead of them, preventing the invaders from reaching the trenches. They were supported by the hulking outlines of Dreadnoughts and the strange, darting runs of the Underfang beasts. The creatures of the night instilled terror in the mortal Prosperine soldiers, even more so than the Wolves themselves.

Many of the creatures had been killed during the repeated actions, but whole packs remained in action, fearless, tireless and horrifying.

Sturmhart stole a glance to his right, over to where the fighting was fiercest. Greyloc was still on his feet, as he had been for days without pause. His Terminator plate was near-black from plasma-burns, his pelts ripped to tatters and the ceramite beneath cut deep by a hundred blades. But still he fought on, cold and clinical, holding the line together by force of example. He was no longer the White Wolf, more like a coal-black shade of Morkai let loose into the world of the living.

You have surprised me, lord. There is iron beneath that pale skin.

Between them, Greyloc and Bjorn dominated the battle for Borek's Seal. The Thousand Sons were too numerous to be driven back for any length of time, but the invaders had made painfully slow headway since the start of their full-scale assault. The Wolves had forced a deadlock across the barricades, and that in itself, given the numbers of troops in play, was a staggering achievement.

It couldn't last. Eventually, the line would break and the Rubric Marines would sweep into the chamber beyond. Until then, however, no ground would be ceded.

'*Fenrys hjolda!*' Sturmhart bellowed, trying, as always, to rouse the Wolves around him to greater heights of heroism. He slammed his rune-staff to the ground, sending up forks of storm-lightning from the cold stone. 'For Russ! For the—'

He broke off. A shadow passed across his hearts, chilling them. The power that sluiced across his runic armour flickered and died. He staggered, putting a hand out to prevent himself falling.

You feel it too, Priest.

Bjorn's voice was dominating, even over the comm. Sturmhart saw black stars spinning before his eyes, and dizziness wrapped itself around him.

‘He is here.’

Greyloc broke from combat.

‘What do you sense, Odain?’ he voxed, racing back up towards the Rune Priest’s position. Behind him, Grey Hunters struggled to close the gap in the defensive line.

Sturmhart shook his head vigorously, trying to rid himself of the lingering disorientation.

‘He has been here all along. Everywhere and nowhere.’

The sorcerers’ attack suddenly stepped up in intensity. Crackling aetheric force whipped out from the attacking ranks, wreathing the oncoming Traitor Marines. For the first time in days, the Wolves began to falter in their defiance.

‘He is here?’ roared Greyloc, his voice heavy with loathing. ‘Show me where he is, Priest.’

He assaults the Fangthane. Even now he lays it to waste.

‘Too far away...’ gasped Sturmhart.

‘We must reach him,’ said Greyloc, his voice urgent. ‘There are routes through the mountain, fast ways up. None at the Fangthane can withstand him.’

‘Nothing on Fenris can withstand him.’

I can.

Sturmhart whirled round to face the approaching Dreadnought, still feeling groggy and nauseous.

‘You’re deluded!’ he blurted. ‘You cannot sense him as I can. He is a primarch, an equal to Russ himself. This is *death*, Bjorn! This is the cutting of the thread.’

Ominously, the Dreadnought raised his plasma cannon, pointing the heavy, blunt barrels directly at Sturmhart’s helm.

You have a heart of fire. If I had not seen that already, you would be dead where you stand for those words.

Greyloc didn't hesitate.

'The defence of the Seal will be given to Hrothgar of the Revered Fallen – he can hold the line for a little longer. I will go after the Traitor, as will my Wolf Guard. Bjorn will stand with us, and so will you, Rune Priest – your wyrd-mastery will be needed.'

Sturmhart straightened, looking first at the lowered plasma barrel at the end of Bjorn's gun-arm, then at the blackened and ravaged helm-face of his Jarl. The worst of the sickness brought on by Magnus's translation ebbed. He felt his resolve begin to return, closely followed by shame at his outburst.

'So be it,' he growled, taking up his staff in both hands. 'We will face him together.'

Greyloc nodded, and motioned to his two surviving Terminator-armoured Wolf Guard to follow him.

'Of course, we have to break out of here first,' he said grimly.

Do not worry about that, snarled Bjorn, his voice low and resonant like a starship engine. He swivelled on his axis, training his weapons on the enemy once more. **Tell the Fangs to lay down heavy cover. Now I have prey worthy of a kill, I feel the need to stretch my claws.**

Wyrmblade let his arms fall slack by his sides. He stood at the summit of the Fangthane stairs, between the massive images of Freki and Geri, the final layer of defence before the hall itself. He was an old warrior, tempered in the fires of a thousand engagements, as inured to surprise or despair as any of the *Vlka Fenryka*.

Yet he couldn't move. The presence before him was so dominating, so transcendent, that it filled his veins with lead and locked his superhuman muscles into a horrified stasis.

Magnus had come. The daemon-primarch was at the foot of the stairway, attracting tracer fire in glowing, angry lines. The ordnance seemed to explode before it hit him, blooming in starbursts of angry red and orange

around his massive frame. The Long Fangs and heavy weapons squads had unloaded all they had at him, pouring streams of flame at the monster's head and chest.

It had no discernible effect. Magnus was a giant, a five-metre-tall behemoth striding through the clouds of promethium like a man pushing through fields of corn. He was radiant, as splendid as bronze, dazzling amid the shadows of the mountain. Nothing hurt him. Nothing came close to hurting him. He had been created for another age, an age when gods walked among men. In the colder, weaker universe of the thirty-second millennium he was unmatched, a walking splinter of the Allfather's will set amid a fragile world of mortal flesh and blood.

As Wyrmblade watched, gripped by a vice of horror, the kill-machine got to work. There were no battle cries, no shouts of rage. The daemon-primarch had retained his phlegmatic humours of old, and cut threads with a chilling equanimity. Wyrmblade saw his Wolves charge up to the shimmering titan, as immune to fear as ever, hurling their bodies into the path of the monster. They were brushed aside, thrown bodily into the stone where their backs were broken.

Still, Magnus strode forwards, reaching the bottom level of the stairway. The barricades there had held for days, resisting every attempt to breach them. Box-guns spat at the primarch, surrounding him in a curtain of flickering, sparkling impacts. One by one, he tore them down, ripping them up by their roots and dashing them across the trenches.

Magnus came on. Lauf Cloudbreaker stood in his path, arms raised in defiance. The Rune Priest began the summoning, whipping up the storm-wyrd, contesting the advance of the daemon with all the art he possessed. The primarch clenched his fist and Cloudbreaker simply exploded, lost in a ball of blood, his totems scattered amid the fragments of his shattered runic armour. Kaerls scrambled to evacuate the trenches then, all thoughts of resistance quashed by the immense force striding toward them.

Magnus came on. More Wolves charged to meet him, still undaunted by the destruction wreaked around them. Wyrmlade saw Rossek, the grim-faced Wolf Guard, lumber into contact, his Terminator plate streaming with golden flames. Grey Hunters went in alongside, howling with rage. For a moment, the primarch was held, rocked by the sudden assault of so many blades, each of them wielded with passion and courage. Rossek even managed to land a blow, causing Magnus to pause in his rampage.

A single blow. A lone strike with his chainfist, followed up by a hail of storm-bolter rounds. That was all he managed before Magnus's fists caught him, hurling him back into the ground, pummeling him into shrapnel and crushing him into a slick of gore beneath his ironshod feet. Rossek was gone, taken down in seconds, his proud life snuffed out with the casual descent of a primarch's boot. The Wolves with him were ripped apart soon after. More fixed guns unloaded their ammunition at the primarch. All were destroyed, torn from their mounts and tossed aside like chaff.

Magnus came on. The Fangthane's six Dreadnoughts waited for him halfway up the stairway, resolute and unmoving. They opened fire as one, launching missiles and plasma bolts in a blistering, crushing flurry of destructive energy. In a few seconds they unleashed enough firepower to level a whole company of Traitor Marines, chewing through heavy bolter ammo-belts and exhausting energy packs. Magnus emerged from the inferno intact, his armour trailing goutts of smoke and flame. As he towered over them, the Dreadnoughts closed up, gunning their massive power fists and lightning claws into life and bracing for impact.

Magnus seized the nearest Dreadnought in one hand and lifted it from the ground. The huge sarcophagus swayed up above the rolling torment of fire, its close-combat weapon flexing impotently, its heavy bolter thudding shell after shell into the impervious hide of the primarch.

Magnus drew his arm back and hurled the Dreadnought against the walls of the stairway. The Revered Fallen hit the surface at speed, shattering the stone and driving a huge rent in the rock. Magnus loomed over the stricken war machine and clenched his fist again. The Dreadnought's armour cracked open, shearing down the middle with a resounding clap of thunder, revealing the seething amniotic chamber within. The ruined scrap of flesh and sinew inside the tank writhed for a moment, still possessed by some primordial urge to survive, before Magnus smashed the plexiglass and dragged it out. With a flex of his mighty fist, the remnants of the Dreadnought's body were squeezed into a slurry of blood and wasted muscle.

Then Magnus turned to take on the rest.

Still Wyrmlade couldn't move. Some power compelled him to stay immobile.

'Lord.'

His limbs were frozen, heavy and sluggish. His sword was rooted to the ground, a dead weight.

'Lord.'

A black curtain of despair sunk behind his eyes.

Nothing can stop this. Even Bjorn could do nothing against this.

'Lord!'

He snapped out of his visions, shaken free by the presence at his elbow. The few surviving Wolves clustered around him at the summit of the stairway. No more than a dozen had escaped the onslaught of the primarch. There were kaerls streaming to join them from the stairway, a couple of hundred perhaps. Below them, the Dreadnoughts fought on, dying one by one under the terrible attentions of Magnus, holding the line for just a few more moments before his relentless march resumed.

The one who spoke was a Blood Claw with blood-drenched armour and teeth studded under the jawline of his helm. Like all the Wolves, he'd seen

heavy combat and his plate was dented, burned and blade-scored.

Wyrmlblade should have sensed it sooner.

Maleficarum. He is contesting for my mind.

With a huge effort, Wyrmlblade fought off the terrible feelings of despair. His troops were looking to him for guidance. The Blood Claw grabbed his arm, yearning for leadership.

‘What are your orders?’ he asked urgently.

Wyrmlblade looked across the faces of those around him. Only hours ago, they had still dared to hope. The barricades had been held for so long. Now, in the space of a few terrible minutes, everything had been destroyed.

He didn’t know what to say to them. For the first time since taking the rites of priesthood, he didn’t know what to say.

‘We will hold him here,’ came a clear voice.

All eyes turned to the speaker. It was a mortal rivenmaster with an honest face. Alone among the kaerls, his eyes were not alive with fear. There was a hollowness there, as if the thought of living longer had become somehow abhorrent to him.

‘We mortals will hold him for as long as we can,’ he went on, speaking calmly despite the roiling explosions moving up the stairway below. ‘We are expendable, but you are not. You must go. Seek some way of resisting him in the Valgard. If you hesitate, you will die.’

Wyrmlblade looked at the mortal. At last, the final shreds of Magnus’s psychic paralysis left him. The rivenmaster looked back, an expression of defiant insolence on his face.

Morek Karekborn. Ah, how I underestimated you.

‘The mortal is right,’ announced Wyrmlblade, recovering his poise and sweeping his blade back into position. ‘We will fall back. Our stand will be at the Annulus.’

He gestured toward Morek.

‘Take command of what heavy weapon squads we still have. Hold him as long as you can in the Fangthane. The rest of you, come with me. The abomination shall not walk into our holiest chambers unopposed.’

Then he turned, his armoured boots scraping on the stone before breaking into the run that would carry him across the Fangthane and to the transit shafts beyond. The rest of the Wolves came with him, none of them questioning the order, though Wyrmlade could detect the stubborn reluctance to depart from combat. The surviving kaerls struggled to keep up behind them, all now racing freely from the horror in the stairwell. As they went, more crashes surged up from the stairs, punctuated with isolated barks of bolter-fire.

Wyrmlade only looked back once. Morek was already busy, organising the mortals who’d been able to stand alongside him, drawing up the final gun-lines and heavy weapons squads at the summit of the stairs, under the shadow of the snarling wolf images. Beyond them, the bronze leviathan loomed, coming closer.

Brave. Horribly brave. Once the last of the Dreadnoughts was taken down, he’d be lucky if he lasted more than a few seconds.

The Wolf Priest turned back quickly, switching his mind to the present, to survival.

I cannot feel guilt for this. There is more at stake than the lives of mortals.

But as Wyrmlade raced across the empty Fangthane, leaving the powerful primarch behind him, accompanied by the dregs of his command retreating ignominiously upwards in the hope, the faint hope, that things would go differently at the Annulus, a single nagging thought wouldn’t leave him alone.

I have no idea how to fight that monster. No idea at all.

The Rubric Marines were on the rampage. With the departure of Bjorn, Greyloc and the Rune Priest, their powers had been greatly enhanced.

Phalanxes of sapphire-clad warriors plunged into battle, surrounded by eldritch whips of energy and spitting cold fire from their gauntlets. Even the remaining Wolves on the barricades were no match for such powers, and fell back in a fighting retreat, pulling back across the rows of trenches to the refuges beyond.

They were covered by the continual fire of the fixed guns and protected by the indomitable presence of the five remaining Dreadnoughts. Hrothgar led them, a huge war machine scarcely less imposing than Bjorn. Under his command, Aldr and others stayed firm in retreat, keeping up constant volleys of fire against the oncoming tide, slowing it down though not halting it. The beasts still fought with undented savagery, launching themselves at the throats of the silent killers, tearing at armour and steel with their strange augmented claws.

Freija could see that it wasn't enough. The departure of the bastion's command squad had robbed the defenders of their most potent weapons. She had watched them fight their way free with growing disbelief, gaping openly as Bjorn had carved a path through the milling hordes and into the tunnels beyond. Russ only knew whether they'd made it to the far side, nor what terrible errand had called them away from their duty on the barricades.

To make things worse, the Thousand Sons seemed to have been filled with a new zeal for combat. They charged into contact faster, their reactions were sharper and their blows landed more heavily. Something had happened to give them new momentum, and the current of the battle had decisively swung their way.

Freija fell back, as ordered, retreating through the massive portals of Borek's Seal and into the cavernous space beyond. Her squad remained in tight formation around her, all of them facing the enemy, all of them firing non-stop. Heavy impacts crashed all around them, many of them bolter-rounds loosed from the approaching Rubric Marines. As the defenders withdrew from their long-held positions at the portals, the guns within

Borek's Seal itself opened up, throwing new crashes and explosions into an already deafening storm of sound and light.

There were trenches dug further back, and more lines of barricades. They would fall back and regroup, then fall back again. This was all part of the plan. As long as the Dreadnoughts lasted and the Wolves stood up to fight, they still had a chance. She had faith. After so many years of cynicism, it was a nice feeling to have.

Then she staggered, crying out with pain.

One of her men reached for her, trying to haul her back to her feet. Stumbling again would be fatal – none of the squad could afford to wait for her to catch up if she fell behind.

Freija's world tilted on its axis. For a moment, she thought a las-beam had hit her, but then realised the pain was internal. Like a spike through her heart, a sharp wave of agony swept through her.

'Rise, huskaerl!' urged her trooper, yanking hard at her armour.

Freija barely heard him. The only thing she saw was a fleeting vision of a bronze-armoured giant striding through curtains of flame, tearing down everything in range of its terrible grasp. Then there was a man in front of him, a mortal, standing defiant as the inferno came for him. On either side of him were wolves, massive and carved from granite. Though their muzzles were locked in snarls, they were static and impotent.

The vision faded, and the rush and fury of the fighting in Borek's Seal returned.

'Father!' she cried, realising what she'd seen.

Her weapon clattered to the ground, dropped from shaking fingers. The trooper made a final attempt to haul her along with him. The rest of the squad was now many metres away, falling back to their assigned muster-point under heavy fire.

'We have to go!' he snapped, urgency in his voice.

‘He is gone!’ gasped Freija, feeling grief like she’d never known before rise up to choke her. Tears spiked at her eyes, hot and acrid. ‘Mercy of the Allfather, he is *gone!*’

The kaerl gave up then, letting her fall to the stone and racing to join his comrades. Freija sank to the ground, careless of the carnage around her. Ahead of her, the Wolves fought a final, losing battle with the remorseless enemy. The line of battle was getting closer. Soon, it would sweep over her like the tide washing away sand.

She didn’t care. She didn’t even register. Her world had been ripped from under her feet, torn away by the death of the one man who’d given her everything. Days of exhaustion suddenly took their toll, crushing what spirit remained in her.

He is gone.

So it was that, as Borek’s Seal was finally breached, and as Traitor Marines stormed the great bastion at the base of Russ’s citadel at last, Freija Morekborn, savage warrior-daughter of Fenris, fell to the stone, heedless of everything but her vision of death.

There she remained until the shadow fell across her, the shadow of one of the many warriors who’d come into the Aett with no purpose but to kill. As he lowered his weapon, she didn’t even look up.

Magnus stood in the Fangthane. His mantle ran with flames, slowly dying out as the glory of his ascent receded. The vast space still echoed from the residual firestorm, but the flashing lights of the guns were long gone. The floor was littered with bodies and broken gun-cases, partly-hidden by the ragged clouds of smoke drifting across it. Freki and Geri had been shattered, their limbs left among the strewn remnants of barricades like burnt offerings.

Across the wide expanse of the stone floor, Rubricae moved in tightly ordered squads, preparing for the push upwards. Spireguard were busy removing the residual defences and repairing the worst of the damage to

the stairway. Now that the choke-point had been broken, the upper levels of the Fang lay open.

Magnus knew what he would do. He would crash through the shafts and tunnels, driving his way to the very summit, ripping a trail of flame through the reeling mountain. Then he would break out on to the pinnacle, taking the aspect of a lord of ruin, and watch as his sons tore the remainder of the citadel to pieces. The destruction would be complete and irrecoverable, a fitting riposte to the devastation wreaked on Tizca. By the time he left, the Fang would be an empty, uninhabitable corpse-house.

But he would not do that just yet. There was one task in the Fangthane that remained, one he had been looking forward to for many centuries.

He walked up to the giant statue of Russ.

It was, he had to admit, a good likeness. The ruthless energy of his gene-brother had been perfectly captured. As Magnus approached it, he grew in stature. By the time he drew up to the image, his head was at the same height. They stood facing each other, just as they had done on Prospero. Magnus looked into the unseeing eyes of his old enemy, and smiled.

‘Do you remember what you said to me, brother?’

Magnus spoke aloud, his voice pure and powerful. His fingers twitched at his sides, eager for what was to come.

‘Do you remember what you said to me as we fought before the Pyramid of Photep? Do you remember the words you used? I do. As I recall, your face was tortured. Imagine that – the Master of Wolves, his ferocity twisted into grief. And yet you still carried out your duty. You always did what was asked of you. So loyal. So tenacious. Truly, you were the attack dog of the Emperor.’

Magnus lost his smile.

‘You took no pleasure in what you did. I knew that then, and I know it now. But all things change, my brother. I’m not the same as I was, and you’re... well, let us not mention where you are now.’

Magnus put his arms out, grasping the stone shoulders of the statue, pressing bronze fingers into the granite.

‘So do not imagine there is a symmetry to my emotions as I do this. I will take pleasure in it, and I will take pleasure in seeing your hearth destroyed and your sons scattered. In the centuries to come, this small act will make me smile, a minor consolation for the hurt you inflicted on my innocent people in the name of ignorance.’

Magnus heaved, and the gigantic statue came free from its base, breaking off at the ankles with a crack of tortured stone. Manipulating the colossal weight easily, Magnus swung the figure into a face-up horizontal position, and brought his knee up under the curved backbone.

‘I have waited long for this, Wolf King, and I find that, now the moment is here, it is quite as precious as I hoped it would be.’

With a single, savage, downward thrust, Magnus broke the back of Russ across his knee. The two halves of the statue thundered to the stone below, sending up a slow tidal wave of dust and rubble. The booming sound of the fall resounded from the high vaults of the Fangthane, ebbing like sobs. The head rolled free, still fixed in a grimace of static rage, rocking as it gently settled in the debris.

Magnus paused then, looking down at the ruin of his enemy’s image. For a long time, he didn’t move. There was a defiant pleasure on his face, the expression of a man who wished to fully enjoy an experience long anticipated.

But behind it, as Ahriman would no doubt have recognised, was a deeper pain, the pain of remembrance. There would always be pain. That was the tragedy of the past, of the things done that could never be undone.

The introspection could not last. As the last of the dust settled in the cracks of the Fangthane walls, Magnus stirred himself once more. He knew his sons would be impatient for more conquest, and he had a duty to them still.

‘The final push,’ he murmured, speaking to himself. ‘The most grievous blow of all.’

He departed then, shrinking in stature back to his old size as he walked, though still towering over the tallest of his servants. Behind him came his Rubricae and their surviving sorcerer-guides. Many had died, but several hundred warriors still remained, all as implacable and dedicated as ever. They marched with their usual eerie, diffident confidence, tramping up the slopes towards the transit shafts. They all followed their father, leaving none behind.

After they were gone, mortal Spireguard picked their way through the wreckage of the hall. They were strung-out after weeks of solid campaigning, but they carried themselves with heads held high. They were no longer scared. They had seen the majesty of the Wolves laid low, and it did wonders for their confidence. Many of them believed all of the defending Space Marines had been killed. It was a reasonable belief, given the recent evidence of their senses.

So it was that, a few hours later, none of the sentries noticed the pairs of glowing red eyes at the base of the stairway, moving fast and in pursuit formation. Only when the wolfc claws broke out from the darkness and the booming war cry of the hulking war-engine triggered terror among them once again, did it become apparent they had relaxed too soon.

There were Wolves left alive, and they were hunting.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Redpelt didn't have time to marvel at the ancient wonders of the Annulus Chamber. In another situation, he'd have lingered over the great stone circle, lost in contemplation of the devices inscribed there. In the current circumstances, that would have been an indulgence too far. He knew the enemy was hard on their heels, sweeping up the transit shafts and tunnels like a rising tide. They would be here soon, ready to finish what they'd started.

So he worked hard, digging in with the few remaining Wolves and the demoralised kaerls. They dragged what protection they could across the doorway to the chamber, piling heavy iron sheeting across the metres-wide portal. All of them knew such flimsy barriers wouldn't last long, but at least it would give the kaerls some cover to fire from.

The mortals looked ready to collapse. They'd been fighting for days already, with only short sleep breaks to keep them from going mad or dying from fatigue. Even their Fenrisian constitutions, about as tough as any in the Imperium, were on the brink of implosion. It was a miracle any of them could still hold their rifles, let alone use them.

Helfist wouldn't have appreciated such things. He'd always been impatient with mortal frailties.

'Why do we still need them?' he'd complained. 'Just breed more Space Marines. Thousands of us. Don't stop until we're all that's left, and forget

about the weaklings.'

He'd been joking, but there'd always been an underlying seriousness there. He really didn't see the point of unaugmented humans. Now he was gone, consumed by the very power that had elevated him into superhumanity.

That is the point, brother. We pay a price for our potency.

'Blood Claw,' came Wyrmlblade's dry old voice.

Helfist snapped round. The Wolf Priest stood there in his half-ruined armour, dark against the angry light of the hearth-fires.

'You will have to hold the Annulus for a little while without me.'

For a moment, Redpelt couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'Forgive me, lord. I don't under—'

'There is something of the utmost importance I must attend to. Russ willing, I shall be back before the enemy reaches you. But if I am not, then hold the line until I return.'

Redpelt felt a roar of anger building up within him. He knew he was on the edge of his strength, and knew the penalty for defying a Wolf Priest, but what Wyrmlblade intended was madness. There was nothing, *nothing*, more important than defending the last and holiest chamber of the Aett against assault.

'You cannot,' he said, keeping a lid on his temper with difficulty. 'We need you here, lord.'

Wyrmlblade shook his head.

'Do not attempt to argue with me, Blood Claw,' he said. 'I know how you feel, and I will go as swiftly as I may.'

For a moment longer, Redpelt considered protesting. Hel, he even considered hammering the Wolf Priest to the floor and forcing him to stay.

As that thought crossed his mind, it forced a weary smile, the grim acceptance brought on by utter desperation.

Have we been reduced to this?

‘If you miss the action, I will claim the primarch as prey,’ said Redpelt. ‘You’ll have to live with that shame.’

Wyrmlblade laughed in his strange, cynical way.

‘You deserve it, Blood Claw. But you will not fight Magnus alone. Take my oath on it.’

Then he turned and strode through the makeshift barricades, pushing his way past the working kaerls. Redpelt watched him go for a while, then cast his eyes back over the remaining defences.

Twelve Wolves, a mix of Claws, Hunters and Long Fangs. A few hundred kaerls, rammed into the narrow approaches to the Annulus Chamber or taking up positions within it. A couple of heavy weapons, but mostly sidearms, and those low on ammo.

Then he looked over to the Annulus stones, only a few metres away. The image of the Wolf that Stalks the Stars sat in the centre of the circle, the emblem of the Chapter. Russ himself had stood before that device once, surrounded by his mighty retinue, all warriors without equal.

So few left. So few, to defend the very heart of our realm.

Redpelt let out a shuddering sigh. He was in danger of letting the events of the past few hours get the better of him. He could imagine Helfist laughing at that, taunting him as he always had done.

Not now. There was work to be done.

‘You! Mortal!’ he roared, striding over to where a gang of kaerls was struggling to carry a fresh barricade into place. ‘Not there. I’ll show you where.’

And then he was busy again, consumed by the need to make the Annulus as secure as possible. They did not have long. As the defenders worked, the sounds of the coming storm could be heard, far below them, lost in the endless maze of tunnels. It was still a long way off, but coming closer with every heartbeat.

Magnus stalked through the corridors of the Aett, pausing only to destroy the meagre wards against sorcery that still lingered in the upper reaches of the Jarlheim. Behind him came the slow-moving squadrons of Rubric Marines.

There was almost no resistance. The tunnels and shafts were empty, or surrendered quickly by scattered bands of mortal defenders, bereft of hope and leadership. Magnus knew that Wolves still fought on down in the lower levels, pinned back by his troops and suffering a slow strangulation. The few defenders in the upper levels capable of mounting any kind of fight must have retreated to the summit, hoping against reason to hold the last redoubt for a few more hours.

That defiance did not surprise him, though he couldn't summon much admiration for it. He'd never expected them to roll over and give up. The Wolves had kept attacking him as he'd swept up the Fangthane stairway, even though they must have known they would die in the attempt. That big warrior, the one with the chainfist and the sound of bitterness in his battle cry, his strikes had even hurt.

Magnus looked around him with disdain. These were, he knew, the levels where the Sky Warriors dwelt. The surroundings were as squalid and bare as the rest of the benighted mountain. Though the Fangthane had a kind of bleak grandeur, there was really very little in the Fang to be impressed by. It wasn't much more than a big rock, half-carved open, cold and shivering with mountain draughts.

Czamine, the Pavoni sorcerer-lord, came alongside him then, striding hard to match his primarch's pace.

'Lord, do you have more orders?' he asked. 'I have sent squads into the side tunnels to destroy the remaining wards. We can cause much damage there before we engage the last defenders.'

Magnus nodded.

'Do that. Burn, crack and maim everything you find. Pay special attention to the totems and charms. The Wolves have an inexplicable

weakness for them, and it will hurt their souls to have them broken.’

‘It will be done. And then, the summit.’

‘Indeed, though you will be alone there, at least for a time.’

Czamine inclined his helm questioningly, though he didn’t dare voice a query.

‘I have an appointment of my own to keep,’ explained Magnus. ‘When you’ve finished smashing what remains of the artefacts, look for me again at the pinnacle.’

Magnus didn’t bother to hide the look of anticipation on his face then.

‘Russ’s chamber is close, my son, the one he called the Annulus. You will have the honour of taking it. We will meet again there, once the last hope of this wretched Chapter has been extinguished.’

Wyrmblade entered the chamber of the fleshmakers. He went hurriedly, passing through the many interlinked rooms swiftly. The vacated spaces were still brightly lit, but looked mournful in their emptiness. He hadn’t encountered enemies in the tunnels leading from the Annulus to his own domain, but he knew it was only a matter of time before they arrived. He had precious moments; moments he could use to salvage the essential elements of his research before all was destroyed. He had little idea what to do with it after that, but something would occur to him. It always did.

Wyrmblade strode through the empty fleshmaker labs, hardly seeing the bare metal slabs where the bodies had lain. After so long detained in the Fangthane, it felt odd to be back in those antiseptic spaces, bathed once more in the harsh light of medicae glowglobes reflected from the walls of white tiles.

Wyrmblade approached the inner sanctum, the place where the Tempering programme had been conducted in secrecy for so many years. The blast doors were shut, just as he’d left them. He prepared to issue the voice-activation release, forcing his pulse to lessen as he did so. Agitation would only interfere with the mechanism.

It was then that he stopped. He looked around, down the long rows of silent machinery, the pristine operating slabs.

There were no bodies. Frar, the Grey Hunter who'd been brought here by Morek, was gone. All the others were gone. It was as if no trace of them had ever existed. It was then that he realised the truth.

He'd not arrived at the laboratorium first.

Turning slowly, knowing the consequences of what he did, he opened the doors.

The Tempering chambers lay beyond. They were in disarray. The birthing tubes were shattered, their contents dribbling across the tiled floor. The corpses of the experimental Sons of Russ lay on the floor, trampled and torn apart. The vials were all destroyed, broken into glistening shards of glass. In the rooms beyond, the cogitators crackled, consumed by flames. Irreplacable equipment, some of it dating back to the days of Unification on Terra, had been entirely devastated, and priceless inner mechanics were now strewn open like entrails.

It was gone. All gone.

Wyrmlblade took in the ruin of his life's work in an instant. Then his amber eyes flickered up. Most of his attention was drawn to the man standing in the centre of the destruction.

No, not a man. He was smaller in stature than he had been on the stairs of the Fangthane, but still greater than any Space Marine. His golden mantle hung from three-metre-high shoulders, encasing a breastplate of bronze. Amniotic fluid dripped from his fingers. His single eye glistened with triumph.

Wyrmlblade drew his sword, and the dragon-edge slid from the scabbard with an empty hiss.

'Do you really intend to fight me, Thar Hraldir?' asked Magnus calmly.

'With all my hearts,' said Wyrmlblade, igniting the blade's disruptor field.

The primarch nodded.

‘Of course you do. But know this first, old man. The future you envisaged was worth striving to prevent, and so what remains of my Legion has been sacrificed for it. There would have been no invasion of Fenris without your meddling, Wolf Priest. In the last moments you have alive, reflect on that.’

Then Wyrmlblade roared with all his old, bitter fury, charging toward the giant primarch and sweeping the blade towards his neck. The dragon-sword, carved with the flowing image of the wyrm, screamed in its turn, hurtling over the bronze breastplate and toward its target.

Magnus drew his own weapon in an instant. His movements seemed casual, unhurried, but they somehow had effect instantly. One moment, he was unarmed and relaxed; the next, he was restored to the fiery angel he’d been in the Fangthane.

The swords clashed, and the clang of the metal edges resounded from the walls.

Wyrmlblade moved as if he were a Blood Claw in the prime of conditioning, twisting his blade in tight, sharp arcs, crying aloud with every strike. The weariness of the long battle fell away from him, freeing his limbs to move with their old crushing, dazzling speed.

In all his hundreds of years of service, he had never fought more finely, had never perfected the channelling of kill-urge more completely. Wyrmlblade whirled, ducked and thrust with sublime energy, driven by an anger and loss that consumed him utterly; a burning, terrible grief that, for a few moments, lifted his artistry beyond even that of the Wolves of Fenris and into the category of legends.

Magnus parried him with an unconscious ease, moving just as smoothly, deploying his blade with all the remorseless skill of his heritage. It was almost as if he were allowing the Wolf Priest his last moment of

perfection, gifting him a final flourish of martial sublimity before the end had to come.

But it couldn't last. Wyrmlade, for all his furious energy and control, was to a primarch what a mortal was to a Space Marine. As even his age-hardened muscles tired of their furious assault, the dragon-blade dipped for an instant, leaving an opening. It only took one stroke from Magnus's sword, just a single thrust aimed directly at Wyrmlade's chest. The primarch's eldritch blade passed through the armour smoothly.

Impaled on the metal, Wyrmlade spasmed. He struggled for a little longer, desperately trying to pull himself from the bite of the sword. His own blade fell from his fingers, its energy field still fizzing angrily.

The Wolf Priest coughed up blood, hot and black, and it sprayed across the inside of his helm.

For a final time, his vision came to him. Space Wolves, as numerous as the stars, bringing war to the darkest reaches of the galaxy, shaping the Imperium in the image of the Wolf King and making it as vital and powerful as Russ had been.

'It was... done... for Russ,' he gasped, feeling the cold clutch of death steal upon him.

Then he went limp, slumping heavily on his enemy's sword.

Grimly, Magnus withdrew the blade, letting Wyrmlade's body crumple to the floor.

'If that is so, then you failed him,' remarked the primarch, looking down at the ravaged corpse impassively. 'This struggle is over.'

'Not while you live, betrayer!'

Magnus snapped his gaze up. Amazingly, there were warriors charging towards him. A Terminator-clad giant, his wolfclaws blazing with angry lightning. A Rune Priest, flanked by two bodyguards, his staff crackling with forks of aether-born power. And behind them, moving more slowly,

something massive and lumbering. Something he recognised from long, long ago.

The Russvangum hurtled into the orbital engagement zone, its lances blazing. The escorts flew hard in its wake, opening fire with every weapon they possessed. The arrival of the Wolves' battle fleet was devastating, wrapped in fire and fury.

The Thousand Sons fleet did not engage them, but began to pull away from Fenris in a move that had clearly been planned for. The *Herumon*, the only vessel in the armada capable of taking on Ironhelm's flagship, powered out of harm's way smoothly, turning on its axis and heading directly for the jump-points.

Space Wolves frigates and destroyers headed straight into the heart of the enemy, throwing broadsides against the flanks of the ponderous troop ships as they screamed past them. The golden vessels began to burn, their shields buckling under the fury of the assault.

But an orbital war was not what Ironhelm had come for. He could see the dark circle of destruction about the Fang even from the real space viewers. Kilometres-wide, it stained the pristine reflective expanse of Asaheim like a wound in pale flesh.

As he looked at it, his mind was taken back to the ranks of Wolf Brothers, howling in mockery and anguish even as they were cut down. The air of the Gangava pyramid had been noxious, infused with madness and horror. Breaking free of that battle had been the hardest decision he'd ever made. Lost in a world of rage, he'd barely recognised Kjarlskar when the Wolf Lord had fought his way to his side. Even then, even after he'd heard what had happened on Fenris, a part of him had resisted the call to come back.

The depth of his folly had been revealed in an instant. It would have been less painful to have kept on fighting, to have lost himself in the kill-

urge, to have gloried in the righteous drive to purge the tainted from existence.

He still saw the faces of those he'd killed. Tortured faces. Faces that masked a dreadful awareness. Somewhere deep down, the Wolf Brothers knew what they'd been twisted into.

We keep the danger close.

'To the pods,' he growled, stomping from the bridge and down to the launch bays. On every ship of the fleet, Jarls of the Great Companies did the same. Dozens of drop pods were already primed for planetfall, each one carrying a full payload. Thunderhawk engines thrummed into life in the hangars, waiting for the all-clear to burst out into the troposphere and into cannon-range.

The entire Chapter had achieved orbit, sweeping away resistance with the same contemptuous ease as the Thousand Sons had so many days ago. The massed landings were only moments away.

Ironhelm boarded his pod impatiently, leaned back against the adamantium walls and felt the restraint cage slam into place. The shell-doors hissed closed, and launch klaxons began to blare.

'Land me on the summit,' he snarled over the comm.

That would be dangerous, with no margin for error – the bulk of the pods were being sent down to the causeways. The operators of the bays knew better than to argue, though, and the coordinates were duly set.

'Clear to launch, lord,' came a voice over the comm.

'Do it,' ordered Ironhelm, bracing for the release of the clamps, and then the dizzying, whistling descent towards the surface. It could not come soon enough.

I am coming for you.

The launch-tube doors flew open, and the pods began to fall. In every direction, Wolves vessels powered into battle, tearing apart any enemy ships too slow to evade their guns.

He knew what the enemy would be thinking now. He knew that, all along the causeways, entrenched Spireguard battalions would be looking up, realising that their fleet was deserting them and that they were being left to fend for themselves. It was then, as they watched the skies darken, that the same terrible thought would enter every one of their terrified minds. He took a cold pleasure in that.

This is the planet of the Wolves. And they have come to take it back.

Sturmhart spread his arms wide, kindling a rage of storm-energy. Fists of lightning raced out, engulfing Magnus in a nimbus of coruscating brilliance. The sigils on the Rune Priest's armour exploded into life, burning heartblood-red.

Greyloc and his two Wolf Guard leapt into action, snarling with pent-up rage. They went for Magnus like a pack taking down a *konungur* – one at the throat, one at the breast, one at the legs. Their armour shimmered from Sturmhart's protective aegis as they charged into combat.

Greyloc was fastest. He got his talons up into the primarch's face, raking and tearing. Magnus fell back, rocked by the speed of the assault. Though he stood over a metre taller than the Terminator Marines, the pace and ferocity of the attacks pushed him on to his heels, and he stumbled.

Magnus the Red, son of the immortal Emperor, primarch of the Thousand Sons, *stumbled*.

'For the Allfather!' roared Greyloc in triumph, his whole being consumed by the awesome, feral power of the hunt. Like Wyrmblood before him, the absolute hatred engendered by Magnus lent him, for a time, truly astonishing power. 'For Russ!'

Greyloc bludgeoned the primarch back another pace, howling his hatred in scarcely intelligible frenzy. Magnus got his sword in place, but it was cracked aside by a savage swipe of wolfc claws.

A Wolf Guard made contact, plunging his talons into Magnus's leg. Sturmhart bellowed with kill-pleasure at that, and his wyrdfire roared

with even greater intensity. The other Wolf Guard crunched his claw into the primarch's chest. The Wolves had the scent of blood in their nostrils, and it made them awesome.

Magnus staggered again, crashing into the wall behind him, breaking it open, demolishing it as he passed through. Greyloc leapt after him, closely followed by the others. Sturmhart kept on their heels, consumed with an inferno of raging wyrd-flame. The four Wolves harried, stabbed and hammered at the retreating daemon-primarch, their fists flying and blades biting. There was no let-up, no respite, just a flurry of horrifying blows, each one sent hurtling into contact with a visceral, remorseless passion.

They drove the daemon-primarch back further, tearing through another wall, laying waste to everything around them. The noise of roaring and slavering was deafening, a hideous cacophony of hate-filled defiance that rose, booming, into the narrow space of the fleshmaker halls.

'Death to the witch!' bellowed Greyloc, utterly possessed by kill-urge, his whole body pumping with furious energy.

He was fighting at such a pitch of perfection that it made him want to scream aloud. Greyloc could feel himself burning up as he fought on, damaging himself irretrievably through the very action of such unrestrained violence. There was no retreat from this, no possibility of recovery. He was fighting himself to death, using up every gram of potential in his mortal body.

I am the weapon.

Nothing less would do. He was contesting a living god, and only his indomitable faith, his unshakeable certainty, his complete commitment, would possibly match up to that awesome task.

My pure state.

So he pushed Magnus back again, giving him no time, no space. Another wall crashed into ruins, destroyed by the lightning-crowned rampage of their furious progress.

They burst through the rubble into a wide, open space. They'd broken out of the laboratorium and into a hangar of some kind, one of the many hundreds that studded the mountain near the summit. There was a single gunship left on the apron, ruined and black from heavy battle-damage. At the far end of the launch bay, a gale roared past. The thundering of the vengeful wind boomed around their ears, fresh from the frigid airs of Asaheim, harsh and howling.

The soul of Fenris. It shares our fury.

The Wolves tore onwards, wreathed in Sturmhjart's wyrdlight, bellowing defiance, landing blow after blow, each one of which would have ended another fight but in this case merely prolonged it.

But their strength, for all its extravagant majesty, was fixed by clear limits. Magnus was a child of the Emperor, one of the peerless twenty who had lit the fires of the Great Crusade, and his poise could only be disrupted for a short time. The onslaught had been horrendous, the worst he had endured in a thousand years, but his strength was near-infinite and his guile scarcely less so. He straightened, towering over his assailants, and remembered what power lay within his gauntlet-grasp.

One of the Wolf Guard let his defences slip for a fraction of a second, and that was enough. Magnus's fist crashed into his face, hurling him out of contact and sending him flying metres through the air. The Wolf Guard crunched heavily to the ground, his helm smashed in, and didn't get up.

Sturmhjart was next, caught by a devastating blast of witchfire from Magnus's outstretched hands. The Rune Priest bent double, clutching by sudden, agonising pain.

'*Hjolda!*' he cried, writhing in apoplexy, blood spraying from his armour-joints.

Magnus clenched his fist, and the ceramite shell exploded, throwing a storm of flesh and bone across the hangar floor. Then the primarch whirled back to face Greyloc and the surviving Wolf Guard. The equanimity had

been wiped from his face, and his wine-red hair hung in straggling clumps around him. He was bleeding, and limped from a deep wound to his leg. Only once before had his physical form sustained such wounds, and the remembrance of that pain enraged him.

‘You have angered me, Dog,’ Magnus snarled, back-handing the Wolf Guard viciously out of contention, breaking his back with a messy snap. Then he lowered a crackling fist at Greyloc.

He never loosed the witchfire. A spinning ball of plasma hit Magnus directly in the torso, throwing him across the hangar. Another impacted, and another, knocking him further back. Limbs flailing, doused in supernova-hot bolt-residue, Magnus slammed into the carcass of the downed Thunderhawk. He smashed it apart as he crashed into it, his golden fists plunging through the crushed adamantium superstructure like a raging child trapped in a doll’s house.

You know nothing of anger, Traitor, boomed Bjorn, lumbering from the wreckage of the hangar wall and punching another flurry of plasma bolts from his arm-cannon. ***This is anger. This is hate.***

The bolts impacted, one after the other, each aimed with exact precision. Magnus was enveloped in a furious, screaming inferno, a stream of starbursts that bludgeoned him back further, smashing him deep into the wreckage of the gunship.

He still stood. He fought back. For a moment, it looked as though the primarch would rip the Thunderhawk’s structure apart completely.

Then the promethium tanks ignited.

The explosion was titanic, rocking the entire hangar and sending a blast-wave sweeping across the apron. Magnus was engulfed by a bulging sphere of white-hot destruction, an orb of flame that raced out, surging up to the hangar roof and running along the stone like quicksilver. Greyloc was hurled to the ground. Cracks raced across the apron, deep and gaping. The wind howled, dragging tongues of flame through the tortured air.

Only Bjorn endured. He kept firing, over and over, pouring more plasma into the raging torrent of destruction.

When Magnus finally emerged from the heart of it, his face was contorted with murder. Skin hung from the bone, smouldering and blistering. His golden mantle was black, his bronze armour scorched. His mane of hair was gone, replaced by a flesh-tattered skull. His lone eye was star-red, burning like metal on the blacksmith's forge. Huge gashes had opened in his flesh, revealing a lattice of shifting, luminous colour beneath. The physical cloak he'd draped over his daemonic essence had been ripped open, snatched away by the furnace.

Magnus leapt from the inferno, straight at Greyloc, streams of fire trailing him like an angel's wings. Bjorn swept his plasma cannon round, but too slowly. The wounded primarch crashed into the Wolf Lord as he struggled to regain his feet. Magnus felled him with a hammer-blow from his clenched fist, still flaring with raging promethium. Greyloc's head cracked against the stone, and for a moment his guard was down.

Magnus plunged with both hands, tearing up the Jarl's breastplate with grasping fingers. Silver-gold warp-energy blazed out, dissolving the ceramite in hissing clouds. Magnus delved deep, seizing both Greyloc's hearts in his crackling fists.

The Wolf Lord *screamed*, his limbs going rigid with agony. With a sickening wrench, Magnus ripped the beating organs free, hauling them from Greyloc's still-living chest, snapping the clutching trails of gore, and hurled them aside.

For a moment, the Wolf Lord retained consciousness, somehow managing to hold the gaze of his killer.

Beneath his helm, his white face was harrowed but defiant. His eyes reflected, for the final time, a fleeting vision of a snow-smooth plain, of prey moving under the harsh sun, of the icy wind against his naked arms.

My pure state.

Then the arms went limp, and the blood-glare from his lenses died.

Jarl! roared Bjorn, his voice distorted by loathing.

Still firing a stream of plasma bolts, the Dreadnought strode right into the primarch, his lightning claw blazing with angry disruption. The two giants came together in a crash of warp-energy, promethium, and steel on steel.

As Magnus and the Fell-Handed fell into terrible, devastating combat, the storm around them whined to a new pitch of vitriol. The ground beneath their feet cracked open further, tearing chasms in the plascrete floor. The ancient Dreadnought, fuelled by the greater rage, forced the distracted primarch on to the defensive again, gouging at Magnus with his talons and blasting him from close range. At such proximity, the terrible plasma backdraft affected Bjorn nearly as badly as his enemy, but he maintained the barrage nonetheless.

Step by step, shrouded in smoke and trails of fluid energy, the two fighters staggered towards the open hangar bay in a grotesque, swaying embrace, each trading hammer-blows of crushing, heart-stopping force. There was no shielding left over the portal. Beyond the plascrete edge of the apron, the bare rock carried on for a few metres before plunging down sheer. They reached the precipice, blazing away at each other with strikes of such brutality that the rock edges crumbled under them.

Magnus had been hurt. He'd been hurt more profoundly than any mortal had hurt him before. His shock at that translated into his movements, which had become strangely halting and erratic. All his easy grace had left him, and he fought like a bar-room brawler, clubbing at the heavy armour of the Dreadnought even as Bjorn thundered back.

They got closer to the edge. More rocks broke away, streaming down the steel-hard flanks of the mountain in tumbling trails. The drop was nearly vertical. They were thousands of metres above the causeways, duelling in

the high heavens like the gods of Fenrisian myth, surrounded by the lancing tongues of lightning and the death-cry of the gales.

Far below them, there was fire and slaughter. The Wolves had landed in their hundreds, and now ran amok across the stone, cutting threads at will. Columns of them were streaming towards the broken shells of the gates, entering their own citadel again with the deadly light of pursuit in their eyes. The skies were studded with the outlines of drop-ships and the dark trails of Thunderhawks. Far above that, surrounded by leaping bursts of chain lightning, heavier ships were slowly descending through the upper atmosphere.

They both saw it. Even as he fought, Bjorn let slip a triumphant snarl.

Ironhelm is here, witch, he taunted, plunging his claw hard into the bronze armour and twisting the blades. **This is death for you.**

Magnus seemed beyond speech. The flesh around his mouth was ragged, burnt ebony by the clinging promethium and torn into a gash by the Dreadnought's slashing strikes. He grabbed the barrel of Bjorn's plasma cannon, clamping claw-like fingers over the red-hot muzzle.

Bjorn fired it again, engulfing Magnus's wrist in a searing holocaust of energy. The primarch clung on, absorbing the terrible heat, twisting and crushing the blunt barrel-end into a blocked mess. His gun rendered useless, Bjorn switched to his claws, driving them again at the primarch's ravaged face. The talons connected, tearing more of the flesh from the daemonic essence beneath.

Stone pillars broke and crumbled from the cliff edge, and a filigree of cracks ran under Bjorn's mighty feet. Both titans teetered on the very lip of the chasm, exchanging blows even as the icy abyss beckoned them down. The harsh wind of Asaheim clutched at them, dragging them closer to oblivion.

It was then that Magnus, weary, wounded and burned as he was, seemed to remember his dread authority at last. He let fly with a broken hand, and

fluorescent warp-energy spat from his outstretched fingers. Bjorn's claw crumpled, withering amid a storm of varicoloured madness. The talons flexed wildly, then cracked apart.

Weaponless, the venerable Dreadnought powered in close, attempting to grapple with the primarch and bear him over the edge. Magnus evaded the manoeuvre, punching out with his other hand. Though bereft of a blade, the daemonic flesh was still potent enough to crack Bjorn's sarcophagus open, rending a jagged tear in the long face-plate. Bone icons shattered, and runes were cloven asunder.

Bjorn reeled then, finally exposed to the full power of the primarch's wrath. Magnus cocked a flaming fist, aiming for the eye-slit. Bjorn could do nothing. The blow came in hard, tearing up the reinforced plate, rocking him back on his central axis, forcing him closer to the edge. Magnus swung round, positioning himself on surer ground, pushing the Dreadnought half over the drop and holding him in place one-handed. The ground supporting Bjorn's clawed feet gave way, dissolving in a mini-avalanche of rubble and ice-blades.

'You were on Prospero,' hissed the primarch, his voice a horrific echo of what it had once been. 'I recognise your soul-pattern.'

Bjorn tried to reply, but his vox-generators had been destroyed. He could feel systems failing all over his artificial body. At last, the hellish existence he'd been forced to endure for so long looked like coming to an end. He couldn't be too sorry about that.

'Did you really think you could kill me?' Magnus rasped, sounding both incredulous and furious. His free hand kindled with fresh witchfire. 'If my brother could not, what hope have you?'

It was then that Bjorn saw the shape careering down the slope above. A huge, armour-clad warrior, loping down the sheer ice-face toward them. Far above that was the profile of a drop pod embedded near the very summit of the Valgard.

Within his cracked shell, what remained of Bjorn's ancient mouth smiled.

Ironhelm pounced, leaping through the air, hurtling fast, arms outstretched. He crashed into the locked figures with the force of a Land Raider at full acceleration. There was a hard clang as armour smashed into armour. The ledge shattered, and all three of them wheeled over the broken edge of the precipice, rolling down the steep slopes in a cloud of broken stone and flying ice.

Ironhelm's head snapped back as he hit something at speed, then his arm crashed through a rock outcrop, smashing it open. He slid and tumbled, falling over and over, destroying the flanks of the mountain in his fall. He had the vague impression of Bjorn crashing straight through an ice-field before the Dreadnought's huge body passed out of view. Showers of snow were everywhere, blinding him. He heard Magnus crying aloud and caught snatches of daemonic flesh flashing close to him before being torn away by the descent.

He fell, and fell, and fell. There was nothing to break the whistling plummet except loose snow and fire-blackened stone. Ironhelm slammed into a fresh outcrop and felt it shatter before he corkscrewed away. Everything was in motion, disorientating and whirling in a white-out of sensory deprivation.

Then, with a sickening crash, he hit something bigger. Even cocooned in his Terminator plate, the impact was staggering. Ironhelm blacked out, his body bouncing like a whip-crack before grinding painfully to a halt.

It was a ledge, one of the thousands of steps in the jagged upper reaches of the Fang, a hundred metres wide and high up the dizzying cliffs of the ultimate peak.

Ironhelm felt awareness return almost immediately, and knew then how much he'd been damaged. Pain surged through his body like a roaring fire, blazing across his tortured joints and spliced bones. He could feel the steel

plate in his skull rattle loose. That meant his cranium was fractured, a prognosis consistent with the sun-hot agony that buzzed behind his eyes.

He snarled with anger, and thrust himself to a half-sitting position. Magnus was there too. The two of them had come down together, kicking and flailing. There was no sign of Bjorn, though there was a long gouge running down the rock behind the primarch, torn out of the stone like a plough's furrow. Snow and pack-ice still fell in clouds, laced with biting slivers of rock.

The primarch was on his feet. All semblance of his old form was gone. There was no golden mantle, no bronze plate, no beautifully inscribed greaves with images of the zodiac glinting in the sunlight.

What remained was a being of energy, a vaguely man-shaped network of pulsating warp-matter, vivid and unsettling. The only fixed point within the skin of shifting aether-essence was a single eye, garnet-red and blazing like a circle of fire.

The wind skirled around the ravaged primarch, frigid and tearing, trying to snatch him from the mountain-edge and dash him to the ground below. The planet's soul knew what kind of abomination had been unveiled, and screamed to hurl it back into the warp.

Magnus took a single, pain-filled step towards Ironhelm's broken body, and the eye shot a look of distilled venom. He swayed in the wind.

Ironhelm clambered to his feet, ignoring the blazing agony throughout his mighty frame. He felt blood slosh in his boots, pooling in his armour-joints. The pain kept him conscious, kept him focused. He had travelled across the warp for this encounter with all the speed and fury he could muster. *Twice.*

'Witch,' he spat, feeling the blood-rich saliva slap against his face-plate.

His frostblade had been lost during the crashing descent, but his Terminator armour had other weapons. His right wrist held twin storm bolter muzzles embedded in the curve of the plate, while his left hand was

enclosed in a hulking power fist. Trusting in his prowess with both, Ironhelm lumbered into a heavy, rock-fracturing charge towards the wavering form of the primarch. As he powered into the barrelling run, he loosed both bolter barrels. The rounds punched into Magnus's flesh but didn't detonate. They seemed to disappear entirely, though the impact clearly hurt the daemon-primarch. Magnus roared with pain and anger, bracing to meet the charge of the Great Wolf with his bare hands.

Ironhelm felt his legs burn as he thundered into contact. His armour boosted him, propelling tons of dense flesh, bone, ceramite and adamantium into the body of the primarch. As he connected, he swung his power fist in a massive, hammering arc straight at Magnus's shimmering face.

Magnus veered from the path of the fist expertly, keeping his body supple, and rammed his own fists into the Great Wolf's breastplate, slamming him back across the ice. Ironhelm staggered against the slick surface. Magnus swept in for another strike, but Ironhelm managed to get his power fist round in time. It connected on the full, and the blow felt like punching a bag of bones.

Magnus was hurled away, crashing into the cliff edge. As his body hit the mountainside it shimmered, like a hololith flickering on low power. The primarch's expression was a mix of incredulity and anguish.

He had been diminished. Terribly diminished.

Ironhelm laughed ferociously, charging again, using his massive bulk to generate momentum. Magnus rose to meet him, his fists blazing with witchlight. The two came together with a sickening crunch. Ironhelm felt his bolter-arm shatter, blasted apart by a discharge of white-hot fire. He also felt his power fist strike home, rocking the daemon-primarch on his flickering heels.

Ironhelm snarled with the raw pleasure of the fight. After so long hunting ghosts and being taunted by apparitions, he was in his element at

last. With every fresh strike of his tormented arms he felt a little more alive. The pain was immaterial. The only thing that existed for him was the contest, the test of arms, the exercise of his peerless capacity for controlled violence.

That capacity was stoked by rage, the rage he had cultivated ever since leaving Gangava. The faces of the Wolf Brothers clustered into his mind, still howling their horror and pain. The faces of the slain on Fenris were among them too, growling in accusation. Greyloc had been right. The dead had all been sacrificed on the altar of his hubris, and now they demanded retribution.

He intended to deliver it. The power fist crunched again into Magnus's aether-woven flank, slamming the primarch back against the cliff face. The one-eyed visage blazed with pain as Magnus was crushed against the sword-sharp rock. His whole frame juddered, rippling like a flame caught in the wind. The wounds bit deep, sending shockwaves across his patterned flesh. Far above, the storm crashed in furious triumph, hurling void-cold gales around the mountainside. Ironhelm hit him again, and again, pummelling him against the rock-blades of the Fang's flanks.

Magnus cried out then, a cry of pain that had not been heard since the Wolf King had destroyed his first body. It echoed from the rock, outmatching the wind; outmatching the thunder of artillery from below as the Wolves tore through into the mortal troops on the causeways. In that cry was the weariness of ages, the despair of a demigod bred to fathom the deep mysteries of the universe and instead locked in grubby conflicts amid the dirty snow of a world of barbarians. It was a cry of loss, of waste, and of the infinite futility of an endless war that he had never wanted.

Ironhelm heard that cry, and grinned savagely. He kept going, hammering away at the abomination before him, his limbs working like a mighty engine, lost in a storm of blood-frenzy.

'Fight me, witch!' he roared. 'Raise those hands and fight me!'

For a moment, it looked like Magnus had lost the will to. He absorbed the punishment, his back arching against the cliffs. Trails of fire still clung to his ravaged outline, the residue of his tortuous ascent through the Jarlheim. His eye was open, staring with pain. He looked lost, cast adrift on the summit of the death world he had sworn to ruin.

But then, just as before, he began to remember himself. From somewhere deep within, a new flame kindled. The primarchs had been bred, above all, to survive, to endure all that an immeasurably hostile galaxy could throw at them. Their residue of power was near-inexhaustible, a well on to the deep ocean of the Emperor's matchless potency. Even now, even after enduring so much, having absorbed so much pain, his essential strength, the core of fire that fuelled him, remained inviolate.

His back straightened up. Magnus caught one of Ironhelm's incoming punches with his palm, clutching at the power fist and holding it in fingers of fire. With his free fist, he lashed out, catching the Great Wolf full in the face. Ironhelm reeled, and staggered backwards.

Magnus raised himself up higher. The wounds on his body flared crimson as they healed themselves. Aether-born lightning crackled where his feet trod. The single eye burned again, an ingot of molten iron amid the ice. He opened his fist, and a neon deluge burst from his palm, dousing Ironhelm in consuming, wracking electric fire. The Great Wolf was driven back toward the edge and beaten down to his knees, wrapped in the raw quintessence of the immaterium.

The torrent broke off. Ironhelm rocked to the ground, his armour charred and smoking. He didn't get up.

Order had been restored. The demigod looked down at the broken challenger, the last of the many Wolves who had stood up to face him.

'You should have stayed on Gangava,' Magnus rasped, his fractured voice playing across insubstantial vocal cords like the fingers of Hel's

harpist. To the extent he still resembled a human at all, he looked exhausted.

‘Gangava no longer exists,’ coughed Ironhelm, tasting blood in his mouth as he tried to rise. ‘Orbital bombardment. Atoms now.’

His bolter-arm had been twisted out of shape, and hung limp. His power fist smoked from the ruinous touch of the primarch, and the ceramite cover was blistered and cracked. All he had left was his native strength. They both knew that would not be enough. He clambered to his feet with slow, agonising effort.

Magnus drew closer. The patterns on his warp-wound flesh were gyrating faster, spinning into new and strange formations. Something was changing within him again. His brief sojourn into physical space was coming to an end.

‘Gangava served its purpose,’ he said.

Then the primarch launched himself at Ironhelm, sweeping at him like a vengeful bird of prey. His arms stretched wide, bursting with more neon blades of aether-matter.

Ironhelm had nothing left to counter the assault with, and no time to evade the embrace. He stood up to the onslaught, and when it hit him his fangs were bared under his helm, his fists clenched, raging in defiance.

The world disappeared in pain. Ironhelm felt his armour torn open, cut into ribbons by the rending power of the warp. Dimly, he was aware of his organs breaking open, bursting with hot, wet pops. He could hear the sound of cracking across his chest, and only half-knew it was his own ribcage. His vision swam out of focus, replaced by a white wall of searing, writhing witchlight. The hurricane of power, the full and final expression of the primarch’s mastery, tore through him like a tempest of the Helwinter, terrible, frigid and inexorable.

He didn’t fall. Somehow, he maintained his position on the edge of the drop, dug into the shattered stone and beaten down across it. When the

agony ended, he was on his back, broken open, prone before the wrath of the Emperor's son.

One eye still worked to see his death come for him. In that sense, if in no other, the two of them were equal.

Ironhelm coughed a gobbet of something slimy and hot from his mouth. From far below he could hear the distant thunder of his Chapter's war machines. Already he knew they must have penetrated the Aett. His Wolves would hunt down every invader in those halls, one by one, driven by the remorseless focus that had always been their badge of honour. The fact that they would come too late to save him was unimportant.

'The Aett endures,' he rasped, his voice a wet scraping whisper. 'You ran out of time. I'll take that victory.'

Magnus's body loomed over him. The patterns on his flesh were still moving, still whirling. He was less than opaque now, and the wind snatched at him. For the moment, he held back from the killing blow. He looked death-cold.

'What victory?' he said. 'You wished to kill me. Such as you could never kill such as me, Harek Ironhelm – I am beyond your vengeance now.'

Then Ironhelm laughed, despite the fact it made his punctured lungs flare with fresh agony.

'Kill you? No. I failed in that.' The choking laughs died out. 'But I hurt you, Traitor. We hurt you here. We cut the threads of your sons and broke your witches' sticks. We tore that smile off your face and ripped the skin from your back. And I have lived to see it. That's worth losing some bottles in a fleshmaker's tray for. Blood of Russ, you bastard, I lived to see you *howl*.'

Then Magnus spoke no more, but pulled his fist back. By the time he released the blow that would kill Harek Ironhelm where he lay, the Great Wolf was laughing again, hacking up blood against his vox-plate, strung

out on the spikes of pain all over his body, crushed against the side of the mountain with no hope of recovery, but laughing like old Russ himself in the morning of the galaxy.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Forty days.

From the first arrival of the Thousand Sons in orbit over Fenris to the slaying of the last Spireguard mortal within the Aett, forty days had passed. That number was given to the skjalds, who implanted it into the sagas. Those sagas were declaimed, and the Dreadnoughts took them down into the cold vaults of the Underfang with them so they were never forgotten.

Alongside that number were the names. Vaer Greyloc, the White Wolf. Odain Sturmhart and Lauf Cloudbreaker. Thar Ariak Hraldir, the one they called Wyrmblade. Tromm Rossek, Sigrd Brakk, Hamnr Skrieya and the other Wolf Guard. Garjek Arfang of the Iron Priests, and eight Dreadnoughts of the Revered Fallen.

Of the Grey Hunters, Long Fangs and Blood Claws of the Twelfth Great Company, twenty-two lived. Twenty-one of those had been in Borek's Seal, still fighting when the relief forces arrived at the portals. The only survivor in the Valgard was a Blood Claw, Ogrim Raegr Vrafsson, the one they called Redpelt. When Egial Vraksson of the Fifth broke into the Annulus Chamber with his Wolf Guard, Redpelt was standing over the central stone, surrounded by Rubric Marines, guarding the sacred image

with his own body. He had been long in the Red Dream after that, but lived.

Countless kaerls had given their lives in the defence of the Aett. Their names were not recorded.

It was not known by what means the Traitor Marines escaped vengeance. Many did not, it is true, and were killed in the tunnels. But others, including most of the sorcerers, disappeared from Fenris at the same time their fleet achieved the in-system jump-points. The Wolf Priests speculate that Magnus himself departed in the same manner, though there were no witnesses to his leaving. When Harek Eireik Eireiksson's body was discovered, there were some who believed the Great Wolf had indeed killed the primarch. Though the rumours persisted for many years, the wisest among the Rout knew that it was not in Ironhelm's wyrd to do such a thing, and prepared for the day when evidence of the Crimson King would emerge once again.

None of the mortal soldiers brought to Fenris by the Thousand Sons were saved by their fleet. When the returning Wolves made planetfall, the troops were slaughtered in their thousands. The fires of their destruction darkened the air of the planet for a month, so that the tribes out on the ice cowered in their shelters and cried out against the coming of Morkai.

But the darkness passed. In time, the Sky Warriors came among them again, taking the best and bravest to fight for the Allfather.

So it had ever been. So it would ever be.

The fires of the Hammerhold had never gone out. Now they roared more angrily than ever, working hard to replace the weaponry that had been destroyed.

Aldr stomped across the long bridge in convoy with his brothers. He had no wish to return to the dark. None of them did. But the long task of driving the enemy from the last recesses had been completed, and the

sagas had been memorised. There was nothing left for them to contribute, and so the Revered Fallen went back to the Long Sleep.

They went alone, unaccompanied by the living. In time, an Iron Priest would come to read the rites and prepare the tomb-cradles. For now, the fellowship of Dreadnoughts was left alone, given a little time to reflect on their sojourn in the world of vital flesh before leaving it again. The living respected that, knowing how important the niceties of ritual were.

All except one. Freija Morekborn walked with Aldr, seemingly unwilling to leave him even as the Underfang portal beckoned.

Aldr couldn't say he was sorry about that. It had been irresponsible of him to pick her from the floor of Borek's Seal and carry her from danger. She had failed in combat, and such weakness was habitually met with execution on the field. But he owed her for other things, and debts were important on Fenris.

What will you do now?

Freija gave a weary smile.

'I've been given penance. For the moment, I still serve in the kaerls. I prefer it in the ranks. I didn't cover myself in glory at the Seal.'

It was weak.

'I know. I recognise my weakness, and will strive to correct it. I believe I can overcome my flaws.'

Your mind wanders where it should not. You are made to serve.

In the past, Freija would have balked at such words. Now, she merely bowed her head.

'That is a lesson I will learn,' she said. 'I have the example of my father.'

She looked back up at Aldr then.

'Morek never doubted. In the face of that horror, he never doubted. His faith in the Sky Warriors was complete even at the end, and I will work to match it.'

Aldr said nothing, and they walked together for a while in silence.

The Dreadnought knew that, next time he awoke, he would recognise no faces. It was a sober thought. Perhaps the second awakening would be easier. Perhaps it was something that became less excruciating the more one did it.

He doubted it.

The portal to the Underfang drew closer. He kept walking, though each step was harder to make.

‘I know I’m too curious,’ interjected Freija, just as they reached the point where she couldn’t follow. ‘I know it’s a weakness. But tell me one thing.’

Aldr halted.

‘The beasts, the ones who fought with us at Borek’s Seal. What were they? You said they were weapons, but who made them?’

Aldr hesitated. For a horrible moment, he realised how fully he would miss their conversations. He would miss this mortal’s endless questioning, her bluntness, her lack of poise. It was beneath him, to feel that way about a thrall, but he would miss her all the same.

You said you would strive to improve yourself, he replied. Start now. Cease your questions. That knowledge is not for you.

Freija broke into another weary smile.

‘You are right,’ she said. ‘I have offended you again. I will leave.’

At that, Aldr made to move off, to follow his brothers into the tunnels. His powerful leg-motors whined as he stepped across the portal. Freija fell back, at last respecting the sanctity of the occasion.

You never offended me, he said, his voice thick, before stalking off back into the dark.

By the flickering light of the hearth fires, two voices echoed in the chamber. Both were impossibly deep, resonating from ancient armour. One belonged to Jarl Arvek Kjarlskar, who would soon be elevated to Great

Wolf in place of Ironhelm. The other belonged to Bjorn the Fell-Handed, who had been Great Wolf before and had since passed beyond such titles.

The venerable Dreadnought had been recovered from the mountainside a day after the last fighting had been completed. His life-sign had been so faint that no auspex had picked it up. Only a visual scan of the Valgard slopes had marked his final resting place. He'd torn half the pinnacle down in his fall, grinding a huge wound in the bare rock before lodging in a deep crack between two mighty spurs. Retrieving him had taken two days, and his physical recovery had taken many more. Even now, his sarcophagus bore the signs of battle, and the Iron Priests still had much work to do before he could rejoin his brothers in stasis.

There were Wolf Brothers on Gangava?

‘Yes, lord. A Great Company, or something close to it. They’d been corrupted, and were wholly given over to the enemy.’

So you destroyed them.

‘Lord Ironhelm wished to finish them himself, but we had tidings of the siege here, and I persuaded him to break from combat. The city was destroyed from orbit, and a squadron left behind to ensure the devastation was complete.’

Bjorn grunted with grim satisfaction.

It sickens me. What purpose did the Traitor have in this?

‘He meant to detain us on Gangava. He knew Ironhelm would not refuse combat with corrupted brothers. He was right. Had news not come of the battle here, we would have hunted the last of them for many days, and the Aett would have fallen in our absence.’ The Jarl’s voice was speculative. ‘But that could not have been all. We were shown the weakness of our successors in that place. With all that has transpired here, I do not believe that could have been an accident.’

You speak of the Tempering.

‘I do not know the details. Only Ironhelm and Wyrmlade did. Possibly Jarl Greyloc too, since he was close to the Wolf Priest. But we all knew the

goals of the programme. It cannot be chance that the fleshmaker chambers were destroyed before the Chamber of the Annulus was assaulted.'

It should never have been done. It was a betrayal of the primarch.

Kjarlskar shrugged, his massive shoulder-guards moving only fractionally.

'Perhaps. In any case, it cannot be restarted. None now live who understand Wyrmlblade's work, and the equipment is destroyed. We will remain alone, the sole inheritors of Russ's mantle.'

As it should be. If I'd known of the work, I'd have destroyed it myself.

Kjarlskar had to suppress a smile. He could well imagine the Dreadnought doing just that.

'Then you should be content, lord. You have fought a primarch and lived, and the Aett was defended. Soon the sagas will be full of your deeds and no one else's.'

Bjorn gave no indication of a smile.

Not my deeds. Greyloc held out the longest, and this is his victory.

'So it will be recorded,' said Kjarlskar. 'But I do not think it will be remembered that way.'

A fire burned on the pinnacle of Krakgard, the dark peak overlooking the Fang where the dead had been honoured since the age of the primarchs. The summit of the mountain was flat and smooth, having been carved out in the days of the Allfather and hallowed in the long years since. The entire Chapter was assembled across its expanse, standing in rows of grey, their heads bare and exposed to the biting elements.

The sun was low in the sky, and the shadows were long. The flames leapt, red and angry, sending sparks floating high into the dusk.

Kjarlskar stood before the blaze, the heat of it pressing against his back. The Rune Priest Frei was with him, as were others of the Lords of the Wolves.

‘Sons of Russ!’ he cried, and his voice carried far across the wind-whipped heights. ‘As is the way of our kind, the bodies of those who died in the defence of Fenris are now committed to fire. Here lies Jarl Vaer Greyloc, and the Rune Priest Odain Sturmhjart, and the Wolf Priest Thar Ariak Hraldir. So do we reverence them for their sacrifice. As their mortal bodies burn, it kindles our everlasting hate for the ones who did this. Remember your hatred. Keep it vital, and forge it with malice into one more weapon in the Long War.’

The rows of Space Wolves listened intently, each one of them as silent as stones. In the front rank stood twenty-three warriors, removed slightly from their brothers. They were the survivors of the Battle of the Fang, the last of Greyloc’s company. Redpelt was there, his face still badly scarred. There were few Blood Claws left to stand alongside him. It hadn’t been decided how best to reconstitute the packs yet, but many believed Redpelt would not serve in one again, instead choosing the path of the Lone Wolf. The death of his comrades had hit him hard, and such a path was an honourable response.

As Kjarlskar spoke, he stared into the flames, watching as the bodies of the fallen turned to ash. He carried Brakk’s force-blade Dausvjer at his belt, the last weapon his battle-brother Helfist had taken into combat. Though none assembled there knew it yet, the sword had a powerful wyrd set upon it, and would find a place in the sagas millennia hence. For then, though, it was merely a weregild, and a reminder, and a warning.

‘The Great Wolf, Harek Eireik Eireiksson, does not lie here,’ said Kjarlskar. ‘His body has been taken to the place where he fell fighting the great enemy. I have ordered that a shrine be built there, a place of pilgrimage to test the endurance of the faithful. Let it serve as a memorial to his unwavering devotion. Let it also serve as a memorial to his blindness. Never again will we allow ourselves to be drawn into a war not

of our own making. This is the lesson we will draw, and we will use it to improve ourselves further.'

Set aside from the twenty-two veterans of the siege, shunning as ever the company of his brothers, was Blackwing. The Scout had recovered much of his poise on the journey back from Gangava. He'd since been assigned the task of rebuilding the Twelfth's void-war capability, though few expected him to last long in the position. He'd already fallen out with the Chapter's armoury over requisition plans for new fast-attack frigates, insisting on an engine-heavy design that most thought of as wildly impractical.

As Kjarlskar spoke, he looked up at the stars, mild tedium playing across his dark features. Ceremonies bored him, though he'd been satisfied by his manoeuvre over Fenris being placed in the sagas. It was some compensation for losing the *Nauro*, the only element of his life on Fenris he'd ever felt much affection for, and the only element he ever would.

'We will rebuild,' said Kjarlskar. 'The Aett will be restored and made even greater. The last taint of the enemy will be scrubbed from the ice, and the remnants of his forces on other worlds hunted down and destroyed. The Twelfth Great Company will be rebuilt, its honour intact and its packs restored.'

The Great Wolf swept his golden eyes across the assembled companies.

'No recovery will take place for our enemy. We have broken them. Never again will they mount such an operation, for they have been reduced to petty warbands of knowledge-thieves, roaming the galaxy for scraps of hidden trinkets. Their shame knows no limit, and their poverty knows no equal. They have come here, led by their primarch, and failed.'

Kjarlskar's eyes blazed then.

'Remember that, brothers!' he cried. 'They failed. This will be the greatest lesson of all, the truth we will carry with us as we march once

more to war in the sea of stars. Our faith defines us. Our loyalty defines us. Our hatred defines us. So it is that we endure while the Traitor falters.'

His voice shook with fervour.

'In a thousand years men will still speak of this battle. For as long as the Imperium of Man stands, skjalds will tell of the Battle of the Fang, and hope will flare in the hearts of the loyal. Whenever the flames of war return, they will remember what we have done here, and find the strength to rise up and accept the test.'

Kjarlskar thudded a fist against his breastplate.

'This is our legacy. This is our purpose. This is why we fight.'

Then he lifted the clenched gauntlet in a gesture of defiance, pride and acclamation.

'For the Allfather!'

And across the summit of the Krakgard, two thousand warriors of the *Vlka Fenryka*, the Space Wolves of fearsome repute, slammed their fists on their battle-plate and raised them up to the heavens. The roar of their massed response rose high into the darkening sky, a war cry that was already ancient, already feared, and as bold and exuberant as the dawn across unbroken snow.

For the Allfather. For Russ. For Fenris.



LEGION OF THE DAMNED

ROB SANDERS



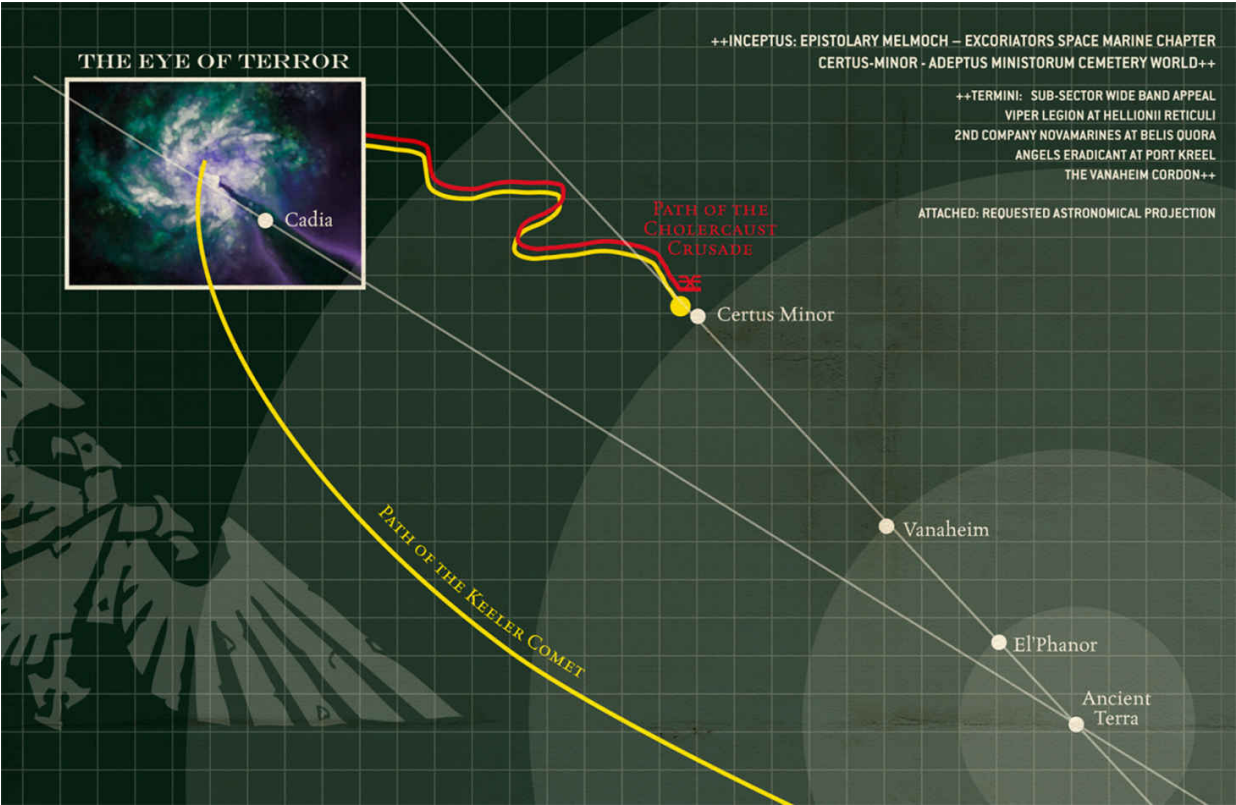
CERTUS MINOR

ADEPTUS MINISTORUM CEMETERY WORLD

File: 44L-21-Digamma/Theta-B Encrypted
Ordo Obsuletus

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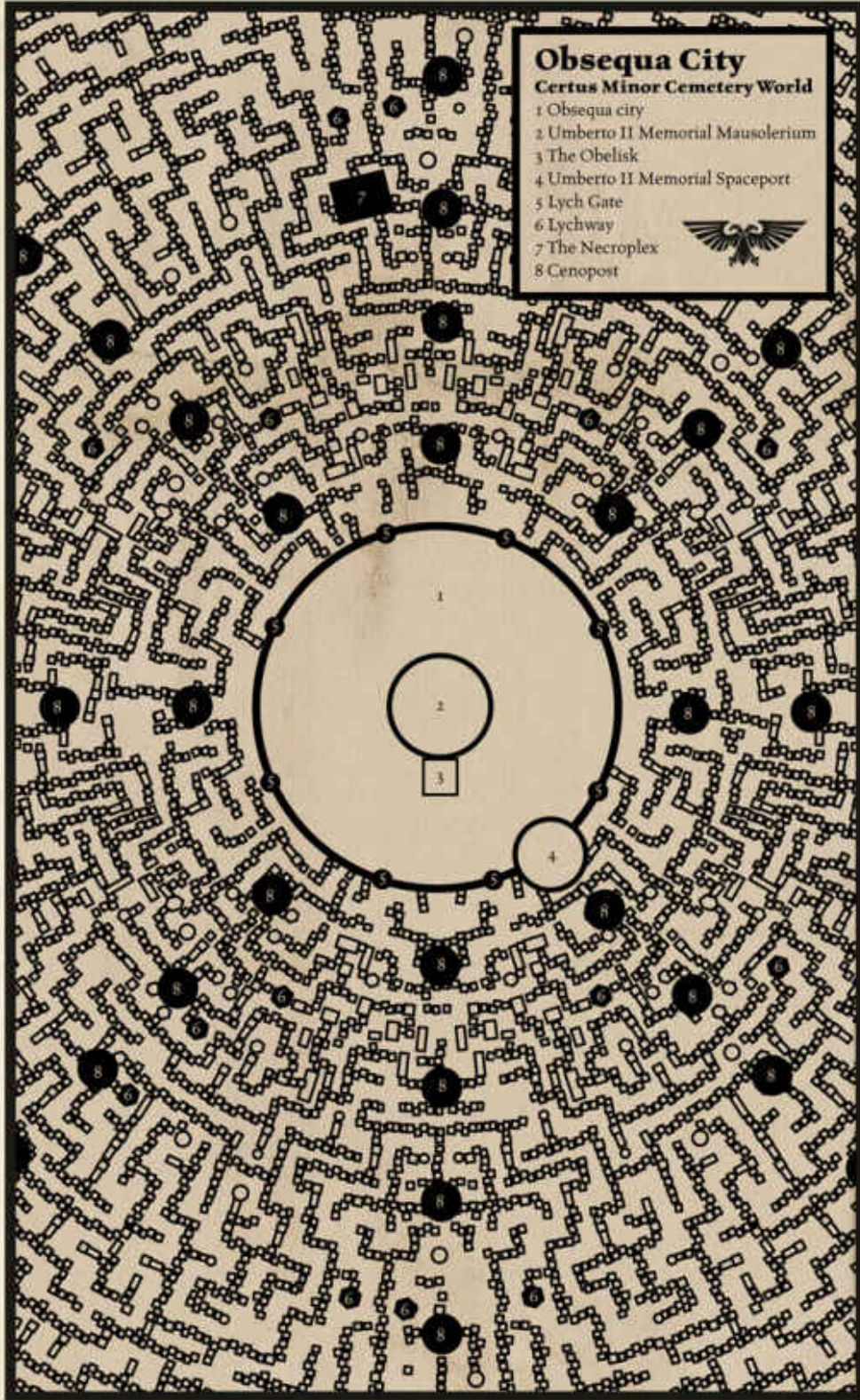
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Obsequia City

Certus Minor Cemetery World

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LEGION OF THE DAMNED



Rob Sanders

ANNO INCOGNITA



PROLOGUE

Signs and Wonders

The deafening silence of carnage after the fact.

An ocean of bolt-riddled bodies, as far as the eye could see. Corpse crests and blasted troughs, black with blood and swarming with flesh lice. Plunging breakers of ragged remains and shattered armour, marking the abrupt end of some maniacal charge. The trampled mulch of the fallen: deviants, the daemon-possessed and warriors in desecrated plate. Hideous faces of indescribable rage. A battle-smear of wretched flesh, hammered out of its misery by some merciful trajectory. The Emperor himself, it seemed, guiding the path of each blessed bolt and blast.

Approbator Vaskellen Quast of the Ordo Obsoletus pulled his scented neckerchief down and brought the grille of the meme-vox to his lips. ‘Twenty-seven fifty-eight hours, Central Planetary Time. Certus-Minor – Adeptus Ministorum cemetery world.’ The stench of gore steaming in the morning heat seared his nostrils, prompting the young acolyte to snort, hock and spit. ‘Praga subsector, Segmentum Obscurus.’

Quast clambered carefully across a ridge of corrupt forms. His advance was frustrated by more than just bodies. Beneath the carpet of bone-jutting butchery lay the cemetery world surface: a crowded expanse of ornate tombstones, mausolea and funerary sculpture. Every square metre of dirt was devoted to the art of burial and the infrastructure that served that hallowed purpose. Space on Certus-Minor existed at a premium, with grave plots and baroque memorial markers almost built one on top of another. This created a landscape of cold, crafted stone. A graveyard on a planetary scale.

The approbator could see little of the surface from where he was standing, covered as it was with the splattered remains of those who had never reached the solace of an Imperial grave, and those who didn't deserve one. Knee-deep in the Chaotics and carnage, Quast felt tense with overwhelming disgust. It was more than just the stench and warming rot. He felt that his very soul was in danger just standing in the presence of the unhallowed dead – that the corrupting influence of the Ruinous Powers was still in evidence in the mutilated remains and that it was aware of his God-Emperor-fearing footsteps.

Behind the acolyte hovered a Valkyrie carrier, as black as a silhouette against the pearly cloud cover of the cemetery world sky and marked only with the sinister insignia of the Ordo Obsoletus. About him stalked Inquisitorial storm troopers from the 52nd Ranger Pelluciad, all field masks, humming weaponry and camo-carapace.

‘Ruling pontifex and planetary governor,’ Quast continued, ‘one Erasmus Oliphant. Tithe grade: Solutio Tertius. Population at last Administratum census estimated at one million Imperial souls. Certus-Minor, revised estimates, post-atrocities: zero.’

The Cholercaust had built its fearful reputation on such barbaric efficiency. The Blood God's servants couldn't help themselves. Survivors weren't a strategic consideration. The Slayer cared little for the tales of

victims-in-waiting and what others might do with such information. Its tactics were always the same: uncompromising, overwhelming and savage. Where hearts beat with the defiance of life, the goremongers raged, honouring only the razored edge and baptising worlds in torrents of blood.

‘Hadria, Dregeddon IV, L’Orient, Callistus Mundi, Port Koronach, among a hundred other worlds, all similarly butchered. All victims of the Cholercaust Blood Crusade. All planets on the path of the Keeler Comet.’

Quast’s vox-bead chirped. ‘Proceed.’

‘Sir, the *Providence* reports that a large vessel has just translated in-system.’

‘Markings and registration?’

‘Still collating that information, sir. I can tell you that it has achieved high orbit.’

‘Probably a Ministorum heavy transport, bringing in penitents and frater labour from Bona Phidia. Get a visual. Keep me informed. Quast out.’

The approbator let his eyes linger on the charred mountain of rubble that was Obsequa City. The smouldering ruins before Quast had been a beautiful, baroque metropol. A vision of towers, steeples and spires. Stained-glass and rockrete, dark with age, thrusting for the heavens with reverent majesty. With nearly every square metre of dirt on Certus-Minor devoted to the dead, even the city was considered an extravagance. Like a tiny, ecclesiastical hive, Obsequa City comprised bethels, basilicas and cathedrals that were built tall and tight. The narrow alleys and passages were steep and cobbled, leading up to the crowning monument – the heart of the city in both a physical and spiritual sense – the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum.

The huge dome of the vault had once dominated the city skyline. Now it was a blasted remnant. A demolished edifice, collapsed in on itself – open and exposed to the elements. It had originally been built to honour and house the bones of Umberto II – Ecclesiarch, High Lord of Terra and

prosecuter of innumerable wars of faith. Under Umberto, the Ecclesiarchy's influence across the galaxy grew and the forces of darkness in and around the Eye of Terror made precious little progress. With Umberto's leadership, the common faithful of the Imperium rose up and took the fight back to the Ruinous Powers, standing shoulder to shoulder with their brothers and sisters in the Imperial Guard and the Emperor's Angels of Death. Ancient Terran scholars ascribed the near two thousand years of uneasy peace between the Eleventh Black Crusade and the Gothic War largely to the legacy of Umberto's efforts in the segmentum.

Quast watched the frater burn teams clear bodies about the wrecked city. They were uncovering the arterial routes of the necroplex – the labyrinth of lychways and paths that ran through the crowded memorial burial plots, mausolea and cenoposts. With the main roads leading into Obsequa City clear of death and destruction, the Adeptus Ministorum forces had started to move in heavy equipment and excavators.

Dig-teams swarmed across the city rubble and the ruins of the great Mausoleum. The cemetery world already had a new planetary governor, Pontifex Clemenz-Krycek, newly arrived from St Ethalberg with manpower and instructions to purge the hallowed ground of Certus-Minor of the taint of corruption. The irresistible bureaucracy of the Imperium implemented even in the face of carnage and catastrophe. Quast had felt it prudent to meet Clemenz-Krycek before initiating his investigations. He told the pontifex little of his true purpose there. The driven ecclesiarch seemed not to care, engaged as he was with the small army of frater militia faithful that were piling and incinerating the corrupt forms of the battle-dead and excavating the ruins of the mausoleum. Quast found that the pontifex's vows of devotion to the God-Emperor had done nothing to quell the fire of ambition burning in his veins. Clemenz-Krycek clearly hoped to find Umberto II's bones intact in the spiritual stronghold of the underground vault. Safe from the corruption of Chaos. Even without the

ecclesiarch's bones, the pontifex was boldly heralding Umberto II's sacred remains as responsible for the halting of the Cholercaust Blood Crusade.

The investigation of such assertions was well within the remit of the Ordo Obsoletus, but information already in Quast's possession made him question such a possibility – that and the fire behind the pontifex's eyes. Clemenz-Krycek was already mooted recommendations for Umberto II's veneration to the rank of Imperial Saint – a call that, if approved by the High Ecclesiarch, would undoubtedly improve the pontifex's own prospects in the ranks of the Adeptus Ministorum.

A rusted breastplate creaked underfoot and, with a crack, the approbator's boot slipped down into the stinking chest cavity of a fallen giant. Its armour was a god-pleasing red and one shoulder plate was spiked like an ocean urchin. A studded gauntlet still hate-clenched the shaft of a brute axe, unable – even in death – to surrender the weapon. The monster's helmet was missing and the monstrous head with it. As Quast's boot sank into corruption, liquefied tissue spilled from the neck brace, thick with squirming flesh lice.

'Merda!' Quast spat in gutter Gothic, flicking gobbets of rot from the toe of his boot. The approbator shook his head. He was a savant, a researcher – not a field operative. What he had learned aboard the Ordo Obsoletus Black Ship *Providence*, however, was too important to leave to another. If he had found evidence of an authentic miracle – an event beyond human phenomena, alien curiosity or the pollution of Chaos – then it was his solemn duty to ask challenging questions and hunt for elusive answers. Answers his venerable master, Inquisitor Ehrensperger, had charged him to find.

Quast went to scrape the sole of his boot on the sculpted finish of the Chaos Space Marine's other shoulder plate, only to find himself staring down the brass throat of a fang-filled maw. The symbol of the fell xiith Legion, wrought in pure hate. The World Eaters.

Quast swiftly retracted his foot, fearful that the effigy itself might assume a bloodthirsty life and snap shut. There had been other Blood Crusades. The Odium Wars. The Coming of the Brazen Host. The Dominion of Fire. The Black Crusade of the Daemon Prince Doombreed. But not since Armageddon's First War had so many berserker brethren of the World Eaters Traitor Legion gathered under one banner.

‘Approbator?’

‘Carry on, sergeant.’

The Inquisitorial storm troopers brought forth a prisoner. She was naked but for the scraps of filthy, feral world hide that preserved her modesty. Her matted hair trailed down her back and her flesh was the canvas upon which primitive tattoos were carved and inked. Her emaciated form crawled across the butchery like a hound on a scent, while the two troopers flanked and followed, holding her between them on metal poles and lanyards. The savage began clawing at a mauled body draped across a gravestone that was carved in the fashion of the Imperial aquila.

‘Sir, looks like the witch has something.’

Quast wiped his boot on the scalp of a dead cultist and turned back to approach the feverish psyker. She froze with her bare back to them, and then without warning started thrashing this way and that. The lanyards around her neck bit into her thin flesh and the storm troopers on the ends of the poles were yanked back and forth. The Ranger Pelluciad sergeant called to Quast to hold his position.

The witch returned to stillness before turning her head and snarling at the approbator. Her bright eyes rolled over blood-red like a wine glass filling with claret and her entire face suddenly contorted with an agonising rage. She looked along the pole at one of her storm trooper sentinels like a thing possessed. The witch suddenly convulsed and spewed forth a stream of bloody vomit. The blistering gruel splattered the Ranger's helmet and

body armour. He tore at his chin strap and started screaming something about burning.

‘Hold her down!’ the sergeant bawled, and to this end the remaining storm trooper brutally thrust the pole at the witch and the witch to the ground. ‘Reinforcements. Now!’ the sergeant called into his vox-bead, before drawing his hellpistol and charging across the slaughterscape at the struggling storm trooper and his charge. The trooper had forced the thrashing psyker right down into the stinking carpet of rent armour, jutting bones and festering bodies.

‘Sir!’

‘Hold her, damn it!’

But the witch was gone. The wasted creature had somehow slipped down into the layers of rotting flesh and ceramite, crawling – swimming almost – through the disintegrating carcasses. The pole suddenly followed, whipped into the cadaver-mound and taking the second storm trooper with it. ‘G’Vera!’ the sergeant called into his vox-link. ‘Corporal, talk to me!’

The mound exploded. A fount of blood blasted up out of the bodies and at the Certusian dawn-sky. How much of it belonged to G’Vera and how much to the surrounding dead was impossible to tell. What was certain was that the corporal was now one of them.

The sergeant began scanning the ground about them with his hellpistol. A limb twitched here. A body moved there. The witch was certainly on the move. ‘Sir, arm yourself,’ the storm trooper instructed. The approbator had been so sickened at the spectacle that it was the meme-vox that he still clenched in one white-knuckled hand, rather than his laspistol. Fumbling for the weapon, Quast drew his sidearm.

The witch was suddenly before him, slithering out from the slaughter like a serpent. Her body was completely naked now and slick with black blood and spoilage. Her eyes burned hate and her lips had retracted horribly like a predatory cat.

‘Approbator!’ the sergeant screamed, but Quast found that he couldn’t move. Fear clouded his mind and all he could do was gawp as the possessed witch hissed and came in so close as to touch her bloody forehead to his own.

There was a flash. The furious face suddenly disappeared. Snapped out of view. Blasted away. Quast stood, blinking. His face was speckled with the witch’s blood and his laspistol still felt a world away. Turning, the approbator saw the reinforcements that the sergeant had called for. Storm trooper sharpshooters, swiftly descended from the Valkyrie transport, with hellguns to chins and scopes to visors. They had executed the psyker from some distance away with a cool nerve, precision marksmanship and supercharged las-fire. As they brought their weapons down, Quast nodded in silent respect.

The sergeant was suddenly beside him, his boot on the witch’s ribcage and his hellpistol pointed at what was left of her head. The storm trooper put three more blasts into the creature before he was satisfied.

‘Freaks,’ the sergeant spat. ‘Can’t stand them, sir.’

‘She was no doubt possessed by some residual evil she found amongst the bodies,’ Quast announced, trying to re-establish some kind of authority over the situation, even if it was only intellectual. He found himself looking down on the jumbled cadavers: the hellspawn, Traitor Guardsmen and degenerate World Eaters.

‘How are you, sir?’

‘Better now, sergeant,’ Quast managed.

‘Approbator, perhaps we should—’

‘Continue,’ Quast interjected. ‘Perhaps, sergeant, we should continue.’ He holstered his laspistol and nodded at the ordo Valkyrie. ‘Bring me another.’

The sergeant hesitated, before nodding. ‘As you wish, approbator,’ he said, before marching off towards the Valkyrie transport. He left Quast

alone with the dead and his thoughts.

‘The question...’ Quast began again, activating the meme-vox and wiping blood from his cheeks with a silk scarf, ‘...is not what ended this world. The Cholercaust clearly did that. The question is, what ended the Cholercaust?’

Inquisitorial records often identified the Blood God’s favoured operating in wretched warbands roaming the galaxy. Greater concentrations were rare, since the xiith Legion’s primordial hate seemed to extend to brother-slayers as well as the innocents of the Imperium. The Cholercaust had been different, however. The planetary populations upon whom it descended were always slaughtered to the last man, woman and child. Failed Adeptus Astartes interventions and Imperial Navy gauntlets had confirmed large numbers of ancient World Eaters vessels in the screaming cultist armada, which seemed to grow with every conquest. Some of those frigates and cruisers identified hadn’t been seen since the Horus Heresy, thousands of years before.

Little was known about the champion that led the Blood Crusade, the maniac who had managed the impossible and gathered so many of his murderous brothers to one cause and objective. He was known only as ‘the Pilgrim’ and led his vast host with religious conviction, following the strange path of a blood-red comet. Celestial cartographers believed it to be the Keeler Comet, a long-period body with a highly eccentric orbit, recorded to have passed through both Segmentum Obscurus and Segmentum Solar nearly ten thousand years before. Euphrati Keeler, the remembrancer of great antiquity, immortalised the comet over El’Phanor in *The Ancient Traveller*, a pict rumoured to hang in the Imperial Palace and reproduced across the Imperium. The comet had found the galaxy much-changed upon its most recent return. The xenos empire of the eldar had fallen, the Imperium had been shattered by civil war and the colossal warp storm known as the Eye of Terror had erupted in its path.

As the Keeler Comet blasted out of the immateriality of the Eye, it became apparent that it too had changed. A blood-red beacon, it appeared to wander with a mind of its own and trailed in its wake the Pilgrim and his Cholercaust Blood Crusade. The daemons, cultists and World Eaters seemed to believe that the cursed comet embodied the will of their Chaos god and would lead them across the stars in a celebration of slaughter, right to the Imperium's finest and Holy Terra itself.

That was until the comet appeared in the skies of a tiny cemetery world in the Praga subsector. Until the Cholercaust came to Certus-Minor and the Blood God's butchers became the butchered.

A shadow screamed above. The thunder of engines passed straight through Quast and an involuntary instinct shocked the approbator into ducking his head and dropping into a crouch amongst the rot. The wash of the thruster trail bathed the area about Quast in a dry heat. Squinting through the blaze of afterburning engines, the acolyte stood and watched the craft rocket across the corpse-strewn necroplex before banking and taking in the ruins of Obsequa City in a double pass.

Even serving in the ranks of the Holy Emperor's Inquisition, Quast had only seen such a craft once before. It was a Thunderhawk gunship, the Adeptus Astartes' fearsome steed amongst the stars. Spinning around, the approbator saw that another had punched through the sheen of pearly cloud, dropping silently like the first in a controlled free-fall, thrusters ready to snatch it from gravity's embrace and slingshot the gunship across the cemetery world surface. A swarm of gunships followed, spearing down through the heavens in formation, before peeling off to take position above the killing fields, around the demolished city.

'Sir, the vessel has made itself known to us,' the vox-bead in Quast's ear announced.

'Proceed.'

'Adeptus Astartes battle-barge *Cerberus*. Golden Throne, she's huge.'

‘To which Chapter does this blessed vessel belong?’ Quast pushed.

‘The Excoriators, approbator.’

Quast nodded. It made sense. Among the warped and wretched servants of Chaos, the acolyte had come across numerous Adeptus Astartes dead, all armoured in the holy plate of the Excoriators Chapter. The defenders of a doomed world.

‘Have the captain greet the *Cerberus* and inform the battle-barge commander of our presence in orbit and on the planet surface. Extend my compliments and that of the ordo, then beg an audience for myself with the ranking Adeptus Astartes among their number.’

‘What are the Emperor’s Angels doing here, sir?’

‘I do not know,’ the approbator admitted, ‘but I intend to find out. Quast out.’

The acolyte left the Valkyrie and its storm trooper contingent and struck out across the slaughter. He walked for the ruined city and the gathering of gunships that hovered with ominous intent above the carnage. Clambering across the twisted dead and the expanse of tombstones beneath, Quast spoke into his meme-vox.

‘The Excoriators,’ he said, out of breath. ‘Battle-brothers of the Great Dorn’s seed. Their reputation is for fearsome feats of stamina and attrition. The Codex Astartes records the Excoriators as created from the ranks of the Imperial Fists post-Heresy, during the dark days of the Second Founding. This in recognition of their stalwart defence of the Imperial Palace during the Siege of Terra.’

The approbator’s eyes settled upon a particularly horrific visage, daemonflesh that leered murderous lust at Quast, even after its destruction and banishment. For a moment the corpse-thing held his horrid attention before the acolyte forced his eyes closed and stumbled on across the battlefield. ‘The Excoriators are listed in the *Mythos Angelica Mortis* as one of the Astartes Praeses,’ Quast continued, ‘those Space Marine

Chapters charged with the solemn duty of guarding the Eye of Terror and the vulnerable regions of Imperial space bordering.'

He slipped a small pair of magnoculars from the folds of his robes and scanned the dun-white lengths of the Excoriators Thunderhawks.

'Markings indicate the presence of the Third, Sixth and Eighth Companies. Three companies and a Chapter battle-barge suggests an undertaking of extreme importance. Cross reference with Telepathica transmittal 44L-21-Digamma/Theta, intercepted from the Stroika-Six Observium Array.'

The approbator attempted to make his presence known to the nearest Thunderhawk. He held up his ordo identification and waved his arm at the craft. The pilot took little notice of the tiny Quast, amongst the bodies and funeral sculpture, and the craft held its station above a corpse-strewn blast crater. The lead Thunderhawk, the scout ship that had preceded the formation of gunships, took another pass, however, once more prompting Quast to crouch down in the blood and the mire.

Grit and grave dust whipped up about the approbator, and turning, Quast came to regard the Thunderhawk that had led the formation down through the thick cloud cover. Its prow section drifted up behind him, hovering like some great predator. Quast stood up in the beast-craft's sights, his robes thrashing about him in the squall of its engines. The tempest invested cadavers with momentary life as bodies trembled and mortis-stiff limbs rocked in the backwash of the Thunderhawk's thrusters.

Once again Quast held out his identification, finding himself turning and stumbling as the Thunderhawk circled, the craft's tail gliding around while the armoured cockpit, heavy bolters and troop section remained fixed on the approbator. The gunship's engines, landing gear and weaponry gleamed with sacred oils and clear maintenance; however, its armour was sallow and abused. The flash-scarring of las-blasts accompanied soot-smeared missile strikes and a nosetip-to-tail mauling of bolt plucks and heavy-gauge auto-fire.

As the bay ramp opened, Excoriators Space Marines filed down the incline and dropped to the ground below in two flanking lines. The Excoriators moved with solemn purpose, the compact brutality of their boltguns breaking up the curvilinear lines of their ceramite. The plate itself was a dirty ivory – shabby in appearance against the polished gleam of the torso cabling – and above the scorn of their half-moon helmet grilles, a pair of dark optics burned with resolution.

The battered cream of their armour became immediately splattered with the ichor of the dead. With the crouch landing of each armoured Angel, Quast fancied he could feel the flesh below him quake. As the gunship circled, the deploying Excoriators began fanning out, boltguns aimed at the carpet of carnage and helmets methodically scanning from left to right. Turning his magnoculars on the other Thunderhawks, Quast found that they too had delivered their Adeptus Astartes payloads to the battlefield about the smoking remains of Obsequa City. And they too seemed to be doing more than a reconnaissance sweep. The Excoriators were looking for something. Or someone.

As the howling wind grew about him, Quast lowered the glasses. The Thunderhawk had completed its deployment and now closed on the approbator. The last thing that the acolyte wanted was confusion, or to cause offence, and so he kept his ordo identification stretched out in front of him, that the living arsenal of the Emperor knew that he was no enemy of the Imperium.

A final figure stepped out of the shadows of the troop bay. His steps were those of a warrior bearing the burden of great age and rank, and as he waited on the edge of the ramp, the Thunderhawk effortlessly drifted forwards. Quast felt like they were both in the eye of a storm. The acolyte staggered back as the gunship rolled right up to him. The Excoriator stepped off the ramp and onto the battlefield. The ramp behind him closed

and the craft gently banked and peeled off, leaving the two of them amongst the calm and quiet of the massacre.

Quast was drowned in the shadow of the ceramite hulk. Like the Thunderhawk from which he'd stepped, the Excoriator's armour was blasted and scarred. Unlike his superhuman brethren, however, this figure was decked in battle-plate of deepest black. A blizzard of bolt craters blemished its dark surface, while the criss-cross of blade slashes and claw scratches scored the plate into a mosaic blaze. This once again contrasted with the adamantium gleam of its cables, casings and Imperial aquila, unfolding its glorious wings across the warrior's broad chest. His scuffed gauntlet clenched a great crozius, beneath the mirrored blades of its sculpted eagle head. The shaft of the power weapon extended all the way to the ground and the giant used it like a staff as he took his first steps across the felled bodies towards the approbator.

'Approbator Quast?' the Adeptus Astartes rumbled. When Quast didn't answer, the Excoriator removed his helmet. He peered down at the acolyte over his chestplate, revealing his mangled features, a patchwork of ugly stitching cutting his ancient face into quarters.

Quast couldn't quite find his words in the presence of the Angel. Neither could he hold the intensity of the Excoriator's dark eyes, and found his own drifting down and across the detail of the warrior's scarred battle-plate. Unconsciously leaning in, Quast saw that adorning each nick, each sword slash and bullet hole was an inscription, scratched in High Gothic lettering. The battle-plate was covered in such markings, each gouge and las-burn bearing its own notation, dates and locations: *221751.M41 Gethsemane; 435405.M41 Delleria Secundus; 997640.M41 Mallastabergiii* . From the dun sheen of the ivory armour worn by the Excoriators beyond, Quast assumed their plate bore the same mixture of script and scarring.

'Approbator?'

‘Yes,’ Quast managed, lowering his ordo identification and looking up. ‘It was my vessel that hailed your mighty battle-barge.’

‘And I thank you for your concision,’ the Excoriator said. ‘I know you broke with the protocol of your Holy Ordo. In turn forgive me the forthright nature of our approach. For the Adeptus Astartes, like the Emperor’s Inquisition, there is often much to accomplish and little time. I am Santiarch Balshazar, Chapter Chaplain of the Excoriators, and I represent the interests of Chapter Master Ichabod, here on this cemetery world.’

‘Vaskellen Quast,’ the acolyte replied. ‘And I represent Lord Ehrensperger and the interests of the Ordo Obsoletus on this planet.’ Quast tried to hold the stony gaze of the Excoriators Chaplain but failed a second time.

‘The Ordo Obsoletus?’

‘We are an ordo minoris, my lord. Santiarch, may I offer my condolences to your Chapter during the test of these times. I understand that the entire Fifth Company was lost in garrisoning this world against the predations of Chaos.’

‘Duly noted, approbator. Might you tell me what the Inquisition’s interest in our misfortunes might be?’

Quast felt the crushing weight of the Angel’s expectation. The authority of seeming immortality in his grave words. The fearful insistence of the Space Marine’s physical presence.

‘The interest of the Ordo Obsoletus extends to your own interest, Santiarch,’ Quast responded with growing confidence.

‘Just like the Inquisition,’ the Santiarch replied. ‘To reply in riddles. Are the Excoriators to suffer the indignity of investigation, approbator?’ Balshazar asked. When Quast didn’t respond, the Chaplain continued. ‘The Emperor’s Angels come to Certus-Minor to bury brothers, search for survivors and recover our sacred seed. I suffer your aspersions only to

achieve that end all the faster. Now, approbator, tell me, have you encountered any of my battle-brethren?’

‘Yes, Santiarch,’ Quast confirmed. ‘Many of them. All dead, I regret. Some of their bodies are spread out across the battlefield beyond, but the greatest concentration lie about the ruins of Obsequa City. I wish I could assist you further but the Cholercaust is absolute in its insistence to leave us nought but corpse witnesses.’

‘Thank you,’ the Santiarch replied soberly and strode across the slaughter towards the demolished city.

‘Three companies and a Chapter battle-barge,’ Quast said as the giant passed, causing the Chaplain to grind to a furious pause. ‘Withdrawn from active duty garrisoning the Eye of Terror? That seems a great outlay for such a solemn mission.’

Balshazar turned dangerously, and Quast became very aware of the gleaming blades that adorned the Chaplain’s death-dealing staff of office. ‘And what would you know of deployments and the Emperor’s Angels, mortal, having existed for all but a galactic blink in the greater scheme of the Imperium?’

‘Nothing, Santiarch. I beg of you. Explain them to me, for I fear you are not here on this dead world just for the bodies of your fallen brothers.’ Quast gestured about the battlefield at the hovering Thunderhawks and swarms of Excoriators methodically picking through the annihilation. ‘What are you looking for, Santiarch? The Adeptus Astartes and the Holy Inquisition have a history of cautious cooperation. Let us build on that heritage. Perhaps I can help you. Perhaps we can help each other. Perhaps together we might truly come to understand what happened here.’

‘You are bold for one so young, approbator. I hope your master understands how incorrigible and stupid you really are.’

‘He does, Lord Santiarch,’ Quast returned. ‘It is undoubtedly the reason he sent me.’

Balshazar stared at the acolyte. This time, Quast held his nerve and stared right back. ‘Santiarch, please.’

‘The Adeptus Astartes do not often share their shame so publically,’ the Excoriator said finally. ‘The Fifth Company requested reinforcement. The *Cerberus* was en route to Certus-Minor to answer our brothers’ call and halt the progress of the Cholercaust. We failed. We failed to reach our battle-brethren in time and they faced an unstoppable enemy alone and in our absence. Our battle-barge was delayed by strange warp currents in the wake of the crimson comet. Our approach vector was direct but flawed, as was my intention in ordering it. If we had not encountered such problems then we might have been here to fight side by side with our brothers and perhaps prevent their destruction.’

Quast nodded. He chose his words carefully.

‘Santiarch, I do not doubt the truth of your tribulations and the misfortunes that resulted, but we both know that the *Cerberus* is not here to reinforce the Fifth Company.’

The Excoriators Chaplain began a livid and inevitable advance.

‘You would tempt me, mortal, in a place already sodden with bloodshed?’

Quast stumbled back, his heart battering the inside of his ribcage. He tripped back over a severed limb and landed on his backside in the remains of a ruined cadaver. With the Space Marine towering above him, Quast reached inside his robe pockets and produced a vellum scroll which he offered up to the furious Excoriator.

‘The Fifth Company did request reinforcement but had little expectation of its arrival,’ Quast blurted. The Chaplain snarled and leaning down tore the scroll from the approbator’s fingers. As the Excoriator read, Quast climbed awkwardly to his feet and brushed gore from his robes. ‘They sent long-range astrotelepathic requests to the Viper Legion at Hellionii Reticuli, Second Company Novamarines stationed at Belis Quora and the

Angels Eradicant at Port Kreel. They even sent to the Vanaheim Cordon, in full knowledge of its futility. That the Imperial Fists, the Exorcists and the Grey Knights stationed there would not leave the line of defence for fear that the Keeler Comet and trailing Cholercaust might resume its progress on towards Ancient Terra. The Adeptus Astartes wouldn't leave Terra open to attack to help defend a tiny Ecclesiarchy cemetery world. Their allegiance is to the living, not the dead. The *Cerberus* set out from your home world of Eschara and no astrotelepathic transmission was sent there. You are too distant a prospect, given the time constraints of the Cholercaust's arrival.'

'How did you come by this information?' Balshazar demanded, scanning the vellum transcript in his ceramite fingertips.

Quast hesitated. 'My Lord Ehrensperger maintains a choir of powerful astropaths aboard his personal Black Ship. They have instructions to listen for telepathic messages and to scan those communiqués for motifs relating to the Ordo Obsoletus's work.'

'Your inquisitor lord roams the galaxy, eavesdropping on the communications of others?' Balshazar marvelled. 'Again, how like the Holy Ordos. How pathetic. Then specimens like your good self are dispatched to investigate the promise of information and authenticate its relevance.'

Quast nodded, allowing the slurs to wash over him.

'Our choir intercepted a psychic distress signal in an Adeptus Astartes code, relayed through the Stroika-Six Observium Array but originating from this very world.'

'I should have you flayed for even that,' the Santiarch growled. 'Those were Adeptus Astartes words for Adeptus Astartes ears, information not meant for mere mortals such as yourself.'

'I'm not sure it was meant for the Emperor's Angels, either,' Quast told the Excoriator. 'The message transcript in your hand contains a report of

planetary invasion and a request for reinforcement, followed by a direct appeal to the God-Emperor of Mankind for assistance. For intervention. For a miracle.'

Balshazar scanned the words to which the approbator was referring.

'A simple prayer,' the Santiarch said. 'Open reverence to the father of our very own. I hope that such benediction is not absent from the prosecution of your own work, approbator.'

'A prayer,' Quast echoed. 'My master reached the same conclusion. Until I showed him the intended destination of the message.'

Balshazar located the astrotelepathic terminus on the crumpled vellum. 'Ancient Terra...'

Quast nodded. 'The Excoriators did not prevail on Certus-Minor. They are all dead. Yet the Cholercaust was defeated. I do not know what happened here. What I do know is that one of your Librarians made a direct appeal to Holy Terra, to the God-Emperor of Mankind for a miracle, and that appeal seems to have been answered.'

The Space Marine and approbator locked gazes. 'And that is reason enough for the Ordo Obsoletus's involvement, so please, Santiarch, now tell me what you and three companies of your Excoriators are really doing here.'

The Chaplain's mangled face creased with vexation. His anger had dissipated and his brow now furrowed with genuine conflict. As his lips began to form around a response to the approbator's request, the storm trooper sergeant jogged up behind him.

'Approbator!'

'Yes, sergeant,' Quast replied with obvious displeasure. His eyes remained on the hulking Santiarch.

'Report just in. One of the frater burn teams has found a survivor.'

Both Quast and Balshazar turned.

'A cemetery worlder?'

‘An Adeptus Astartes.’

Balshazar seemed to sag in his heavy plate.

‘We might get answers to our questions, yet,’ the Santiarch told Quast.

The approbator gave a brief nod. ‘Sergeant, take us to him. Take us to him, right now.’

POST HOC, ERGO
PROPTER HOC

PART ONE

Terror is their harbinger...



CHAPTER ONE

The Darkness

‘How goes the Feast, brother?’ called Apothecary Ezrachi, across the frigate *Scarifica*’s tactical-oratorium. Corpus-Captain Shiloh Gideon stood at a rostrum decorated with runeslates and scrolls of vellum. As Ezrachi approached, the small gathering of bondservants about the rostrum peeled away. The Apothecary’s right leg was a full bionic replacement and almost as old as Ezrachi himself. While robust and powerful, it sighed with hydraulic insistence and lagged a millisecond behind its flesh-and-bone equivalent, giving the impression of a slight limp.

‘The Feast of Blades goes badly,’ the corpus-captain lamented. ‘For the Excoriators, at least.’

‘How many?’ inquired the Apothecary as he approached.

‘Too many,’ Gideon snapped, running a palm across the top of his tonsure-shaven scalp. He grasped hair that grew like a silver crown around his skull in obvious frustration. ‘We lost three more to our Successor Chapter kin this morning in honorific contestations. Occam, Basrael and Jabez. Occam fought well, but not well enough. I thought Jabez was dead.

I don't think anything is going to stop that Crimson Fist. The Feast may already be theirs.'

'Brother Jabez will live,' Ezrachi assured him. 'Just.'

Gideon didn't seem to hear the aged Apothecary.

'Shame begets shame,' the corpus-captain said. 'Our failure at the Feast is tied to the loss of our Chapter's sacred standard. I can feel it.'

'Your head is full of Santiarch Balshazar's sermons. I honour the primarch, but Dorn lives on through our flesh and blood, not dusty artefacts,' Ezrachi insisted. 'The loss of our standard is a mighty blow, but in truth it was but a blood-speckled banner.'

'Rogal Dorn himself entrusted his sons – our Excoriator brothers – with the standard over ten thousand years ago,' the corpus-captain said. 'It displays the Second Founding's decree and is threaded with the honours of every battle fought in our long, bloody history. It carries the distinctia of the Astartes Praeses and our service in garrisoning the Ocularis Terribus. It bears the Stigmartyr – the emblem that the Chapter adopted as its own.' Gideon turned to present his own ivory shoulder plate, adorned with the scarlet symbol to which he made reference, a gauntleted fist clenching the length of a thunderbolt-shaped scar. 'It is much more than the blood-soaked rag to which you allude and I'll have you mind your irreverence, Apothecary.'

'I meant no offence, corpus-captain,' Ezrachi replied plainly, slapping the adamantium scaffolding of his thigh. 'As you well know, there is more than a little of my own blood splashed across that standard.'

'Our brothers fight for a broken honour,' the corpus-captain continued, oblivious to Ezrachi. 'We are accursed. The Emperor's eternal fortitude, once absent in the brother that surrendered the banner, is now absent in us all. It is our collective punishment.'

'Is it not our way?' Ezrachi put to him. 'Do not the Excoriators of all Dorn's sons feel the loss of the Emperor deepest? Do not the Excoriators

alone know our primarch's true grief, the agony of his redemption and the cold wrath of his renaissance? Do we not purge his weakness and our own from this shared flesh through the Rites of Castigation and the Wearing of Dorn's Mantle?'

'This is beyond our inherited sin,' Gideon said miserably. 'The loss of the Honoured First Company. The near assassination of our Chapter Master. The failure and near decimation of the Fifth and now this – one hundred years of humiliation in the making, right underneath the disapproving noses of our Legionary kindred. All as spiritual censure for the loss of Dorn's gift – the very embodiment of our Adeptus Astartes honour.'

'We have lost a great symbol,' Ezrachi admitted, 'but not what the standard symbolised. That is alive and well in the hearts of every Excoriator who bears his blade in the Emperor's name. As they do here, brother, at the Feast of Blades.'

'Blades drawn in disbelief and sheathed in failure,' the corpus-captain said grimly.

'Is our standing in the Feast really so dire?'

'I'm pinning our hope on Usachar and Brother Dathan. Usachar is a squad whip and a veteran. Dathan is young but fast and has a way with a blade.'

'Some hope, then,' Ezrachi said.

'Usachar is chosen against Knud Hægstad of the Iron Knights and young Dathan has drawn Pugh's champion,' Gideon reported. 'It's never easy crossing blades with those chosen to wear the primarch's plate, but with the Imperial Fists defending their title and the Feast fought on a First Company-conquered world... I don't rate our chances. Even if they win, they'll have to face that damned Crimson Fist in the next round. It's fairly hopeless.'

'So,' Ezrachi put to the corpus-captain, 'it's time.'

‘I would enter the arena myself, but for the desperation it speaks to our brethren.’

‘Making your decision all the easier and more forgivable,’ the Apothecary persisted. ‘You have no choice. Give the order. Let me set free the Scourge.’

‘I would not do that for a hundred worlds,’ Gideon snarled. ‘He’s afflicted and has damned us all. Dorn has seen fit to punish him. The Scourge can rot for all I care. The Darkness is his to endure and I for one would not spare him his agonies.’

I am in a place... of darkness. I have never been here, yet I know it well. My mind – like my body – is in sensory overdrive. Something far beyond my genetic inheritance, beyond the rigours of Chapter indoctrination and the suprahormones roaring through my veins. This moment feels more acute, more vivid and keener than any I have formerly experienced. Every molecule of my being is devoted to it. Like the seconds have been honed to a razored edge.

Despite the intensity of this experience, the world about me is dark and indistinct. Everything, from the walls to the floor beneath my feet, is cloaked in a peripheral haze. I try to focus, but anything upon which I settle my eyes assumes the quality of screaming shadow. The howling gloom spreads like a stain, running into everything else and framing me in a vision of smeared charcoal.

I wander the labyrinthine nightmare of this place, weapon in hand. Searching. Splattered with blood that is not my own. Knowing that brothers both lost and true clash about me. There is gunfire. There is death. I can hear calls of distant anguish. I cannot make out the words but know that they are laced with venom and cold reason. The hot ringing of blades fills the air, punctuated by the crash of bolt-fire. I am on a smoke-stained battlefield. Boarding an enemy vessel. Reclaiming heretical dirt. Bringing sanity to a daemon world. I am in every battle that I have ever

fought, one superimposed upon the other. Death and foes blurring. The colours of destruction smudging and blotting until all that is left is black.

My hearts hammer in unison. I am running. Fearful, but not for myself.

The dark nothingness about me saps my soul. Blood courses through my body. Battle beckons. I tremble not with dread but with expectation, the impending realisation of my genetic heritage. I am a warrior down to the last molecule of my being. I was engineered to kill for something greater than myself, to serve the Father-of-All with blade, bolt – even my last breath, and all those preceding.

I live the lost brothers I have ended. Their bodies fallen and terrible in the murderous ruin they have committed – one upon the other and myself upon them all. Mighty brothers lie twisted and broken. Their god-flesh is still. Fratricide over. The chime of battle hangs about their corpses. Their weapons decorate the changing floor. My own joins them.

A doom, so deep, has reached me. A pain so clear and a loss so searing to my existence that it shatters my soul. Like a dread nova, erupting through histories both galactic and personal, the Darkness finds me. For a moment, there is light in the nothingness. The Emperor of Mankind is with me – here, in this hopeless place. His presence and legacy a beacon in the blackness. Withering to look upon. Impossible not to. I approach as one might his doom. Hesitant. Uncomprehending. Child-like. The moment overwhelms me and tears cascade down my blood-flecked cheeks. Then like a nova – brief, beautiful and sad in its distant diminishing – the beacon fades. I fall to my knees and I weep uncontrollably, for there is nothing left to do. No higher power to whom I can appeal.

The star has faded. The light is gone. In its place is dead space, laced with the poisonous shockwave of the aftermath, trembling through the ages. All that is left is the bottomless grief of the orphan Angel. My hearts know his immortal sorrow. Rogal Dorn. My father's loss. My loss through his. I feel what he felt, stood over the Emperor. I know the fear and misery

he allowed himself. That moment of doubt and horror-stricken possibility becomes my eternity. It saturates me with its despair. I sink deep within myself and find a greater darkness there. An Imperium without an Emperor. A fatherless humanity. An eternity without direction. Dorn's Darkness.

I roar my defiance, like an infant freshly ripped from the womb. I fall to my knees. A new coldness clings to me. I quake. I know only fear and fury at an empty cosmos, devoid of answers.

But there is a figure. Something I have not seen before. There and yet not. An armoured shape that steps from the darkness into silhouette, glorious against the emptiness. Unlike the stygian surroundings or the Emperor, his presence eclipsed by his own brilliance, the figure falls into harrowing focus. Its movements are slow and deliberate, and as it walks towards me, it grows in stature and menace.

An ally? An enemy? There are no shortage of either, dead on the innumerable battlegrounds about me. I remain kneeling, as though my legs are now part of them all. My mind is overwhelmed with a grief beyond grief. I sit. I watch. I dread.

The revenant approaches. Its searing plate is of the blackest night. Each ceramite boot is wreathed in spectral flame. I look on as its incandescent steps fracture and frost-shatter the metal of the deck beneath them. The ghost-fire curls and crooks its way about the figure as one burned at the stake. It slows to an appalling stop and looks down on my kneeling form. Before me is an Angel of Death. A brother of the beyond. Devoid of Chapter markings, the armour speaks only of the grave, a rachial nightmare of rib and bone, a skeleton set within the surface of the sacred plate. Beneath, the ghastliness goes on. The faceplate of its helmet is smashed and a ceramite shard missing. The bleach-white of a fleshless skull leers at me. The glint of a service stud. The darkness of an eye socket that burns with unnatural life. Perfect teeth that chatter horribly.

‘What are you?’ I manage, although it takes everything I have left to brave the utterance.

It says nothing, but reaches out with a raven gauntlet. A bone digit protrudes from the splintered ceramite fingertip. I watch it drift towards my face with horror. The thing touches me. And I scream.

Corpus-captain Gideon stepped into the stone corridor. Closing the barbican behind him, the Excoriator rested his broad shoulders against the cool metal of the door. Beyond, Gideon could hear the crisp ring of blades rise up from the pit and through the solemn gathering of Adeptus Astartes officers stood amongst the tiered galleries.

Apothecary Ezrachi stepped out onto the long, empty corridor. He wiped blood from his hands with a surgical rag and stared down at the corpus-captain, whose head was angled to the door.

‘Usachar?’

‘Cut to ribbons,’ the Apothecary told him, his voice bouncing around the confines of the subterranean passage. ‘He’ll be more stitch than flesh when I’m finished with him.’

Gideon turned his head to put his ear flat to the metal barbican. The sound of clashing blades had ceased. A sombre announcement was being made. Even muffled through the door, it was obvious to the corpus-captain that Brother Dathan had not been successful.

‘Expect another for your slab,’ Gideon informed the Apothecary. He turned to look at the aged Excoriator. Rubbing the red from his hands, Ezrachi returned the grim gaze.

‘Corpus-captain...’

‘I know,’ Gideon said with slumped resignation. ‘I would not do this but for the dishonour we would endure in exiting the Feast so early and the disgrace to carry back to Eschara. I promised Master Ichabod a victory to lift the Chapter and carry our brothers through these dark times. I cannot return with both empty hearts and hands. News of our failure would likely

finish what the filth Alpha Legion started. I fear the disappointment alone might end him, Ezrachi.'

The Apothecary shook his battered face. 'Quesiah Ichabod is the greatest Excoriator to have ever lived. Those armoured serpents were lucky – and perhaps born so – but even they, with their lies and infernal ways, could not take him from us. Besides, he is now on Eschara with one of our best, the Chief Apothecary.'

'I can't look my Chapter Master in the eye and tell him I did everything in my power to secure victory when I did not.' Gideon seemed to come to a dismal decision. 'I'd hoped that it would not come to this. Nine Excoriators have fought for their Chapter in the Feast, yet ten were sent for such a hallowed duty. Only Dorn knows why Master Ichabod insisted upon his inclusion, but that is now the choice laid before me. Can the Scourge be made fit for anything, let alone battle?'

'I believe so. We are pure of hearts but not of blood. As part of a former Legion and now as a Chapter, we are not alone in our experience of genetic deficiency. The Wolves and the Angels, as well as the brethren of future Foundings, carry the flaws of their blood heritage on to new generations,' the Excoriators Apothecary explained. 'When the Darkness takes one of our number, it might appear to us a wretched palsy: the slackness of the jaw, the tremor of the limb, the blankness of the eye. But those who survive it report the experience as a living nightmare, a sleeping wakefulness in which they relive the bottomless woe of Dorn's most trying time – the grievous loss of our Father-Emperor, at least as we knew him. This is both our father's genetic blessing and his curse to his sons. To know the possibility – for even a second – of an Imperium without the Emperor. To feel what Dorn felt. The profound misery of a primarch. The paralysing fear that even one as great as he experienced, for himself and for humanity, over the Emperor's shattered body. To live the Darkness.'

‘Such details have little meaning for me, Apothecary,’ Gideon told him. ‘The Adeptus Astartes are bred for battle. They exist only to avenge the Emperor and put the enemies of humanity to the blade. I need warriors, not dreamers. Whatever the actual nature of this affliction, it does not befit one of our calling. If it were me, I’d rather my brothers ended such a vegetative existence than watch me live on in a senseless state.’

‘Since the Darkness can strike any of us at any time, corpus-captain, I’ll bear that in mind,’ Ezrachi promised with a subversive curl of the lip. ‘While we dwell on such matters, you should know that the procedure I intend is untried and that the brother in question might not survive it.’

‘For the calamity he has brought down on all of us, I would lose little sleep over that.’

‘I suspected as much,’ the Apothecary said. ‘I inform you only that it in turn might inform your strategy for our brothers in the contest. You do know it is possible that his suffering caused the loss of the Chapter standard rather than his failure being the cause of the Darkness.’

‘What do I care for that?’ Gideon snorted. ‘He failed his primarch. He failed his Chapter Master. He failed us all. The only care I have in this is to find use for such traitorous hands. What will you do and how long do you need?’

‘Santiarch Balshazar has his way of managing the afflicted,’ Ezrachi replied. ‘A spiritual treatment that those suffering the Darkness survive or they do not. While I respect the symbolic significance of the Santiarch’s practice and the rituals specific to our Chapter cult, my method is comparatively direct.’ The Apothecary indicated a point at the back of his skull, where in the fashion of the Chapter, his thinning hairline met a scarred and shaven scalp. ‘The catalepsean node is located here on the brain stem. As the implant responsible for modifying the circadian rhythms – our patterns of sleep and elongated periods of consciousness – it seems possible that a malfunctioning node could be responsible for a loss

of motor control and the experience of a “living nightmare”. I plan to drill through the bone and insert a hypodermic lightning rod into the brain. There I shall issue a localised shock to the catalepsean node, hopefully interrupting the affliction of the Darkness and reinstating the natural function of the implant.’

‘Sounds painful.’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘Good,’ the corpus-captain said. ‘When you are finished with Usachar and Dathan, return to the *Scarifica*. The Rites of Battle begin for the next round shortly. The Feast waits for no one. Send word if your experiment meets with success. I’ll also need informing if our fallen brother fails us once again.’

‘How do you define failure?’

‘A living-death or an actual one,’ Gideon told the Apothecary as he took his leave. ‘It makes very little difference to me when it comes to Zachariah Kersh.’

‘I trust everything is prepared?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Apothecary Ezrachi stomped down the ramp into the cargo compartment of the frigate *Scarifica*, his leg clunking against the metal floor. His nostrils flared. They were down in the bowels of the ship. He would have preferred a more suitable location for the procedure, but his brother Excoriators would not tolerate the Scourge’s presence.

Crates and bulk-canisters had been cleared in the centre of the compartment, creating an open space. There stood a decorative casket, an item transported from Santiarch Balshazar’s Holy Reclusiam, buried deep within the Excoriators’ fortress-monastery on distant Eschara. Beaten from dull adamantium, the box had the dimensions of a sarcophagus and the extravagant garniture to match. Its frontispiece featured a raised depiction of the Emperor-of-All; despite the casket standing upright, it

represented him as prone, maimed and broken, following his confrontation with the beast Horus. Santiarch Balshazar's solution to the affliction of the Darkness. A darkness of his own. The most solitary of confinements, where no self-respecting Excoriator need look upon his weakness and invalidity.

On either side of the sarcophagus's head was a small confessional grille. On the left, Ezrachi's apothecarion aides busied themselves in ivory robes, adorned with the insignia of the prime helix. They were making adjustments to a tripod arrangement and drill, the trepan of which was pointed through the open grille. On the opposite side were the Scourge's own serfs, looking thoroughly miserable. Since the disgrace of their master they had been relegated to the cargo compartment also, bunking and toileting in the dark, down with the casket that held the fallen Kersh.

There were three. Old Enoch was the Scourge's seneschal. He sat, perpetually oiling the braided length of 'the purge' and mumbling insensibly to himself. He was caretaker of the ceremonial lash and overseer of his master's devotional mortification. Enoch's son Oren proceeded to mop the area around the sarcophagus base where a growing pool of waste was escaping the casket-base. He was the lictor. Barrel-chested, with the thick arms of a scud-wrestler, it had been Oren's solemn function to administer 'the purge' with all the devotion of which he was capable. His father supervised the ritual, his crabby eyes burning in disappointment that his own son had not been honoured with tissue compatibility for a life beyond mere humanity. Old Enoch's daughter Bethesda was the Scourge's absterge. An elfin waif of a girl – gaunt and grim – she was charged with the routine cleansing and dressing of the Adeptus Astartes' ceremonial wounds. Excoriators all took their purification across their broad, muscular backs – as part of the ritual they called 'Donning Dorn's Mantle'. Beyond basic servitude to the Scourge, the three serfs were charged – by Kersh himself above all else – to

excoriate his flesh and purify him of weakness so that he might achieve endorphic communion with the primarch.

Bethesda was reading to the Scourge through the confessional grille on the other side of the casket, although it was unclear how much of the text Kersh was hearing. Whilst enthralled by the Darkness, victims couldn't speak or communicate. They couldn't feed themselves or take water and seemed feverishly insensible to everything happening about them. At the Apothecary's entrance, Kersh's servants stood or turned to present themselves. Bethesda slammed the tome shut. Ezrachi caught the title: *The Architecture of Agony* by Demetrius Katafalque. He knew it well. A treatise of devotional suffering by the former captain and first Master of the Excoriators Chapter.

'Pray, continue,' Ezrachi ordered softly. 'This will not be pleasant and I wish our convalescent every distraction.'

Bethesda returned to her reading.

'...During Terra's infancy, in which the warriors of brute nations were flogged as a test of their manhood...'

'We've broken through the lower cranium, my lord,' one of Ezrachi's aides told him, standing at the tripod-trepan like a workman at a lathe.

'All right,' Ezrachi called to his aides. 'Do your duty.'

'...Later monastic orders of the Church Katholi indulged flagellation as a form of militant pilgrimage...'

Kersh seemed unmoved by the horrific procedure, held in place within the casket. The Scourge remained silent and still, the drill embedded in his skull and Bethesda's honeyed words filling the cargo compartment.

Locking off the drill, one of the aides depressed a plunger on a power cell situated between the legs of the tripod. The other wrapped himself around an underslung buttstock and trigger arrangement hanging beneath the drill.

'Charging. Six megathule range.'

‘...of the Old Hundred. The Geno Seven-Sixty Spartocid fought for the Emperor in the Unification Wars and during the Great Crusade, where it was considered a genic officer’s honour to match the number of strokes suffered by a stereobreed soldier, for failure under his command...’

‘Launching hypodermic rod.’

The apparatus fired and a sickening thud reverberated around the chamber. The robed aides made adjustments to their drill.

‘...whereas it is practice aboard the mighty *Phalanx* to embrace a technological solution to the self-infliction of suffering, I favour my Lord Dorn’s practice for my brother Excoriators. On our primarch’s fosterworld of Inwit, the winters were cold and the lash was hot. Such instruction was adopted across Dorn’s early empire and favoured by the Progenitor personally as a form of martial communion and as purification for the soul...’

Pressing his face into the micronocular eyepieces above the stock, the aide consulted a pict screen before announcing, ‘We have achieved the catalepsean node, Apothecary.’

‘What are you waiting for?’ Ezrachi barked. ‘Pray to Dorn and deliver the charge.’

A faint hum indicated the duration of the treatment. Bethesda closed the Scourge’s copy of Demetrius Katafalque’s mighty tome and got to her feet. The chamber fell still. Ezrachi’s brow began to knot with disappointment.

‘Again.’

The aides repeated the procedure. All in attendance waited.

Then it began. A sound like distant fury, building within the casket. An agonising roar that was everywhere. The rage of a woken giant.

‘Fire the seals,’ Ezrachi ordered Oren and Old Enoch. ‘Get this thing open.’

The sarcophagus started to shake. Ezrachi pursed his age-cracked lips. Perhaps the Scourge was experiencing a variety of fit. Perhaps the

procedure had caused some kind of neural damage. Perhaps the warrior simply wanted out of the casket. ‘The drill!’ the Apothecary remembered, prompting his aides to simultaneously begin retracting the hypodermic rod and reverse-screwing the trepan drill-bit.

As the box shuddered and the furious lament built to a horrible crescendo, the sarcophagus lid swung open. Silence reigned in the compartment once again. The depths of the casket were a foetid darkness. The trembling cabinet grew still. Inside, the laboured breathing of the Scourge could be heard. The apothecarion aides worked frantically to withdraw the deadly reach of their apparatus. With a teeth-clenched grunt, Zachariah Kersh pulled his bulk from the sarcophagus interior.

He was as naked as the day he was initiated, five hundred and fifty-two years before, and stumbled from the interior and out into the cargo compartment. His beard was scraggy and cotted, and his white tonsure overgrown and threaded with silver. The Scourge had a face to match his name, both afflicted and afflicting. He had inherited the dour mask of his Lord Dorn, behind which eyes alive with predatory intensity and accusation burned. He would pass for Demetrius Katafalque himself, if the etchings were to be believed, but for a ragged wound on his right cheek, which had long healed exposing tendons, part of the jawbone and the darkness of his mouth.

Kersh wasn’t as tall as many of his Excoriator brothers but more than made up for this deficiency with muscle crafted in the desperation of battle, rather than the monastery gymnasias. His flesh was a primarch-pleasing canvas of burn marks and scar tissue, stretched across a frame broad with age and experience. He wavered before a delighted Ezrachi, reminding the Apothecary of a statue of Terran antiquity with his demigod’s physique. The Scourge had emerged alive, covered in his own filth but free of the Darkness and its curse.

Bethesda came up behind him with a cream shroud and threw it across the Scourge's lash-mangled back and globed shoulders. The fabric blotched immediately with the Excoriator's blood, sweat and mess. Kersh half slipped and went down on his knees, reaching out for support and finding only the slender serf. With his great hand on her tiny shoulder he steadied himself. Reaching for the back of his skull with the other, Kersh tore out the broken drill-bit and hypodermic rod, flinging the attachment at the compartment floor where it *pranged* off the metal decking.

Ezrachi hesitated, his lips forming around a greeting. He wanted to know if his subject had survived the procedure with his faculties intact. The Scourge beat him to it.

'Stay out of my skull, Apothecary,' Zachariah Kersh growled. Shoulders dropped with relief among the gathered Chapter serfs, and Ezrachi smiled.

'You're welcome, brother...'

The Scourge's absterge crossed the benighted cargo bay and entered the bondservants' berth with a heavy water cask. It was less a berth than a dusty unguent locker used by Techmarines to store oils and bless them in readiness for use in the enginarium. The Cog Mechanicum hung above a small shrine to the Omnissiah that Old Enoch had put to good use as a counter or tabletop. The seneschal was stripped to the waist, baring a shrivelled chest, and had laid out a bowl and a shaving blade. He peered at his gaunt, empty features in a section of metal wall that he'd had Bethesda clean and polish to dull reflection. The absterge poured fresh water into the bowl, at which her father said nothing. The seneschal dipped his hand into a can of blessed oil and rubbed his bristled chin with the thin unguent. He then went to work rhythmically with the razor, scraping his slick, leathery skin and cleansing the blade in the water.

Putting down the cask, Bethesda passed her brother Oren, who had toppled one of their metal bunks and was using it to accomplish pull-ups. The lictor's meaty arms pulled his broad bulk up off the locker floor. With each rise and fall Oren gave a piggish grunt. Bethesda knelt in the corner of their berth and stacked a small collection of empty unguent cans. She

produced a selection of half-spent candles and began to amuse herself with their arrangement.

‘What in Katafalque’s name do you think you’re doing?’ Oren asked between grunts, but Bethesda didn’t answer. Enchanted with her simple display, she attempted to light the candles with a screw-flint. The brawny lictor came to a stop, watching his sister. ‘I said, what are you doing? Answer when you’re damn well spoken to.’

Bethesda looked up, smiling to herself. ‘I’m just lighting some candles.’

‘Where did you get them from?’

‘Traded them, with one of the attendants in the chapel-reclusiam,’ the serf admitted.

‘What in damnation for?’

‘Sundries.’

‘You stupid slattern,’ her brother came back savagely. ‘I mean, why?’

‘For the Scourge,’ she answered. ‘To celebrate his delivery from the Darkness.’

This time it was her father’s turn to grunt. Oren put an angry boot straight through the cans and candle arrangement.

‘Not in here you don’t.’

Bethesda went to reclaim her smashed candles. She murmured, ‘Just because he is what you can never be.’

‘What did you say to me?’ Oren growled, his eyes livid and cheeks flushed. He closed on her and she stood with fragile defiance. Bethesda heard her father’s razor pause. Old Enoch mumbled something. Oren paused dangerously before her, his chest rising and falling with a sibling’s petty anger.

‘Once,’ he told her through clenched teeth, ‘I wanted more than my pitiful existence to be an Emperor’s Angel. More than a hundred pitiful existences to be the warrior at whose pleasure I serve – the Scourge. An Excoriator without equal. I know better now. Our master is but a false

prophet. An Angel fallen. He is so deep in his brothers' blood that he might as well have slain them himself. We are punished. The Darkness has taken us all. But know this, good sister, if *I* had been Chapter Scourge, I would not have given up our Stigmartyr so easily.'

A call came from the distant cargo bay. A demigod demanding attendance. Old Enoch grumbled his garbled insistence and Oren backed away from his sister, holding her gaze as he did so. As the lictor left the locker, his father dashed his unkindly face with water before using a ragged towel to dry it off. He turned and stood, giving Bethesda a sour glare. Throwing the towel at her, he mumbled his disgust before following Oren out, leaving the absterge alone with her candles.



CHAPTER TWO

Stigmartyr

‘Cease!’

Zachariah Kersh heard Ezrachi’s command across the *Scarifica*’s penititorium and the crack of the whip. Kersh’s personal serfs paused at the Apothecary’s order. Oren hesitated, the stock of ‘the purge’ clutched in his white-knuckled fist, the bloodied lash resting in coils on the deck beside him. Old Enoch looked to his Adeptus Astartes master, whose teeth-clenching snarl fell and eyes opened. He gave the seneschal a stabbing glare. Old Enoch began babbling to his son in a savage tone that echoed the Excoriator’s displeasure. His chest heaving with exertion, Oren gathered ‘the purge’s’ sacred length before handing it to his father for cleansing and consecration.

Kersh took his palms off the numbing cold of a section of reinforced armaplas. The blast shielding was closed, but the plas of the vistaport still retained the scalding sting of the void beyond. The heat from each handprint vanished from its deep blackness. The Scourge turned to present himself to the Apothecary and his freshly mauled back-flesh to the port.

Ezrachi shook his head as he took in the constellation of ugly welts on the Space Marine's body. Old scars from battles fought long ago.

‘What on Eschara do you think you’re doing?’ Ezrachi put to him. The Apothecary’s ceremonial plate was splattered with blood and he held his white helmet under one arm. ‘My express instructions were for rest, not mortification.’

‘I shouldn’t have to learn my shame from an errant,’ Kersh said, staring at the approaching Apothecary but nodding at Old Enoch. ‘I heard from mortal lips how Dorn’s flesh had failed them, failed their master and failed their master’s master.’

Ezrachi slowed. ‘I regret that,’ he said finally. ‘There have been pressing demands on my time. I had hoped to perform such a duty... at a suitable moment. Still, in my absence you had my orders—’

‘I have fallen so far in my estimation,’ Kersh seethed, ‘and that of my brothers that I’m not even sure I deserve to live.’

The Apothecary jabbed a gauntleted finger at Kersh’s superhuman bulk. ‘Do not be casual with this divine instrument, for it belongs neither to you nor your brothers,’ Ezrachi warned. ‘Your soul belongs to the Emperor and your flesh to Rogal Dorn – as you have correctly observed. The death separating the two belongs only to your enemies. In the meantime an Imperium’s interest resides in what may become of this crafted form before that eventuality.’

‘This flesh needs purification. I must find myself and the presence of the primarch within me.’

‘You have been one with the Darkness,’ Ezrachi countered. ‘You have walked in Dorn’s plate, seen the galaxy through his eyes, known the emptiness of his grieving heart. Some may say that no living Excoriator has known his father as well.’

‘Where is the Stigmartyr?’ Kersh asked. ‘Where is the Chapter’s sacred standard now?’

‘It is lost...’ a voice rumbled from behind Ezrachi. ‘Like you.’

Another Excoriator entered the penitorium. He was stripped to the waist, like Kersh, and accompanied by his own trio of Chapter serfs. His flesh was that of a veteran, leathery and lined from a lifetime spent in battle. His brow bore a neat row of service studs and a necklace of chainsword teeth jangled about his taut neck. ‘And now... like us.’

‘Tiberias,’ Ezrachi warned.

As his seneschal, lictor and absterge filed past, the Space Marine turned to hang a towel from a hook set into the wall. The word *Vanguard* was tattooed across his broad shoulders, identifying him as an honoured brother of the First Company. As he turned again his baleful gaze drove the Scourge’s eyes to the deck. The sting of shame kept them there for a moment, but before Kersh knew he had done it, he was staring back at the Excoriator in defiance.

‘Kersh,’ the Apothecary said.

‘Do not spare me, brother,’ the Scourge called at Tiberias. Fresh blood pitter-pattered the deck about the Space Marine, falling from the torn flesh on his back. Bethesda approached with Kersh’s own towel. ‘Back...’ the Scourge growled, causing the absterge to drop the item where she stood and retreat. Ezrachi watched, uncertain, as Tiberias approached. Kersh took several steps also, scooping up the towel and wiping the glistening sweat from a knotted brow. ‘Where is it?’

‘What would you do with such information?’ Tiberias teased through a sneer. ‘Reclaim it?’

‘I would.’

‘And I would check your instruments, Apothecary,’ the veteran said to Ezrachi, ‘for your patient here seems still to dream.’

‘You’ll wish I was dreaming, brother,’ Kersh told him.

‘I am no brother of yours, Scourge...’

‘Must I beat it out of you?’

‘Desist. The both of–’ Ezrachi began.

‘I’ll fight you for less than that,’ Tiberias informed him as the two of them closed. ‘The Alpha Legion has the Stigmartyr now.’ The two Excoriators began to circle. ‘You and the Santiarch are all that remain of the Chapter Master’s inner circle. And I am all that’s left of the Honoured First.’

Kersh looked from Ezrachi to Tiberias, then back to the Apothecary.

‘Chapter Master Ichabod?’

‘The Chapter Master lives,’ Ezrachi confirmed, ‘but the rumours are that he is waning.’

‘Rumours!’ Kersh spat. ‘You are Ezrachi, of the Helix – what does your Lord Apothecary say?’

‘My lord is dead,’ Ezrachi admitted, more harshly than he intended. Taking his helmet from under his arm, he hugged it to his chestplate. ‘Like Tiberias says, the circle is broken. Chapter Master Ichabod is strong, but his wounds are grievous. The Alpha Legion’s assassination failed, but they employed a virulent toxin for which we have no record, nor antidote. It is only a matter of time.’

‘How long?’

‘Weeks. Perhaps years. In truth we do not know.’

‘We must search for the source of this toxin.’

‘Already begun – that is the Fourth Company’s honour. They suspect it to be a naturally occurring substance, since it betrays no evidence of engineering. They have been despatched to every known death world in the segmentum. That is why I have been attached to this venture. Apothecary Absalom of the Second was due to travel with you to the Feast, but he is needed to coordinate the search and to formulate an antidote. He is Lord Apothecary now.’

‘Then where are the Alpha Legion?’ Kersh demanded.

‘They have slithered away like the serpents they are,’ Tiberias said.

‘The Fourth waste their time,’ Kersh said to Ezrachi. ‘We must find the Traitors and recover both the banner and intelligence of the toxin’s origin.’

‘You think we have not all thought on that?’ Tiberias goaded.

‘They are everywhere and nowhere,’ Ezrachi said with sadness. ‘They have played with us. Even the most promising leads have thus far turned out to be no more than shadows and whispers. That was until Veiglehaven.’

‘Veiglehaven?’

‘The Fifth Company were lured there,’ Ezrachi told the Scourge.

‘Looking for the Chapter standard,’ Tiberias added, jabbing a meaty finger at Kersh. ‘Your standard.’

‘A trap?’

The Apothecary nodded sadly.

‘How many?’

‘Over half the company was lost,’ Tiberias said. Kersh’s gaze fell to the deck. ‘Brothers, sent to suffer an ignoble death, while you live and breathe before me. The Scourge? More like *a* scourge. A scourge on this Chapter. Your hearts beat only to expound your dishonour. How do you suffer the insufferable? Our blood – on your hands.’

‘It’s Dorn’s way,’ Kersh said finally, his eyes rising once again to meet his accuser’s. ‘We are for the Emperor, to the point of death. Devotion at any cost – even that of my soul, Brother Tiberias. We talk of your blood and its whereabouts. My understanding is that you will find it in ample quantity on the blade of the White Templar you fought in the Cage.’

The Excoriator’s sneer split into an ugly snarl. His bruised fist came at Kersh with a furious desire. Tiberias was fast but his movements were those of a close combat veteran: precise, measured and committed. Predictably so. Kersh had spent a lifetime at his Chapter Master’s side, fighting experienced warriors of all creeds and species. The enemy would

always send their best at him and it had been the Scourge's simple honour to end them before they could end his master.

Kersh held his ground, craning and stretching. Tiberias's fists were everywhere: punching, back-handing, swinging. Each failed to find its mark – the fury of each strike lost on air. The Scourge angled his shoulders, swooping and bobbing his head just out of the veteran's considerable reach. A bare foot struck out at Kersh, forcing him to pivot. He slapped the knee aside and flung his towel into Tiberias's contorted face. The honoured brother tore it away, only to find that Kersh had pivoted back.

A gobbet of blood and teeth erupted from the veteran's mouth as his head was smashed to one side. The Excoriator's mighty body followed, his feet thrown up into the air and his tattooed shoulders hammering into the hard deck with a metallic boom.

Kersh stood with Ezrachi's helmet clutched in one hand. The Apothecary had tried to get between the two warriors in his ceremonial plate, but Kersh had snatched his bone-white helm from his hands. It sat snug in his fist as he'd spun around, like a moon in rapid orbit around a serene gas giant, until it crashed into Tiberias's face.

Ezrachi knelt down beside the felled Space Marine to check his ruined features. A broken nose and shattered jaw fountained a further spray of blood as Tiberias coughed up more teeth. Kersh looked down at the gore-smear across the white of the helm's faceplate.

'I've found more of your blood, Brother Tiberias,' the Scourge spat, prompting the veteran to shove the aged Ezrachi aside and scramble, half blood-blind to his feet.

'Come on, meat,' Kersh dared.

'Enough!' Corpus-Captain Gideon called, striding into the penititorium. 'Save it for the damned arena,' he said in disgust. 'Get him out of here. Clear the chamber.'

Chapter serfs hurried past, while Ezrachi angled the unsteady Tiberias's shoulders towards the exit. The Apothecary gave the Scourge a sullen scowl.

'I will see you planetside,' Ezrachi told him. Kersh threw Ezrachi back his besmirched helm.

The Apothecary looked back at Kersh and then left. The corpus-captain hit a vox-stud in the wall.

'This is Gideon. Open the blast shields, port-side aft.'

The penitorium shuddered as the clinker plates of armour running down the frigate's aft section began to part. As Gideon crossed the chamber, the colossal metal slats receded like blinds to admit the scene beyond. Light flooded the dim penitorium. 'With me,' the corpus-captain ordered.

Kersh hovered for a moment, just long enough for Gideon to register his defiance, before striding across to the vistaport. The armaplas window ran the length of the penitorium. The two Excoriators stood in silence, taking in the planet below and the craft upon which the *Scarifica* held orbital station. Beside the Excoriators frigate sat the Death Strike gunfreighter *Nihilan Proxy*. Beyond that the pocket-frigate *Bellicose* rolled, bearing the Chapter insignia of the Black Templars. Several other rapid strike vessels, all belonging to different Adeptus Astartes Chapters, lay in high orbit, gathered about the battle-scarred flanks of the *Titus*, a veteran Imperial Fists cruiser.

Below them was a world the yellow of cowardice and swirl-smeared in a cloud-cover of soot and ash. The *Titus* and the attending smaller craft drifted above a blackened pole. About the fat belt of the planet's equator, Kersh could make out the lightshow of colossal impacts and explosions beneath the smog. A huge xenos craft hurtled towards the region. An obscenity of interstellar scrap, the vessel had the unmistakable graceless and clunky design of a greenskin kroozer. Flanked to starboard by Imperial Navy destroyers and a light cruiser, and on the portside by an Imperial

Fists Gladius frigate, the unstoppable craft seemed to have an enemy escort. An almost continuous stream of fire existed between the Navy vessels and the monster's thick hull, however, and the Imperial Fists vessel was engaged in a desperate high-speed boarding action. Beyond the spectacle, the distant sparks of lance beams and cannon fire marked out a distant cordon, a gauntlet of Navy and Adeptus Astartes vessels through which a swarm of other greenskin attack craft were attempting to punch.

‘All right,’ Kersh said finally. ‘Where are we?’

‘Samarquand.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘I’m not surprised. It has been part of the Urk Empire for two thousand years. A greenskin overlord called the Great Tusk holds the system here.’

‘Some overlord, I haven’t heard of him either.’

Gideon ignored Kersh’s obvious insolence. ‘The Samarquand agri-worlds supplied the cluster-hives of Coronis Agathon. Twelve verdant planets – amongst the most productive in the Imperium – inadequately garrisoned and consigned to doom and the infection of the xenos. Unfortunately, the Great Tusk and its line are plagued with an uncharacteristic lack of ambition. The fat monsters seem content to sit here, breeding in their own squalor. Their fleet and forces have never committed themselves out-system or joined the invasions plaguing nearby sectors.’

‘We think that this Tusk is building up to something?’

‘Two thousand years is a lot of patience for a greenskin, don’t you think?’ the corpus-captain returned. ‘No. But a populous xenos empire, no matter how small, cannot be tolerated so close to Imperial shipping lanes.’

‘So, destroy it,’ Kersh said.

‘The effort to do so continues to this day,’ Gideon told him.

‘For two thousand years?’

‘In turn, the Imperial Fists, the Dark Angels and the Space Wolves all have had honoured commitments to remove the Great Tusk and cleanse the system. Progress has been slow.’

‘The xenos are dug in?’

‘Nothing so sophisticated. There are just too many of them. Reports return of coast-to-coast greenskins on the planet surfaces: the Vostroyan Firstborn 13th Regiment, the Moloch 132nd Rifles and the Urdeshi 27th Mechanised – all wiped out in taking Samarquand.’

‘Then Samarquand is taken.’

‘Emperor be praised. Our brethren the Imperial Fists have succeeded where the Wolves and Angels failed. Samarquand IV has rejoined the Imperium. Still, one amongst twelve, with the enemy intent on taking it back...’

‘What in Dorn’s name are we doing here?’ Kersh interrupted. ‘What am I doing here?’

‘If it were my choice, Scourge, I would not have you here at all.’

‘Have our brother-Fists requested our assistance?’

‘No.’

‘Then don’t we have ongoing engagements of our own to honour?’

Kersh pressed. ‘The Alpha Legion. Chapter Master Ichabod?’

‘You are here at Master Ichabod’s decree and that is all your wretched ears need know.’

Kersh turned on the corpus-captain. ‘I belong at my master’s side.’

‘You are not wanted, nor needed there,’ Gideon said. ‘You are to play no further role in the tragic events afflicting our Chapter. Do you hear me, Scourge? Whatever worth you have left is to be measured here.’

‘Here?’ the Excoriator said, jabbing a finger at the vistaport. ‘I don’t even know where *here* is.’

‘Samarquand IV is the chosen ground for the eight hundred and sixteenth Feast of Blades.’

‘We’re here to compete?’

‘You’re here to compete.’

‘With the Chapter under attack and our master’s life hanging in the balance, we are here contesting?’ Kersh said, his words dripping with incredulity. ‘Have you gone mad?’

‘The Feast is important.’

‘The Feast is a distraction!’

‘An important one. These are dark times, Kersh – and not just for the Excoriators. The Emperor’s Angels are spread thin across the stars. Dorn’s sons spread even thinner. Chapter relations must be maintained. The bonds of brotherhood strengthened and tempered through contestation.’

‘We have only just concluded a Feast.’

‘Tradition dictates the Feasts are centennial – at least centennial. It is the right of the reigning Chapter to call a Feast before its time. They often do.’

‘Why, by Katafalque, would they do that?’ Kersh sneered.

‘The Feast of Blades serves its purpose,’ Gideon said. ‘Many pacts are created and obligations honoured among our brethren – but we are bred for victory. Reigning Chapters want to build on past triumphs, for their success to echo through eternity, to catch Dorn’s approving eye or ear, wherever the Lord Primarch might be. They call the Feast to best complement their advantage – the prowess of their champions, the perceived weakness of their opponent Chapters. Like us, they want to win. I would be surprised if the recent trials of our own Chapter hadn’t been a factor in the Feast’s most recent calling.’

‘Could we not we request that another Chapter take our place?’

‘On occasion that happens.’

‘Then why didn’t you make that happen?’

‘A brother’s love is hard won,’ Gideon told him. ‘The Feast of Blades is not, however, an empty exercise. Chapter relations bear fruit. Even now,

the Fire Lords move in to relieve our Second Company at Celator-Primus.’

‘We are Excoriators—’

‘Yes, we are. You’ll find our blood in the earth of Holy Terra and staining the mighty walls of the Imperial Palace. We hold our ground now as we did then, in our primarch’s plate. Our very existence is a war of attrition. As a Chapter we shall not falter. Not now – not ever.’

‘Agreed,’ Kersh said. ‘But why contest honour when we can earn it through the worthy deaths of our enemies?’

‘There is a fire within you, Scourge, that even I can feel,’ Gideon told him. ‘Be it loyalty, shame, hunger for revenge – I know not. I care not. The Chapter is suffering its worst losses in five thousand years. These are dark times and I need that fire burning bright in every company, every squad, every Excoriator. As well as reinforcing relations with our primogenate kin, participation in the games generates Chapter pride. With Master Ichabod afflicted and the Stigmartyr lost, our brothers’ hopes have turned to ash in their chests. The mere embers of faith sustain them. Ichabod hoped that some success at the Feast might stoke the fire in their hearts. That is why he sent me. That is why he sent you.’

Kersh stared out across the frozen void. ‘How do we fare?’ he said finally.

‘The worst in our history,’ the corpus-captain admitted. ‘Nine of our ten champions have been beaten and are out of the contest – and the Feast is but yet at an early stage. You are the last. That is why I had Ezrachi experiment with that damned box.’

‘If I fail?’

‘Then we have dishonoured Dorn and our entire Chapter. In your case, again. It would strengthen the belief in our brothers that we are ruined and I don’t know if Master Ichabod would survive such news.’

‘But we would leave the Feast early?’

‘Think not on crusades to reclaim the Stigmartyr. If winning back your honour is the prize, then that can only be achieved here. If you do not do your utmost – as every Excoriator before you – to succeed in the Feast, then I shall leave Samarquand with my ten defeated champions and take the *Scarifica* to Onassis and join the Marines Mordant on their penance crusade through Tempest Hippocrene. You will not see our home world, Eschara, for a hundred years, and when you do, it will be because the dishonour of our failure has been bled from your body. I will then select you for participation in the Feast once more. Consider this both my threat and my promise, brother.’

Kersh stood there. Angry at Gideon. Angry at himself. He watched the Imperial Fists cruiser peel away from the greenskin hulk. The Imperial Navy vessels disengaged likewise, their magnabore laser batteries silent but still glowing. The kroozer rippled with explosions. Sections broke away and the bulbous monstrosity split in two. Both sections tumbled towards Samarquand IV, wreathed in an upper-atmospheric blaze. These were followed by falling stars that had erupted from the belly of the Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser and were now thunderbolting down through the wake of the wreckage. Drop-pods laden with Imperial Fists, intent on finishing the job and cleansing the inevitable crash-site of greenskin scum.

Kersh turned to Gideon, but he had gone, leaving the Scourge in the penitorium on his own. The deck lamps were out and the cool chamber was only lit by the sickly light of the planet below. A shiver danced up the Space Marine’s spine and the flesh on his forearms suddenly pimples, telling Kersh that the temperature in the penitorium had dropped considerably. Something brushed past the tiny hairs standing erect on his thick neck, causing the Excoriator to spin around. He found nothing but empty darkness. He hocked and spat into the black.

‘I spit on your childish tricks, Tiberias,’ Kersh announced to the echoing chamber, ‘for they proceed from a cowardly soul.’

Kersh turned back to the thick armaplas and the deeper darkness of space. He soaked up the emptiness for a moment – the totality of black loneliness offered by the void – before realising that he wasn't actually alone. The unrequested appearance of his serfs would simply have irritated the Scourge. If he had sensed Tiberias then the Excoriator's brawny arms would have flared with the sudden burn of anger and adrenaline. This was something else. The pit of his stomach curdled. He felt the coolness of his blood. Then, the chatter of teeth.

The Scourge turned his head slowly. He saw a ghostly reflection in the plas, the silhouette of an armoured figure, cutting its shape into the darkness beyond.

'No...' Kersh mouthed, his breath misting before him. His eyes widened. Before him was the revenant from his dark dreams. It didn't look at him. It merely existed. There. A horrifying reality. Its grotesque armour was the skeletal nightmare he remembered, and through a rent in its helm, Kersh caught a glimpse of something unliving, a vision of fear crafted in bone and smouldering with radiance unnatural.

Something akin to fear fluttered through the Scourge's being. He had not been built with the emotional spectrum to experience dread as mortals did, but something deep and primordial within him was reacting to the phantasm, and it was not pleasant. This alien feeling soon churned into something all the more recognisable to the Space Marine. Anger. The desire to meet a threat head on and end it. The revenant could be heralding the return of the Darkness or it could be an unknown menace that was a danger to the ship. Either way, Kersh felt that he had to act. He risked a fleeting glance about the benighted penititorium, his eyes darting for anything that might serve as a weapon. The brief search revealed nothing and within a moment, his distrusting gaze was back on the revenant. Except, it wasn't there.

Through the vistaport plas, the busy hull of the *Scarifica* became silhouetted against the sallow curvature of Samarquand IV. Amongst the aerials, crenellations and grotesques, Kersh could make out a distant, armoured figure on the exterior of the ship. The revenant. It too was in silhouette and held his attention as it worked its ghostly way up through the crowded architecture.

‘Terran Throne...’ Kersh murmured, his eyes almost to the armaplas. Step by spectral step he followed it with his eyes, until, with a ghoulish uncertainty plucking at his hearts, he watched it disappear around a maintenance barbican.

He felt something wet and slippery to the touch on the plas interior. Backing away, Kersh found himself staring at High Gothic scrawl written with a fingertip on the vistaport surface. Some of his own words – words he’d used in the penitorium only minutes before – quoted back to him. *In dedicato imperatum ultra articulo mortis*. ‘For the Emperor beyond the point of death,’ Kersh mouthed. Stunned, the Excoriator strode across the darkness of the chamber. Hitting a stud by the penitorium bulkhead, he brought the deck lamps back to life. With the lamps on, Kersh could see that the words were spelled out in blood. Blood taken from the pool Brother Tiberias had left on the floor. There were bloodied footsteps also. Armoured, broad and heavy. They led from the spot Tiberias had fallen to the High Gothic on the vistaport. They seemed to come from nowhere and they led to nothingness.

Kersh hit the stud that opened the bulkhead and found Old Enoch, Oren and Bethesda waiting obediently outside. Gideon had dismissed them but no one had given them permission to re-enter the penitorium.

‘Did anyone enter after the corpus-captain left?’ he put to them. They looked to each other and began to shake their heads.

‘Are you all right, my lord?’ Bethesda ventured.

His eyes narrowed, then he turned back to the penitorium chamber. The pool of Tiberias's blood still decorated the floor, but the footprints were gone. The Excoriator scanned the vistaport, but all trace of the words had vanished. He approached and looked back out along the *Scarifica*'s hull for any sign of the figure, but there was none.

'My lord?' the absterge asked, stepping into the chamber.

Kersh turned and placed his scarred back and shoulders against the cool plas. He looked up at the blood-speckled ceiling of the penitorium. 'I need the Apothecary,' Kersh told her.

'He is not here, my liege.'

'Where is he?'

'On the planet surface.'

'Then that is where we will go. Prepare a transport.'



CHAPTER THREE

The Feast of Blades

‘Listen, Ezrachi...’

Kersh followed the Apothecary down the crowded stone corridor towards the arena. In turn the Scourge was trailed by his three serfs. Ezrachi limped through a throng of mortals and dead-eyed servitors. Each was pushing its way past, fetching, carrying and attending to urgent if minor duties. A sea of different Chapter colours, they parted as the Excoriators Apothecary marched to the rhythm of his leg’s hydraulic sighing.

‘I tell you, I am not well. I am not myself.’

‘Well, whoever you are,’ Ezrachi told him, ‘you’re entering the Cage in about three minutes, so I suggest you get yourself ready.’

‘I am suffering a spuriousness of the mind.’

‘Existential anxiety is an understandable side effect of such an unusually long time spent in the Darkness.’

‘Perhaps there was an error with the procedure...’

‘Gideon said that you would try something like this.’

‘I see the impossible.’

‘Seeing is believing, Kersh. Make the impossible happen here and we might just have a chance.’

‘I am still afflicted, Apothecary!’

Serfs, who usually had their eyes directed to the floor in the presence of an Adeptus Astartes, looked up at the tormented Excoriator.

Ezrachi ground to a halt and turned. ‘I’ve reviewed the procedure and already made a thorough medical examination of your person. The procedure was a success.’

‘An oculobular defect?’

‘Impossible.’

‘Suprahormonal imbalance.’

‘Would have other symptoms.’

‘Cerebral damage.’

‘I was wrong, Kersh.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Back on the *Scarifica*, I ordered rest and recuperation. I was wrong. All of your wounds, those sustained at the hands of the Alpha Legion and the catalepseal procedure that followed, are all but healed. We are the Emperor’s Angels and we are made in his image, but we are not the same. I underestimated your powers of recovery. You are gifted, Scourge, and I need you to use that gift now. Your brothers expect this of you. It is a matter of honour and you must answer your Chapter’s call. This above all other considerations. Do you hear me, Kersh? The time is now. Two minutes – or the Excoriators forfeit the contest *and* their honour.’

The Scourge’s shoulders sagged. ‘Then I am simply losing my sanity.’

‘A mortal condition – I assure you. Follow me,’ Ezrachi instructed and ducked through an archway. Inside, Kersh found a small chamber. Each Chapter had been set aside a small area close to the arena known as the Cage to use for their preparations martial, medical and spiritual. ‘Assist

Brother Hadrach,' Ezrachi ordered Kersh's serfs as the Scourge came to stand on a central stone bearing the Excoriators' seal. The young Techmarine Hadrach had forgone his ceremonial plate and had settled instead for forge-robies. He worked feverishly over an adamantium anvil with an assortment of calibrated hammers, but paused long enough to give Kersh a stare of positive dislike.

'As you were, brother,' Ezrachi said, and the Techmarine returned to his work. Old Enoch and Oren started walking pieces of armour from Hadrach's workspace to their Excoriator lord. Bethesda disrobed the Scourge. As her two compatriots began decorating their master's muscular form she got to work on the belts, clips and seals that held the ceramite plates together.

'What is this?' Kersh asked looking down at the deep yellow of the battered breastplate the absterge was harnessing to his chest.

'All combatants wear the old Legion's colours in the Cage,' Ezrachi told him. He peered out of the chamber and down the corridor before turning back to the Scourge. 'A sign of symbolic unity.'

Hadrach handed Old Enoch and Oren a shoulder plate each. The first was the allegiant yellow of the Imperial Fists. The second bore the Chapter marking of the Excoriators. It had been this plate that the Techmarine had been working on. It was crumpled and badly damaged.

'That will have to do. Usachar took a real beating.'

'Ezrachi...'

'The contest had already begun when you were awoken. You therefore did not attend the opening rites.' The Apothecary peered into the corridor once more, anxious about the time. 'What do you know about the Feast of Blades?'

'I know that it's a diplomatic waste of time to have brothers fight one another when we have a galaxy of enemies more worthy of our blades.'

‘The Feast of Blades commemorates our Lord Primarch’s decision to break up his Legion as the Codex Astartes instructed. Dorn chose the Iron Warriors fortress known as the Eternal Fortress on Sebastus IV as the instrument upon which to break us.’

‘And make us,’ Kersh acknowledged. ‘I know the saga of the Iron Cage.’

‘We entered the Eternal Fortress as a Legion,’ Ezrachi said. ‘We left as a multitude of Chapters. It pained the primarch to do this, but he knew it was necessary. Dorn himself presided over the first of the centenary Feasts. He wished successor Chapters to maintain good relations and a cult brotherhood. This commitment was re-honoured following the Daedalus Crusade. Our brothers from participating progenitor Chapters were invited to attend, and many of the Feast’s present rites and rituals were established. We know that Rogal Dorn broke the blade he’d used on Horus’s barge, after it had failed to protect his Emperor. His second sword, the weapon to which we refer as the “Sword of Sebastus” or the Dornsblade, emerged with the primarch from the Iron Cage. It is one of our most revered artefacts, a weapon carried and used by mighty Dorn himself. The Chapter that wins the Feast has the honour of retaining the blade and the solemn duty of presenting it at the next Feast – the contest they will host, at most, one hundred years later.’

‘Thanks for the history lesson. You sound like Santiarch Balshazar.’

‘You should know what you are fighting for.’

Kersh watched Bethesda fasten his shoulder plates in place. ‘I haven’t worn carapace since I served in the Tenth Company.’ Kersh wore a simple sparring arrangement. Upon a tunic and plated skirt sat an aquila-adorned chestplate, codpiece and ceramite shoulder-guards. Plated gauntlets and boots completed the armour. He wore no helmet and both his forearms and muscular thighs were exposed.

Ezrachi led Kersh from the chamber. ‘The rules are simple. Each round consists of a knock-out. Two champions enter. The one that walks from the

Cage is declared the winner. Contestations last as long as they have to. The Cage is a ceremonial arena but is no dusty amphitheatre. It is an architectural interpretation of the Iron Cage as far as accounts allow, but the layout is changed between and within each round.'

'Within?'

'Within.'

Ezrachi took the Scourge through a sequence of gates and drome-barbica. The iron portcullis and stone of each entrance was decorated with sculpted scenes depicting Imperial Fists at their primarch's side – a reminder to all who came to fight at the Feast that the Fists above all were Dorn's chosen. The first among equals. Those deemed worthy to wear the primarch's plate and colours. It sent a powerful message of martial and cultural superiority to other Chapter champions.

The Apothecary directed the serfs up to the tiered gallery. Old Enoch mumbled a blessing and Oren gave a moody nod of subservience.

'Fight well, my lord,' Bethesda said and lingered before disappearing after her father.

'Talk to me about weapons,' Kersh said. Ezrachi nodded. Kersh – ever the pragmatist and warrior.

'You are only permitted two weapons within the Cage,' the Apothecary told him. 'This,' he said, slapping the Scourge across the back. 'Use it as you will. The second is a gladius secreted about the Cage. There are two: one for you and one for your opponent. The tips and edges of both blades have been smeared with a powerful paralytic toxin, engineered by the Adeptus Mechanicus especially for the Feast. The more you are cut, the more likely that you will go down. Your opponent will, of course, walk away victorious.'

The pair of Excoriators stood at the gate to the Cage. A single bell chimed, indicating the beginning of the contest.

'Ezrachi?'

‘Yes?’

‘What if it’s not the procedure? What if it’s not my mind? What if it’s a further manifestation of the Darkness?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What if these things I’m witnessing are... real?’

The Apothecary paused. ‘That would be a spiritual matter. Why don’t you discuss it with a Chaplain? As fortune would have it, you’re about to meet one.’

As the portcullis gate began to climb, a second bell sounded. Ezrachi brought his clenched right gauntlet to his lips and kissed it reverentially.

‘*Dextera Dornami*, Zachariah Kersh,’ the Apothecary said before climbing a set of steps up to the gallery. Kersh nodded and knelt before the opening gate. He formed a fist with his own gauntlet before touching his forehead with one knuckle, then his lips and then his breastplate – one heart then the other. Getting to his feet, the Excoriator entered the Cage.

It was like no amphitheatre or training dome he had experienced. The arena was large, perhaps the length of two gunships arranged nose to tail in diameter, Kersh estimated. The pit floor was uneven, an angular landscape of blocks, crafted from dark Samarquandian stone. There were square pits and perpendicular rises, steps and crenellated bulwarking. High above, through a caged dome, Kersh could make out the tiered gallery. This was no feral world gladiator pit. There were no howling onlookers or the frenzy of battle wagers that usually accompanied such contests. Rows of dark, armoured figures stood in silence, like impassive statues. The audience had the composure and still interest of those visiting a museum, with Chapter serfs, invited guests and gaunt servitors standing about the Emperor’s Angels, as the demigods looked on in expectation and judgement. Kersh swiftly picked out Oren and Old Enoch gathered about the dull white sheen of Ezrachi’s armour. Bethesda was at the bars, her knuckles blanched and her face a mask of fear and forced fortitude.

Kersh slowed to a standstill, looking up through the cage roof. There it was. Behind Bethesda was the horrid figure from his unending nightmare. His recent haunting. The phantasm in plate and bone. It stood amongst his brother Adeptus Astartes, watching him. As Kersh walked into the pit the sombre glow of its helm-optics followed him across the arena with dark interest.

The gate closed behind him. Kersh scanned the angularity of the Cage for any sign of a gladius. Breaking into a run, the Excoriator set off for higher ground and a better vantage point to spot a weapon. The soles of his boots scuffed the stone as he leapt lightly from block to block. His kept his shoulders low. His gaze was everywhere. His movements were athletic and economical. A predator's approach.

Kersh heard a sudden roar of exertion as his waiting enemy revealed himself. The Space Marine slammed into him from the side with the force of a freight-monitor. Slabs of muscle and shoulder plates clashed as Kersh was knocked clean off his feet and down a steep flight of steps. The Excoriator's kaleidoscopic tumble was punctuated by the harsh stone edges of the steps until finally Kersh met the grit and stone of the mezzanine level below.

Prone and vulnerable, Kersh turned. His attacker had cannonballed him off one floor of the busy, vertiginous arena and down onto another. His objective became immediately clear. The Space Marine clambered swiftly up an angular column. Kersh heard the scrape of metal on stone. Turning to face him, his opponent held in his gauntlet one of the two gladius blades left about the chamber.

Ezrachi had been right. Kersh had been drawn against a Chaplain. A heavy amulet dangled down by his opponent's waist on a necklace of precious prayer-beads. The amulet itself was a stylised, adamantium aquila, which Kersh recognised as the Chaplain's rosarius, deactivated for the competition, as honour dictated. His shoulder plate identified him as a

member of the Fire Lords Chapter, but Kersh would have known this from the Space Marine's tattoos. The Chaplain was a walking illustration – every part of his body inked to represent the swirling inferno he wished to bring to his foes. His canvas-flesh curled with flame and fury, while the blackened dome of his skull was spiky and soot-smeared, like the burned stubble of agri-world fields.

With another roar, the Fire Lords Chaplain launched himself from the top of the steps. He hungered for a swift end to the contest and closed with the distracted Excoriator. The gladius cut through the air. Kersh rolled to one side, allowing the blade to fall where he had lain, chipping the stone. Rolling back, the tip of Kersh's boot made contact with the Fire Lord's jaw, sending the Chaplain off balance. By the time Kersh was back on his feet, the Fire Lords Space Marine was coming at him with the envenomed blade, flicking it this way and that, exploring the Excoriator's defences. Kersh danced away on the toes of his boots. He arched and angled his body, retracting his limbs and skipping back out of the blade's path.

The Chaplain's style demonstrated flair and expert choreography. The movement of the gladius flowed, stabbing and slashing with a razored poetry. It reminded Kersh of flames dancing in the darkness and was no less entrancing. The Scourge brought up his plated gauntlets, allowing the tip of the blade to glance rhythmically off the back of his fists. Kersh envied the warrior's grace. The Excoriators were attrition fighters. Fluidity, timing and technique were all subservient in Kersh's Chapter to the simple, primordial desire to be the last man standing. Survival was everything. Magnificence with a blade was worth little to the dead.

Kersh allowed the gladius to snake its way through his defences. As the Fire Lord sensed an opening, he extended his reach, allowing the Scourge to lay one of his gauntlets on his opponent's wrist and the other around his throat. The Fire Lord's blade danced no more as the two Space Marines fought for the right to direct it. For a moment the Adeptus Astartes stood

in a stone embrace – immovable – faces taut in a contest of strength and will. The Chaplain grasped Kersh's own wrist, attempting to break the lock the Excoriator had on his throat. He swiftly exchanged this for a desperate grip on the Scourge's chestplate and the two Space Marines spun around. The Chaplain ran Kersh back into the brute architecture of a block obelisk. The surface of the Samarquandian stone shattered and fell in pulverised fragments. Kersh pushed back, slamming the Chaplain into the thick iron wall of the Cage. The Fire Lord's shoulder plate screeched against the metal as Kersh pinned his shuffling opponent against the wall. The metal surface boomed with the repeated impact of the Chaplain's gauntlet as Kersh smashed the Fire Lord's fist and weapon into the wall. The Chaplain released his hold on the Excoriator's carapace and began slugging him in the side.

The Fire Lord's hand opened and the gladius fell to the floor of the Cage. This surprised Kersh, who hadn't expected his efforts to be rewarded so swiftly. His immediate desire to lay his own hand on the tumbled blade slackened his grip, and before he knew quite what was happening, the Chaplain had hammered the Excoriator with a skull-bouncing blow. Kersh went down with the sword. Skidding around on the grit of the Cage floor, he slapped a hand out, feeling for the gladius's hilt. The heel of the Fire Lord's boot found his grasping gauntlet first. With his hand pinned, Kersh braced himself for impact. The sole of the Chaplain's other boot hovered above him and then came crashing down again and again on the fallen Excoriator's face.

Opening one bruised and bloodied eye, Kersh realised that the abuse was over. The Fire Lord was no longer above him and he heard the scrape of the gladius being reclaimed. There were other disturbing movements. The architecture of the Cage, mirroring the nightmare of the Iron Warriors' Eternal Fortress on Sebastus IV, was moving. The section of stone upon which he lay was either rising or the floor around him falling away.

Rolling off the moving block, Kersh landed messily on the Fire Lord below. The Adeptus Astartes both went down, and once again the gladius became a prize wrestled between them. Grasped with gauntlets at both hilt and blade tip, the Fire Lord and Excoriator battled for supremacy of the weapon. The Chaplain found his grimacing way on top, the inked globes of each bicep thumping with might as he attempted to force the blade down across Kersh's throat.

The Scourge gagged as the Chaplain leant in closer. The Fire Lord's breath was a chemicular wheeze. It was as though the Space Marine had been swilling promethium. The blade fell a little further and Kersh's eyes widened. Raw effort had drawn the Fire Lord's lips back in an ugly snarl. Instead of the perfect teeth of an Angel, the Scourge found himself staring at a maw of flint. The teeth had been replaced with shards of razor-sharp stone, each with the appearance of a primitive arrowhead or spear tip. Biting down, the Fire Lord's clenched jaws sparked. The Chaplain hissed through his teeth, sending a gout of flame at the Excoriator's face.

Kersh threw his head to one side, allowing the gladius to fall even further towards his throat. He felt the flesh on the side of his bulging neck roast and blister. Jerking his head in the opposite direction, Kersh felt the flames of a second searing breath burn his ear and the side of his face.

Writhing and stretching, Kersh caught a glimpse of the silent crowds above. He could feel Ezrachi's disappointment. He saw Bethesda's stricken beauty. He then caught a glimpse of the sickening apparition that haunted him still. It stood there amongst the still figures of the audience. Waiting. Watching. It seemed not to be looking at him, Kersh suddenly realised. Following the angle of the phantasm's dread helm, the Scourge cast his eyes across the brute landscape of the Cage, the mock courtyards and battlements of the Eternal Fortress in miniature. Where the stone blocks of a mezzanine platform had rumbled aside, Kersh could now see the dull glint of the second gladius on the other side of the arena.

The sword became everything to Kersh. He hungered for the solid satisfaction of its grip, the cutting sheen of its leaf-shaped blade and the blunt punch of its broad, tapering point. With one concentrated effort, the Excoriator pushed the poisoned blade away and heaved the fire-breathing Chaplain off him. The two Space Marines rolled until Kersh released his foe and threw himself across the arena floor. The Scourge stumbled to his feet as fast as he could, but felt the bite of the Fire Lord's sword-tip clip the back of his thigh and knew he had not been fast enough.

The effect of the Mechanicus-engineered toxin was almost instantaneous. Like the sting of some giant arachnid, a crippling deadness spread through the muscle of Kersh's leg. With the Chaplain still on the ground, Kersh made a dash across the Cage, but his sprint soon became a hobble and the hobble a limp. The leg became rapidly useless to him. A handicap in flesh and bone. It refused to bear weight or answer the Excoriator's desperate desire. The Excoriator flailed across the dread architecture of the arena, falling rather than dropping off blocks of black stone and crawling rather than climbing over crenellated bulwarks and barriers. As he slipped down into a depression in the Cage floor, he found himself in a shallow pool. Splashing through the dark water, he felt the breeze of sword swipes brush his skin. The Fire Lord was moments behind.

Ahead, Kersh could see a tower of blocks. It was atop the tower he'd spotted the second gladius. The stone blocks were unusual in as much as they were decorated with a neat pattern of equidistant holes. The Scourge slid down onto his palsied leg, showering water at the tower side.

The clunk of a firing mechanism reverberated through the stone. Iron spikes shot out of the holes in deadly unison. Kersh had heard of the Eternal Fortress's nightmare design, its labyrinthine layout and nests of traps. The Imperial Fists had designed their representation of the Iron Cage with peerless attention to detail.

The Scourge skidded down below the reach of the lowest spike. The Fire Lord, in his desire to acquire his enemy, had not been as fortunate. He peeled off to one side but was still gouged through his shoulder by a sharpened iron shaft. As he groaned and began the agonising process of extricating himself from the metal barb, Kersh began hauling himself up the spikes. Using them as a ladder, the Excoriator climbed gauntlet over gauntlet up the side of the block tower. His paralysed leg dangled uselessly as he pulled himself over the angular edge and up onto the flat summit. There the gladius was waiting. Crafted. Sharp. Glistening with paralytic toxin.

Looking down through the forest of spikes Kersh saw that his opponent had gone, leaving a length of bloodied iron as evidence of his difficulty. From the block tower, the Scourge commanded an excellent view of the Cage, but with blocks rising and sinking, and entire floors moving, it was almost impossible to get a fix on his enemy. His superhuman hearing and vision swam with the rumble and disorientation of the arena's motion. He had lost the use of one limb, but with the gladius in his grip, the Excoriator felt like he had gained the full use of another.

Dropping down the opposite side, Kersh faltered. His leg gave out immediately and he fell. Scrambling back to one foot he hopped about, sword held out in front of him. Dragging his paralysed leg around he slowly turned, expecting his enemy to erupt from anywhere. The Fire Lord, however, was nowhere to be seen. As he hopped full circle he came to the sinking conclusion that he had been fooled. The Fire Lord stood on top of the block tower from which Kersh had descended. He dropped in the fashion favoured by his brothers during their specialist planetary assaults, landing with the surety and barbaric grace of a drop-pod. The Fire Lord tossed his gladius from one hand to another. The puncture wound through his shoulder plate leaked blood down the side of his yellow carapace, but the Chaplain seemed unconcerned. His eyes burned into Kersh and his flint

teeth ground together, flashing and sparking. The two shared a moment of calm before the Fire Lord assumed his familiar fighting stance. With both gauntlets on his sword and his leg like an anchor on his own movements, the Excoriator did likewise.

‘Come on, meat,’ Kersh growled.

The Iron Cage sang with the clash of fevered blades and the grunts of superhuman exertion as Kersh and the Fire Lords Chaplain did their utmost to best one another. Kersh was a killer of champions. It was his duty on the battlefield to neutralise the direst individual threats and cut down the best the enemy had to offer, freeing his Chapter Master to strategise and direct his Adeptus Astartes forces. His swordcraft was clean, brutal and, like his primarch, often demonstrated flashes of inspired invention that were difficult for his enemies to counter. The Chapters attending the Feast of Blades only sent their best, however, and his opponent was an equally gifted brute. His blade swirled and swooped like the raging of an inferno. He passed the gladius rapidly from hand to hand with ambidextrous skill and confidence. Where the blade wasn’t the Chaplain’s fists and boots were, and it was all Kersh could do to parry and deflect the rhythmic barrage. The Chaplain’s movements were entrancing and his form, despite his grievous injury, perfect.

The Fire Lord’s blade slithered through Kersh’s savage defence and nicked the Scourge above the brow. A curtain of blood washed over his eye. As the paralytic seized him, Kersh felt one half of his face freeze up. The eye closed and his lip began to droop on one side. He compensated with a desperate lunge unworthy of his training or Chapter standing. The Fire Lord hissed through his flint-clenched jaws once more. This time Kersh realised that the tongue of flame was aimed at his gladius. The orange gout evaporated about the blade, leaving the metal steaming and tacky. With horror, Kersh realised that the Fire Lord had cleansed his blade of the paralytic toxin.

The assault continued and, as Kersh's sword was battered this way and that by the Fire Lord, blocks shifted and the dark landscape of the Cage changed about them. A block had descended immediately behind Kersh creating a small pit. Half-blind and hobbled, with the pit edge behind and the irresistible onslaught of the Chaplain in front, the Scourge was trapped. He felt the audience's expectation and his own desperation on the air. A seed of doubt blossomed within him, and he felt the weight of the apparition's gaze. For a moment the Darkness returned and Kersh knew a universe without hope. Perhaps his affliction had damned them all and the Excoriators were doomed to failure. To fail at the Feast. To fail as a Chapter.

Kersh became intensely aware of the limitations of his Adeptus Astartes body; what it could do and what it couldn't. He was to be bested by a brother more worthy of the Emperor's beneficence. A true son of Dorn. A master of the blade. An actual champion of champions.

The Fire Lord had found him. The Chaplain's blade struck out with such fluid force that it not only smashed the Excoriator's plated gauntlet to pieces, but broke several bones in his hand and knocked the gladius through the air like a propeller. Both warriors watched the blade clatter to the ground nearby. The end had come. They both knew it.

The Fire Lord arched. It was to be a strike from above. Something suitably dramatic to finish the Excoriator. To cut him down and drop his beaten body into the grave that had opened up beyond. A warrior vanquished. A Chapter routed. Honour tarnished.

One side of Kersh's lip curled. His gauntlet shot up, batting the Fire Lord's arm back. Snatching up the Chaplain's rosarius, the Excoriator back-slashed the Space Marine across the face with the adamantium aquila. Gritting his teeth and holding on to the wire cord with both his gauntlet and smashed hand, Kersh leant into a centrifugal swing. Using his weight as the counter-balance, the Scourge swung his opponent about him.

Dragged around, the Fire Lord fell back over Kersh's trailing leg. The two Space Marines toppled. Kersh fell to the floor, but not before he had tossed the Fire Lord into the pit behind him.

Even prone, Kersh saw the flailing Chaplain strike the edge of the opening's far side. The impact knocked the gladius from his hand and together both sword and Space Marine disappeared into the darkness. Kersh pushed himself up, balancing on one leg. He hobbled over to his own sword and scooped up the weapon with his unbroken hand. Limping back, he proceeded to half-scowl down into the depths. The Fire Lord lay on his broken back, his ragdoll form spread out across the bottom of the pit. Grasping fingertips reached out for his gladius, the weapon having fallen just out of reach.

‘Yield, brother,’ Kersh called down to the Fire Lord.

‘Not to you,’ the Chaplain finally managed, his voice just above a strangled hiss. ‘Not to the dishonourable wretch they call the Scourge. Not to the unfavoured of Dorn.’

Kersh narrowed his eye. He nodded slowly.

‘As is your right, brother.’

The Excoriator spun the gladius around in his gauntlet, so that he gripped the cross guard and the weapon's pommel and grip protruded between his fingers. The blade he held parallel to his wrist and forearm. Sliding down onto his chest, Kersh dropped down into the pit. He knelt on the Fire Lord's chestplate and brought back the sword hilt, ready to strike. The Chaplain's eyes said it all. He would not surrender. The gallery waited. The Fire Lord would not yield. Kersh retracted his arm, ready for the first, merciless blow.

‘Kersh!’ the Apothecary called down, unable to disguise his disgust – even in a single word. The Scourge turned his head slightly. Above him, at the edge of the pit, was an Imperial Fists contest arbitrator. The aged Adeptus Astartes looked down on them both. With grizzled hesitation, the

arbitrator raised a solemn gauntlet at the Excoriator's gate. The Fist nodded to Ezrachi and left.

Kersh sagged. Returning his gaze to the Chaplain he found a little of the fire gone from the Space Marine's eyes. Using the sides of the pit for balance, he stood as best he could and threw the gladius down at the still body of his mauled opponent.

'It seems I was favoured by Dorn today, brother,' he announced before spitting some of his own blood at the stone wall. Kersh looked up at the domed cage ceiling and the stunned audience above. He saw Bethesda – her face unreadable – and Ezrachi, whose bleak revulsion was all too easy to read. The apparition, it seemed, had gone. With no little revulsion of his own, Kersh finally called up to the gallery.

'Who's next?'

I am not sleeping, yet even as I think this, I know this to be a kind of sleep. Within his daily regimen of training, cult devotion and litany, an Excoriator allows himself four hours of rest. The demands of a single day in the Adeptus Astartes would kill an ordinary man. Our engineered forms are biological instruments of the Emperor's will, but the mind needs rest. There is much to learn; errors to interrogate; the capabilities of an Angel's body to master. Ever since the Darkness, I have been unable to lose myself in what might be described as a natural sleep.

My body is beaten and bruised. Some of my bones are broken. My blood swims with magna-opioids and growth hormones that help repair my injuries. A punishing training schedule and the ever more punishing contestations of the Feast are followed by 'the purge' and penititorium, the ritual purification of the flesh. My body, superhuman though it might be, is exhausted, but my mind will not submit. Abatement comes only in the form of catalepsean abstractions, like the one I assume I am experiencing now. Different parts of my genetically altered brain are allowed to shut down in sequence, while I remain in a state of semi-wakefulness. I have rested this way even in the lethal environs of death world phase-forests and

quakeclonic superstorms. Your survival instincts remain intact while parts of the mind are allowed to rest. It cannot replace sleep, however, and the distinction between what is an abstraction and what is real is increasingly difficult to make.

Sitting here, I did not realise that I had entered such a state. I am down in the hold of the Scarifica. Despite my successes in the Feast of Blades, my presence on the dormitory decks and in the refectory is still not tolerated by my Excoriator brothers. Corpus-Captain Gideon has allowed me restricted use of the penitorium, chapel-reclusiam and the apothecarion – although I avoid the practise cages. Most of my preparation takes place down on the planet surface. Apart from the ceremonial presence of the Imperial Fists about the purpose-built Cage colosseum, only a garrison of the Thracian Fourth remains on Samarquand. All other resources are stationed on the cordon, keeping the Great Tusk and its greenskin invaders away. When I asked why the Fists would select such a place for the site of the Feast, Ezrachi told me that it was customary for the hosts to select the site of a recent Chapter victory for the contest location. Such choices were in line with the martial heritage of the Fists and their affiliated Chapters. With battles against greenskin blockade runners proceeding above our heads, and Imperial Guard cleanse and burn sorties decontaminating the earth for kilometres around, such a choice smacked of theme and pride. Regardless, it left me with the solitude of the ash fields and the apocalyptic ruins of a reclaimed world as my training ground.

I am sitting on a cargo crate. I sense the Apothecary and his Helix-serfs about me. My own people also. Ezrachi's servants work solemnly on my face. Their needlework is neat and confident, and my flesh is a tessellation of stitching and stapled gashes. Between the nipping bladework of Sergeant Tenaka of the Death Strike and brutal headbutting I received from the hulking, nameless Crimson Fist I had the unfortunate honour of

crossing swords with in the latter stages, my face is a mess. I know that each of these scars – these excoriations – are Katafalque's blessing and the mark of Dorn, but my skull aches and my features feel as though they have been reassembled like a child's puzzle. Ezrachi's aides do their best with what's left.

The good Apothecary works on my swordarm himself. The crate is covered with surgical foil, and Ezrachi's instruments are laid out along the strapped-down length of my forearm. My flesh is open and the inner workings of the limb exposed. In the previous round, Knud Hægstad of Brycantia thought it prudent to shatter my arm – unhappy at what it was doing with a gladius on the end of it. I had the Iron Knight pay for the injury by cleaving off his hand – gauntlet, gladius and all – with the finest overhead downcut I believe I have ever performed. Dorn demands perfection. Demetrius Katafalque writes in detail on the sound a blade should make during the successful execution of such a manoeuvre, and the sword sang like a Terran songbird. Perfection is an ideal to which I aspire, but an imperfect victory still has a great deal to recommend it.

Ezrachi informed me that such an action, although legal in tournament terms, had offended several of the participant Chapters, the Iron Knights and Imperial Fists among them. It was not my intention to invoke an insult, an echo of the primarch's own severed hand. That was how it was received by the Brycantians, however – a polemic and litigious breed, more interested in the detail of ritual law and tournament etiquette than victory itself. They petitioned my disqualification, and not for the first time. Earlier in the Feast, I left a former champion of the same Chapter called Hervald Strom gutted and all but dead on the Cage floor. A full day's delay to the Games was called. A day for Ezrachi to attend to my wounds and Shiloh Gideon to berate me – although behind the corpus-captain's words I sensed an unmistakable pride and relief. The dishonour of conduct in

battle was preferential to the dishonour of early defeat. Strom lived, tough Brycantian bastard that he is, and my advancement was allowed.

The Excoriators would not indulge in such Chapter politics. There were no appeals on the ramparts of the Imperial Palace. No petitions to be had with the Sons of Horus, degenerate World Eaters or the warsmiths of Perturabo. When Berenger of the White Templars took my eye, I did not call for the tournament official or Feast charta. I did not yap like a dog, protest or pontificate. I fought on, like I was born to do. I took the only thing that mattered from my opponent: victory. I tire of rules and regulations. I yearn for the cold simplicity of the battlefield, where enemies were at least good enough to signal defeat with their deaths.

The Apothecary attended to my eye and offered a bionic equivalent. I refused. Ezrachi and Hadrach insisted that I would see better than with the original, but I cared not. When pressed they admitted that the change in depth perception would take some getting used to. I couldn't afford the distraction this late in the contest. I opted for a simple ball-bearing to be inserted instead as a temporary measure. The matt, scratched surface of the metal revolves as I move my head. I catch others watching its motion. Ezrachi insists he'll replace it after the Feast, but I have to admit that it is growing on me. The Apothecary already has his hands full with my shattered arm. He is surgically inserting an adamantium pin and piston arrangement that runs the interior length of the limb.

My serfs make themselves busy about my sitting form. With my arm strapped, there is little in the way of blood. What there is Oren moodily massages into the deck with his mop. Old Enoch is on his knees, babbling prayers and incomprehension. Bethesda is beside me, working around Ezrachi's aides. She's applying a moistened cloth to my brow, for all the comfort it gives me. I allow this irrelevance to continue. She is young and my form more than mortal. Her reverence is only human and if such

meaninglessness gives her comfort then who am I to deny such minor mercies?

Of course, my visitor is here. It indulges in what might be described as an otherworldly pacing, the inky blackness of the hold giving up its armoured form before the phantasm disappears, again one with the darkness. I catch it in the periphery of my vision. It seems always there, even when it's not. Once, in the chapel-reclusiam, I turned to find it beside me. The cleaved faceplate of its helmet radiated a chillness that turned my breath to fog. I heard its teeth chatter and, as I turned away, I caught once again the helmet interior and the fleshless face within.

It seems never not with me. On the dark and lonely passages of the lower decks I hear the distant footfalls of the revenant. On Samarquand its distant form stands atop the ruins and on the smouldering horizon, observing my progress as I run, train and fight. It is there above the Cage, always. I no longer look for its macabre presence, for I know I will find it amongst the colosseum crowds. Watching. In silent appreciation it stands, never talking, but a seeming supporter of my gladiatorial efforts.

'Wake him,' I hear a voice command. I know the voice. It is Corpus-Captain Gideon.

'I am awake.'

The corpus-captain entered the gloom of the cargo compartment. His eyes flashed around the chamber. It was clear that the Excoriator had never been down in the hold before. Beside him Chaplain Dardarius glowered in his dark plate.

'Chaplain Dardarius,' Kersh greeted the Excoriator. 'The good corpus-captain has allowed me restricted visitation to the chapel-reclusiam, yet when I am there you are not. Have you come down here to hear my affirmation? To cleanse my soul of doubt with your counsel as the lash cleanses my flesh of weakness?'

The gaunt Dardarius looked from Kersh to the sarcophagus that still decorated the chamber floor and then to Ezrachi, who busied himself with the surgery. ‘Chaplain?’ the Scourge pressed.

‘Later,’ Gideon instructed. ‘The Master of the Feast has made his ruling.’

‘Fortinbras came himself?’ Ezrachi asked, getting up off his adamantium knee and allowing an aide to close up the surgery.

‘And?’ Kersh said.

‘Fortinbras rules in favour of a continuance.’

Kersh looked to the Apothecary and his arm. ‘Let’s finish this.’

‘There’s a condition,’ the corpus-captain said.

‘Yes,’ Kersh agreed with building annoyance. ‘It’s a little matter called victory.’

‘The Fists have ruled in our favour,’ Dardarius added with low contempt. ‘But the corpus-captain’s equivalents amongst the remaining Chapters do not recognise your legitimacy, Scourge.’

‘They’ll recognise my blade as it comes for them.’

‘They will not honour you with sole engagement.’

‘What does that mean?’ Ezrachi put to the Chaplain.

‘It means their cowardice prevents them from stepping into the arena with me,’ Kersh barked.

‘Their honour prevents it,’ Dardarius corrected.

‘Again,’ Ezrachi asked. ‘What does that mean?’

‘The same honour also prevents them from claiming victory in the Feast without your besting,’ Gideon said. ‘Therefore, Master Fortinbras, with the primarch’s wisdom, has decreed that the Feast of Blades be decided by a three-way duel.’

‘A three-way duel...’ Ezrachi nodded.

‘The champions of the Fists and the Black Templars need not besmirch their reputations by facing you in single engagement,’ Dardarius informed

them, ‘yet their victory will be rightful in your defeat.’

‘You seem confident of their success, Lord Chaplain,’ Kersh accused.

Dardarius took a moment. ‘You face Alighieri of the Black Templars. A devout Brethren of the Sword, a Castellan and veteran of the Volchis, Deltamagne and Hive Nimbus Crusades. He is half your age but has twice your conquests to his name. As for Montalbán, he is Pugh’s champion and the best of the Fists – the best of all of us, perhaps.’

‘I find your lack of faith inspirational, Chaplain,’ Kersh told him.

Dardarius simply bowed his head.

‘Well, that is the situation, brothers,’ Gideon said finally. He looked to Ezrachi. ‘Get him planetside. Get him in his plate.’

‘And what from you, corpus-captain?’ Kersh asked. ‘Any advice?’

Gideon pursed his lips. ‘Do what you do best.’ The Excoriators captain went to leave. ‘Don’t lose.’

Montalbán. Alighieri. Kersh.

The Excoriator was surprised to find the rush of combat – the mad murderous scramble of gladiatorial confrontation – absent from the Cage. There were no stealth approaches or ambush attacks. No battle calls and no furious charges. The Imperial Fist and Black Templar simply walked out into the arena and composed themselves by their barbica-entrances. It was refreshing. All the while the Cage itself seemed to dominate with the mechanical thunk of blocks and floors moving about them, with pits opening and simple towers rising from the symbolic architecture. The Cage seemed in overdrive.

Above, Kersh saw that the gallery was crowded with superhuman silhouettes. The sons of Dorn had gathered to witness the final of the Feast; to discover which Chapter would demonstrate themselves worthy of their brothers’ esteem and be granted centennial custodianship of the primarch’s blade. History was about to be made. The eight hundred and

sixteenth Feast of Blades was to end and a champion be immortalised in memory.

Alighieri was a devout killer. Zealot. Fanatic. A devotee of victory. He knew no fear. Doubt had never known a home in his pious hearts and his belief was absolute – in his primarch, his Emperor and his Imperium. The Black Templar was already on his knees in the arena grit, indulging in a warrior's blessing. The dim light of the Cage shone off his bald crown and the bleak line of a mouth ran beneath the lustrous length of his crusader's moustache. Alighieri was all about the moment. He lived his penitence and existed in a perpetual state of judgement – both on his enemies and himself.

Montalbán, by contrast, radiated presence. He was huge, second only in size to the savage Crimson Fist Kersh had fought in the earlier round. Unlike Alighieri, Montalbán's belief grew from a place deep within his colossal chest. His faith was that of an Angel, long accustomed to the supreme capabilities of his superhuman body. He already thought of himself as a champion of champions. A symbol in flesh, sculpted in Dorn's own image, whose eyes were not the pinpoints of grim determination that belonged to his Black Templar opponent, but gleaming, grey discs of adamantium assurance. A warrior who had played through the engagement in his mind a hundred times and had won every time. The Imperial Fist went through rudimentary flexes and stretches. His throbbing arms and shoulders were like rolling foothills to the tabletop mountain of his blond hair and graven brow, and beneath these hung a stoic visage of immortal calm.

Both Adeptus Astartes looked virtually untouched by the trials of the Feast so far, a testament to their skill and the ease with which they had despatched their opponents. Kersh looked like hell in comparison and decidedly ugly in his display of stitches and scarring both old and new. With his remaining eye the Excoriator caught a glint of light off the

mirrored blade of a gladius. Montalbán strode over to the weapon and picked it up in one meaty gauntlet. Looking over at Alighieri he found that the Black Templar had ascended the wall of a mock-battlement. Stepping lightly across the merlon-tops, the Castellan found the second gladius and picked it up nimbly.

Kersh felt suddenly vulnerable.

‘Scourge!’

Kersh heard Montalbán call him and turned back. The mighty Imperial Fist was stood over the third sword. Kersh died a little inside. The blades had been randomly placed. It was not the kind of fortune he’d been hoping for. Hooking the tip of his gladius under one of the sword’s cross guards, Montalbán scooped the weapon up into the air. It spun the distance between them before being snatched out of its flight by the Scourge. With the gladius firmly in his grip, Kersh nodded his appreciation.

‘For all the good it will do you,’ Montalbán announced across the animated arena. He flashed his eyes at the Excoriator in mock surprise. ‘Here comes Alighieri. It begins...’

Alighieri was there. Like some feudal knight in an ogre’s cave, the Black Templar launched himself at Montalbán from the battlement, gladius clutched in both hands. Kersh admired the Castellan’s courage. It had been a brave opening gambit. The Imperial Fist turned on his heel and smacked the blade aside with his own, although the weapon looked comparatively short in the giant Montalbán’s fist. Alighieri hit the dark stone floor of the cage, tumbled and rolled, landing back on his feet like a cat. He came straight back at the Imperial Fist with immaculate bladework, each swipe and slash a manoeuvre of cold conviction.

It became immediately apparent to Kersh that although undeniably skilled, Montalbán’s fearsome reputation as Chapter Master Pugh’s champion was not built upon swordplay. He was fast for one so tall, however, and the power of each strike was irresistible. For every stabbing

riposte the Templar offered in the wake of the champion's broad sweeps, Alighieri suffered the reply of a hammerfall of cleaving cuts and smashes.

As blades sparked and the Black Templar was pounded back, Kersh found his grip tighten around his own gladius and his hesitant steps pick up speed. It was not fear that had slowed his advance, although the Excoriator feared it might be interpreted as such if he dallied much longer. It was opportunity. He had been unfortunate with the positioning of the gladius, but the opportunity to witness even a few seconds of his opponents at each other's throats was a welcome gift. Kersh took in the Imperial Fist's reach and his preference for scything sweeps and rapid downcutting. The Space Marine treated his blade like an extension of his arm, driving the razored edge at his opponent with brute proficiency.

Alighieri, the Scourge observed, guided his gladius. His technique betrayed a crusader's bluntness, but the Castellan had a clear respect for the weapon's balance. His wrists did much of the work, working within the counter-arcs of both pommel and fulcrum. He favoured the tip of the leaf-shaped blade, relying on its length for the demands of a hasty defence, and worked the weapon with an even speed and rhythm. Strike for strike, the Templar was the better swordsman, but round after round Montalbán had smashed the skill senseless from his opponents' hands and it appeared that Alighieri would be little different.

Within moments Kersh was among them. The Scourge was a killer rather than a fighter. He lacked both the Black Templar's deftness with the blade and the centrifugal power of Montalbán's swordarm. The Excoriator's gladius came at them both with murderous intent, however. His first few swings spoke of a squat ferocity, the first almost taking out the giant Montalbán's throat and the second flashing narrowly before Alighieri's face. The pair instantly sensed the threat and responded with a double-dealing of punishing bladework. Kersh could barely get his gladius between the Black Templar's stabbing weapon and Montalbán's

bludgeoning, overhead barrage. He wouldn't have achieved that if it hadn't been for the pair's own exchanged blows.

With the impact of the Imperial Fist's weapon still ringing through his own and up through his arm and shoulder, Kersh rolled beneath a low, opportunistic swipe from Alighieri. Out from between his brothers, Kersh assumed a defensive posture at the apex of the revolving triangle the three Space Marines had created. If the sons of Dorn formed the points, the clash of blades gave the shape its scalenic sides.

As the battle roamed the Cage, the architecture of the arena transformed about the three warriors, adding the simple danger of disappearing footholds and floorspace to the evolving deathtrap of blades slicing up the air between them. The movement of the blocks in symbolic representation of the Iron Cage fortress was more than disorientating. Preoccupations with footing, falling and hazards sapped the only seconds the Space Marines had to spare between the furious onslaught of their opponents' blades. Serrated discs spun like circular saws along the gaps between floor blocks, forcing the Adeptus Astartes to sidestep and jump in their carapace.

Pummelled into the ground by Montalbán's unremitting overhead assault, Kersh was forced to roll across a quad of blocks set with vents that were flush to the stone. As the Excoriator tumbled, the vents emitted a volatile gas that was sparked and ignited about him. Burying his head in his arms, Kersh rolled shoulder over shoulder until he emerged, hair singed and armour smoking from the shallow field of flame. A pit had unexpectedly opened up beneath Montalbán and the giant had dropped down into a darkness into which Alighieri and the Scourge were forced to follow.

The Black Templar was easily the most sure-footed of the combatants, but even he could do little to avoid the clouds of thick, greasy smoke that erupted from grilles in the floor beneath the Space Marines' boots. The

tacky fog smeared the skin and ceremonial carapace, as well as gunging up the eyes and enveloping the warriors in brief banks of billowing gloom. Through the smog, sword strikes lost their discipline and technique lost out to the hack and slash of open opportunity. All three of the participants' blades made contact through the smoke, but it was impossible to tell which strike belonged to which warrior.

Alighieri received a slash across his forehead, an arm and a leg, considerably hampering the Black Templar's former grace and agility. Kersh took a swordpoint in the groin – at the top of his left thigh – as well as a slice across the back of the neck running parallel with the line of his carapace. The Excoriator felt the now familiar spider-bite numbness creep through his flesh as the paralytic took effect. His head began to droop to one side and the Scourge was forced to bunch his shoulders and tense the sinew in his neck to rawness in order to keep it upright. Montalbán emerged the worst hit, being the largest target in the greasy blindness. A razor edge had found a backstrap on his carapace, cutting it free and allowing the ceremonial armour to fall away from his broad, muscular chest. The hulking Imperial Fist was adorned with crippling nicks and slashes across his shoulders and down one leg, but seemed unconcerned. His movements were as assured as they were before, the giant simply pushing through the paralysis like a runaway train that had blown its brakes. Grabbing the chestplate, Montalbán tore it free of his perfect form and tossed it aside.

The nightmare of battle went on. Dorn and his Fists had endured weeks of torment and relentless assault at the design of Perturabo and his traitor Iron Warriors. There the battle-brothers had come to know each other's true worth as both warriors and spiritual siblings, this as part of their own primarch's design. As the crowds built and gathered in the gallery above the Cage and the spectacle of superhuman endeavour and skill continued, it became apparent that some of that same hard-won respect and the

kindred bond of Dorn's spirit had been ignited between the three warriors. Too many blades had been turned aside and too many brief fantasies of triumph had been quashed for the Emperor's Angels not to feel the sting of Legion pride in their brothers' indefatigable efforts.

Neither Montalbán, Alighieri or the Scourge had any idea how long they had been fighting. It was not the weeks of their brothers' historic trials, but it was longer than all of the other rounds and contestations of the eight hundred and sixteenth Feast added together. Movement became a sluggish blur and detail of the surrounding arena ran like painting left out in the rain. The snarling faces of Montalbán and Alighieri flashed before Kersh. So furious and exhausted was the exchange that at one point the Scourge fancied he even saw his own face amongst the glint of blades.

In the background, beyond the whirlwind of the fray, Kersh sensed his ethereal stalker. In the shattered fragments of reeling moments, the Excoriator caught an impression of his private revenant – not watching from the gallery in ghastly expectation, but down in the evolving arena. It was everywhere. Different places; different moments. An armoured shade, bedecked in death, whose presence seemed to suck the life out of the very space it occupied. It watched and waited with the patience of the grave.

The living in the Cage could only measure the passage of time in the fat beads of sweat shaken from their skin, the ache and burn of their battered bodies and, if they had had the luxury of a spare moment to observe, the closing gap between the faces of their riveted audience and the bars of the domed ceiling-cage of the arena.

The spectators found the contestants closer than ever as the three Space Marines scaled a line of block-columns rising up out of the Cage floor. Bounding from the top of tower to stone tower, the Adeptus Astartes exchanged blows. In yet another fearless move, Alighieri had launched himself across the open space between the towers and landed on the one being defended by Kersh. Somehow the Black Templar had avoided being

cleaved in two by the Scourge and danced in and out of the Excoriator's tiring swordplay. The two were so close that Kersh could hear the incessant stream of battle-catechisms and recitation spilling from the Black Templar's lips. The manoeuvre was even more daring than the Scourge had anticipated, as he discovered when Alighieri made it through the blaze of his blade and clipped the gladius from the fingers of Montalbán, who was swinging for all he was worth atop the tower beyond. The gladius left the Fist's gauntlet and spun through the air above a large pool. Blocks had sunk into the floor of the arena, lined by the towers between which the Space Marines had been leaping. Dirty water had rapidly seeped up through grilles in the block-bottom of the large pit and filled it to a reasonable depth.

Montalbán watched the weapon fly across the water's expanse and clatter to the ground on the other side. Instead of waiting for Alighieri to join him on his tower, the Imperial Fist dropped down the side of the column, sending a quake through the dark stone as he landed. The Black Templar wouldn't have been able to make good on his bold opening since Kersh had come back at him with a lunge that had every right to gut the Castellan. Somehow the nimble Alighieri managed to arc his palsied form about the sword's stabbing path.

The tower suddenly bucked. Kersh initially assumed that the blocks were once more on the move, but a second impact convinced him otherwise. The giant Montalbán was throwing his bulk at the tower base like a beast of the plains felling titanwoods. The third slam of superhuman shoulder against stone took out the base block and toppled the tower. As the column shook and tipped, Kersh lost his footing and went down in an ugly fashion. Striking his chest against the block edge he felt the shell of his fused ribs crack. He clawed at the smooth surface of the dark stone, allowing his gladius to tumble from his grip and into the filthy water

below. The unsuccessful Scourge followed the weapon and was in turn followed and buried by the falling blocks of the collapsed tower.

The fallen column had created a shattered causeway across the pool and a path Montalbán fully intended on using to swiftly reclaim his weapon. Once again, the Black Templar's light feet and balance had proved their worth and the Imperial Fist found a dry Alighieri holding an awkward fighting stance but blocking his way across the stepping stone. The Fist's lips wrinkled in infuriation. Slapping the palms of his gauntlets on a colossal fragment of the broken base block, Montalbán heaved the slab of stone above his head and launched it at the Black Templar. As the rock flew like a meteorite along the path of the causeway, a wide-eyed Alighieri was forced to jump from the bridge and dive into the water.

As his feet found the bottom and the Castellan surfaced, sword in hand, he found himself staring up at Montalbán's rippling chest. The giant had torn the remainder of the base-block out of the arena floor and was once again hefting the rock above the flat-top of his blond hair. Alighieri prepared himself to dive left or right out of the boulder's trajectory. At that moment, like a daemon of the deep, Kersh broke the water's surface. Coming up behind Alighieri he grabbed the Black Templar by both the wrist of his swordarm and his neck. The Castellan struggled in desperation but the Space Marine's speed and agility were no match for the Scourge's meaty arm-lock.

Kersh held Alighieri to him, holding the Black Templar in place and outstretched, resting his forehead against the back of the warrior's skull. The Castellan's face fell as he watched Montalbán hurl the rock at them both. Kersh felt the Templar's bones break as the stone shattered against Alighieri's presented form. The pair were smacked down through the water, leaving a cloud of rock dust to mark the point of dreadful impact.

Once again beneath the surface, the Scourge was slammed into the pool bottom by the weight of the broken block. The back of his head bounced

off the stone and something cracked. Heaving the deadweight of the sinking rock off both himself and Alighieri's motionless body, Kersh kicked off the pool floor only to find his right leg wouldn't answer. It was broken and useless. Clawing for the surface with one hand he dragged the Templar behind him with the other.

He need not have bothered. The arena was morphing about them once again with a mechanical shuddering. Water drained about the Scourge through the grilles, and the pool bottom rose up to meet him.

All three Space Marines were now back on the same level. Alighieri was a broken and bloodied mess. Half of his chest had been caved in by the rock's impact. Kersh slithered up beside him and put his ear to the other half and then to the Black Templar's torn lips. Incredibly, he was still breathing. Barely.

Kersh heard the damp scrape of his blade on the arena floor and craned his stiff neck around to see the giant Montalbán reclaim it from down beside the toppled tower. Swinging it experimentally about him the Imperial Fist advanced. The gallery was silent and still.

'Scourge!' Montalbán called as he strode across the arena. 'The time has come.' Like a great death world predator, the Imperial Fist broke into a run. His sword came up overhead.

Kersh turned back to Alighieri's broken body. His eyes drifted along the Black Templar's arm and to the gladius clutched in his smashed hand. In the mirror blade of the weapon the Excoriator found himself looking at a reflection of the revenant. It peered out through the ceramite shard missing in its midnight faceplate. Kersh saw its teeth rattle and otherworldly life glow from the eye socket of its bleached skull, the full horror of its form revealed through a chink in its armour. An opening. A vulnerability.

Kersh felt the hulking Fist's steps pounding through the floor. He was almost upon the prone and suppliant figure of the Excoriator. 'Are you

ready, brother?’ Montalbán boomed above him. Kersh began to tear feverishly at Alighieri’s broken fingers. With the gladius in his own, the Scourge sat, turned and twisted. Sent catapulting over Kersh’s own bleeding head, the sword shot the short distance between the Excoriator’s loosened grip and Montalbán’s exposed chest.

With a thud the gladius buried itself in the Imperial Fist’s torso. Stumbling, the mighty Montalbán tripped over the prone forms of Alighieri and the Scourge. Crashing to the arena floor, the champion rolled across one shoulder plate before coming to rest on his back. Crawling arm over arm, Kersh dragged himself alongside the fallen giant. The Imperial Fist’s eyes were stricken and wide open. He held his back off the floor and thrust his chest at the cage-dome of the arena ceiling and the spectators beyond. The toxin smeared on the tip and blade-edge of the gladius was spreading through the Space Marine’s chest, paralysing his twin hearts and bringing them to a stop.

‘Am I ready?’ the Scourge hissed in the champion’s ear, repeating his previous question. ‘For anything, brother,’ Kersh told him with blood dripping from his lips. ‘Even you.’

The Excoriator rolled onto his own back and stared up at the gallery of silhouettes staring back at him. ‘Call the Apothecaries!’ he bawled finally. Above, Master Fortinbras nodded his authorisation and the drome-barbica opened. The arena grew still and silent, and figures in gleaming white plate dashed out across the dark stone. Robed serfs and servitors followed with equipment. A Black Templars Apothecary went to work straight away on Alighieri’s crushed chest and collapsed lung.

The Imperial Fists Apothecary expertly withdrew the gladius Kersh had put in Montalbán’s chest. His serfs went to stem the blood pooling and streaming down the side of the champion’s torso. The Apothecary took a pair of hypodermic syringes from a medical crate carried by a gruesome servitor. One at a time the Apothecary stabbed them down through the

muscle and black carapace of the Imperial Fist's breast. With both piercing the Space Marine's hearts the Apothecary depressed the plungers with his palms and administered the anti-paralytic. Montalbán spasmed. The needles twitched in rhythm as the Space Marine's hearts resumed their thunderous beat as the Fist gulped a deep lungful of air.

Ezrachi suddenly appeared above Kersh. The solemnity of the occasion prevented Ezrachi openly celebrating or offering congratulations, but the Apothecary was clearly having difficulty hiding his pride and pleasure behind a mask of professional concern.

'Remain still,' he told the Scourge, an unintentional grin breaking through his usual scowl. 'You have a fractured skull, a multitude of breakages and internal bleeding.'

'I feel tired,' Kersh told him, his speech beginning to slur.

'That'll be the concussion,' Ezrachi said.

'Ezrachi?'

'Yes.'

'Is this a dream?'

The Apothecary watched the Scourge's eyes close. He looked from the prone Black Templar to the giant Imperial Fist. He recalled what it had taken for Kersh to beat them both.

'I hope not.'



CHAPTER FOUR

The Chains of Command

The chapel-reclusiam of the *Scarifica* was all but empty. The Scourge knelt beneath its vaulted ceiling with his eyes cast down on the black marble of the chamber floor. The polished stone reflected a little of the stained-glass brilliance of the window beyond the altar – a tessellate representation of Demetrius Katafalque at Rogal Dorn's side during the post-Heresy crusades of penitence. Kersh brought up his gaze. Before the glorious depiction, laid out across the simple altar, was the length of a highly-wrought stasis casket. The bejewelled case hummed, the temporal suspension of its contents and interior drowned out only by a small choir of chapel servitors. Chaplain Dardarius had the drones embedded in the stone plinths which lined the chamber so that they stood like statues, perpetually engaged in a round of liturgical chants.

Kersh was dressed in full battle-plate, as honour decreed. With the Excoriators frigate well into its journey home and Kersh recovered from his arena injuries, Corpus-Captain Gideon had allowed the Scourge his suit of power armour in quiet recognition of the warrior's achievement. Kersh hadn't worn the plate since the terrible day the Darkness had taken him. The day he had lost the Stigmartyr.

The day he had allowed the filth Alpha Legion to slither past and sink their fangs into his Chapter Master's flesh. The Scourge had experienced mixed feelings upon first donning the ornate ceramite plates. It felt undeniably good to be back in both power armour and his Chapter's colours, but his chest flushed with shame at such gladness. He had come through the Darkness but had left the Chapter in a darkness of its own, bereft of its standard and afflicted with grief and doubt. He was in good health while his Chapter Master writhed in envenomed agony. He was alive when so many of his brethren had fallen. These burdens and more weighed heavily on the Excoriator, and after his daily 'Donning of Dorn's Mantle', Kersh spent time in quiet reflection in the chapel-reclusiam, searching his soul for a little of the primarch's wisdom and fortitude.

Kersh wasn't convinced that Gideon had reunited the warrior with his armour in entirely good faith. The *Scarifica's* journey to Eschara was a circuitous one, returning battle-brother after participating battle-brother to their far-flung companies and Chapter houses across the coreward expanse of the segmentum. Each veteran of the Feast was returned to their corpus-captain in a small but significant ceremony, attended by battle-brothers of their company, senior officers, contestants and Gideon himself. As champion of the Feast of Blades, it was appropriate that Kersh appeared as such, in full battle armour. The Scourge suspected that this consideration – rather than a renewed respect and liking for Kersh – had a great deal to do with the corpus-captain's decision to return the blessed plate to him. A ceremony without a champion would have been embarrassing.

In this way Gideon had also decided to return the Scourge to his commander last. Apart from Kersh's ceremonial significance, his commanding officer was the Chapter Master himself. Since the Excoriators home world of Eschara was the final destination on the frigate's journey, it made sense to deliver the Scourge last. Still, this did little to assuage the warrior's impatience. As he had confided to both

Gideon and Ezrachi, Kersh was eager to return to Eschara, beg forgiveness of Master Ichabod in person and request that Santiarch Balshazar despatch him on a penitence crusade of his own, to track down the Alpha Legion and reclaim the Excoriators Chapter's precious standard. Only through such recompense could the Scourge earn redemption in the eyes of his brothers and achieve a spiritual peace.

About the kneeling Scourge's penitent form his mortal serfs busied themselves, at once dedicated yet inconspicuous. While Techmarine Hadrach was responsible for the maintenance of the ancient plate and the suit's machine-spirit, many Chapter rituals and cult appeasements fell to Kersh's seneschal, lictor and absterge; and there was much to do. The plate was magnificent – as befitting a Scourge of the Excoriators Chapter. Every Excoriator honoured with carrying the Chapter standard or 'Ancient' had worn the suit and it was as old as it was immaculate. Like the banner itself, it displayed the venerated symbol of their brotherhood – the Stigmartyr – on the suit's loincloth. Kersh had considered himself, therefore, part of the standard, making its personal loss all the more grievous.

Seals, chains and brown leather strapping dripped from the suit, but Old Enoch and Oren occupied themselves with the plate itself. The armour was a relic and as such had been heavily modified by Adeptus Astartes artisans, but its studs and robust cabling betrayed its original mark and designation. The ceramite surface was pock-marked and scarred like the meteorite-battered surface of a moon. The ivory paint was mottled silver-grey with burns and bolt-craters from the many engagements the armour had witnessed. It had been the Scourge's honour to add to these. Equally scarred and annotated was the helm sitting on the flagstone before the Scourge. It spoke ugly belligerence with its unsmiling grille, snake-eyed optics, studs like horn buds and a short, brutal crest.

Oren's bulging arms were put to good use rubbing sacred oils into the ancient plate of the suit's pauldrons. Each was a representation of the Stigmartyr: crafted ceramite fists, clutching Kersh's shoulders and shot through with lightning bolts that protruded both front and behind like wicked spikes. The sacred oils preserved the excoriations and provided extra spiritual protection for the plate. Bethesda stood barefoot beside him, reading benedictions of bearing and repairing from a devotional tract, her syllables a sibilant whisper amongst the servitor chanting. Old Enoch knelt beside one gleaming vambrace, a diamond-tip vibro-quill in his bony hand, annotating each nick, scar and hollow with a date and location.

Each of the seneschal's additions bore the same name: Ignis Prime. The planet on which Chapter Master Quesiah Ichabod had come to inspect the mountaintop Excoriators garrison of Kruger Ridge, only to find a slaughterhouse rather than a Chapter house, and a waiting ambush in the form of heretic Alpha Legionnaires. It was there, barricaded in the oratorium, that Zachariah Kersh had fallen to the Darkness, failing both his Master and his Chapter, and allowing the Alpha Legion's victory to become complete.

The Scourge blinked, shaking another abstraction from the mists of his mind. 'Where is the Chaplain?' he asked. He had come to the chapel-reclusiam to see Dardarius, against his better judgement. Since finding a new home for the sacred Dornsblade in his tiny temple, the Chaplain was now rarely found anywhere else. Old Enoch mumbled something unintelligible.

'The corpus-captain sent for him, my lord,' Bethesda answered, closing the tract.

Kersh's eyes narrowed. 'The engines have stopped.'

Old Enoch nodded. The faint rumble was absent from the deck. After the long haul from Samarquand, short jumps and frequent receptions had become the order of the day. As the *Scarifica* moved between the cruisers,

keeps and warzones of the Excoriators Chapter, Kersh had learned that precious little progress had been made in locating an antidote for the toxin slowly eating its way through his Chapter Master. The hazardous environs of feral hellholes and death worlds had not given up their secrets.

Meanwhile, all companies were on high alert. News of Kersh's victory at the Feast of Blades had indeed lifted the hearts of his battle-brethren, but it made their duty of garrisoning the sectors bordering the Eye of Terror no easier. Servants of the Dark Gods were ever ready to test the mettle of Excoriators bastions, gauntlets and cordons, and with recent misfortunes the numbers of battle-brothers holding such precarious boundaries were dwindling.

'Enough,' Kersh commanded, scooping his helmet from the floor and rising to his full height. A sporran arrangement hung across the ceremonial loincloth, holstering an Adeptus Astartes Mark II bolt pistol. The ancient weapon was squat, fat and ugly like a guard dog, and sat within easy reach across the Excoriator's groin to allow not one but two scabbard-sheathed gladii to hug the Scourge's hip. The first bore a bulbous pommel, sculpted in the fashion of a clutched talon of the Imperial aquila. Both gladius and pistol, with the relic plate, accompanied the honour of being the Chapter Scourge.

The second sword was plain and had been with Kersh since his inception as an Adeptus Astartes Space Marine. The Excoriator used it as a functional back-up weapon. With standard held high and a Chapter Master to defend, Kersh did not want to fall to an enemy for want of weaponry, and many enemy champions were skilled in the arts of disarming and blade deprivation. In the end the Darkness had turned out to be the true master of such strategies. Gideon's ceremonies did not necessitate carrying such an arsenal aboard the ship, but traversing the dreadspace about the Eye of Terror did, with all battle-brethren on board instructed to

be armed and ready for the ambushes, boarding actions and unpredictable mayhem the warp rift routinely threw at them.

The serfs lowered their eyes and retreated. The Scourge turned to his seneschal. 'Discover why our engines have stopped.' Old Enoch bowed his head and left. To Oren and Bethesda he simply said, 'Pray, leave me.'

As the lictor and absterge repeated their father's subservience and exited the chapel-reclusiam, the Scourge approached the altar. The bejewelled case was closed. Looking furtively about him, Kersh found the chapel empty but for the blind chorus of the choir. Depressing two gleaming studs the Scourge disabled the case stasis field and opened the casket.

Within was the Dornsblade. Sheathless. Simple. Resplendent. The weapon's spartan honesty had shocked the Scourge at first. With most warriors – even amongst the Adeptus Astartes – the greater the glory of the wielder, the more extravagant the decoration of the weapon wielded. Even laid out on the ermine interior of the stasis casket, the Dornsblade rang with history. It entranced the observer with the dull gleam of honours eternally earned. It was rumoured to be unbreakable, a symbolic reminder of the unbreakable spirit of the Imperial Fists in the face of adversity, given form in the trials of the Iron Cage. It also represented Legion unity during the necessities of the Second Founding.

It was crafted from a single piece of high-grade adamantium and remained completely unadorned. Cross guard, hilt and pommel were all bare metal, with the heavy blade counter-balanced by a solid pentagonal prism, with angular edges and featureless faces. The hilt had been cross-hatched and scored to provide a grip, and the cross guard had been stamped with three simple numerals across its breadth: VII. The blade was razored and featureless, bar its bronzed discolouration, which was believed to be the stain of the traitor blood that had baptised the blade in Rogal Dorn's hand, during the Battle of the Iron Cage.

The blade misted. Kersh suddenly became aware that the temperature in the chapel-reclusiam had dropped. The lamps dimmed and the choir trailed off. The Scourge saw the white clouds of his breath before him.

‘Only you,’ Kersh announced to the temple without turning. ‘Phantom.’ There was no reply but for the chill on the air. The Excoriator turned but the revenant was nowhere to be seen. Kersh suddenly became aware of footsteps in the corridor approaching. The lamps returned to full brightness and the coolness dissipated. Snapping shut the casket and re-engaging the stasis field, Kersh turned just in time to see Gideon enter with Chaplain Dardarius. The Chaplain’s eyes narrowed and his gaunt expression soured. He made it clear he was unhappy with the Scourge’s proximity to the relic blade. Apothecary Ezrachi followed and behind him two strangers entered the chapel-reclusiam.

They were Adeptus Astartes. Excoriators. The first was like Dardarius, a Chaplain, also dressed in midnight black but sporting a hood and cloak mantle in the Chapter’s colours. The second wore the faded blue plate of the Librarian and a surcoat of tattered white identifying his rank as that of an Epistolary. Instead of a helm, a crafted metal hood protected the Librarian from both physical and psychic attack, and the willowy shaft of a war scythe rested in one gauntlet, the wicked blade-tip of the force weapon barely scraping the deck.

‘Corpus-captain,’ the Scourge acknowledged. Gideon looked uncomfortable.

‘May I introduce Chaplain Shadrath and Epistolary Melmoch,’ Gideon said, ‘attached to the Fifth Battle Company.’

Kersh looked to Ezrachi, whose eyes failed to meet his own, and then to Chaplain Dardarius, who glowered back. Both Shadrath and Melmoch walked out before the altar and the case containing the Dornsblade. Shadrath pulled back his hood to reveal a Chaplain’s helmet. From temple to jaw, the faceplate was decorated with a half-skull. He knuckled his

forehead, the half-grille of his helm and then his breastplate – crossing from one heart to the other – before kneeling in front of the relic.

Melmoch, whose piercing eyes and unguarded smile seemed out of place on the psyker's weather-beaten face, merely kissed his fist before joining the Chaplain on the chapel flagstones.

‘No champions for the Feast were selected from the ranks of the Fifth,’ Kersh stated. ‘No offence intended, Chaplain.’

Shadrath said nothing, but came up off his ceramite knee and stared at the Scourge through the darkness of his helmet optics. The Epistolary looked to Kersh also, a knowing smile fixed on his odd features. ‘Then this is about the Stigmartyr,’ Kersh concluded. ‘You have found our sacred standard?’

‘We have not,’ Shadrath admitted, the grille of his helm reverberating with his grave words. ‘Though, we have lost over half our number in the endeavour.’

Kersh felt his face tighten. ‘I...’ he began.

‘...don’t have the words to express the loss of these brothers,’ Shadrath interrupted with plain but savage honesty, ‘both to their company and their Chapter.’

Kersh bridled. ‘Do you have intelligence of the Stigmartyr’s whereabouts or the movements of the traitors who took the standard?’

‘Our reconnaissance is sketchy,’ Shadrath said. ‘The enemy had the benefit of a clean escape and unchallenged withdrawal.’

The Scourge stared hard at the Chaplain’s half-skull helm. Without diverting his eyes, he said to Gideon, ‘Corpus-captain, we have returned the Feast’s contestants to their battle-brothers. Although Chaplain Shadrath is welcome to bathe in the hard-won honour of our contest victory, the *Scarifica*’s schedule is tight and we are needed above Eschara.’

‘You will not be travelling on to Eschara,’ Gideon told him.

‘What?’ the Scourge seethed, at last turning to face the corpus-captain.

‘Chaplain Dardarius and myself will see to it that the sacred Dornsblade is delivered safely to our home world. Have no fear of that.’

‘I am the victor, the champion of champions. It is my right to bear the blade back to our brothers and present it to Chapter Master Ichabod.’

Gideon offered him a data-slate he held in one gauntlet.

‘The Chapter Master has greater honours and greater need for you elsewhere, Scourge. You will not return to his side or even to the decimated First Company. You have been promoted, Kersh. You are corpus-captain of your own company, with all the power and responsibility that entails.’

Zachariah Kersh couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Silence intruded on the gathering.

‘The Fifth...’ he said finally.

‘What is left of it,’ Chaplain Shadrath hissed.

When Kersh didn’t take the data-slate, Gideon stepped forwards and placed it in his ceramite fingertips. ‘Corpus-Captain Thaddeus is dead. Long live Corpus-Captain Kersh. Your orders, corpus-captain,’ Gideon said. ‘From Eschara. From the Chapter Master himself.’

Kersh stared down at the slate. ‘There must be some kind of mistake,’ he insisted. ‘An astrotelepathic error. A garbled communication. Some confusion with the message terminus or destination.’

‘I was the terminus,’ Epistolary Melmoch told him, the broad smile still clear on his warrior’s features. ‘There was no mistake. I transcribed Master Ichabod’s orders personally. He was very specific, as you can read on the slate I’ve prepared for you.’

The Scourge’s gaze was on the floor. His mind light years away.

Gideon spoke. ‘I have taken the liberty of setting your personal serfs to work on packing up your... belongings and transporting them across to the *Angelica Mortis*, the strike cruiser in whose shadow the *Scarifica* currently resides. Your strike cruiser, corpus-captain. You will not be alone, either.

I'm sending Ezrachi with you. Shadrath tells me the Fifth are bereft of their Apothecary as well as their commanding officer and, Emperor willing, we shall make Eschara without need of his talents.'

Kersh looked to the old Apothecary. Ezrachi raised a crabby brow. The Scourge said nothing for a while. 'Kersh,' Gideon said. 'This is a great honour.'

Kersh's face was creased with lines of fresh vexation and responsibility. 'I am corpus-captain of the Fifth...' he said.

'You are,' Chaplain Shadrath confirmed.

'Then may I have the chamber once more, to fully take on board the magnitude of such an honour and consult the Chapter Master's orders?'

Melmoch, still smiling, bowed his head and withdrew from the chamber.

'As you wish,' Shadrath hissed through his helmet half-grille and followed.

Gideon offered his gauntlet. 'I know we've had our differences,' he said, 'but what I saw you accomplish in that arena will stay with me the rest of my days. Let me be the first to congratulate you, corpus-captain.'

Kersh didn't take the offered hand. He turned to face the altar. Eventually, Gideon let it drop and nodded. It was the Scourge's way. As he left, with a sneering Dardarius at his heels, Kersh called, 'I fear you may be the last to do that.'

Gideon stopped and nodded once again.

'Kersh, to command is not to be liked, feared or even respected. It is to be followed. Every corpus-captain finds his way. Some ways are harder than others, but they are all lonely paths,' Gideon told him. 'That's why I left you Ezrachi.' With that, Gideon left the chapel-reclusiam.

Once again, silence reigned.

'This is a mistake,' Kersh said, looking up at the towering stained-glass tessellations of Katafalque and the Primarch Dorn.

‘As corpus-captain you must master the art of the politician,’ Ezrachi answered. ‘It’s never a mistake when the Chapter Master makes it.’

‘I’m the Scourge,’ Kersh said, not seeming to hear the Apothecary. ‘I was born a warrior. I was engineered to kill.’

‘You’re a killer, yes. But killers need to be led, sometimes by other killers. You think yourself not worthy?’

Kersh let the question hang.

‘You are the first Excoriator to win the Feast of Blades. The first of our kind to earn the primarch’s sword. This promotion is just reward for your efforts at the Feast. Also, you are justly qualified for such a position. Before you were the Master’s Scourge you were a squad whip.’

‘First with the Eighth, second squad. Then, like Tiberias, with the Vanguard – First Company.’

‘Then I fail to see the mistake.’

‘The Feast is a distraction. I am afflicted. The Chapter has lost its standard and shares that affliction. I must assume responsibility for the Stigmartyr’s loss and the damage done as a result. I was a fool to think the Master would welcome my return – with or without the Dornsblade. He cannot trust me by his side. This promotion is a convenience. A way to keep me at arm’s length. Like sending me to the Feast in the first place.’

‘From what I know of the Chapter Master, that seems unlikely.’

‘Have you fought by his side for most of your life, Ezrachi?’ Kersh challenged. ‘Been his blade where his could not be, bled in his stead and been the moment between his life and death?’

‘No,’ the Apothecary admitted.

‘Then tell me not of your observations from afar. I know Quesiah Ichabod. He is a fair and honourable master, the best of us by a light year. He is more than a man, but he is still human and feels as humans do. He is dying. Slowly and in agony because he took an assassin’s blade that should have been mine to turn aside or receive. I am the Scourge!’

‘You are human also,’ the Apothecary reminded him. ‘You may think this promotion a return for some perceived failure or betrayal, but I watch as your all-too-human guilt eats away at you, corpus-captain. You punish yourself enough for both you and the Chapter Master. You view the Darkness as an affliction, but perhaps this is the primarch’s wish. Like Ichabod you were spared the butchery of that dark day on Ignis Prime. You both live your pain but are meant for greater things. The Feast of Blades. Company command.’

‘Command?’ Kersh snorted. ‘You honestly think of me as a commander? I am my brother’s right hand and the blade in his blind spot, not a voice on the vox directing that blade. I am not strategist or tactician. I am an attrition fighter in the best traditions of our Chapter, but when I cross blades I little know what I am going to do next, let alone a hundred others. And of the hundred, why the Fifth? Why did it have to be the Fifth?’

‘There is a poetry to the thinking,’ Ezrachi admitted. ‘You think that you earned the displeasure of your Excoriator brothers at the Feast? Wait until you meet the remainder of the Fifth Company. Then you will come to understand the true hatred of brother for brother.’

‘Like the loathing Master Ichabod must hold for me?’

‘Perhaps that is the point. Or perhaps the Master still has much to teach you and this is in turn a much needed lesson. You said it yourself, we are attrition fighters. We endure as you will endure this new responsibility and all that goes with it.’

‘Does your tiresome advice go with it, Apothecary?’

Ezrachi chuckled. ‘I will give you honest counsel when I can. To be corpus-captain is not to have all the answers. You will lead the way and your brethren will follow, it is as simple as that.’

‘I am a poor choice.’

‘But you are the choice. These are the chains of command, Kersh, and they are binding.’ The Scourge nodded.

‘Now, corpus-captain, if you’ll excuse me I have staff and equipment to transfer to the *Angelica Mortis*.’

Kersh nodded once more and the Apothecary withdrew, leaving him alone again in the chapel-reclusiam. He approached the altar, looking up at Katafalque and Dorn. He placed his helm and the data-slate of Ichabod’s orders next to the Dornsblade and knelt before the glass representations. He thought on the trials of the Second Founding. Dorn’s own guilt and the agony of the Codex Astartes’ decree, the division of the Legion into autonomous Chapters. He considered the noble features of Demetrius Katafalque at his primarch’s side. The captain who bled with his men before the walls of the Imperial Palace, under the horrific onslaught of the Warmaster’s siege. Holding out for as long as he could. Putting his body between the enemy and his Emperor. Making them pay in blood for every treasonous step. Demetrius Katafalque, whom Rogal Dorn had designated the first Excoriator. The first Master of their Chapter. The Scourge rested his gauntlet on the pommel of his gladius. The weapon he’d received upon becoming a fully-fledged battle-brother, so many years before.

‘Were you ready?’ Kersh put to the stained-glass Katafalque.

The four men of the God-Emperor knelt before the cardinal’s throne.

‘You think it wise to treat the Adeptus Astartes thus?’

‘How many of their calling have you encountered?’ Pontifex Nazimir asked his brother ecclesiarchs across the ancient’s lap. They too wore their years of faith on their faces, but where the cardinal drooled into his vestments, his sycophants still revelled in the wiles of old men.

‘None,’ Convocate Clemenzen-Krycek admitted.

‘They’re solemn bastards,’ Confessor Tyutchev complained bullishly.

‘Much in love with their own self-importance and genic heritage.’

‘Common Imperials fear them,’ Nazimir said. ‘They are in awe of their blood-bond with the God-Emperor – but in reality the Adeptus Astartes are little more than genestock slaves.’

‘We are still right to fear them,’ Clemenz-Krycek replied. ‘Surely it is hubris to ensnare the Emperor’s Angels and shackle them to our bidding.’

‘You talk of hubris – an Angel’s prerogative,’ Tyutchev interrupted.

‘I will, of course, be guided by your excellencies in this,’ Arch-Deacon Schedonski told them. ‘But I too have some misgivings about using the Adeptus Astartes in this way.’

‘You would ask them politely for assistance, would you?’ Nazimir teased.

‘No—’

‘For it would be futile. They think themselves removed from the concerns of modern men.’

‘They think of themselves,’ Tyutchev repeated, ‘as the giants of old, battling alien barbarians on far-flung worlds, repeating the mistakes of their failed crusade.’

‘They still look outwards,’ Nazimir said, ‘acting on orders given ten thousand years hence, from an Emperor who was not all He would be. They do not appreciate as we do, the God-Emperor’s divinity.’

‘They deny it.’

‘A brand of heresy in itself,’ Clemenz-Krycek agreed.

‘It would not be the first heretical thought an Adeptus Astartes has entertained,’ Nazimir chuckled darkly, and the four priests made the sign of the aquila.

‘Perhaps a deceit would be preferable,’ the convocate advocated. ‘A truth even, one that played to the Angel’s noble inclinations.’

‘There is no need for such subtlety,’ Nazimir insisted. ‘The Adeptus Astartes were built to fight, not to think. Obedience is wired into their cult observance and fealty to their forefather. Being a martial breed, they are at their best when issued with straight orders and instruction. Their power is ours to wield.’

‘What do you know of these Excoriators?’ Schedonski said.

‘They descend from Dorn’s blood, I think, and favour mortifications of the flesh. They are, of course, one of the Astartes Praeses and have many honours to their name, won garrisoning the Eye and battling the dark forces of the Black Crusades. Their recent history escapes me.’

‘What if this does not go to plan?’ Clemenz-Krycek asked. ‘What if they refuse?’

Nazimir considered the question. ‘The Angels Eradicant Third Company takes supplies and munitions at Port Kreel. A sizeable contingent of White Consuls approaches the subsector from victory in the Ephesia Nebula to the galactic east. Then, there is the Viper Legion on Hellionii Reticuli. We exchange one of their names for the Excoriators Chapter in the record and repeat, until some of these wayward scions finally listen to their God-Emperor’s wishes from our lips.’

‘What if they become unruly?’ Clemenz-Krycek put to the gathering.

‘The convocate has a point,’ Schedonski agreed. ‘We’ll be exposed. Defence force troops garrison the palace – common soldiers are not traditionally tolerated within its holy chambers.’

‘Worry not about our security,’ Confessor Tyutchev assured them. ‘Our frater brothers will not allow violence against us.’

‘You are too close to the Redemptionists,’ Clemenz-Krycek warned.

‘To every shepherd a flock,’ the thick-set confessor replied. ‘Besides, we have the Sisters.’

‘It is settled then,’ Nazimir said and watched Tyutchev and Schedonski nod, followed finally by Clemenz-Krycek. Tyutchev took Cardinal Pontian’s hand. It was thin and frail with swollen joints and skin spotted with age. On one finger the cardinal bore a ring of office bearing the holy symbol of the Adeptus Ministorum. Tyutchev bowed his head to kiss the ring. With his lips to the sacred symbol he squeezed the cardinal’s hand. Crushing several bones within, the confessor prompted the dribbling ecclesiarch to momentarily break his aged insensibility and groan.

‘The cardinal has spoken,’ Pontifex Nazimir proclaimed. ‘And through him, the God-Emperor’s will is known to us...’

I am tempted to think of this as a dream, but know it to be a mere daydream of a nightmare. I lie in my private cell, with space and sparse luxury that as corpus-captain I am yet to get used to. I feel a claustrophobic anxiety crushing me into the stone slab of the berth, regardless. The weight of a responsibility that had not existed before. Ezrachi insists I will grow into it, comparing the feeling to the deadweight of plate first worn and the way in which before long the suit becomes part of the body and no more of a burden than the weight of the limb lifted to swing a gladius or aim a bolter. I am not so sure. Fifty Adeptus Astartes now live or die at my command, with a full squad of those Space Marine Scouts from the Tenth Company, assigned to bolster our numbers. I can feel the weight of their expectations within my chest, making it difficult for me to catch my breath.

There are far worse things waiting behind the lids of my eyes, however. For days now I seem privy to a slideshow of the mind. Images stab into my consciousness without warning during purification, briefings, cage practise and moments of calm reflection in the cruiser reclusiam. Experiences of wanton violence, delivered or received, with perspectives changing between horrible visions from perpetrator to victim. There is blood always, accompanied by suffering and screams, sometimes my own. When I’m not screaming, I’m roaring my jubilant rage. The horror is there and then it is gone, leaving me an irregular beating of the hearts and the copper-tang of blood in the mouth.

At first I considered these flashes of murderous lust to be some manifestation of my existing haunting, that my phantom was to blame. Since I could not consult Chaplain Shadrath over anomalies without crumbling whatever derelict authority I had with the Fifth Company, I reported this new symptom to Ezrachi. I was surprised to find that he too had been experiencing the visions. Further investigation by the Apothecary revealed that we were not the only ones. Without a medical

explanation, the haughty Chaplain in turn had to be consulted to provide a spiritual perspective.

The door rumbles aside and Bethesda enters the cell with a bowl. The bowl rattles against the plate upon which it is sitting. If I had been asleep the sound would have woken me. It is Bethesda's way of announcing her arrival. I sit up and check the time. We are in warp translation. Outside the eddies and currents of the immaterium – a sight never meant for human eyes – ripple and swirl as the Angelica Mortis slows and charges her warp engines, ready to tear her way back into reality. I must confess to an unsettled stomach. I cannot tell whether it is simply the ether-draught of different vessels or the styles of the Navigators piloting them, but this warp jump feels different. I have never had an appetite for warp travel but had just got used to the Scarifica's smooth passages and the slim frigate's knife-like dimensional shifts. The strike cruiser, by comparison, is a blunt-nosed beast that bulldozes its way through the currents of the empyrean. The Angelica Mortis's Navigator – who I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting – goes about his translation like a Land Raider ramming through a blast door. I can feel the vessel below me, smashing through the troughs and prevailing drifts rather than riding them like the Scarifica had done.

There, stood by the opening arch, is my phantom. It has been stood there in the darkness, as has become its unsettling habit, cast in the brilliance of the warp. Its black armour shines with the indescribable spectrum of light and colour flooding the cell. It is almost constantly with me now. Always somewhere, unobtrusive, providing a ghastly background. Whatever it is, it seems to be perpetually on guard, casting me in the role of either prisoner or protectee. I am either being guarded or guarded against. The revenant never speaks but is merely there and ever more so.

The bulkhead opens and my seneschal and lictor enter. They have new robes, as befitting the serfs of an Excoriators corpus-captain. I blink as they file in past the armoured apparition. They seem not to see the thing.

This is new. Usually the phantom disappears in the presence of the living. This time it remains for all to see, but for the fact that my serfs seem not to see it at all – the darkness of its armoured form becoming a peripheral blind spot or clouding in the corner of the eye.

Old Enoch mumbles an officious greeting. He is carrying the freshly oiled ‘purge’, ready for my purification. I look to the living and the dead, stunned at how I can be seemingly inbetween. I nod and stand. A moody Oren deposits a bowl of fresh water by my berth and follows his father into my private and adjoining penitiorium. Bethesda holds before her the bowl of sourdough bread and Escharan figs. I’m not hungry and give an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

‘You must eat, my lord – to keep up your strength,’ the absterge says. She deposits the plate on the stone of the berth. I go to refute the suggestion but the girl pops a fig into my mouth before I can. She moves to the bowl of water and wrings out a rag. The figs are sweet and more pleasant than I remember. Grumbling, I take another from the plate to settle my warp-churning stomach.

As Bethesda cleanses my flesh in readiness for my purification, Old Enoch and Oren prepare the penitiorium for my ‘Donning of Dorn’s Mantle’. Two misshapen servitors enter also, wheeling in the caterpillar-tracked frame upon which my helm and relic armour hangs. My eyes linger on the sheathed blades dangling on their belts from the mount.

After Dorn’s Mantle I don my plate, each piece of ceramite locked and sealed in place by the serfs and servitors. Clearing and reloading my bolt pistol I slip it into my navel holster while Old Enoch and Oren belt my gladii to my hip. The only new addition to the ensemble is Corpus-Captain Thaddeus’s chainsword – a Fifth Company heirloom. A Ryza-pattern rarity, the weapon is relatively short and falchion-shaped, making it perfect for use in areas with restricted space like tunnels and the meat-

grinding throngs of battle. The weapon and its harness are strapped to my other thigh.

Oren carries my helm as I make my way through the dormitories, cell blocks and refectory of the strike cruiser. Everywhere I go, unsurprisingly, eyes are averted and heads bowed – a sign of passive defiance easily disguised as subservient acknowledgement. The battle-brothers of the Fifth Company have not forgotten themselves. They are the Adeptus Astartes, proud and bound by centuries of ritual and stricture. I can see through the martial routine and cult observance, however. I see tight jaws and eyes red-rimmed with defeat and loss. They feel the emptiness of the Angelica Mortis and hear the echoes of their butchered brethren. I can hear the snap of the lash with greater regularity than cult observance requires. A company punishing itself beyond the healthy parameters of its primarch's teachings. Penitoria decks awash with blood. Angels, angry with themselves, furious at me; hollow vessels filling with hate and frustration. I have lived this loathing and there is but one cure. To become honour's avenger, to right wrongs in the heat of battle; vengeance, surgically applied – the solemn duty for which we were created.

This company is one big open wound. I feel it in the halls and corridors. I feel it across the table of the tactical-oratorium. My officers are gathered here. The great and the good of the Fifth, within whom this pain finds its most intense expression. Again, I have plate, bodies and faces but no eyes. All eyes are on the table. They will not look at me for fear I might know their abhorrence. A hatred born of the shame of my loss both of our precious Stigmartyr and my mind to the Darkness. The same hatred tempered in the fires of their own loss and failure to reclaim the Chapter standard. It is all here, as clear as the Codex Astartes on their faces. The philosopher Guilliman has no advice for me in his great book. Even our own Demetrius Katafalque composed no chapter for this in The

Architecture of Agony, *although it would have been a worthy subject for his writings.*

I sit at the head of a long stone table, a table where the seats are half empty. The absence of the heroes who would have filled those seats has already established a tone. Worse still, I find my phantom has already assumed a dead-man's seat at the far end of the table. It watches me with a shadowy stillness. The rest of the gathering seem unaware of its macabre presence. I have grown used to the grotesque being and its parlour trickery and attempt to emulate them.

Silence stings the air. Ezrachi is present. The Apothecary is satisfied with his new facilities and Helix-staff, but has found the company's welcome no warmer than my own. Next to him are the other company specialists: Melmoch, the Fifth's assigned Librarian and astrotelepathic communications officer – still smiling; Techmarine Dancred with his clockwork face; Chaplain Shadrath, hiding his cold discontent, as always, behind the leering half-skull of his helm. Sitting opposite is Corpus-Commander Bartimeus of the Angelica Mortis, as gruff and blunt as his immaterial voidmanship. Beyond the bridge officer sit the Fifth Company's remaining squad whips: Ishmael, Joachim and the chief whip, Uriah Skase. Skase is a veteran – as the torn and mangled flesh of his face testifies. It sits on his face like an ugly, snarling mask, seemingly only held together by the staples, stitches and decorative rings that run across it. I have no reason to believe that the rest of his body isn't scarred in the same way, like some hideous resurrection experiment.

Ezrachi has already told me that Skase is going to be a problem. More so even than Chaplain Shadrath. He is a legend within the company. An assault squad whip, he has more combat experience than the rest of his squad added together. He has walked away from the most grievous injuries and heaviest fighting of the Fifth Company's many victories and has been at the forefront of the Excoriators' efforts to reclaim the Stigmartyr from

the filth Alpha Legion at Veiglehaven. He is loved by his men, who view him as an indestructible force. Ezrachi heard that he was so unrelenting on the battlefield that on the midnight plains of Menga-Dardra, a Black Legion Land Raider slammed into him with its dozer blade, ran him down and crushed him beneath its tracks, only for the mauled and buckled Skase to get back to his feet and rush back into the heart of the fighting. Worse, he had been Corpus-Captain Thaddeus's right hand and, with Shadrath, had held the company together in the wake of the atrocities at Vieglehaven. Every Excoriator in the Fifth had fully expected Uriah Skase's promotion to corpus-captain as a given. That was until Chapter Master Ichabod's intervention and my unwelcome arrival aboard the Angelica Mortis.

The surviving battle-brothers of the Fifth have been reorganised by Skase into three full squads. He has taken the first, Squad Cicatrix. The second, Squad Castigir, is led by Skase's own right hand, Squad Whip Ishmael, an Excoriator crafted of much the same unforgiving brutality as the chief whip. Brother Joachim has been recently promoted to whip of Squad Censura. Joachim is younger and fresher of face, but his devotion to Skase and his ideals is clear, assuming the form of a kind of hero worship. Together, the three whips have the allegiance of the company's fighting brotherhood locked up and the Fifth Company's detestation of my existence is universal.

The only battle-brothers not under Skase's influence are the Tenth Company Scouts under Veteran Squad Whip Keturah. Fortunately, Silas Keturah allows for no other influence upon his neophytes but his own. I have felt little warmth for my own authority from the silver-haired veteran, who has clearly not relished using his young charges to bolster the depleted numbers under my command. Whenever we speak, I feel his critical scrutiny through the visor interface built into his brow and the cyclopean burn of the sniper's single bionic lens, whirring softly to magnification.

By the time I finally speak, I have been sat there for some time – lost in my thoughts. No doubt my brothers will think this some proud indulgence and abhor me all the more.

‘Corpus-commander Bartimeus, when do you expect us to make St Ethalberg?’ Kersh asked across the cool stone of the table. When Bartimeus didn’t immediately reply, Kersh pressed. ‘Learned brother?’

The Scourge immediately regretted the derisive comment. Sarcasm was an indulgence and one not befitting the Emperor’s Angels, let alone a corpus-captain. Ezrachi had warned him that it would be unwise to meet the discontent in the company head on. He advised the Scourge to think like an officer and handle his men as such. Kersh’s belligerence was not so easily tamed, however, and his warrior’s pride was constantly fed by the sting of the company’s own mordant provocation. As Ezrachi had observed, it was fuel for the mutinous cancer already eating away at the Fifth Company’s collective soul. Initially, the Space Marines – already unhappy with the choice of their new corpus-captain – had been taken aback by the Scourge’s manner, but this soon settled into a morose sourness that became the hallmark of their disappointment and acceptance.

‘Warp translation was successful,’ the Excoriators commander mumbled with ill-disguised truculence.

‘Speak up, sir!’ Kersh barked. ‘This is the tactical-oratorium. You’re not talking to one of your bridge drones now, corpus-commander.’

Bartimeus glared at the Scourge. Raising his voice a little, he reported, ‘We are approaching from the edge of the system at quarter sub-light speed.’

‘Why the hesitant approach? Were not my orders to reach the cardinal world at best possible speed?’

‘That is the best possible speed,’ Bartimeus snapped back. ‘The system is crowded with Adeptus Ministorum craft and the like on similar approaches.’

‘Understood,’ Kersh acknowledged. ‘And what of our turbulent passage?’

‘Sir?’

‘I felt every bump and roll in the pit of my stomach. Did we encounter difficulties during the jump?’

‘The *Angelica Mortis* is a thoroughbred cruiser, a veteran of her class...’ Bartimeus began defensively.

‘I don’t doubt it, corpus-commander,’ the Scourge replied. ‘No censure was intended. I was making reference to the journey, not the vessel.’

Bartimeus’s broad features dropped a little. ‘Immaterial squalls and storms are common this close to the Eye. It is possible that we crossed the wake of a convoy or flotilla, just clear of their entry point.’

‘Possible, corpus-commander?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it possible that it was a fleet or an armada, rather than a convoy?’

‘I’m sure I could not say...’

‘Well let’s try to be sure, shall we? Work with the Epistolary here to have your observations communicated to Cadia and Cypra Mundi. They may contribute to other intelligence. There could be a Black Crusade, for all we know, blasting its way out of the Eye of Terror.’

‘I think that unlikely...’ Bartimeus bit back.

‘And I think we should not profess to know the polluted contents of the Despoiler’s mind.’

‘It’s not the Despoiler,’ Chaplain Shadrath announced.

‘A spiritual perspective, Chaplain?’ Kersh turned on him. ‘I dare say the victims of previous crusades might have thought the same before their untimely deaths.’

‘It is the Keeler Comet,’ Shadrath hissed through his half-grille.

‘Stargazer too, Chaplain?’ Kersh said. ‘Are there no end to your talents? Pray, tell us how this astral body might provide an impediment in the

warp?’

‘It’s an unnatural body, my lord,’ Melmoch interjected. The Librarian looked from Kersh to the Chaplain and then back to Kersh. ‘Records show that it was a long-period returning body that last visited the segmentum over ten thousand years ago.’

‘Was?’

‘Upon its return it found the Eye of Terror in its path. Witnessing vessels claim that it has emerged... changed. A blood-red comet, with a trailing ethereal tail and an erratic and unpredictable course.’

‘How can a comet have an unpredictable course?’ Kersh marvelled. ‘It has an orbit, it obeys the laws of gravity.’

‘Not the Keeler, sir,’ the Epistolary insisted. ‘It seems to have a mind of its own.’

‘How do you know of this?’

Melmoch told him. ‘*The Ancient Traveller*, sir. A pict of the original body, from antiquity, by the remembrancer Euphrati Keeler.’

‘Euphrati Keeler?’

‘Yes, corpus-captain. Saint Euphrati – prophet of the God-Emperor.’

‘The God-Emperor?’ Kersh questioned. ‘You think there not enough traits to set you apart from common Adeptus Astartes, Epistolary Melmoch, that you must indulge a belief that those more than mortal find offensive?’

‘I meant no offence, sir,’ Melmoch stated. ‘Only that the gift to which you allude is believed by some of my kind to be an expression of His divinity.’

‘And by some of mine to be an aberration, good Librarian, but there we have it.’

‘I am not the first Adeptus Astartes to hold such beliefs,’ Melmoch said, his smile still fixed to his face.

‘Well,’ Kersh said, leaning his head against the palm of his gauntlet. ‘We are all learning something today. To think that I was spending my time in the practise cages when I should have been in the Librarium.’

‘Your travels have taken you out of the segmentum, my lord. The comet’s reappearance is a relatively recent occurrence.’

The corpus-captain nodded slow thanks to the Epistolary. The Librarian would have made an able diplomat. Kersh had indeed been out of circulation for some time, but the psyker had only mentioned his duties at the far-flung Feast of Blades – and for this Kersh was grateful. He had not mentioned the time the Scourge had spent in the Darkness. Kersh allowed the index digit of his gauntlet to rest in the raw cavity in the side of his face. It had become a habit during moments of thoughtful reflection. Since losing his eye in the Feast, he had also taken to tapping the metal ball-bearing in the socket of his eye with the ceramite tip of his finger.

‘And what of these visionary distractions the company has been experiencing, Chaplain Shadrath?’ Kersh continued. ‘The Apothecary informs me that he has checked our water, provisions and life support systems for any evidence of tampering or neglect and has found none. I put it to you that there is some other explanation, perhaps the effects of this strange comet Melmoch speaks of.’

‘I believe the malign influence of the comet could be responsible,’ the Chaplain told Kersh evenly, ‘but I detect no signs of outward corruption or spiritual licentiousness. At present I have too little to go on to make an informed judgement.’

‘I am beginning to understand how you feel, Chaplain,’ Kersh retorted. ‘Well, while you reach a conclusion the rest of us will go on fearing for our eternal souls.’ Before Shadrath could reply the Scourge moved furiously on. ‘Brother Dancred, what is the status of the company’s Thunderhawks?’

The two power-towers reaching out of the back of the Techmarine's adapted armour crackled and arced with energy. Dancred's clockwork face whirred to life, the nest of Omnissiah-honouring cogs and pinions working in unison like a mask of gears.

'Two of the company's Thunderhawks are lost to us, corpus-captain,' Dancred told him. 'During the attack on Ignis Prime, the *Inwitian* was destroyed on the Chapter house landing pad. The *Flagellant* returned but has sustained too much damage to be saved. I have conducted the appropriate rites and appeased the fading spirit of the fallen machine. It will live on through the invaluable parts it will provide for ongoing repairs to the *Demetrius Katafalque III* and the venerable *Gauntlet*. The *Impunitas* did not partake in the original operation or the rescue on Ignis Prime.'

'The *Impunitas* is our only functioning gunship?'

'Yes, corpus-captain.'

'Well, Brother Dancred, that simply will not do,' Kersh said. 'The Fifth Company will need all of its weapons of war.'

'The *Gauntlet* is our oldest and most decorated Thunderhawk. Her firepower will be yours shortly, my lord.'

'Make sure it is, brother,' the Scourge said, and then a little softer, 'and know your efforts are appreciated.' The Excoriator turned to Ezrachi.

'Have you had opportunity to inspect the gene-seed?'

'Apothecary Philemon gathered the progenoids of the dead and dying at the Chapter house, as his solemn duty demanded,' Ezrachi reported. 'He lost his life to the Alpha Legion's second ambush with Corpus-Captain Thaddeus. Squad Cicatrix had the honour of driving back the Traitor Legionnaires and recovering the bodies.' The Apothecary nodded respectfully across the table at a smouldering Skase who, disarmed at such diplomacy, managed an almost imperceptible nod back. 'In doing this Chief Whip Skase and his men saved the harvested gene-seed of their fallen brothers, and the company is rightfully in their debt.'

Kersh would not be drawn into the Apothecary's placation. 'The seed itself?'

'In good condition and stored in the apothecarion frigocombs—'

'And what of the brothers to whom the seed belonged?' Skase boiled over. He stood, slamming the palms of his gauntlets into the surface of the table. 'Who knows the price of their esteem? We taketh away. When do we giveth – that's what I demand to know.'

Kersh burned into him across the stone. 'Take your seat, brother.'

'I will not.'

'What would you give them, whip?' Ezrachi cut in. 'Was not their loss lamented in ritual?'

'He does not speak of ritual,' Chaplain Shadrath hissed.

'He speaks of vengeance,' Kersh said. 'He speaks of a battle-brother's gift to his fallen brethren: avengement.'

'You have intelligence from the Angels Eradicant of Alpha Legion sightings amongst the petrified hives of Rorschach's World, yet you do nothing,' Skase accused.

'You think I hide upon this cruiser – afraid to engage our enemies?' Kersh seethed. 'Filth to whom we have both lost so much?'

Skase considered his words. 'You are the Scourge. You are victor in the Feast of Blades. You have not a cowardly bone in your body... and yet you have found one.'

Within the blink of an eye Kersh was on his feet and had kicked his chair back behind him. Both Excoriators had their gauntlets to their weapons. Kersh gripped the hilt of his chainsword; Skase had his palm on the haft of his power axe, just below the dormant blade, ready to snatch the weapon from his belt. 'Found your spine, Scourge? Going to cut me down with my corpus-captain's sword?'

Kersh's lip curled.

‘I have lived your pain,’ the Scourge told him honestly. ‘No one wants to face the Alpha Legion more than I. They have the Stigmartyr and I am honourless without it. I have pledged on the primarch’s blade that I shall reclaim it, but until I do the blood of those who lost their lives in its taking, and the attempts to reclaim it since, stains these hands.’ Kersh released his weapon and presented his palms to the squad whip. ‘Know that the loss of the Stigmartyr, for me, is more a punishment than you could ever devise. So be satisfied, loyal whip, for no more blood of the Fifth Company will be spilt here today – by my hand or yours. As corpus-captain, I will not permit it.’

‘That’s not good enough...’

‘Well, it will have to be, Chief Whip Skase.’

Skase looked about him at the frozen masks of alarm and expectation around the table. Releasing his axe, the squad whip slowly presented his own open palm and took his seat. ‘I have my orders,’ Kersh announced to the gathering, but his eyes were still on Skase, ‘and you have yours. The reason we do not make straight for Rorschach’s World to act upon this intelligence is because Chapter Master Ichabod has already designated our present duty. His orders take us to St Ethalberg. These are the chains of command,’ Kersh repeated from his earlier conversation with Ezrachi. ‘And they are binding.’ The Scourge let his words sink in. He detected faint nods about the table.

A bridge serf entered. Bowing before Kersh he delivered a whispered message to Commander Bartimeus.

‘We are about to make the cardinal world system,’ Bartimeus relayed gruffly.

‘Oversee the warp translation,’ Kersh ordered, prompting the Excoriators commander to follow the serf out of the oratorium. When the young Joachim and Squad Whip Ishmael got to their feet the Scourge turned on them. ‘Remain!’ he barked, causing the pair to sink moodily

back to their seats. ‘Damned insolence,’ Kersh told them. ‘You will leave when you are dismissed and not a moment before.’ He turned back to Skase. ‘You forget yourselves but you can be forgiven, given the poor example set by your chief whip. Therefore, after due consideration, I have decided his punishment to be a three day cessation of ritual observance. Over this time he should consider himself unfit to don the mantle of Dorn.’

Chaplain Shadrath’s helm turned sharply. Ishmael and Joachim glared. Skase sat enraged but silent.

‘Mortification of the flesh is every Excoriator’s right,’ Squad Whip Ishmael shot back.

‘No, brother,’ Kersh returned, ‘it is not. Union with the primarch is a privilege and should be denied to those whose actions have proved unworthy of his ideals. I’m sure Chaplain Shadrath would agree.’

Shadrath said nothing.

‘Then I too volunteer for punishment,’ Ishmael said.

‘Seconded,’ Joachim echoed.

‘As you wish,’ Kersh told them. ‘Your confessed unworthiness is noted. The Chaplain will oversee the implementation of this punishment.’

The oratorium felt the cold sting of the corpus-captain’s orders. The chamber was silent. ‘Dismissed, brothers.’

As the Excoriators left, Ezrachi held back.

‘That could have gone... smoother,’ the Apothecary said. Kersh wasn’t in the mood, however.

‘Why don’t you devote your talents to the wounded pride of my officers?’ Kersh bit back.

‘I fear they are wounds that are already festering and beyond my abilities,’ Ezrachi admitted.

Kersh nodded, appreciating the Apothecary’s appraisal. The Apothecary went to leave.

‘I want you to accompany me down to the cardinal world,’ Kersh called as he reached the oratorium archway.

‘As you wish, my lord,’ Ezrachi said.

‘I need someone who can cut through the Ecclesiarchy politics and subtlety,’ Kersh admitted. ‘I haven’t the ears for Adeptus Ministorum guile and sermonising. I am not much of a politician.’

‘I think you have already proved that today,’ Ezrachi said, allowing himself a dark chuckle before disappearing through the arch. The bulkhead fell to closing and Kersh was left in the empty oratorium.

Looking down the length of the table, the Scourge found himself staring at the revenant, who had been there all the while, like a macabre ornament. The otherworldly eavesdropper sat still and said nothing.

‘What are you looking at?’ Kersh said irritably.



CHAPTER FIVE

Suspiriana Obligatio

The Thunderhawk Impunitas dropped out of the heavens.

St Ethalberg was a bitter, unforgiving world. As soon as the gunship broke the upper atmosphere it tumbled through a maelstrom of glass-shard gales and caustic snowstorms. Below, the planet surface was a stake trap of steeple-colossi, lofty towers and hive-shrine spires. A dark world of vertiginous devotion, reaching up into the chemical blizzard above.

Zachariah Kersh entered the cockpit. The helmscarl and his crew went to kiss their fists but the corpus-captain stopped them.

‘As you were.’

Kersh stared out through the hail-dashed canopy. Ahead was their destination. Carved from the frost-shattered peaks of the Vatic Heights was St Ethalberg’s administrative and episcopal capital. Here the monstrous pinnacles of the Palace Euphorica breached the clouds, the palace in turn nestling like a behemoth amongst the dark and forbidding sprawl of the grand cathedrals. It was from the daunting heights of the Palace Euphorica that the Ecclesiarchy provided spiritual guidance for the

billions of pious St Ethalbergers below and for trillions more beyond the cardinal world and across the subsector. Highest of all was the bulbous tower known as the Pulpit, containing both the cardinal's throne room and an Adepta Sororitas Preceptory.

'My lord,' the co-helmscarl called. Looking out to the left and right of the Thunderhawk, Kersh saw a pair of Vendetta gunships falling into escort position.

'Identify.'

'Ethalberg Inclements, fourth reserve.'

'Defence force?'

'Aye, my lord.'

'Confirm our credentials and take us in,' Kersh commanded.

Flanked by the local military aircraft, the battle-scarred *Impunitas* made for the landing pads that sprouted from the tower minaret like a crown. With the pock-marked Thunderhawk on the deck and Vendettas hanging with ominous intent in the sky like scavenging raptors, the Excoriators disembarked. Striding out into the cruel bluster of the cardinal world stratosphere, Kersh watched Scouts from Tenth Company's Squad Contritus fan out with their silver-haired squad whip ahead.

Silas Keturah and his neophytes were all clad in their ceremonial carapace and dark, hooded cloaks, which streamed behind them in the relentless gales. They clutched slender sniper rifles to their chests. Each trailed a clutch of neat cables that disappeared beneath their mantles as well as large magnocular sights, laser guidance and long barrels terminating in a chunky muzzle, decorated with a fluttering Chapter pennant. The Scout squad took ceremonial flanking positions and walked the Excoriators party into the cardinal's palace. For his unpurged sins, Kersh had Ezrachi, Epistolary Melmoch and Chaplain Shadrath accompany him.

Above the landing pad, amongst the busy Gothic architecture of the Pulpit, Kersh spotted gun emplacements and demi-turrets mounting heavy stubbers and autocannon. This didn't surprise the Scourge. The Palace Euphorica was not only the cardinal's seat, it was also the residence of the planetary lord. On St Ethalberg these positions were one and the same. The local defence force therefore had the responsibility of securing the palace perimeter, though they were rarely tolerated beyond its gates. Kersh looked up at a crow's nest and watched the Ethalberg Inclements shiver in their Guardsman's flak and sink down into the moth-eaten fur of their lined jackets.

The Excoriators marched, dwarfed by the gargantuan archways, naves and vaulted aisles of the cathedral palace. They were greeted by a gushing wretch of a cleric-warden, whose responsibility it was to officiate the north-west advent-archway. Due to the altitude, and like everyone else who worked within the palace, the warden wore a smeared plas altitude mask. The warden chattered inanely as he led the Space Marines inside, the warmth of his breath a continual stream of white haze escaping his mask.

Inside the monstrous dimensions of the Palace Euphorica, flocks of ancient priests and miserable novitiates moved across the polished obsidian expanse like birds, while others emerged from the myriad confessional booths and private chapels lining the chambers. Muscular fraters in sectarian skirts and conical sackcloth hoods observed the Adeptus Astartes with obvious suspicion from the darkness of ragged eyeholes. Kersh observed the Redemptionists with equal suspicion, and in particular, the slung-straps and crescent clips of grubby autoguns that were protruding from behind their bully-boy backs.

The ambulatory along which they walked was punctuated with lecterns, pulpits and altars, while statues of all-but-forgotten saints and ecclesiarchs seemed to watch the Excoriators pass beneath their stony gaze. Behind these, at intervals along their path, Kersh spotted the gleaming darkness of

the revenant's plate – the deathless thing appearing much like a statue itself. The open space about the Excoriators was thick with the bass of devotional choirs and sibilant chanting, but the air itself was thin and gelid.

Through an endless succession of cavernous chambers, the Space Marines were led by the warden into the equally enormous palace throne room. Kersh snorted. A chill mustiness assailed his nostrils like the smell of bad meat in an ice-locker. The throne room itself boasted power-armoured sentinels: bolter-wielding members of the Adepta Sororitas. With their claret-coloured plate and dusty black vestments, Kersh recognised the Daughters of the Emperor as belonging to the Order of the Bloody Rose. He nodded his head at the Celestian in respect but found that his generous gesture was not returned.

Although the throne room was large, it seemed crowded, as befitting a centre of episcopal and administrative authority. A woebegone choir seemed to hold the same despondent note while a small legion of cenobite scribes scratched commandments and observances into vellum with barbed quills. Armed Redemptionists milled about the devotional throngs, while vergers lit candles and restocked globes of billowing incense that swung on extensive lengths of chain suspended from the chamber ceiling.

At the epicentre of the activity was a vaulted throne, sat atop a tall stone column. The column was situated between a nest of other stunted pillars, each displaying a fully armed Sister of Battle, standing statuesque around the throne. A rickety scaffold had been constructed about the structure to enable access to the column's summit and the frame was swarming with Sisters of various Orders Hospitaller. The throne itself was illuminated by a shaft of kaleidoscopic light falling from a circular stained-glass window situated in the ceiling. The desiccated husk who sat upon the throne was buried in a mitre and the heavy robes of his calling. A mind of mulch,

within the wasted body of an ancient, Cardinal Bonifacius Pontian occasionally dribbled recitations or befuddled prayers to the gathering.

At first Kersh took Pontian to be the source of the chamber's crisp stench. The cardinal had probably been quietly rotting away on the throne for the best part of a half-millennium. But the smell was not Pontian. Casting his eyes up the wall of both sides of the throne room, the Scourge regarded what he thought at first glance to be decorative stone statues and gargoyles. Water ran from the goylespouts and down the architecture in the manner of an ornate water feature, to be collected in the fonts that lined the wall below. The water was clearly collected from the steeple architecture, after falling as caustic sleet from the bitter cardinal world sky. Upon second inspection, however, Kersh saw that the forms were not statues built into the wall but unfortunates chained from it. Heretics, witches and mutants – unbelievers all – suspended from the cathedral-palace walls. Their faces and extremities were black and frostbitten, their features dissolved in the baptism of an agonising chemical-freeze. Their slow suffering, in turn, blessed the waters of the fonts below – waters that were being collected and distributed in vials to favoured priests and devout clerics across St Ethalberg and the subsector beyond.

‘Sir,’ Ezrachi said, drawing the Scourge's attention back to a pack of priestly jackals who were approaching the Excoriators. The cleric-warden backed away like a beaten dog. Four ecclesiarchs presented themselves; old, wiry men, knotted with age and cunning. The first had been surrounded by Sisters of the Order of the Eternal Candle, who had parted at his brusque insistence. He limped over to the Adeptus Astartes using an ornate cane and was joined by a priestly inferior, who had fire in his eyes. Another ecclesiarch had been in deep discussion with a Guard officer and his ensign, while a thick-set third had been flanked by two brutish Redemptionists, who looked more like bodyguards than part of the priest's

pious congregation. Peeling off from their retinues, the four converged on the advancing Excoriators.

‘Corpus-Captain Kersh,’ the first announced with a sickly smile. He jabbed his cane towards the Scourge. ‘I am Nazimir, Pontifex-Urba of the Palace Euphorica. Welcome to St Ethalberg.’

Kersh cast his eyes over the pontifex at the heretics suffering on the wall. ‘Thank you, pontifex, but I can think of few places in the galaxy less welcoming than this,’ he told him.

Nazimir managed a sardonic laugh, passing Kersh’s reply off as a joke. ‘Can I introduce Convocate Clemenz-Krycek, Confessor Tyutchev and Arch-Deacon Schedonski.’

‘You can,’ Kersh said, ‘but I’m even less interested in meeting them than I was in meeting you.’

Nazimir’s smile died on his face.

‘We have invited you into our—’

‘No, sir,’ Kersh corrected him. ‘You have demanded an audience with the Emperor’s Angels. You now have that audience. You have applied some mysterious pressure, through your wiles and politicking, that has meant that Quesiah Ichabod – Master of the Excoriators Chapter – has insisted I exchange words with Cardinal Pontian of St Ethalberg. I am here to do just that. No less. No more.’

‘We speak for the cardinal,’ Nazimir said, leaning on his cane.

‘The cardinal cannot speak for himself?’

‘Not for many years now.’

‘Then the cardinal and I have said all that we are ever going to say,’ Kersh told them and turned away. Marching for the colossal archway egress, the Scourge said into his vox, ‘*Impunitas*, this is Kersh. Prepare—’

‘Corpus-captain!’

‘Excoriator!’

‘Kersh!’

Something hit the Scourge's pauldron. With blistering reflexes the corpus-captain turned and snatched the object out of the air, his face a mask of grizzled venom. In his gauntlet he held a crumpled vellum scroll. The stunted Schedonski held the other end in his gnarled claws with the length of manuscript taut between them.

'That was unwise, mortal,' Ezrachi warned.

'This is the *Suspiriana Obligatio*,' Schedonski continued. 'It details the mysterious pressure you speak of, Excoriator. It is the holy covenant that binds us and blesses our union with common purpose.'

Snatching it from the priest's grip, Kersh slapped the tattered scroll into Melmoch's chestplate. The Librarian scanned through the manuscript, feeding the length of the scroll through his gauntlets as he read. The Epistolary's eyes blazed across the complexities of Adeptus Astartes Chapter commitments, blood oaths and the resolutions of antiquity. His shoulders sagged.

'Well?' Kersh pressed, his snarling face still fixed on Schedonski.

'It's a small avocation, my lord, but it exists. The cardinal world is granted succourance rites for their role in the prayer-suppression of the daemon Choroqramodeus. These are guaranteed through the Conclave Suspiria and the Decree Vinculum, sworn on the bones of Constantine of Alamar. These rites extend through the unhonoured obligations of the Relictors, an existing accord between Chapter Masters Bardane and Abadiah – and through Abadiah, Master Ichabod. The rights also extend through the reassignment of the Aquinas and Ptolemy subsector boundaries. This, sir, all reinforced by a solitary but significant verse from the *Mythos Angelica Mortis*.'

'The witchbreed speaks true,' Schedonski spat, ill-disguising his disgust at the presence of the psyker.

'Kersh,' Nazimir sneered as Schedonski gathered the vellum. 'You have obligations, corpus-captain. The weight of history lies on your broad

shoulders. It would be a shame to see you falter and have such responsibilities pass from the penitent Relictors, through your failings, to another Chapter.'

'That is why your Chapter Master has sent you here,' Confessor Tyutchev pitched in. 'He appreciates the import of pact and decorum. Mind you do the same, Excoriator.'

'Be guided by the God-Emperor's will in this, Angel,' Convocate Clemenz-Krycek instructed.

Kersh let the ecclesiarchs' insults wash over him. He looked to Ezrachi. He had brought the Apothecary along to help him cut through such chicanery.

'You have words for these words?' Kersh asked him.

Ezrachi's face was taut with tension. The priests' conduct had irritated him as much as any Excoriator in the chamber.

'We are the Adeptus Astartes,' he replied. 'Our actions speak louder than our words.'

Kersh nodded. 'Squad Contritus, are you in position?' the Scourge said simply. His vox crackled back a short confirmation. Nazimir's hooded eyes narrowed with confusion. The priests looked about the throne room. The Excoriators' escort of Scout Marines had vanished. Only Kersh and his power-armoured brothers remained. 'Pick your targets,' Kersh said, his eyes burning into Nazimir. Red dots appeared on the hoods of armed Redemptionists about the room, causing consternation and panic in the hordes of clerics, scribes and menials about them.

'You would mount an operation within the Palace Euphorica!' the pontifex screamed incredulously.

'Execute,' Kersh commanded.

A *thud-whoosh* reverberated about the chamber. Headless bodies crashed to the cathedral floor in unison. The response was immediate. The statuesque Sisters of Battle in their crimson power armour turned to

present arms – the gaping barrels of their bolters pointing at the Excoriators. The Inclement Reserves immediately went for their officer sidearms and, like the fraters who had got their chunky fingers to their secreted autoguns, were scanning the alcoves, statues and doorways to private chapels for any sign of their assailants. Squad Whip Keturah and his Scouts had all long secreted themselves, peeling off one by one unnoticed to take concealed positions about the colossal chamber. They had attached sonic-suppressors and set their rifles to non-visible wavelengths.

‘What are you doing?’ Convocate Clemenz-Krycek shouted.

‘Again,’ Kersh ordered. Spinning around, the priests watched a fresh set of frater bodies hit the throne room floor. Scribes and clerics shrieked and scattered like a flock of frightened birds. Kersh spotted the phantom at the heart of the horror and confusion. It watched and waited. The thunder of bells rang through the palace.

‘My lords!’ Schedonski called.

‘The Angels have gone mad,’ Nazimir screamed at the Adepta Sororitas, waving his cane about. ‘Defend the cardinal!’

‘Kill the interlopers!’ Tyutchev yelled to his frater militia.

‘Hit them again,’ Kersh said impassively. Once more, the bodies rained to the ground.

The thick-set confessor stepped over the dead and walked fearlessly towards the Excoriators. ‘Heretics in our midst, corrupted by the dark power of the Eye,’ Tyutchev blurted, before finding the broad blade of a ceremonial kris come to rest beneath his wrinkled chin. A helmeted Sister Superior stood behind the confessor.

‘Stop this!’ the ancient Nazimir wheezed.

‘The confessor is correct,’ Kersh announced calmly. ‘There are heretics in our midst. Do your duty, Sister.’

Nazimir, Clemenz-Krycek and Schedonski all exchanged horrified glances. The battle-sister hesitated long enough to demonstrate that the Excoriator's words were encouragement rather than instruction. Then she slit the confessor's throat, spraying Nazimir with blood, and allowed Tyutchev's body to fall with his Redemptionists. For a moment the throne room was lost for words.

'What are you doing?' Clemenz-Krycek finally repeated.

'Tell them,' Kersh ordered.

Chaplain Shadrath gave the fool ecclesiarchs the horror of his half-skull helmet. 'The Adeptus Ministorum is forbidden to keep men under arms,' he hissed, 'by order of the High Lords of Terra. You have broken the *Decree Passive* – a violation punishable by death.'

A clumsy stampede could be heard in the adjoining chamber accompanied by the echo of hastily issued orders. The bells had summoned the Ethalberg Inclement Reserves in their threadbare furs and cheap flak.

'Squad Contritus, stand by,' Kersh spoke calmly into his vox-link.

'No, no, no!' Arch-Deacon Schedonski shouted, waving his arms at the giant archway entrance to the throne room. He was swiftly accompanied by the Guardsmen to whom he had been talking. The officer and his ensign ordered the charging defence force troops to stand down.

'We had no knowledge of the Redemptionist transgression,' Convocate Clemenz-Krycek said.

'For the love of the God-Emperor, please, I beg of you,' Nazimir pleaded. Kersh looked to Epistolary Melmoch and found the psyker's disarming smile waiting for him.

'I hear enough of this God-Emperor from my Librarian,' Kersh told them. 'The love of our Emperor?' Kersh marvelled. 'You think yourself worthy of that?' Nazimir fell to his arthritic knees. 'You think you can earn his love through your worthless words? Your hives and palaces of

soulless devotion? Your veneration of an empty idea? I feel the love of my father, as he felt the love of his. This flesh – these hearts – were made to feel. His blood courses through my veins. His loss lives on behind these eyes. He is more than man, but he is not a god. It is your fear that casts him as such. You are weak and foolish, and in your billions need him to be more than he is. But you are wrong, mortal. He is more than man for not being some all-powerful deity. His deeds are his own and we aspire to his greatness – not appropriate it, mythologise it and worship it as a shield against a galaxy of petty doubt, dread and pain. For his love I would do anything. I would obliterate this palace from orbit, for example.’

‘And you should,’ Chaplain Shadrath hissed with masked menace.

Nazimir gagged and vomited in his altitude mask. The stringy gruel dribbled out onto the throne room floor. Kersh looked from the Chaplain to the approaching convocate.

‘We ask only mercy, my lord,’ Clemenz-Krycek implored him.

‘But I won’t,’ Kersh said finally. ‘I will not destroy a world on a technicality.’ Shadrath turned away in silent disgust.

‘An Angel’s wisdom indeed,’ Clemenz-Krycek gasped and kissed the Excoriator’s gauntlet.

‘As the Fifth Company will not shirk their responsibilities on a technicality, either,’ Kersh said.

‘Rorschach’s World waits for us,’ Shadrath insisted. ‘It will not wait forever.’

‘Noted, Chaplain,’ the Scourge answered. ‘But Chapter Master Ichabod’s word has been given and we will honour it.’

‘Thank you, my lord. A thousand thanks,’ Clemenz-Krycek said.

‘Now, mortal,’ Kersh said, looking up briefly at the insensible ecclesiarch in the elevated throne above. ‘What does the cardinal ask of the Excoriators? Be brief – our patience wears thin.’

Clemenzen-Krycek bent down and rifled the vomit-splattered robes of his pontifex. He extracted a data-slate and handed it to the corpus-captain.

‘The Keeler Comet blasts across the night skies of the subsector,’ the convocate said. ‘The crimson comet brings doom to all the planets on its path. This is well known. But it brings fear and madness to the region as a whole. An explosion of cultish activity. Insanity, violence, bloodshed. The statues of the Notre Dumas shrineworld bleed for the ungovernable atrocities committed there. Our sister cardinal world of St. Faustina is in uproar, with the enforcers forced to put down riot and rebellion with brutal force. The sanctuary worlds of Frau Mauro and Benedictus Secundus suffer blood cults and outbreaks of vampiric contagion. We have also lost contact with the Preceptor retreats on Caritas Minoris, Boltoph’s World and VII-Solace-Sixteen. We despatched the cloister-corvette *Seraphic Dawn* to investigate these mysteries, but she too has not returned. And this is but the Ministorum worlds in the subsector. Emperor only knows what is happening on the others. We fear for what might be in store for St Ethalberg itself. We have trebled persecutions within our jurisdiction, requested more Sisters from the Convent Prioris on Terra and prayed for the intervention of the Holy Ordos.’

‘We are the Astartes Praeses,’ Kersh announced. ‘It is the Excoriators’ sacred duty to garrison damnation’s borders. What you speak of is not unusual in such regions. The Eye of Terror is a storm. Its immateriology is unpredictable and cruel.’

‘But the comet, my lord—’ Clemenz-Krycek insisted with his eyes to the floor.

‘Is a new manifestation, I grant you,’ Kersh admitted. ‘As you have observed yourself, however, we are the Emperor’s Angels. We are not investigators. We are not charged with keeping order on Imperial worlds. I suggest you pursue the advice of the Inquisition. If the local military forces on these worlds cannot cope, then the Ordo Hereticus will use its

influence with the Imperial Guard to have regiments brought in-sector and assigned to peace-keeping and security duties.'

'Corpus-captain,' the convocate said, 'there is a small planet, out in the Andronica Banks, close to Hinterspace – a cemetery world called Certus-Minor.'

'Go on,' Kersh prompted.

'Like the Preceptor retreats, we have lost contact with the cemetery world. We have stopped receiving astrotelepathic messages, and our last convoy of necrofreighters have not returned. Pontifex-Mundi Oliphant is both planetary governor and senior ecclesiarch of the cemetery world. The last few messages we did receive from him indicated that Certus-Minor was experiencing the same problems as other worlds with heretic cults. The very last, that his people had discovered a colossal monument, made of human skulls and bearing the markings of the Ruinous Powers.'

'This giant monument just appeared?' Kersh frowned. 'I find that hard to believe. Were there no witnesses to its construction?'

'I cannot answer to that. Pontifex Oliphant communicated fears that cultists operating on the planet might be trying to summon some unholy creature from the warp – that the object might be a gate or portal. He was instructed to quarantine the region around the object, establish a prayer-cordon and not interfere directly with it. He was told we were sending for assistance.'

'You want us to destroy this dread monument?' Kersh asked.

'And whatever might proceed from the infernal artefact,' Clemenz-Krycek replied. 'We have heard nothing from Oliphant since – and that was over a month ago.'

Kersh looked at Epistolary Melmoch. 'Opinion.'

'This close to the Eye, anything is possible. I echo your concerns about this portal's construction, but with the right tracts and dark knowledge a

group of accomplished cultists might be able to achieve such a Ruinous wonder.'

Kersh looked to Ezrachi.

'It is the Chapter Master's wish that these obligations be honoured,' the Apothecary commented, adding with a harsh edge, 'no matter how foolishly these miserable wretches have acted in our midst. They are but mortal, after all.'

Kersh turned back to Clemenz-Krycek. 'You went to a great deal of trouble to secure our involvement. What is the significance of this cemetery world?'

'Certus-Minor is the birthplace of Umberto II – Ecclesiarch and High Lord of Terra. It is also the location of the memorial mausoleum containing his bones. It was the Ecclesiarch's dying wish that he return. Such a prestigious burial ground is secured at a premium by the great and good of our fair Imperium. It is a holy place – we cannot allow the unclean to contaminate its sacred soil.'

Kersh considered the power and influence wielded by the families of the dead, their loved ones bound for a costly grave plot on the distant Certus-Minor. It was little wonder that the Ecclesiarchy on St Ethalberg had managed to secure the Excoriators' involvement. Kersh felt a shoulder plate press against his own. It was Shadrath.

'May I speak with you?' the Chaplain hissed.

'Proceed, Chaplain. We are all friends here now.'

Shadrath held on to his words and his fury a few moments longer.

'We have intelligence of Alpha Legion activity in the Scintilla Stars,' he stated, finally. 'We have a small portal of opportunity. I suggest we take it. The Fifth Company's finest hour waits for us on Rorschach's World – not some miserable cemetery world in the lonely depths of Hinterspace. The Stigmartyr is there for the taking, but our sworn enemy will not wait.'

‘Nonsense, Chaplain,’ Kersh said. ‘It is the Alpha Legion of which you speak. Rorschach’s World is a trap and the intelligence allowed us by that most secretive of Legions is our invitation. We will be there for the taking. The trap will wait for us, Chaplain, for we have yet to spring it.’

‘Corpus-captain—’

‘Calm yourself, Chaplain Shadrath,’ the Scourge warned. ‘Before you do us both an injury.’ The Chaplain shook his helmet slightly before backing away. ‘Convocate. Pontifex,’ Kersh addressed the priests. ‘Chapter Master Ichabod’s word is his bond, as is mine. My Excoriators will travel to Certus-Minor, destroy this corrupt monument and anything that has issued forth from its darkness. I pledge no less but no more. Then, I hunt Traitor Angels in the Scintilla Stars as my Chaplain advises.’

‘Bless you, my lord,’ Clemenz-Krycek said, kissing the Excoriator’s withdrawing gauntlet once again.

‘Squad Contritus, vigilance on the withdrawal. Proceed,’ Kersh voxed. From alcoves, gargoyle wall flourishes and behind statues, fonts and chained heretics, the Scout squad emerged. They stepped lightly and with caution through the throngs of throne room onlookers, their cloaks about them and the long barrels of their sniper rifles lowered. As the Excoriators made their way from the chamber, escorted by a reforming Squad Contritus, Kersh bowed his head to the helmeted Sister Superior. ‘Sister, I leave you this mess to clean up,’ the Scourge told her. She stood impassive. He turned to leave.

At the great archway entrance the Excoriators came face to face with Arch-Deacon Schedonski and the swarm of Inclement Reserves summoned by the bells. The scrawny Guardsmen gulped and parted as the striding giants moved through their number. Among them, the armoured visitant stood, Kersh catching a glimpse of the darklight in one bony eye socket through the crack in the vision’s helm. Kersh stopped, looking from an

uncertain Schedonski back to the bright-eyed Clemenz-Krycek and miserable Pontifex Nazimir, knelt in his own vomit.

‘Pontifex – where is your Emperor now?’ Kersh asked. He crossed his arms and extending a finger on each gauntlet, pointed at his twin hearts. ‘He is here. We shall deliver your cemetery world. I have given your cardinal my pledge. Let me give you another. I am Adeptus Astartes, mortal. If you or your mongrel priests ever attempt to issue ultimatums to me or my brothers again, you will hear my own, issued in the thunder of my bombardment cannon, as I wipe you and your palace from the face of this world with one righteous strike.’

The ecclesiarchs nodded their dumbfounded understanding.

Kersh turned and marched from the throne room. ‘*Impunitas* – this is Kersh. We are inbound. Prepare for take-off.’

PART TWO

Oblivion is their gift...



CHAPTER SIX

Cemetery World

The Empyredrome was situated atop the bridge tower, commanding one of the best views the strike cruiser could offer. A large caged sphere of reinforced, psi-matrix-attuned crystal, it was known to the Adeptus Astartes and the bonded crew as the *Magna-Cubile* or ‘Great Nest’. This was understandable given that it was the private immaterial observation chamber for the *Angelica Mortis*’s Navigator, Alburque Ustral-Zaragoza III. It was all the more appropriate for the fact that the Navigator housed his psyber-eagle, Arkylas, in the drome.

The huge bird was a beauty of bronzed feather. Its wicked talons gripped a sturdy perch frame and its beak was a chrome-plated nightmare. Like the House internuncia who attended upon the Navigator in their claret hoods and robes, Arkylas was blind. The seeing were not tolerated within the chamber. With the Navigator’s warp eye open, exposing all in the Empyredrome to its lethal gaze, only those who had had their eyes removed were truly safe.

Zaragoza’s throne was set on a labyrinth of rails that took him – with the aid of internuncia muscle – to the crystal plate of the drome, where a

perimeter of lens-arrays, specula, magnocular spyglasses and telescopes decorated the perimeter. The Navigator himself was neurally plugged into the chair and sat amongst a nest of runescreens, brass pict-monitors and hololithic displays, which his freakishly long digits and fingernails seemed to perpetually dance across.

‘Check me,’ Zaragoza instructed three calculus logi – lobotomised internuncia. The Navigator shot a stream of warp dilation and velocidratric equations at the hooded attendants. One by one, the internuncios confirmed the Navigator’s calculations as accurate. Satisfied, and not a little impressed with himself, Zaragoza settled back into his throne and clicked his spindly fingers. An internuncio came forwards with a polished metal platter and dome. Removing the dome, the servant revealed a dead rat, recovered from a trap in the vessel bilges. The Navigator picked the vermin up by its tail. With a pendular motion, Zaragoza tossed the dead meat at Arkylas.

Despite being blind, the psyber-eagle snatched the rodent out of the air with predatory grace. It never failed to give the Navigator a thrill. ‘Did you see that beak?’ he marvelled, pointing at the magnificent bird. The hooded vassal didn’t respond. Zaragoza grunted. ‘Of course you didn’t,’ he said to himself. He clicked his fingers to the other side of the throne and another blind servant came forwards with a tray bearing a decanter of amasec and a crystal glass.

The internuncio poured his master the drink and Zaragoza was about to take it when the deck about them began to vibrate. Trinkets and instruments fell from their racks and the servant spilt the amasec. Arkylas flapped its wings.

‘My lord.’ An internuncio came forwards. He wore a vox-headset arrangement around his darkened hood. ‘Corpus-Commander Bartimeus for you from the bridge. He demands to know the source of this turbulence.’

‘He’s not the only one,’ Zaragoza said absently. The Navigator screwed his eyes tight shut and opened the weeping slit of the third that sat in his forehead. The Empyredrome, like Arkylas and the internuncia, was still there – it had just faded to transparency. The Navigator drank in a vista of insanity. About him, with the strike cruiser and even the Empyredrome mere ghostly outlines, the sea of souls raged. A transdimensional medium, it appeared as a polychromatic ocean, viewed simultaneously from above and below. It was unrivalled in its expanse and drama, and through his third eye the Navigator could observe its deranged seascape.

In the ethereal distance Zaragoza could see the heavenly light of the Astronomican, a silvery beacon of serenity in the fermenting pandemonium of the warp. Its beatific beams reached out across the psychic universe, drawing the Navigator to them and filling his being with an angelic chorus of indescribable bliss. It was only by the good grace of the Astronomican that Zaragoza could navigate at all. Much closer, like a puce glower in the warpscape, the nightmarish region of the Eye of Terror broiled and spumed its malevolence, threatening to obscure the Astronomican and swallow the heavenly beacon whole.

Zaragoza looked out beyond the strike cruiser’s prow, beyond the existential static of the Geller field and the glint of warpreal entities impressing themselves on the bubble of reality enveloping the Excoriators ship. There was a psysmic tidal wave of raw immaterial energy rolling towards the Adeptus Astartes vessel for as far as the Navigator could see. The *Angelica Mortis* was heading bow-on for the monster with little hope of evasive course correction beyond dropping out of warp space and continuing at sub-light speed – which Bartimeus would not hear of. The vessel had encountered numerous smaller displacements on its journey to St Ethalberg. As they had pushed on to Certus-Minor, along the ethereal equivalent of the Andronica Banks and out into Hinterspace, the immateriology had grown increasingly agitated and unsettled. This was

not what Zaragoza had come to expect in the region, which was usually relatively free of such stormy conditions.

Strangely, it was not the wave that bothered Zaragoza. The *Angelica Mortis* had been on the etherwave's inclining approach for some time, and it was the Navigator's plan to hold course and either have the sturdy Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser ride the beast out or punch straight through the maelstrom's churning crestface. The Navigator had observed hundreds of vessels on their voyage seemingly lose their nerve and run before the gargantuan swell. Zaragoza had commented to Bartimeus, however, that such numbers and configurations appeared to him more like disbanded patterns of planetary evacuation than flotillas and convoys directed from their courses. In the presence of such evidence Zaragoza felt a little uncomfortable pressing on. He was an experienced Navigator from a House with long service record with the Adeptus Astartes. But he did not know what was causing such an immaterial phenomenon, and could have no way of knowing if an even larger wave lay behind the first.

Squinting down with one of his other eyes, Zaragoza scanned data from a runescreen detailing readings from the *Angelica Mortis*'s ethervanes.

'The Von Diemen Rip currents,' Zaragoza mumbled to himself, 'the Pherrier circumpsysclone, Wallach's Rapidity, the Cascade Borgnino, the Paracelsus Gyres...' The Navigator's face creased with confusion. 'Readings all nominal to profile.'

The Navigator frowned, lost in thought. His thin eyebrows slowly rose. Throwing a lever, Zaragoza sent the throne spinning around so that it was facing aft of the vessel. 'There you are,' he announced and held out a spindly hand. A waiting vassal pressed a pair of psyocular magnoculars into his hand, which the Navigator proceeded to put on. At another hand motion the two other hooded servants put their backs into moving the throne along its rails and up to a large brass telescope. Through both the

psyocular and spyglass arrangement Zaragoza studied the object that had so singularly grabbed his attention.

The Navigator had seen it several times before but at much too great a distance to identify its nature, class or dimensions. It had been barely more than a fuzzy blur in the maelstrom of Chaos and could literally have been anything. It also seemed to appear and disappear, leading Zaragoza to believe it might be some colossal beast of the warp or a daemoniac entity attempting to breach the interdimensional barriers of reality. On each of these occasions he had made a note in the translation log but had not deemed it important enough to alert Corpus-Commander Bartimeus. The Excoriator was a blunt instrument and not one for extraneous detail. With the vessel at closer range, Zaragoza knew different now.

The Navigator stared at the object in awe. The etched grid-lens gave him an idea of its true proportions. Snatching up a communications cable hanging beside the throne, Zaragoza screwed it into one of the many mind-impulse ports decorating the back of his head like craters upon a moon's surface.

'Translation log entry,' the Navigator said, prompting a blind vassal to appear beside him with a data-slate. 'Unknown vessel identified emerging from the Osphoren Flux on an identical course to our own. Vessel signature in absence, but the architecture is distinctive and, along with its size, bears the hallmarks of an ancient vessel. Dimensions are... difficult to measure with this equipment. However, I can confirm that it is the largest vessel I have ever seen and, even with these instruments and at great distance, I estimate that it must be six or seven hundred cubic kilometres. Larger than Lentigo, the largest of the Escharan moons.' The internuncio inputted the log entry.

Zaragoza shook his head. The explanation for the turbulence and agitation in the region now became obvious. The *Angelica Mortis* was

caught in an immaterial confluence created by the etherwave before them and the psysmic swell being driven before the colossal vessel to their aft.

‘Open a vox-channel with the bridge,’ Zaragoza ordered the nearby internuncio. ‘Inform Corpus-Commander Bartimeus that empyreal conditions are likely to worsen, but that I have detected the source of the turbulence. Tell him I am sending a pict-capture. Tell him that he’s not going to believe it.’

Certus-Minor. Cemetery world.

The venerable *Gauntlet* had made a high-velocity insertion, leaving the *Angelica Mortis* in good company with the defence monitor *Apotheon*, a fat necrofreighter and a small gathering of sprint traders. Coming in low and deep, the Thunderhawk tore up the serene surface of one of the great lakes across which it passed. Behind its tail the gunship threw up a continuous fountain of spray, but below the craft the silvery waters reflected a mirror image of the *Gauntlet*’s underbelly and banking flank. Like all of the Excoriators’ Thunderhawks, the *Gauntlet* retained her scars, each bolt-hole, las-blast and impact crater in her ivory plate repaired but preserved and annotated with a date and location. As the oldest of the Fifth Company gunships, the *Gauntlet* bore her battle scars with pride and distinction, even if, when pressed, the Excoriators within admitted to the knocks and rattles of her advancing age.

Lifting her nose slightly, the *Gauntlet* cleared the satin surface of the lake. Beneath the Thunderhawk extended an expanse of crafted stone. Grave markers, tombstones and statues of every crafted tradition, built almost one on top of the other, crowded the landscape with barely a scrap of precious cemetery world earth between them. Vaults, mausolea and private crypts sprouted from the sepulchrescape, dwarfed only by the ancestral tombs and necropoli of noble families. Kicking up a storm of grit and dust, the *Gauntlet* fell in line above an arterial lychway. The cemetery sectors and burial grounds were cut up by a necroplex of labyrinthine

lychways that allowed access to individual plots and charnel houses. The crossroads of these stony procession ways were furnished with cenoposts and shack hamlets, housing sextons, grave fossers and hearsiers, along with their families.

Pulling up, the gunship began lowering its landing gear. Before the *Gauntlet* was the only metropol the cemetery world boasted. Grave dust and burial space existed at a premium on Certus-Minor and sprawling cities were considered a funereal waste. This was why Obsequa City had been built tight and tall. A cluster of steeples and spires betrayed the city's Ecclesiarchical purpose, with lofty cathedrals competing for sky with basilica towers, shrines and citadel-sacristia. Nestled at the heart of the devotional architecture and adorning the metropolis like a crown was the roof-dome of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum – the largest and tallest building in Obsequa City. The vaulted mausoleum housed the preserved bones of Umberto II, former Ecclesiarch and High Lord of Terra. Taking in the breathtaking detail of the colossal dome with a banking pass, the *Gauntlet* began to rotate and descend. The Thunderhawk dropped down into the only level and open space in the city. Crowded by requitaphs and chapel belfries, the Umberto II Memorial Space Port was little more than a small landing plaza for mortuary lighters and hump shuttles.

With its gear on the ground, the *Gauntlet's* tactical bay ramp lowered and Squads Cicatrix and Castigir filed out with weapons drawn. They fell to immediately securing the area around the Thunderhawk. Kersh had ordered vigilance upon arrival. With knowledge of damned monuments to dark gods and cultist activity on the cemetery world, the corpus-captain wasn't taking any chances. For all the Excoriators knew, heretics could have possession of the space port and be waiting for the Space Marines in ambush. Nobody in the Fifth Company wanted a repeat of Ignis Prime and the Kruger Ridge.

Kersh stepped out onto the level rockrete. The dizzying heights of bethel towers and cathedrals surrounded the landing plaza, extending upwards on a steep incline like a miniature hive. Kersh looked back down at the pict-captures he was holding. As Ezrachi followed, the Apothecary's leg sighing in hydraulic rhythm, he too held a capture in his ceramite fingertips.

‘What am I looking at?’ the aged Excoriator asked.

‘Psyoccular image captured from the Empyredrome,’ Kersh replied as the pair of Space Marines strode across the plaza. ‘Aft orientation. Censor-cropped by Chaplain Shadrath, in the interests of spiritual licentiousness. Rendered to full magnification.’

Behind them, the Chaplain himself, Epistolary Melmoch and Techmarine Dancred followed. Ezrachi passed the pict-capture to the Librarian and took another from Kersh. From the tactical bay rumbled the tracks of a mobile weapon. The quad barrels of a Thunderfire cannon emerged, followed by the chunky brutality of its itinerant chassis. Its armour plating bore the colours, scarring and annotations of the Excoriators Chapter, the Cog Mechanicum and a name: *Punisher*. Following the Techmarine like a hunting dog, the cannon's machine-spirit drove the heavy metal beast on down the ramp. Dancred gave both it and a miserable servitor-loader an instruction in lingua-technis, prompting both drone and weapon to follow.

‘This can't be a vessel – not if these reticles are anything to go by,’ Ezrachi commented.

‘Bartimeus's Navigator thinks it is,’ Kersh said.

‘Could this not be some great beast of the warp?’ Melmoch asked.

‘They, for example, look like wings to me.’ He passed the pict-capture to Brother Dancred. The Techmarine's gearface formed a clockwork scowl and the Space Marine slowed to a stop.

‘That is a vessel,’ he confirmed. ‘Something ancient, abominable and glorious. The Imperium hasn’t made vessels of this size and design for thousands of years.’

‘Again, Bartimeus’s Navigator concurs. It’s probably some mangled hulk that’s been lost in the warp for an eternity. I’ve despatched the *Impunitas* to observe our translation point from a dwarf moon on the edge of the system. They will inform us of any new arrivals.’

Brother-Contego Micah moved past with heavy, purposeful steps. Micah was the Fifth Company’s freshly promoted champion. His predecessor had lost his life defending Corpus-Captain Thaddeus on the Kruger Ridge. Micah was young for his position but a cool, impassive Excoriator. He was a gifted marksman and took the responsibilities of company champion seriously. Micah seemed just as unhappy about Kersh’s promotion as everyone else in the Fifth, but had studied his corpus-captain’s orders and their mission brief and had volunteered practical propositions regarding the company’s caution and security on Certus-Minor. Like many of his brothers, he was determined that the Excoriators would not fall to the predations of the Alpha Legion again – even if that meant keeping Zachariah Kersh alive. Micah held his combat shield out in front of him, resting it on a cradle attached to the chunky barrel of the champion’s boltgun. Leading the way with the gun shield and the muzzle emerging from its ceramite cleft, he assumed position on point, putting himself squarely between his corpus-captain and possible enemies.

‘The hulk is not our concern,’ Chaplain Shadrath hissed from behind Kersh.

‘How I wish that were so, Chaplain,’ Kersh said, stopping and turning. The Excoriators came to a halt on the landing plaza. ‘Like you, I am eager to be on to Rorschach’s World. Company protocol is clear on this, however. We are bound by reclamation treaties with the Adeptus

Mechanicus and Ordo Xenos Carta Contagio. Any hulks appearing within Imperial space must be investigated.'

'There are priorities...'

'There are,' Kersh agreed with an edge, 'but I have reports of pirate attacks from the sprint trader *Avignor Star*, an astrotelepathic blackout and Alpha Legion activity in the region to consider. And that on top of the prospect of a space hulk and the taint of Chaos on this Ecclesiarchy world. Our talents are superhuman, Chaplain Shadrath – not supernatural. We cannot be everywhere at once.'

'Corpus-captain,' Brother Toralech interrupted. The Space Marine brought a ceramite finger to the side of his helm. 'The *Gauntlet* has relayed a vox-message from the *Angelica Mortis*. Corpus-Commander Bartimeus requests permission to take the cruiser out of low orbit to commence battery practise.'

'Denied,' Kersh answered simply. 'The *Angelica Mortis* will hold her position.' The Scourge glowered at Shadrath before turning and striding across the plaza. The towering Toralech relayed the response, resting the shaft of the billowing company standard against the rockrete and the long barrel of his flamer against a battle-scarred pauldron.

As the Excoriators strode across the landing plaza, hearsiers paused in their unloading of sarcophagi from mortuary lighters to watch the giants go by. A delegation of priests and their accompanying honour guard of defence force Guardsmen approached from the Memorial Space Port gate.

'Salutations, great warriors,' the priest announced, his eyes to the ground. He bowed his mitre, his vermillion robes flapping in the breeze. 'I am Vasco Ferreira, the Pallmaster General. We received word – the last in a long time – from his grace Cardinal Pontian of St Ethalberg that assistance was coming. We had not dared hope that the Emperor's Angels themselves would—'

'Pallmaster,' Kersh stopped him.

‘My lord?’ the priest replied fearfully.

‘You have a superior?’ the corpus-captain asked.

‘I answer to the pontifex,’ Ferreira said, ‘as all God-Emperor-fearing people do on Certus-Minor.’

Kersh softened his words with a vague smile. ‘Take us straight to him, please.’

‘Of course, your magnificence. A thousand apologies,’ Ferreira said.

With the Pallmaster General leading the way, the Excoriators were flanked by members of the Certus-Minor Charnel Guard, dressed in flak, robes and feather bonnets. They were sombre figures, all in black and carrying long, ceremonial lasfusils. The solemnity continued as the Adeptus Astartes were escorted out of the gate and up through the winding alleyways and steep steps of the cemetery world city. About them walls reached for the ivory skies and the incline became increasingly precipitous. In adjoining naveways and alleys, as well as at archways and fenestra, the Excoriators encountered gathered Certusians. The cemetery worlders looked on with sober reverence and wonder. They remained a silent sea of gaunt faces, the Ecclesiarchical baseborn: vergermen, foss-reeves and vestals. Occasional preachers punctuated the torturous route, making the sign of the aquila and offering blessings.

Across a small square, at the top of the city, the Excoriators were confronted with the colossal archway-barbican of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum. The pillars of the stately sepulchre were thick and tall, and the darkness of the threshold beckoned pilgrim and cleric alike. Two Sisters of Battle, garbed in the midnight-blue sheen of ceramite and hugging belt-fed heavy bolters to their breasts, flanked the entrance. Standing tall before the arch was a baroque nightmare, a penitent engine housing a wretched, emaciated repentant. Crucified across the walker, the unfortunate seemed at peace. Kersh shuddered to think of the carnage the

reformite could wreak, with its caged limbs, mounted chainfists and heavy flammers.

Modest, by comparison with the mausoleum, was the Obelisk or official palace residence of the Pontifex-Mundi. The palace was positioned opposite the mausoleum, across the devotional square, and it was here that Brother Dancred had *Punisher* and his attendant servitor remain. The ecclesiarch's reception chambers were housed beneath an enormous bell in the palace belfry, and from his balcony, the pontifex could command a view not only of the domed roof of the mausoleum but also the receding steeple-skyline of Obsequa City. The palace chambers were dark and dour, and Kersh noticed the retinue of priests and affiliates haunting its shadowy recesses. Pallmaster General Ferreira peeled off and joined their ranks. Amongst their number Kersh also spotted the sickly glow of his revenant's eye, peering out from the crack in its benighted helm. The ethereal presence watched and waited with immutable patience.

Pontifex Oliphant stood in the balcony, his crooked figure cutting a silhouette into the pearly sky. Turning with half a smile, the ecclesiarch proceeded to limp with difficulty across to the entering Excoriators. As Kersh came closer he realised that the pontifex suffered from some kind of paralytic affliction. Half of Oliphant's kindly face was stricken in a mask of horror, and he dragged the deadweight of one leg behind him like a second thought and allowed his arm to dangle uselessly by his incapacitated side. He wore only simple robes and sandals, with little of the ceremonial paraphernalia the corpus-captain had come to expect from the Ecclesiarchy. He even forwent a mitre. Instead, Kersh noted the thin hair plastered across the pontifex's forehead and the beads of sweat trembling on his brow. Even standing seemed like an ungainly effort.

'Pontifex,' Kersh said, offering an armoured gauntlet. Close up, Kersh could see that Oliphant was quite young for his position, despite his old man's carriage and obvious infirmity.

‘Angel,’ Oliphant said, clutching but one ceramite finger of the proffered hand with his own weak digits. Kersh felt the ecclesiarch rest against his mighty frame and saw the momentary relief on his half-frozen face. ‘Our prayers have been answered. I knew you would come. The God-Emperor sends us the sons of Dorn. A true blessing.’

‘Pontifex,’ Kersh began, ‘I am Zachariah Kersh, corpus-captain of the Fifth Company. I bring good will from Chapter Master Ichabod of the Excoriators Chapter. He has secured assistance for this cemetery world through your guarantors at St Ethalberg.’

Oliphant went to speak but wavered suddenly. Thinking the ecclesiarch was going to fall, Kersh grabbed him by the shoulders.

‘The pontifex’s throne,’ Ferreira called and two sallow cenobites wheeled a rolling chaise to Oliphant, although it looked to Kersh more like an invalid’s carriage than a throne. Depositing the pontifex in the chair, the Scourge stepped back.

‘The Emperor’s blessings on you both,’ Oliphant said to Kersh and Ferreira.

‘Pontifex,’ the Excoriator continued, ‘I have been brief with your deputation and with your indulgence I will be brief with you. There is but one of our calling for every world in the Imperium and Certus-Minor is currently graced with a half-company of the Adeptus Astartes.’

Oliphant attempted a twisted smile.

‘We are but a tiny part of the Imperium and we wish no imposition,’ the pontifex said.

‘It is no imposition, pontifex,’ Kersh said, ‘but our enemies are legion and spread across the segmentum like a bloody smear. We would like to be of service and then be on our way.’

‘Of course,’ Oliphant said. ‘I shall introduce my clerics to you later. Perhaps I might convince you, corpus-captain, to receive the God-

Emperor's benediction with us on the morn. The suns will rise on Saint Barthes's Feastday.'

'I think that unlikely, pontifex.'

'Just a blessing then, to consecrate your efforts here and protect you and your Angels in the prosecution of the God-Emperor's will. After all, does not the God-Emperor fight on our side?'

'Our bolters protect us under such circumstances,' Kersh told the pontifex. 'And as I indicate, we are unlikely to be planetside when the sun rises. If there is an evil here then we shall not dally in its destruction. Further evils wait for our bolt-rounds and blades on other worlds, and we are not in the habit of keeping the Emperor's enemies waiting.'

'Well,' Oliphant said finally, holding on to a weak smile, 'we shall see, sir. Let me instead introduce you to three of our flock charged with cemetery world security. I think they are best placed to advise you on our problems.'

Three figures stepped forwards from the shadowy gathering around the edge of the chamber. 'May I introduce High Constable Colquhoun of the Charnel Guard, Palatine Sapphira of the Order of the August Vigil and Proctor Kraski of the enforcers.'

'Honoured to be serving beside you,' Colquhoun said crisply. He gave a grim but reverent salute to the rim of his feather bonnet before returning his black-gloved hand down beside the tapered barrel of an officer's laspistol. Palatine Sapphira, conversely, had a pout of positive dislike crafted into her uninviting features. Her slim, cobalt power armour sported two chunky Godwyn-Deaz-pattern bolt pistols at the thighs and an ermine cloak that hung from her shoulders. She compulsively fiddled with a silver aquila hanging around her neck and burrowed into the Excoriator with her dark eyes.

'The pontifex has overplayed our part, I'm afraid,' she told Kersh with a voice of steel. 'My mission here only looks to the preservation of Umberto

II's remains and the security of the Memorial Mausoleum.'

Kersh had encountered the Order of the August Vigil before, on the genestealer-infected shrineworld of Alamar, where Sisters of the order had been charged with safely evacuating the bones of Saint Constantine in advance of planetary Exterminatus. Their Order Minoris specialised exclusively in the security of Ecclesiarchical relics and sites of Cult significance.

Unlike the immaculate Guard officer and Battle Sister, Kraski was a grizzled veteran. An arbitrator in the senior years of his life, he was charged with keeping order and upholding Imperial Law with a small team of enforcers on the tiny cemetery world. His ragged beard moved to the motion of his jaw working on a vile slug of chewing tobacco, while the smashed lens of a bionic eye stared back at Kersh with blind obsolescence. His enforcer carapace was scuffed and blistered, while the black fur of his greatcoat was dusted with the sandy, Certusian earth. Sitting slung across one of his shoulders, however, was the gleaming barrel and pump-mechanism of an oiled and lovingly maintained combat shotgun.

'Words are for poets and priests,' Kraski told the Excoriators, pushing the plug of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other with his tongue. 'I'll take you straight to the Exclusion Zone and there you can see the work of evil first-hand.'

The Scourge nodded. 'After you, proctor,' he said with solemn appreciation. The corpus-captain had the feeling he was going to like the arbitrator.

The maid Marika knew only her holy duties. As a vestal it was her privilege to escort the Lord High Almoner about the narrow passages and crooked stairwells of Obsequa City. The Lord High Almoner had a sacred responsibility: the redistribution of wealth. The Adeptus Ministorum taxed Certusians on the Imperium's behalf and its demands were harsh. Maid Marika very much enjoyed her role, amongst two trains of her sister

vestals, accompanying the Almoner during his ceremonial act of virtue, pressing coin back into the hands of the poor and needy.

Marika gently swung her incense burner back and forth on a silver chain, allowing the fragrant mist to billow about her and behind the Lord High Almoner's train. A sweet indication of their passing that hung in the air and reminded common Imperials that the God-Emperor still had a charitable thought for them. The incense often made Marika light-headed and the virgin indulged this, walking about the sheer city streets in a dreamy daze.

As she crossed St Lanfranc's corpseway, at the rear of the train, she became enveloped in a cloud of incense and stopped by the cobbled crossroads to rub her watery eyes. As both the smoke and tearful blur cleared she was struck by a vision. Marching down the corpseway were demigods in plate, the giants of legend and antiquity, only immortalised for common Imperials in the stonework of cathedral architecture. Marika could not believe her smoky eyes. The Adeptus Astartes. On Certus-Minor. Her gaze fell from the scars on their immortal faces, across the scars decorating their ancient ceramite and down to their dread weaponry. The cavernous muzzles of handheld cannonry. Sheathed blades of unimaginable keenness, honed to death-dealing perfection. Thick digits. Broad hands. Housed in ceramite and throbbing with the God-Emperor's own murderous strength.

‘Maid Marika!’

Fury – untold. An awakening.

The Adeptus Astartes were gone. The vestal stood alone and had done for some time.

Chancellor Gielgus ventured through the perfumed smoke that cloaked the alleyway. ‘Marika, where in Terra have you been?’ he scolded. ‘The train is stopped. The poor are waiting. The High Almoner is furious.’

As the chancellor approached he could hear the whoosh of the incense burner swinging around at speed. Finally, he came upon the silhouette

doing the swinging. ‘Stop that, child,’ he ordered. The Maid Marika was still but for the blazing arc of the incense burner, which was pouring out smoke. As he came closer, stroking his beard, the chancellor said, ‘What has come over you?’

Something was wrong with her face. As he neared and the mist between them became thinner, he could see that the vestal’s eyes were blank orbs of unseeing red. ‘Marika?’

Chancellor Gielgus only heard the beginning of a wrath-fuelled screech. The silver incense burner broke its searing orbit and smashed down on the top of his skull. Brained, the old man fell to the gutter, only to have the demented vestal fall upon him again and again with bludgeoning blows from her flailing burner. His stymied calls for mercy – and then help – went unanswered, as through the smoke the blood sprayed and the Maid Marika became as one with her unnatural rage.

Braughn Menzel rested his boot against the blade of the shovel and forced the tool down through the sandy earth. The cutting crunch of the spade filled the fosses with a strange satisfaction. There was nothing like the sound of sharpened plasteel slicing through cemetery world earth. The gravedigger needed something to keep him going. His shoulders burned and his back ached. The grave was unfinished and he would have a hundred more to dig before the end of the week. The mortuary lighters brought an unending supply of the dead from necrofreighters down to the Certusian surface. The prestige of spending just a century in the same precious earth as Umberto II drew cadavers from light years around. Senior officers of the Guard, Imperial Navy commanders, the inbred swine of hive-world Houses, merchants, Navigators, planetary nobility and devoted members of the Ecclesiarchy itself were all buried in Certus-Minor’s sacred topsoil. On the other side of the cemetery world Braughn’s opposite toiled, digging up coffins and sarcophagi for shipment back to the families following the expiry of the lease. An unending cycle of inhumation and exhumation on a planetary scale.

Tossing the dirt up and over his shoulder, Braughn came to a stop. He rested against the shovel's stalwood shaft. Sometimes Braughn allowed his sons Yann and Otakar to watch the mortuary lighters at work when they should have been digging with him. At thirteen and fifteen there was precious little excitement in their lives, and the best that they could hope for was recruitment into the Charnel Guard and the possibility of one day travelling off-world with an Imperial Guard regiment. There would be no watching for lighters today – not with word that the Emperor's Angels had come to Certus-Minor. The boys had caught a glimpse of the Space Marine gunship as it left Obsequa City and thundered overhead bound for the Great Lakes. Braughn little expected his sons' eyes to leave the sky for the rest of the day.

He reached over the side of the grave and took a plas bottle from beside the tombstone. Yann had brought mule's milk from their shack at the cenopost. His mother had corked it with a rag which Braughn proceeded to extract before squeezing the liquid into his parched mouth. He gulped down the sour milk with relish before wiping his mouth with a dusty sleeve. An odd noise grabbed his attention, a dull, metallic thud.

'Boys?' Braughn called. When no answer came, the fosser kicked a toe grip into the grave wall and grabbed the edge of the tombstone in an effort to haul himself out of the grave. Halfway out of its depths Braughn looked up to see his youngest son Yann laid out in the cemetery world grit. Braughn felt his heart drop. 'Yann!' he yelled miserably. The side of the boy's head had been caved in and his lifeblood was leaking into the earth. The fosser tried to scramble out of the grave. 'Otakar!' Braughn called with fearful urgency. Turning his head, the fosser found his eldest son stood behind the tombstone. He held his shovel above his head like an axe. His eyes were blood-blind and hollow. 'Son...'

The shovel came down and sliced the fosser's head from his shoulders. The head bounced and rolled through the dust until it came to rest beside

Yann's body. Braughn's body fell back into the hole and came to rest, twitching in the depths of the grave. Looking from the butchered body of his father to that of his dying brother, Otakar Menzel radiated a hatred his heart had never known. Taking his shovel in both hands, he stomped through the dust, heading for home, where his mother would be waiting with mule's milk and a smile, and the boy's bloodlust would find new expression.

Aloysius Mosca felt the abbot's thin staff-sceptre jab his back-flesh. Mosca had not volunteered for the prayer cordon. The chaplain of his cell-block had ordered recompense for an incident at the barracks armoury. He had been part of a team of fraters assisting in the thrice-blessing of reserve ammunition and weaponry for the Charnel Guard defence force. Every lasfusil, stubber, powerpack and individual bullet required consecration, and above the instruments of death and destruction, Mosca had found himself in a dispute with a fellow frater. The dispute had become heated in the silence of the barracks armoury and Mosca had hit out with the palm of his hand. It was not intended as a strike or an assault, but the frater who fell and gashed his head against a mortar rack did not view it that way and reported Mosca to the chaplain. Assignment to the prayer cordon had been the chaplain's idea – a part of Mosca's spiritual probation.

Like thousands of others – some probationers, some volunteers – Mosca had been marched along the Great Eternity-East lychway. When the cavalcade arrived at the bleak Fifth-Circle cenopost and the miserable hovel-hamlet of Little Pulcher, Mosca and his brothers were blindfolded and led arm on shoulder to the shores of Lake Serenity. He could hear the rhythmic drone of the drainage pumps in the distance. Turning their backs to the lake they were instructed to retain their blindfolds and link hands with one another. Mosca could only imagine they were creating an unbreakable circle of prayer around the damned artefact that had been discovered below the drained surface of the lake. There had been low whispers and tattle of such a find in the fraterhouse and in the cloisters. Gossip only to match rumours of grave robbery, diabolists and

disappearances out on the lonely lychways of the necroplex and burial ground provinces beyond.

Abbots walked around the inside of the circle issuing threats and jabbing encouragement as the cordon alternated between communal prayers spoken aloud to hymnals and liturgies sung to the pearlescent skies.

‘Sing, you wretch,’ the Abbot behind him ordered. ‘I want the God-Emperor himself to hear you.’

Mosca recognised the voice. A deep, baritone menace belonging to a fat bastard Mosca remembered from the Progenary. He also remembered the beatings he received at the pudgy hands of the priest and the rattan cane he used on the backs of the choristers’ legs and hands.

Mosca’s eyes moved about under his blindfold. His mouth, moments before full of bombast and lines from ‘Exalted God-Emperor, the Shepherd of Souls’, fell to silence. Lips curled. Nostrils flared. Teeth gnashed together on the gristle of long-forgotten hatreds. Mosca released the hands of the choristers to either side. One had crushed his palm with a pious grip; the other had been moist and slippery with some penitent shame.

Tearing the blindfold from his contorted face, Mosca revealed the blood-brimming rage of his eyes. Reaching down into the folds of his cassock robes and dust cloak, the cemetery worlder found the hot euphoria of a rough handgrip and trigger. Backing away, Mosca brought the brute length of a heavy stubber – thrice blessed and liberated from idleness in the barracks armoury – from concealment. Turning and hugging the flared muzzle of the brute to his body, the chorister yanked frenziedly on the trigger.

The barrel danced this way and that under the recoil and Mosca’s unpractised aim, but at almost point-blank range the stubber’s bullets punched through the pig-priest’s back. With his white vestments blanching red, the abbot crashed to the floor. Like a rider trying to tame a bucking

mule, Mosca brought the chugging weapon around and sent a hailstorm of lead into the presented backs of the choristers. As the massacre unfolded the cordon began to break up. With cemetery worlders screaming, falling and being blasted from their feet, Mosca spun around to present his death-dealer to fleeing choristers on the other side.

Roaring his hatred – his being filled with white-hot insanity – Mosca felled the running choristers, the juddering barrel of the heavy stubber showering the panic-addled crowds with bullets. Like trees before the axe they fell, before their scrambling steps could carry them to the cover of headstones and cemetery statues.

With the choristers dead and the cordon broken, Mosca turned to bathe in the hate-wrought radiance of the unholy monument he'd been securing. Through a blood-filtered gaze, he drank in the scale and magnificence of the thing. It called to him and fed his fury with its dread architecture. Pointing his weapon to the sky, Mosca fired once more. With the belt feed of the weapon dancing a diminishing jig, he sent bullets rocketing for the heavens in honour of carnage and annihilation. He didn't notice the poor marksmanship of Charnel Guardsmen flashing about him – the single bolts of their lasfusils flying past. He was lost to the moment and lost to the monument, until a lucky shot found him – burning out the back of his skull and bringing peace to a mind devoid of reason.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Beckoning

‘Give me a circle of the target,’ Kersh requested.

‘Affirmative.’

The *Gauntlet* banked slightly against the setting suns. At an open airlock situated in the flank of the Thunderhawk, Kersh, Melmoch and Dancred looked down on the abomination. Nobody spoke. Micah, the Scourge’s new shadow, waited nearby. In the tactical bay behind them, Proctor Kraski chewed tobacco while High Constable Colquhoun relayed instructions to his Charnel Guard vox-operator and Pallmaster General Ferreira leant against the compartment wall clutching his stomach and covering his mouth. Beyond, Chief Whip Uriah Skase and Squad Cicatrix primed their weapons and offered thanks to the primarch.

Below the *Gauntlet* were the still waters of Lake Serenity. On the distant shoreline of the lake drainage plants boiled off the fresh water, releasing clouds of steam from fat funnels up into the atmosphere. The waters had receded as such from a shallower inlet, revealing a monstrous monument that had been hidden beneath the lake’s crystal surface. A hideous multi-

sided pyramid, the monument appeared like an eight-pointed star from above. It was a dirty cream colour impacted with silt and draped with scraps of freshwater weed. About the gargantuan artefact, Kersh could make out the thin circle that made up the prayer cordon, with temporary Charnel Guard heavy weapon emplacements situated at intervals beyond.

‘Put us down beyond the cordon,’ Kersh ordered.

‘Affirmative, corpus-captain.’

With the gunship’s landing gear scraping down between the headstones of freshly dug graves, Kersh jumped from the airlock. About him, in the drained earth reclaimed from the lake, fossers had already gone to work with their shovels and masons had put the finishing touches to the gravestones adorning the neat, rectangular pits. Peering into the nearest empty grave Kersh spotted an odd arrangement of pipes running between the headstone and the grave bottom. Wire cables ran down the side of the pipes and up into the stone of the marker.

Proctor Kraski came up behind the corpus-captain.

‘What are the pipes for?’ Kersh asked the enforcer.

‘Mistakes happen,’ Kraski informed him nonchalantly. ‘Thousands of stasis caskets and sarcophagi arrive here every day from Imperial worlds across the sector: hive-worlds, cardinal worlds, garrisons and so forth. Occasionally people are interred accidentally – sometimes even on purpose.’

‘Buried alive?’ Kersh marvelled.

‘Without power and a stasis field, dead bodies rot in the sacred earth. Those buried alive might ordinarily have an hour or two of air, screaming for their lives below the ground where no one can hear them.’ Kraski turned his head and spat a stream of tobacco and saliva behind his back. ‘It is cemetery world practice to fashion all headstones with a safety mechanism: an air source and wire cords leading to small bells, set by the masons in the decorative detail of the gravestones.’

‘All the graves have these mechanisms?’

‘It’s an ancient custom.’

Marching around the Thunderhawk’s nose, the Excoriators and their guides made their way towards the prayer cordon. The choristers were blindfolded and had little idea that it had been an Adeptus Astartes gunship that had landed in their midst. They also had little idea that as abbots broke the chain and moved several choristers to one side, the Emperor’s Angels walked among them.

Beyond the cordon, Kersh strode into shallows, splashing down into the emptying lake. Fresh water lapped about his armoured ankles. The cordon lined the shore but the receding waters were still reasonably deep about the abominate structure. The Excoriators strode towards the damned object, with Skase and his squad kicking up fountains as they filed forwards in a canopy formation. Kraski, Colquhoun and Ferreira made headway a great deal more difficult, especially since the Pallmaster General was retching into the shallows following his first flight by Thunderhawk.

As the Scourge approached he saw that the huge pyramid was constructed of human skulls. Each was a brick within the horrific structure, cemented together with lake silt and sand. Kersh’s boot tapped against something in the water. Kneeling down, the corpus-captain grasped the object and brought it to the surface. In his gauntlet Kersh held a cracked human skull. Rolling it over in his ceramite glove he examined the dome of the cranium. A symbol or design had been daubed in red paint on the top, a cross run through with three parallel, horizontal lines. Kersh tossed the skull over to Melmoch who caught the macabre object, drawing a scowl from the Pallmaster General.

‘Bodies,’ Brother Micah called from a position ahead. Using the barrel of his boltgun he lifted a mesh of tangled bones and shredded clothing. The shallows closer to the monument were a mantrap carpet of twisted

skeletal remains. Lifting his weapon higher, Micah angled the bones around. ‘They all seem to be wearing these,’ the company champion said. From his muzzle dangled a lead cloak on a chain, wrapped around the vertebrae of an unfortunate’s neck. The Pallmaster General looked up from his retching and narrowed his eyes.

‘How did you discover this aberration?’ Kersh put to the cemetery worlders.

Colquhoun directed their attention to the funnels of the distant drainage plants. ‘In order to maximise plot space and extend the burial grounds, Lake Serenity had been marked for land reclamation. As the water levels fell, the top of the structure made itself known.’

‘What about the skulls?’ Kersh said. He turned to Proctor Kraski. ‘That’s a lot of heads to go missing.’

‘They’re not cemetery worlders,’ the arbitrator said, spitting a stream of tobacco-stained saliva into the shallows. ‘The murder rates are impeccable here. Until last month, I only had four murders on my slates for last year, global total. Two, the cycle before that.’

‘What about last month?’ Kersh enquired.

‘Thirty-seven,’ Kraski said.

‘There are a lot more than thirty-seven skulls here,’ Dancred said. Behind him, *Punisher* had rolled down the *Gauntlet*’s opening bay ramp and trundled through the shallows to take position beside the Techmarine.

‘We have occasional robberies,’ Kraski said.

‘Robberies?’

‘Grave robberies,’ the enforcer confirmed. ‘Mostly fossers – having a hard time meeting Ministorum taxes. You have to catch the ghouls in the act because the cunning bastards re-bury the bodies and therefore the evidence. Did catch a couple of lost souls out here a few months back. Took a ceremonial sword from a Guard officer’s casket shipped from the Kallistan garrison world. Took the officer’s head, as well. After I

introduced them to my power maul they confessed that looting the graves is prolific in the martial grounds...’

‘Areas set aside for military burials?’ Kersh queried.

‘Yes,’ Kraski replied, ‘which is unusual, since the ghouls are more likely to make good on the trinkets of some hive-world spirestress than the casket of a Navy commander or Guard brass.’

‘What of the decapitation?’

‘Put in an exhumation request,’ Kraski told the Excoriator before spitting. The enforcer and Pallmaster General Ferreira exchanged a hard look. ‘But it was denied. We liaised with the Charnel Guard and organised extra patrols but nothing came of it.’

‘Melmoch?’

The Librarian seemed lost in the monument’s warped design. ‘Epistolary Melmoch!’ Kersh repeated.

‘Eight points,’ Melmoch replied. ‘The dread star of the Ruinous Powers. Two pyramids, sitting one within the other, eight sides to face, eight corners to turn. Eight – the Blood God’s integer.’

Kersh had fought the Blood God’s servants. Crazy cultists. Berserkers. Renegade Space Marines of the Goremongers Chapter. Even princes of the Rage Lord’s daemoniac pantheon. They had all shared the same unrelenting desire to spill the Scourge’s blood.

‘What is the monument’s function? Is it some dark gateway?’ Kersh put to the Librarian.

‘No,’ Melmoch replied. ‘Not a gate. A throne.’

‘A throne... of skulls?’

‘A throne to be taken,’ Melmoch said. ‘An invitation issued. A beacon beckoning.’

‘A beacon for what?’ Kersh asked.

‘I have no idea,’ Melmoch told him honestly. ‘Proctor, all the surrounding remains seem to be wearing these cloaks. What are they used

for?’

‘It’s part of an Ecclesiarchical practice,’ Kraski said. ‘I know little of it.’

The Excoriators turned on Ferreira.

‘Lead capes,’ the Pallmaster General confirmed. ‘They are a form of punishment. Penitents volunteer to bear the considerable extra weight as part of their rite of atonement. They are a metaphor for the tardiness of their wearer’s spiritual progress.’

Melmoch looked back at the knotted remains in the shallows. Kneeling he plunged his gauntlet into the water and retrieved a rusty blade.

Scanning his eyes across the glassy surface, he found a second and a third, all simple knives, pitted and brown.

‘Melmoch?’ Kersh prompted. ‘Opinion?’

‘Corpus-captain, I think that it is entirely possible that the monument is a reasonably recent construct. These bodies probably belong to cultists devoting themselves to the Blood God and his murderous ideals. As the proctor indicates, graves are robbed and skulls are taken. The martial burial grounds are targeted because the Blood God favours the skulls of warriors for his throne. The caskets are reburied to avoid suspicion in the same way that the monument was constructed in secret on the lake bed.’

‘Breathing apparatus. Heavy equipment. That is a significant undertaking,’ Dancred reminded the Librarian.

‘More than you know,’ Melmoch said, standing upright with the knives in his gauntlet. ‘The monument has been entirely constructed by hand. Each skull added to the submerged structure would be a one-way ticket for its bearer. Each cultist would wear a lead cape and take a blade with them. The lead would take them to the bottom, where they would add their grave-robbed gift to the throne. They would then slit their throats and baptise the unholy monument in the murk of their offered blood. Murder – of the self.’

Nobody said anything for a few moments.

‘Macabre,’ Dancred said finally.

‘Committed,’ Melmoch replied.

‘Futile,’ Kersh concluded. The Scourge bit at his mangled lower lip. He looked about the Excoriators and cemetery world significant, then took in the ghastly monument with an all-encompassing stare, from top to dreadful bottom.

‘As every Excoriator knows, it is a great deal easier to destroy than it is to create,’ Kersh said. ‘We’ll widen the exclusion zone and have the *Angelica Mortis* obliterate it from orbit.’

‘Completely out of the question,’ the Pallmaster General suddenly piped up. There was a new-found edge to his voice – an imperiousness that Kersh hadn’t heard him use with the Excoriators before. ‘The cemetery world’s sacred earth will not be tainted with violence and bombardment.’

‘It already seems tainted,’ Kersh returned. ‘That is why we’re here.’

‘It would cause untold damage to the surrounding plots and tombs...’

‘We can calibrate the warhead,’ Techmarine Dancred informed him.

‘What if you miss?’

‘We’re the Adeptus Astartes, Pallmaster,’ Kersh barked back. ‘We do not miss.’

‘I’m sorry, corpus-captain,’ Ferreira said. ‘But I cannot allow that kind of an intervention.’

‘It is a Ruinous artefact,’ Chief Whip Skase called across with venom. ‘We do not need your authorisation to destroy it.’

‘Corpus-captain,’ High Constable Colquhoun interjected. ‘I’m as eager to be rid of this abomination as you are, but the Lord Pontifex will not sanction an orbital attack on Certusian soil. There must be another way. Please, my lords.’

‘If you don’t want our assistance,’ Skase threatened, ‘then you can keep the damned thing. The Excoriators have duties to attend to elsewhere...’

‘Skase...’ Kersh said. The chief whip looked from Ferreira and Colquhoun to the corpus-captain. ‘What about that?’ Kersh nodded at Dancred’s itinerant Thunderfire cannon. *Punisher* had rolled through the shallows to take position dutifully by the Techmarine’s side. ‘Could we demolish the monument rather than obliterate it?’

‘Unbelievable,’ Skase concluded in the background.

‘The Thunderfire cannon can deploy subterranean ammunition designed to destabilise and disorientate,’ Dancred said, his face whirring and clunking. ‘Directional salvoes combined with strategically placed demolition charges from the Charnel Guard armouries – in prodigious amounts, of course – might topple the structure.’

‘That will take days!’ Skase fumed. The squad whip wanted off the cemetery world as soon as possible to continue the hunt for the Alpha Legion.

‘Can it be done?’ Kersh asked, looking at the sheer size of the monument.

‘I can demolish the structure, but then what?’ Dancred asked.

‘Then we bring in the flamers and meltas,’ Kersh confirmed, ‘and wipe any evidence of the thing from the face of the planet.’

‘The Charnel Guard could–’ Colquhoun began.

‘The Charnel Guard will maintain the prayer cordon until we have destroyed this thing of evil. Only Adeptus Astartes are to work within the cordon to reduce the risk of contamination.’

‘As you wish, my lord.’

‘Brother Dancred will oversee the monument’s demolition,’ Kersh instructed. ‘Squad Cicatrix will provide security and destroy all remnants of the structure once it is down.’

‘You would have us waste more time on this miserable little world?’ Skase accused.

‘Chief Whip Skase, the eradication of Chaos is not a waste of our time. It is the purest expression of the purpose for which we were bred and I’ll have you not forget that,’ Kersh bit back.

‘You question my courage,’ Skase seethed, advancing on the Scourge.

‘Increasingly,’ Kersh spat.

The two Excoriators splashed through the shallows at one another and their ceramite would have clashed had it not been for Brother Micah getting his bolter and combat shield between them. Shoving Skase back with the shield, Micah also put his shoulder against his corpus-captain’s chestplate. Two of Skase’s squad grabbed their leader by the arms and attempted to haul him back.

‘It’s the monument,’ Melmoch called. A calm descended on the scene. Skase and the Scourge’s twisted faces fell and the pair looked at the Epistolary. ‘This is its dread influence. It demands blood, spilt in its name.’

Kersh looked to Skase and then nodded slowly.

‘Squad Cicatrix will return with me to Obsequa City,’ the corpus-captain ordered. ‘Squad Castigir will have the honour of destroying this thing of evil. Chaplain Shadrath will return with the squad to monitor the operation for corruption.’ Kersh turned and began to stomp his way back through the darkening shallows towards the waiting Thunderhawk. ‘Come,’ he commanded. ‘We are wasting time. The chief whip was at least right about that.’

I have a new-found respect for my former commanders. Squad Whip [Thanial](#); Brother Erastus; Corpus-Captain Tobiaz, Corpus-Captain Phinehas; Chapter Master Ichabod. All were great Adeptus Astartes and I feel that I can live up to their warrior example. How any of them survived the trivialities of command, however, I know not. On the battlefield, I have seen mortals exceed the cruel limitations of their bodies. I do not hold them in contempt or exercise a prejudice for such handicap. They, however, exceed the cruel limitations of my attention and interest. They can talk for

hours of nothing. You would think a short existence would breed a brevity in their number, but no.

I sit here, at the long stone table of the pontifex, with the great and the good of Certus-Minor and more food than an army could eat. Ezrachi sits at my side. Beyond Melmoch, he is the only one of our number I thought to afflict with this intolerable duty. The Librarian was acting strangely – a little absent – and with glazed eyes had requested to remain in his allocated cell. The pontifex, crippled down one half of his body, has a palace menial cut his portions and bring fork from plate to mouth. The gaggle of priests at the table devour their portions with relish and I'm sure the feast is the finest quality the Adeptus Ministorum kitchens can produce. But like the conversation, I have no stomach for it. On backwater swillholes and death worlds I have eaten things that would make a grox retch. Here, I do little more than push the fine fare around my plate and then push the plate itself to one side. All the while, Pontifex Oliphant and his clerics jabber incessantly.

Oliphant seems a good man. He doesn't make my skin crawl like the cardinal world husks we found on St Ethalberg, but I find the boundless benevolence of his devotion difficult to endure. Every statement must be qualified with a prayer. Every act is worthy of Holy Terran grace. The pontifex showers me and my Excoriators with compliments and blessings, and prattles his priestly interpretation of the God-Emperor's will. I am glad I did not include Brother Melmoch in such company. I would be ill-disposed to such blind slanders falling from Adeptus Astartes lips.

My mood sours. I do not feel myself and I indulge my baser feelings with a mask of a face. A frozen frown of unmistakable contempt which grows with every word from the ecclesiarch's crooked mouth.

Oliphant has dragged himself to his feet. With one shoulder held higher than the other he offers a twisted toast. The menial prises the pontifex's fingers open and slips a goblet of wine into his trembling clutch.

‘To our saviours, the Adeptus Astartes,’ he begins, and as he does so is joined by his legion of priests. ‘May the God-Emperor smile on their efforts as He does our own. Let Him look out across His holy realm and watch over them as they carry out His will. Let Him bless their endeavour with His divine favour. Let Him lend them the strength to do what is right and cleanse our sacred earth of this foul contagion. In good faith we live in expectation of success and the failure of darkness. After all, does not the God-Emperor fight on our side?’

I think of the Ruinous monument. Of the thunder of Brother Dancred’s efforts on the horizon and Squad Castigir waiting with meltas and flammers to scour it from the planet surface. The throne of skulls calls to us. I can feel its malign influence in my intolerance, the flex of my muscles and the edge in my voice. It reaches out for the warrior in me like some final furious defiance. The last pollutive gasp of a proud evil about to take its fall. I think of Skase. His hatred and that of his brothers. Shadrath’s scorn. The loathing of the squad whips. The bright fire of Joachim’s fraternal allegiance. The cold fury in Ishmael’s eyes.

This is an insufferable position for all. If I were but a squad whip in this company I would share their anger and indignation, and like Uriah Skase, I would make my displeasure known. It is my honour that hangs in the balance. My standard lost. My vendetta to prosecute with the filth Alpha Legion. I marvel that my own Excoriators cannot see the pain I share with them. As corpus-captain, however, my gaze must be broader. The Fifth Company’s hearts beat to a mutinous rhythm, and like the race to the runner, our time on Certus-Minor only serves to amplify the defiant thunder in their chests. It would be easy to excuse this as some malignant influence of the Chaos artefact. I am their corpus-captain and I know better. I cannot find it in myself to thank Chapter Master Ichabod for this duty, or see the wisdom in his orders. In a galaxy overrun with mankind’s enemies, I fail to see the significance of a single cemetery world. My

Excoriators need to exorcise their grief through the blessings of battle. Only in the crash of their bolters and the fall of their enemies can the Fifth Company find itself once again.

Oliphant talks still but I am no longer listening. He spits his prayers and blessings to the God-Emperor through his palsied lips, but his feeble words are drowned out by my silent rage. Like the pontifex, the priests are on their feet with goblets in their hands. Their gathering dims the chamber. They feel like a curtain about me, shutting out the world. I long to be free and for a terrible moment my hand drifts for my weapons.

Then I see it. My spectre. My revenant. My madness – sat at the other end of the table. The dead thing fixes me with the unnatural life force glowing in a single eye. It stares down the table at me like a lance beam from the rent in the being's helm. Then, in an action that chills me to the core, the revenant takes up a goblet from the table and holds it up to toast me also.

My vision blurs. The deep black armour of the spectre blotches and runs into everything else. The clerics take their wine and then, depositing their cups on the tabletop, begin to clap their appreciation. A silent applause. The chamber shrinking. Their forms in shadow growing. Then, beyond them I see others. A gallery of shadows. Shapes in midnight plate. Indistinct but obviously armoured. Pauldrons. Helmets. Optics burning with otherworldly intelligence. They are everywhere. Row after row. An army of revenants. A host of darkness. Everything becomes an inky blackness, like being trapped deep under an ice-covered lake. Through an opening – distant and darkening – I see only Oliphant, deific praise still escaping his lips.

Before I know I've done it, my fists come down. The stone table jumps, the impact of my assault sending a quake down its entire length. Goblets dance. Plates and cutlery leap and rattle. Red wine spreads like blood from wounds across the table, pitter-pattering off the edge and onto the

floor. I am on my feet, towering above the frozen gathering. They are simultaneously shocked and terrified. Rooted to the spot. Even Oliphant has stopped. Light has returned to the chamber. The revenant is gone and so has his company of lost souls.

‘Enough,’ I say. The word is mine, unlike the wave of anger upon which it rides. ‘The Emperor is flesh and he is blood. He lives and breathes. His sons honoured this, as do his sons’ sons. When will humanity, from whose ranks the Emperor emerged, recognise this? Priests... what do they know of the Emperor’s will? Priests, who take history – the truth of deeds long done – and use it to peddle lies and expectation. Who are you to offer hope? Vague promises of sanctuary and intervention, designed to distract humanity from the misery of an Imperial existence? The Emperor is a powerful man – but he is not all-powerful. If he was, do you think he would allow his people to languish as they do under threat of torment, poverty, hunger and death? As a man he is father to us all, not some omnipotent god to feed your desire to be loved and assuage your mortal fears. As a father, he does his best – as he always has – to protect his children. He reaches out to smash, with a righteous fist, those that seek to harm you. We are that fist.’

My own fists are buried in the cracked stone of the tabletop. I don’t really know to whom I am talking. Oliphant? The absent Melmoch? Myself? I lean at the gawping priests, my arms straight and shoulders hunched. I turn to look at Ezrachi, seated by my side. He is more the politician than myself, but I know that as an Adeptus Astartes, the priestly prattle rankles him also. His face is hard but not cast in the kind of disapproval I have come to expect from the Apothecary. My own face falls from fury to consternation.

‘The Darkness,’ I mumble. It is neither statement nor question. Ezrachi’s crabby brow furrows. The Apothecary is suddenly on his feet.

‘Please excuse us,’ Ezrachi says bowing his head. ‘Pontifex, gathered dignitaries. The corpus-captain’s duties demand his attention.’

The pontifex, a good-natured smile still somehow plastered across his half-paralysed face, nods reverently back, an act mimicked by the stunned priests about the table. With that, Ezrachi gets me out of the chamber.

Accompanied by the sibilance of his bionic leg, the Apothecary helped Kersh to the ground floor and the square before the pontifex’s palace.

‘It’s returning. I’m sure of it,’ Kersh said.

‘I severely doubt that,’ Ezrachi told him, ‘but I’ll do some tests.’

‘I told you before, I’m seeing things that are not there.’

‘Symptomatic of sleep deprivation. I can give you something for your sleeplessness. Even an Adeptus Astartes must sleep some time. We should not forget the monument. We have little idea of its malign influence. Melmoch tells me that it is corruptive and had a strange effect on both you and Skase. The Ruinous Powers delight in their mind tricks and we should not discount it.’ Kersh nodded slowly. ‘I don’t think it’s a good idea to alert the Chaplain just yet. I shall summon Melmoch for a second opinion.’

Outside, one of Certus-Minor’s long nights had fallen. All three of the cemetery world’s suns were absent from the sky. Brother Micah stood sentry on the palace door nearby a pair of Charnel Guard. He had been waiting. Upon seeing Kersh slumped against the aged Apothecary, the young champion was prompted to ask, ‘What’s wrong with the corpus-captain?’

‘You protect him,’ Ezrachi said with annoyance, ‘Let me treat him, eh?’

‘Brother Toralech is trying to relay an urgent message from Corpus-Commander Bartimeus, but can’t get a vox-link,’ Micah informed the Apothecary.

‘As you can see, the corpus-captain isn’t answering his vox-bead right now,’ Ezrachi replied sardonically.

With Micah under one ceramite shoulder and Ezrachi the other, the pair of Excoriators took Kersh across the square in the great shadow of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum. The journey downhill on cobbles, with the weight of the stumbling Scourge between them, was difficult. In the darkness of an alleyway the Space Marines heard screams and the echo of running footsteps. Gunshots followed. With his free hand Micah brought up his bolter and combat shield attachment, but Ezrachi pulled both Kersh and the company champion into the deeper darkness.

‘It’s local business. Let the cemetery world authorities handle it,’ the Apothecary insisted. ‘I don’t want anyone to see the corpus-captain like this.’ The three Excoriators held a hidden vantage point at a corner. Silent and still the Space Marines watched a servant girl, a common drudge, run for her life past them. Micah risked a brief glance around the corner. Heavier footsteps followed and close after he saw a thick-set foss-reeve bounding up the alleyway like a man possessed. As the reeve rounded the corner, Micah stepped out and shouldered the cemetery worlder into the opposite wall. Striking the masonry, the reeve hit his head and then tumbled to the cobbles, rolling shoulder over shoulder down the alleyway until he came to rest in a gutter. Ezrachi’s lip curled.

‘He didn’t see anything,’ Micah said before leading the two of them back down the alley.

It was the company champion’s responsibility to protect the corpus-captain at all times and even Ezrachi had to admit that the young Excoriator had done an excellent job of memorising the steep maze of lanes, passageways and alleys back down towards the Umberto II Memorial Space Port. The path was an escape route from the palace to the hermitage Ezrachi and Chaplain Shadrath had arranged for the Excoriators to use as a planetside dormitory.

As the Adeptus Astartes passed a dirge-cloister, they observed members of the Charnel Guard and a pair of Kraski’s enforcers gathered outside an

emporium. The Excoriators with their superhuman hearing could hear stifled screams and growls of intimidation from within. The enforcers kicked in a flimsy door and entered with their shotguns raised. The Charnel Guard followed in their ceremonial gear and with their long lasfusils. There was a sudden rush and a cacophony of threats, followed by the inevitable bark of the enforcers' weapons. The flash of lasfusils filled the narrow casements.

'What on Terra is going on?' Micah posed.

'Come on!' Ezrachi urged and the Excoriators pushed on along the final few alleyways. About them, against the backdrop of night, the city seemed alive with anger, shrieks of alarm and the occasional crack of stub-fire.

'Shouldn't we alert the Chaplain?' Micah asked as they approached the hermitage.

'Not the Chaplain,' Ezrachi insisted.

'Who then?' Micah pushed. 'Bartimeus? The chief whip? This is why we have a command structure.'

Micah stopped. Ezrachi didn't wait for him. Taking the full weight of the barely conscious Kersh onto one shoulder, the Apothecary dragged the Scourge with him along the cobbles.

'You can debate the directives for command with me later,' Ezrachi called behind him. 'For now, help me get your actual commanding officer inside.'

'Apothecary.'

'What?' Ezrachi barked. When Micah didn't appear beside him or even reply, the Apothecary stopped and made an ungainly one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn. Micah stood in the middle of the alleyway, his boltgun slack in his grip. The Excoriator was staring up past the belfries, spires and steeples of the city and into the open night sky. Ezrachi did the same. There, hanging above the cemetery world like a drop of blood, was the bulb-head of a comet. A crimson comet, whose tail trickled after it,

smearing the heavens with gore. Ezrachi had heard of the crimson comet. The worst of omens, it brought death in its wake to entire worlds, for along its pilgrim path blazed the Blood God's servants, unimaginable in number, with an unquenchable thirst for slaughter. The Cholercaust had come to Certus-Minor and with it had come inescapable doom.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Fallen Star

Lord Havloc nestled in his command throne – an object that had become as much part of him as he had the Traitor battle-barge *Rancour*. Pincering a strip of ancient flesh between a pair of black talons, Havloc peeled it from his grotesque shoulder. His infernal face – a mangled snout of sabretusk and red, reptilian scale – twisted with repugnant hate. The lord of the *Rancour* had long felt disgust for his previous, weakling form. He let the strip dangle and drop beside the flesh-throne before examining the bone-scabrous daemonhide beneath.

About the creature the darkened bridge of the battle-barge extended, a nightmare of brasswork and chain. Gouts of flame routinely erupted from the grille floor, beneath which a gladiatorial slave-pit extended for Havloc's pleasure. The roar of murderous intention and resulting death-shrieks that rose from the pit competed with the excruciating struggle of the *Rancour's* ancient engines. Catwalks and elevated gangways led from the throne pulpit across the open space to the banks of rancid cogitators and runescreens, manned by half-mad emaciated and wretched captives that had proven themselves in the pit. The blood-smeared slaves were

manacled to their stations and sat in their rags, staring glaze-eyed at their stations, reliving some past horror aboard the *Rancour*.

Dominating the far end of the bridge were the gargantuan lancet windows, cracked and misted with old blood. Through them the deep darkness of space was visible. One celestial object dominated, however. In the main lancet screen, perpetually held in a set of cross hairs by the mechanical course corrections of brass automatons, was the gory miasma of the Keeler Comet's tail. With ancient orders and angelic masks, the automatons maintained the *Rancour*'s course heading, its torpid pursuit of the crimson comet across the stars.

Behind the mangled blasphemy of the battle-barge's stately dimensions a colossal fleet extended. Like a growing stain on the empty void, the Cholercaust continued to grow. Daily, vessels of all descriptions joined the Ruinous armada. Some were warships, eager to join the Blood Crusade and prove themselves worthy of Khorne's favour. Others had been led there under the command of killers and champions, whose carnage-clouded visions had revealed to them a slaughter without end, a patron-pleasing brotherhood of the barbarous. Others still were captured freighters, traders and heavy transports, swarming with the surrendered slave-stock of sundered worlds, Imperial innocents whose fate now lay in the Blood God's claws and whose depraved treatment aboard the seized vessels led them down Khorne's doomed path.

Silhouetted in the comet's tailsmear, a Traitor Astartes stood before the lancet screen in the studded extravagance of archaic Tactical Dreadnought armour. The figure was a vision of red and brass, spiked like an undersea urchin and draped in skull and chain. His helm was a sculpted representation of monstrous jaws swallowing a bronze globe whole. Held beside the ceramite hulk, one in each gauntlet, were a pair of ugly chainaxes. The Traitor Terminator rested their shafts on the mesh-decking and allowed their chunky belligerence and barbed outline to hang over his

grotesque helmet. Lord Havloc might have been commander of the *Rancour* and leader of the crusader fleet, but Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh – World Eater and Skull Champion of the Blood God – led the Cholercaust once the berserker armies of Khorne stepped out onto the soon-to-be blood-drenched earth of Imperial worlds. He stood like a statue, unmoved in his silent fury, watching the Keeler Comet's haemorrhaging bulb bleed out across the cosmos, leading the Blood Crusade fleet across the stars to its next planetary victim.

On the bridge the air was thick with rage, heat and the haze of blood, pierced only by the Blood God-honouring screams of the dying. Devil-mutants and fang-faced bestials armed with serrated flails drove a chained train of fresh captives out onto the pulpit-mezzanine. There, before the horror of Havloc's daemon form, the slaves shrieked their terror, emptied their bladders and begged for a mercy that would never come. With an imperceptible narrowing of his yellow, serpentine eyes, Lord Havloc gave successive orders for execution.

Like his glorious deity, Havloc the Cold-Blooded had a special loathing for the meek and yielding. The Blood God drank deep in the fury of the sword's swing, the thunder of flesh-pulping gunfire delivered at point-blank range and the seething malice of murderous thoughts. These the Chaos entity drew upon, whether carried out by the depraved champions of his hateful cause or enemies, worthy in their violent desires and bloody intent.

A monstrous hulk lumbered forth, an obscene fusion of what had been a man and machine. Weapons protruded awkwardly from stone-hard flesh which had in turn grown cancerous and rampant across the thing's armour and helmet. Two holes had been punctured in the tissue of the mask to allow the thing to see, and the eyeholes continually bled and crusted.

Released from his bonds, a fat slave threw himself down before Havloc's feet – cloven hooves that had long been fused to the base of the throne.

The hulk snatched up the pleading captive by the head with an embedded power claw. Its other arm was a flesh-cradle for the broad disc of a spinning buzzsaw, which with an effortless swipe, cut the slave's screeching head and shoulders from the rest of his thrashing carcass. Lord Havloc and his followers were baptised in the blood of the slaughtered. Depositing the decapitated head in a net of rotting skulls hanging off the hulk's back, the brute kicked the rest of the butchered corpse off the side of the pulpit-mezzanine. The body tumbled into a crowded den of flesh-hounds below, initiating a short-lived daemonic frenzy. This the hulk repeated with two further submissives until before Havloc came a spitting whirlwind of a girl. Her chains jangled and her feet flew as she attempted to thrash her way out of imprisonment. The Chaos lord licked his lips with a thick, forked tongue. He nodded and a bestial released her from her bonds.

From the back of the throne, Havloc spread a large pair of black, leathery wings. The girl spat at the *Rancour's* commander and, free of her shackles, came straight at the beast. Havloc relished her mindless fury – her lack of fear and desire to kill. Flapping his wings in front of him, Havloc sent a wall of foetid air at the girl. Running and kicking, the spirited slave was blown from the grille of the pulpit-mezzanine. She tumbled with a half-caught scream before hitting the floor with a sickening crack. The scream came fully-formed this time. The slave was squirming around on the blood-slick floor of the gladiatorial arena below. A shattered tibia had sheared up through her knee.

‘That should slow her down a bit,’ Lord Havloc hissed, emerging from behind his retracting wings. Howls of furious delight rose from the audience as another slave was freed from a holding cage. Snatching a crude flensing blade from a hook on the rusting pit wall, the gore-speckled defending champion swept down on the girl.

The howls and shrieks of the berserkers on the bridge suddenly seemed to combine into one horrific roar. Flames thrashed to greater heights and the corroded metal of the deck began to vibrate, causing fragments of grit and shattered skull to dance, and blood to steam from its agitated surface. Umbragg took to one ceramite knee. The damned all spoke as one.

‘Havloc...’

Even the Chaos lord bowed his head and lowered his wings, as though the voice was everywhere and its owner looking down on him from above.

‘My lord,’ Havloc grizzled, with fear and fire fighting within him.

‘Great Pilgrim, the Right Claw of Khorne, Chosen of the Brazen-Fleshed. What is thy bidding, my merciless master?’

‘I lead,’ the cacophony of spite continued, ‘the Cholercaust follows. To what part of the doomed Imperium does the crimson comet – the physical embodiment of the Blood God’s will – take us next?’

‘Under your ruthless leadership, Great Pilgrim – back to Terra, to the crumbling walls of the corpse-Emperor’s palace and the Eternity Gate. For your murderous amusement, the War-Given-Form has blessed your path with a faith world. A planet of the dead, where the corpse-Emperor’s cultcubines minister to the galaxy’s silent majority.’

‘A planet of the dead, indeed,’ the Pilgrim boomed through the mouths of the mob. ‘Hone your blades, my slaughterkin, for shortly they shall taste priest-flesh...’

I dream.

For the longest time I have lived a nightmare. My eyes have been half open to events unfolding about me while behind them a macabre puppet show has played. To be neither awake nor asleep. A mind-breaking combination of both. It is custom to pinch oneself – to test if one is awake. I need no such test to know I am finally asleep. To know I am in the cradle of the unconscious. The world about me has that punch-drunk quality, the distant resonance of the unreal.

I walk the surface of the cemetery world. The sandy Certusian earth crunches beneath my boots. Through my helmet optics I zoom in on a crenulated horizon. A sea of gravestones and masonry markers extends before me. Above, the ivory sky broils and bubbles in the distance. Then, like an atomic explosion, a mushroom cloud vomits forth from the heavens and billows thunderously for the surface. There is no sound – only doom. The creamy cloud spumes and rages, swirling black, then red and gold as a swirling wall of flame overreaches the blast wave and the inferno hits the ground.

I turn and run. Armoured footfalls pulverise the grit beneath my boots as stride for stride my plated form attempts to outrun the conflagration. As the firewall of destruction billows furiously across the necroscape behind me, I feel my progress slowing. Even in full battle-plate I could make the horizon, but it is not the distance, nor the extra weight of ceramite that impedes me. I hurdle gravestones and will myself on, but as the flames engulf the world behind me, my boots sink deeper and deeper into the grave dirt. The soil has lost its consistency and I have run myself down into a quagmire. The earth – black, sodden and heavy – pulls me down into the ground itself. It oozes up my greaves, splatters plate and swallows cabling. With my legs and arms churning the morass, I see shattered bones, earth-stained skulls and rotten remains in the mire about me. Even a smashed stasis casket surfaces for a moment, like a sinking ship, before disappearing back into the depths.

With every movement my ceramite sinks further, and within moments I am up to my helm in cemetery world dirt. I turn to see the bank of flame – an unstoppable inferno of fire and fury that has scorched the Certusian surface clean – erupting upon my position. The most primal of instincts takes over, and before I know it, I have dived down below the quagmire and into an underworld of darkness, grit and death. My optics turn black. I desist in my armoured struggles and allow the cemetery world to take me

down, while above the earth hardens, as the inferno bakes the ground with the heat of its righteous fury.

Kersh opened his eyes. The vague recollection of a dream misted his mind like a taste water wouldn't wash away. He felt smothered yet calm and took a moment to savour several deep breaths. He allowed his head to roll to one side. A form sat by his bunk crystallised into focus. Bethesda, his personal serf and absterge, was watching him. Her mask of tension broke with relief and she smiled. The curl of her lip was simple and sweet, and Kersh found that he was actually quite glad to see her.

She turned and called 'lord' lightly at the dormitory door. It opened slightly and Kersh saw Micah's face in the crack. His expression became a grin.

'It's good to see you, sir. I'll send for your Apothecary, plate and bondsmen.'

Kersh nodded and went to sit up. The hermitage slab made a harsh bunk, but the Scourge had known worse. He had been stripped of his warrior's plate and lay in his clean but blood-stained robes, bearing the venerated symbol of the Stigmartyr. As was custom, the cream of the garment was fresh but the spiritual work of 'the purge' was forever allowed to stain the material.

Putting the soles of his feet on the cold stone of the hermitage floor, Kersh felt something fall from his chest. On the flags beneath him, the Excoriator found a liquid-crystal wafer. He picked it up. It bore an illustration: a single eye, unflinching, open and glinting with predatory intention. The Space Marine felt some unease looking at the disturbing image. It was as though the card itself was watching him. Below the illustration, inscribed in High Gothic, was the title *Magnus Ocularis*. The Scourge's brow creased with confusion.

'Did Melmoch leave this?' Kersh asked. Bethesda shook her head.

'Your armour, sir?' Micah said as Kersh strode past and out into the dark hermitage thoroughfare. The company champion's thoughts were always

centred on his commander's safety. The dim light of struggling candles illuminated the glower on the Scourge's face.

'The plate can wait,' Kersh murmured, advancing up the cloister past the heavy doors of private dorms and hermitories. The corpus-captain came to a silent halt outside one. The ferruswood door was slightly ajar. Beyond, Kersh and Micah could hear the savage crack of a 'purge' at work. Kersh recognised the knotty face of Chief Whip Skase's lictor. The serf himself was stripped to the waist and his body slick with the effort of mortification. Edging around, Kersh could also see the pool of blood gathering around the purged. Dorn's Mantle had not been so much donned as spread across the floor. Both Skase's seneschal and absterge were employed with mops and buckets, attempting to stem the flood. Against the wall stood the chief whip himself, stoic and immovable – like a statue – his mangled back cut to ribbons.

Pain and endurance were their genetic heritage and through the spilling of blood, Demetrius Katafalque had taught them that spiritual communion with the primarch could be achieved. In the cold remove achieved by Excoriators during the hot agony of purgation, Rogal Dorn had answers for each of them. Kersh had seen Excoriators punish themselves as such before. He had done so, cloaked in the shame of losing the Chapter Stigmartyr and failure to protect his Chapter Master. It led to a dark place. The long journey from Samarquand had taught him that his flesh had a greater purpose in Dorn's eyes; that beyond the spiritual unity of the Mantle lay only a labyrinth of needless suffering in which to lose oneself forever.

Kersh was so struck by the spectacle – the simultaneous sadness for and anger towards the hurting Skase – that he did not even acknowledge Ezrachi's hydraulic approach. Others in the dormitory had, however, and a figure behind him promptly closed the hermitory door.

‘Have Toralech relay a message to the Chaplain,’ Ezrachi ordered Brother Micah. ‘Inform him that the corpus-captain is conscious and demands a report.’

Micah nodded and peeled off into the shadows.

‘I ordered a cessation of ritual observance,’ Kersh growled at the ferruswood door.

‘And Chaplain Shadrath enforced it,’ said the Apothecary. ‘You’ve been out a few days.’ Ezrachi turned the Scourge’s face towards him before dazzling the Excoriator with some medical instrument that sent a flickering beam between his eyes. Since the dull, scratched surface of a ball bearing sat in one socket, Ezrachi focused his attention on the corpus-captain’s remaining eye.

‘Days,’ Kersh marvelled. ‘The company...’

‘Shadrath will make his report. Be still.’

Kersh allowed the Apothecary his rudimentary medical tests.

‘It’s not healthy,’ Kersh said looking back to the door, but the Apothecary brought his attention back to the beam.

‘I’ve spoken to Skase,’ Ezrachi said. ‘Right now I’m more worried about you.’

‘Was it a relapse of the Darkness?’

‘No,’ Ezrachi said with some certainty. ‘I just don’t think you were sleeping. Even an Adeptus Astartes must sleep some time. I can give you something for that. You must tell me if you begin suffering the delusions you spoke of.’

‘You think I’m hallucinating?’

‘I should have listened. My apologies, corpus-captain. We must accept the possibility that the catalepsean node is still malfunctioning. It might require further surgery. It is certainly more evidence for the likelihood of the Darkness having a genetic rather than spiritual cause.’

‘Well, thrilled as I am to help you solve a medical mystery,’ Kersh told him, ‘just fix it, will you?’

‘I need the surgical bay in the apothecarion – on board the *Angelica Mortis*. I’m happy, however, to submit a report indicating that you’re fit for duty.’

‘I suppose this recent incapacitation has further cemented ill-will towards my command amongst the Fifth.’

‘The rank and file hate you with a passion,’ Ezrachi told him with brutal honesty. ‘Nothing has changed there. Events, however, have overreached us.’

‘Explain.’

‘Follow me.’

The Apothecary led Kersh up a spiral staircase of stone and dust. In the awkwardness of full plate, Ezrachi found that he had to angle his pauldrons to ascend, while the globes of the Scourge’s muscular shoulders merely brushed the staircase walls. A door at the top of the twisting steps opened out into a narrow balcony. Below them the tiled roofs of the hermitage extended; above, a small bell tower reached for the darkness of the cemetery world sky. Stars glimmered in the heavens, and on the horizon, the Eye of Terror’s distant, heliotropic haze besmirched the depths of the void. It was not the warp storm’s horror that held the corpus-captain’s attention.

‘Katafalque’s blood,’ Kersh said, the oath carried off on the light breeze. Above Certus-Minor, the sky had been cleaved in two, a gore smear trailed across the starry firmament – like that a wounded soldier might make, crawling for his life. Instead of a soldier, the haemorrhaging bulb of a crimson comet blazed the bloody path. ‘The Keeler Comet...’

‘Destruction follows in the wake of the comet,’ Ezrachi told him. ‘It is more than just an omen. If the crimson comet appears in a sky then the world to which that sky belongs is doomed to fall.’

‘Stop talking like a prophet and give me specifics. Specifics I can kill.’

‘We’ve been out of segmentum, but Shadrath claims intelligence is patchy. The comet leaves no witnesses to its passing,’ the Apothecary said.

‘No survivors?’

‘Some claim the comet eats worlds whole,’ Ezrachi replied, ‘others that it is responsible for some kind of rift or daemonic incursion. The Imperial Navy reports sightings of an armada trailing its tail, a Blood Crusade called the Cholercaust. The Exorcists, the Grey Knights and our cousins the Fists are rumoured to man a cordon at Vanaheim – to prevent a crusader advance on Segmentum Solar.’

Kersh’s eyes drifted down to the planet surface. Beyond the city, the necroplex of grave markers, statues and mausolea extended before being swallowed by the darkness.

‘How long until dawn?’

‘Two, perhaps three hundred hours standard. The cemetery worlders call it the Long Night.’

‘We’ve got to send word to Vanaheim,’ Kersh said. ‘We need to alert the Viper Legion on Hellionii Reticuli. The Cadians...’

‘This world’s problems have already begun,’ Ezrachi said, pointing behind the corpus-captain. Turning, Kersh took in the rising spires and towers of Obsequa City with the dome of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum topping the cathedralscape like a crown. Smoke streamed from various fires across the city while tiny sparks of las-fire could be seen flashing across the streets below. Amongst the chaos, Kersh could make out large crowds in the streets. A mortuary lighter made an unsteady take-off and blasted past the belfry at full throttle. Kersh could imagine the panic and pure havoc created on the cemetery world at the appearance of the crimson comet. Kersh made for the stairs.

‘I presume an evacuation has begun,’ the Scourge called behind him.

‘With necrofreighter captains auctioning space in their empty holds to the highest bidders,’ Ezrachi said with obvious disappointment. ‘The ruling classes and many of the priests simply abandoned world. There was little in the way of haggling – speed being of the essence.’

‘The pontifex...’

‘Remains,’ Ezrachi said. ‘He claims he won’t leave his people or sacred Certusian soil. There are, of course, many thousands of scribes and labourers without the coin to secure a passage off-world.’

‘What about the Sisters?’

‘Umberto II’s remains are too fragile to transport,’ the Apothecary explained. ‘With or without the pontifex, the Order of the August Vigil have orders to protect the Ecclesiarch’s bones. I think we can rely upon them to do that, but little else.’

Kersh stormed out of the stairwell and out onto the hermitage thoroughfare.

‘My battle-plate,’ he roared up the cloister at his serfs. ‘Do you know anything about this?’ Kersh asked, holding out the crystalline wafer he’d been holding. Ezrachi took it. ‘It was placed with me as I slept.’

‘From the Emperor’s Tarot. Members of the Librarius use them,’ the Apothecary told him. Ezrachi squinted at the card. ‘The Great Eye,’ he read.

‘Give it back to Melmoch,’ Kersh ordered.

‘It wasn’t Melmoch,’ Ezrachi said. As the Scourge continued marching up the cloister, the Apothecary stopped. He opened a nearby door and called, ‘Kersh!’

Scowling, the Scourge returned and looked in through the open door. It was the small sanctuary chamber Ezrachi had converted to a temporary apothecarion. Epistolary Melmoch lay upon a hermit’s slab, arms across his chest.

‘Is he...’

‘No,’ Ezrachi interjected as the two Excoriators entered the room. ‘But he is out cold. He breathes but fails to respond to drugs or stimuli.’

‘What happened?’ Kersh asked as Bethesda and Old Enoch began running in pieces of plate from the rack outside.

‘He was found like this,’ Ezrachi replied. ‘I believe it might have something to do with this,’ the Apothecary said, picking up a small, ornately decorated urn from a dormitory shelf. He handed it to the Scourge who examined it with interest. ‘It was reported stolen from the Memorial Mausoleum by the Sisters but found here with Melmoch.’

‘What is it?’

‘The Palatine was short on detail but I gather it is used in an annual, ceremonial capacity to dust the Ecclesiarch’s shrine. The material inside the urn is formulated from a by-product of the Emperor’s metabolism, if you believe that. The dust particles are impregnated with negative psychic energy, so I’m told. For all I know there could be bread crumbs inside, but for the fact that the Palatine and her Sisters were almost on the verge of charging down the hermitage door to recover it and the effect exposure has had on Melmoch here.’

‘Why would he do that to himself?’ Kersh asked as his serfs worked fast about him.

‘This is nothing. Ever since the comet appeared, witchbreeds have been dying,’ Ezrachi told the corpus-captain.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Astropaths hanging from cloisters, Navigators stepping unsuited into airlocks. All kinds of insanity.’

‘What about the *Angelica Mortis*?’

‘Zaragoza’s dead. That bird of his went mad and tore his throat out,’ the Apothecary said.

‘Something wrong with the pet?’

‘Or with Zaragoza,’ Ezrachi said. ‘Who knows? Shadrath recalled the *Angelica Mortis* back to the cemetery world. She has the sprint trader *Avignor Star* under her guns. The captain wishes to leave with the last of the great and good, but the trader carries the only remaining Navigator. Commander Bartimeus is under orders to destroy her if she attempts to leave. With the pontifex’s chief astropath, Melmoch and this Navigator are the only psykers left on or around the planet.’

‘Chaplain Shadrath has been in command?’ the Scourge asked.

Ezrachi nodded. ‘He charged me with your care and completed the destruction of the Ruinous monument.’

‘The monument,’ the corpus-commander repeated, looking down at the Librarian. ‘Melmoch said it was a beacon.’

‘Well, now we know what it was beckoning,’ the Apothecary said.

‘Why didn’t Shadrath just leave?’ Kersh asked. ‘That’s what he wanted.’

‘He had no orders to leave,’ Ezrachi insisted. ‘I told him your symptoms were likely to be short-term. He restricted his commands to the execution of your wishes and precautionary measures. The *Gauntlet* sits on the rockrete, fuelled and ready to go. The strike cruiser awaits your order to leave. We are leaving, aren’t we?’

Kersh’s mind seemed elsewhere. He was looking down at the small urn.

‘We should return this...’

‘Kersh!’ Ezrachi said. ‘We’re leaving, yes?’

‘You would have me abandon one of the Emperor’s worlds at the sight of an omen in the sky?’ Kersh grizzled.

‘Whatever is ending worlds in the wake of the Keeler Comet, I fear we are too few a number to dissuade it from taking this tiny planet of the dead,’ Ezrachi barked back. ‘We have a ship. We have a Navigator. We should alert the cordon at Vanaheim. There – shoulder to shoulder with our brothers – we can make our stand.’

‘We have an astropath – you said it yourself,’ the corpus-captain persisted. ‘And we have a message for him to send. The Viper Legion are nearest.’

‘There is an astrotelepathic blackout for light years around,’ Ezrachi shot back.

‘Then he shall have to double his efforts!’

‘Kersh, don’t do this.’

‘Do what, Ezrachi? Carry out my Chapter Master’s orders?’

‘Our purpose here is fulfilled. Events are unfolding on a larger canvas. We must make a run for Vanaheim–’

‘We are Excoriators,’ Kersh seethed. ‘Attrition fighters. Our gene-kindred fought before the walls of the Imperial Palace. We are not heralds and harbingers. We are Excoriators and this is the Imperium beneath our feet. We stand our ground and we fight, whatever the odds. As though this were the palace itself. I have failed my Chapter Master. I will not fail my Emperor.’ The two Space Marines burned into each other with searing eyes as Kersh’s serfs pressurised his seals and attached his weapons to his belt. ‘And neither will you.’

Ezrachi looked away as Brother Micah appeared at the doorway. The champion looked unsure of himself amongst the heated exchange. The corpus-captain turned to the young Excoriator. ‘Have word sent to Chaplain Shadrath. Tell the Chaplain I need him and Brother Toralech at the pontifex’s palace, immediately. We shall meet them there.’ Micah nodded. ‘You too,’ Kersh added before looking back at the livid Apothecary. ‘And you.’ Ezrachi looked down and nodded gently. ‘We have words and deeds for Pontifex Oliphant and his chief astropath.’



CHAPTER NINE

Harbinger

Before the Obelisk Ecclesiarchical palace – which served Erasmus Oliphant as both pontifex and planetary governor – two groups of Excoriators marched out of the darkness towards one another. Kersh was flanked by his Apothecary and Brother Micah, who walked a little out front with his bolter and combat shield attachment held out before him. Chaplain Shadrath had with him the Fifth Company's standard bearer, Brother Toralech, holding his banner proudly above them. A little way behind them, Second Squad Whip Ishmael and Brother Levi – from Squad Castigir – marched across the cobbles. The two Excoriators were helmetless and scorn was etched into their sour faces.

‘I won't offer my gauntlet, brother, for fear you would not take it – and that would only shame us both,’ Kersh opened aggressively, ‘but I thank you for the care you have given to the Fifth in my absence and my existing orders.’

Shadrath came to a halt. His half-skull helm remained fixed on the corpus-captain but did little to acknowledge the appreciation.

‘I did no less than Katafalque expected,’ Shadrath said finally.

‘And no more,’ Kersh admitted.

‘What are we doing here?’ Ishmael spat, the veteran’s face contorting itself around the expression of disgust.

‘Our duty, Brother Ishmael,’ the Scourge informed him. ‘Which I am not about to debate here. The Adeptus Astartes is not a democratic institution. Neither is the Emperor’s Imperium – I’ll have you remember that. You and your Excoriators will do as you’re damn well ordered.’

Ishmael and Levi exchanged dark glances.

Twin columns of Charnel Guard jogged across the plaza carrying the lengths of their lasfusils and in the full sobriety of ceremonial dress. A helmetless lieutenant led them across to the palace doors, replacing the powerpack in his taper-barrelled pistol.

‘What is it, lieutenant?’ the Scourge demanded to know.

‘We’ve been summoned by the High Constable, my lord,’ the dour officer replied.

‘Go,’ Kersh ordered his Excoriators, who had little trouble reaching the palace doors before the Guardsmen. With Ishmael and Toralech flanking the archway, Brothers Micah and Levi kicked aside the heavy doors and led the group into the small palace and up through the Obelisk’s stairwells. Before the reception chambers and beneath the great belfry, the Space Marines found High Constable Colquhoun barking orders to a gathering of his Guardsmen. Some were stationed at the bronze doors of the pontifex’s reception chambers, calling through the thick metal. Others had the long barrels of their lasfusils pointed at the aperture, while a small group had toppled a masonry statue at the High Constable’s instruction and were trying to batter the doors down.

‘Thank the God-Emperor,’ Colquhoun said at the appearance of the Adeptus Astartes.

‘What’s happening?’

‘The pontifex has been in there for many hours. We thought he was at prayer,’ the High Constable confessed. ‘When planetary business

necessitated a disturbance I tried to enter myself.'

'Locked?'

'There is no lock. They must be blocked from the other side.'

'Anyone in there, beside the pontifex?' Kersh asked.

'Only his chief astropath,' Colquhoun confirmed. The Scourge pursed his grizzled lips.

'Toralech, Ishmael,' the corpus-captain ordered.

As the Charnel Guard and their improvised ram retreated, the squad whip and the hulking standard bearer put their ceramite shoulders to the bronze. As the Space Marines pushed against the metal with superhuman might, the doors began to give. With a screech they parted slightly, at which Ishmael put his eye to the crack. 'Barricaded with masonry,' he reported.

'What?' the High Constable exclaimed.

A sulphurous tang stung the Scourge's nostrils.

'Do you smell that?' he asked. As he snorted he detected the otherworldly odours of ozone and scalded reality. The same reek he experienced on the battlefield when the witchbreeds of the Librarius brought the full force of their warp-drawn powers down on the Emperor's enemies.

'Warpstench...' Shadrath snarled.

'Pontifex!' Ezrachi boomed through the gap in the bronze. When no sound returned, Kersh stabbed a finger at Brother Micah and then at the stone wall.

'Shoot it out!'

Pulling the bolter into his shoulder, the company champion hammered the masonry with diamantine-tip precision. As the dust cleared, a ragged circle in the wall was revealed, as well as a peppering of holes that had broken up the masonry within. Like a torpedo, Kersh launched himself at the wall. Punching through the crumbling stone, he dived through the

opening. Rolling across a pauldron and the curvature of his pack, the Scourge landed back on his feet. With dust cascading off his armour, he unclipped his chainsword and brought the short, falchion-shaped weapon out in front of him. Gunning the Ryza-pattern blade to life, he waved it from left to right like a flaming torch in the darkness of a cave. Beyond, the throne room appeared in a state of considerable disarray.

Rolling into a covering position, both Micah and Levi followed their corpus-captain through, bolters up and scanning the chamber.

‘Oliphant!’ Kersh called above the chug of the company heirloom.

Shadrath and Ezrachi stepped through the wall with Squad Whip Ishmael bringing up the rear. Toralech waited by the opening with the standard in hand and his bolter pointed through the hole. ‘Spread out,’ the corpus-captain called, prompting the Excoriators to advance through the pontifex’s reception chambers and throne room.

‘Kersh,’ the Apothecary called, drawing the Scourge’s attention to the small mountain of masonry that had been ripped out of the walls and ceiling and piled before the bronze doors.

Sweeping through the wreckage of the darkened chamber, the Excoriators moved in on the throne room. As Kersh led the way with the idling chainsword, flanked by the gaping muzzles of Micah and Levi’s bolters, the Space Marines found a robed form slumped in the ecclesiarch’s throne.

‘Pontifex?’ Kersh called. When the figure didn’t reply, the corpus-captain shouted, ‘Ezrachi!’

The Apothecary moved up behind the group as they advanced on the throne. The remaining Excoriators gathered at the door, ready to provide cover fire. Levi moved in and pulled the figure’s head back. Slipping the hood off, the Excoriators found themselves looking into the empty sockets of the pontifex’s chief astropath. Ezrachi moved in.

‘Unconscious,’ the Apothecary confirmed. ‘Like Melmoch.’

‘Listen!’ Kersh said, shutting off the chainsword’s brutal motor. The remaining Excoriators, who had been moving through the expanse of the throne room, froze. As they scanned the chamber, they heard a distant murmur.

‘It’s coming from outside,’ Ishmael said. Kersh joined him on the pontifex’s balcony, squinting through the darkness. A narrow ledge ran along the four sides of the Obelisk, running under the balcony, a decorative rather than a practical structure. Peering through the murk along it, the Excoriators caught a glimpse of fingers, clasping the corner of the building with bone-white desperation. A figure was somehow situated out on the ledge. As a fearful face edged around the corner, peering at the Excoriators, the figure released a howl of relief and urgency.

‘Oliphant!’ Kersh cried. ‘Ishmael—’

But the squad whip was already over the balcony balustrade and stepping down onto the narrow ledge. ‘Ezrachi,’ the corpus-captain called, as he craned his head back around into the reception chamber. The Apothecary left Brother Levi with the comatose astropath and made his way up the steps.

‘He’s coming around,’ the Excoriator announced as the astropath’s head came up. Instead of empty sockets, a pair of dark orbs – black as midnight and sizzling with blank hatred – rolled over in the psyker’s skull. Momentarily transfixed, Brother Levi watched as twisted horns of charred bone sliced their way out of the man-puppet’s gaunt flesh.

‘Daemo—’ Levi began, but the thing before him exploded in a bloodstorm of shattered skull and brain. An elongated cranium blasted out of the back of the astropath’s head, while daemonfangs burst through his forehead and neck, swallowing his face whole. In its place a visage of infernal flesh appeared: primordial, bestial and depraved. Willowy, lurid limbs and talons erupted from the palms and soles of the astropath’s own and the daemon grew, wearing the puppet’s body like a garment over its

horrific and emaciated torso. Pinpricks of immaterial life, like keyholes into a furnace, burned through the inky incomprehension in the monster's eyes. In one savage motion, the daemon seized Brother Levi by his pauldrons and enveloped the Excoriator's head with the cage of its jaws. Snapping down, the beast sheared Levi's head from his neck and swallowed, leaving the Space Marine's power armour to fountain gore from the neckbrace.

With his attention split between the throne room and the ledge, Kersh was slow to react. The first he truly understood of the danger was the sight of his Excoriators lifting their weapons at the far end of the throne room. The Scourge felt a shockwave of rage and hatred spread through the chamber like a red mist that could be felt but not seen. All Kersh saw was the cavernous muzzle of Shadrath's bolt pistol thrust at him and the Chaplain lean into a firing position.

Kersh snatched his own Mark II piece from his holster only to see Brother Micah slam the Chaplain's arms aside with his shoulder.

'The corpus-captain!' he yelled.

Before the Scourge could take aim a florid blur shot across the entrance to the balcony. The corpus-captain got the impression of something spindly and daemonic, all horns, claws and blasphemous flesh. Kersh thrust a palm back at Ishmael on the ledge, the squad whip having the exhausted pontifex under one arm. By the time he turned back, the creature had bounded halfway down the chamber on its gangly legs. Both Micah and Chaplain Shadrath's gunfire had now been unleashed, blasting its way up the precious Ecclesiarchical relics that adorned the throne room wall. Kersh brought his own to bear, trapping the beast between two converging arcs of .75 calibre hell.

Clawing a foothold in the masonry, the daemon vaulted up through the beams of the chamber ceiling and into the great belfry above. The *clangs* of its ungainly movements could be heard against the metal of the

Obelisk's bell. As the Chaplain indulged a slick reload of his pistol, Brother Micah sidestepped across the chamber towards his corpus-captain, dribbling bolt-rounds at the ceiling beams. These were joined by the judicious crash of the Apothecary's pistol and the fully automatic hurricane of fire from Toralech. The standard bearer had been drawn in by the sound of gunfire and held his banner upright like some religious artefact, ready to repel the infernal beast with faith alone.

'Hold your fire!' Kersh ordered, bringing even Toralech's chattering bolter to a halt. The Excoriators listened to the ring and scrape of the thing's talons on the bell. Kersh's eyes widened as the potential calamity of the situation crystallised in his mind. 'Fall back!' the corpus-captain roared, but by then the calamity was already in play.

The Obelisk's Great Bell crashed down through the ceiling beams from the belfry above. The colossal instrument descended on a furious cloud of masonry dust and debris, clanging and peeling its thunderous way down through the throne room floor. Kersh watched in horror as Chaplain Shadrath, Toralech and Brother Micah all disappeared, carried down with the bell as it made its cacophonous descent through the different floors of the Obelisk. Once again, Kersh was treated to the hazy impression of the daemon, clinging to the bell crown and riding the instrument down through its path of destruction.

Ezrachi had been fortunate not to have been caught in the path of the object, but now with the demolished throne room floor collapsing under him, the Apothecary had little choice but to make a clumsy bound for the balcony. The Excoriator's hydraulic leg wouldn't entertain the speed such a manoeuvre entailed and Kersh watched the marble floor fall away beneath the Apothecary.

Dropping both pistol and chainsword, Kersh threw himself down and half over the crumbling floorspace. Marble disappeared beneath his chest also, leaving only his legs and armoured midriff spread awkwardly across

the balcony. With one of the Scourge's gauntlets clutching for a handhold, the other shot for the falling Ezrachi. His ceramite fingertips clawed their way around the edge of the reductor adorning the Apothecary's armoured wrist. Ordinarily, Ezrachi would use the sacred tool to extract gene-seed from fallen Excoriators. As the Apothecary dangled from his corps-captain's grasp it became clear that the instrument had saved him from falling. Holstering his pistol and getting his gauntlet to the Scourge's arm, Ezrachi gave Kersh a glare of crabby exertion before hauling himself up the ceramite plating of his arm and shoulder. Swinging his bionic leg up and onto the balcony edge, the Apothecary used his powerful hydraulics to do the last of the heavy lifting.

As the two Excoriators lay on their chestplates looking down through the devastation the bell had punched through the different levels of the palace, they heard Colquhoun's Charnel Guard hit the stairs and make their way down towards the ground floor.

'The casualties...' Ezrachi began, getting to his feet. Kersh snatched up his pistol and chainsword.

'Let me at least kill it first,' the Scourge shouted as he gunned the chainblade to serrated life. 'Call for the *Gauntlet*,' Kersh ordered, 'and get the pontifex off that ledge.'

With that, Kersh turned and dropped off the side of the balcony. As the Great Bell had fallen, taking out floor after floor, it had left behind a narrow rim of masonry on each level, keystones and structural girder-stumps protruding from the exterior wall. Bounding from one to the other, dropping whole floors and spiralling his way down through the wreckage, Kersh went after the daemon.

A thick cloud of dust rose to meet him about halfway down, indicating that the bell had finally reached the ground floor of the palace. With the powdered masonry and final resonance of the instrument hanging in the air it became increasingly difficult to make the footholds out. When what

looked like a snapped support strut turned out to be nothing, the Scourge fell the remaining three floors. Hitting the uneven floor of debris and stone carnage, Kersh felt the hydraulics of his power armour groan and protest. Springing back and rolling, he assumed a combat stance in the miasma of dust. Kersh could make out little but the ghostly outline of the toppled bell and mess of ropes, cords and pulleys left by the falling instrument, hanging in the haze like vines in a jungle mist.

‘Shadrath... Micah... Toralech. Respond.’ The vox-link fed back only static.

The beast was suddenly upon him.

Launching itself over the bell, with a shattered length of girder clutched within its infernal talons, the daemon howled its inhuman desire to end the Scourge. The potent length of a slack, bestial tongue swung from the creature’s maw. The chainsword raged in Kersh’s hand.

The corpus-captain followed the savage motion of the girder with his sword. Kersh ducked the first swing – a manoeuvre that had every right to take his head from his shoulders. A second and a third danced in an arc of pure wrath, flying for the Excoriator time and again. Attempting to keep his focus and composure amid the supernatural speed of the strikes and the primeval roaring and hissing of the thing, Kersh sidestepped across the uneven ground. He leant back out of the path of the shattered end of the girder as it descended, his throat a hair’s breadth from the razor tip of the metal support strut. A roll to the left took him away from the improvised weapon, and the daemon had to content itself with the lump of palace masonry it pulverised instead. A sudden backslash, riding on a crest of spite, found the Scourge, smacking his backpack and slamming the Excoriator into the wall.

Kersh swung straight back with the raging teeth of his chainsword, clipping the tip off the retracting girder. Claspng the weapon like a lance, the daemon charged at the Excoriator. Kersh batted the metal away with

the flat of his sword, allowing the girder to skewer the stone of the wall right beside him. The Scourge accelerated the chain on his weapon to an insane screech before cutting down through the girder's thickness. Again the creature retracted the strut only to have Kersh follow, pressing his advantage. The beast rewarded its opponent with a series of strikes designed to cut the Adeptus Astartes in two, but each one met with the Scourge's serrated blade and the immovable arms of the Excoriator behind it. The girder's length was cut down again and again, forcing the creature to step back up the bell. With just a stump remaining of the daemon's weapon, Kersh brought up his pistol. By the time the Mark II delivered its death-dealing blast, however, the monster had flipped back behind the bell, leaving the girder to fall to the uneven floor and fat bolt-holes in the metal of the bell.

Fuelled by the creature's retreat, Kersh stormed across the demolished architecture. A lightshow cast ghostly patterns through the swirls and eddies in the dust. The Scourge immediately recognised the semi-automatic *whoosh* of the Charnel Guard's lasfusils and the High Constable's calm and routine instruction. The beast had retreated straight into the fearful Guardsmen, waiting in formation at the bottom of the stairs.

Kersh would have stormed into the hail of las-bolts himself if it hadn't been for the company standard, resting in the rubble. Toralech's hand was still clenched around the banner pole, despite the fact that the hulking standard bearer's body was a twisted mess of bone and ceramite, half buried in the wreckage. Kersh spat and swore. Suddenly a gauntlet snatched at his boot. Spinning around, Kersh saw a partially buried Excoriator. Looking from the lightshow to the gauntlet, the corpus-captain slammed his Mark II and his chainsword down in the rubble. Heaving pieces of stone off the Space Marine, Kersh found himself looking down at the cracked, half-skull face of Shadrath's helm. The Chaplain had been

buried in masonry and the rim of the Great Bell rested across the smashed ceramite of his chest.

‘Hold on,’ Kersh told the Chaplain and rested his pack against the metal of the bell. Hooking his fingers around the rim, the Scourge pushed with his legs.

From the stairwell beyond, Kersh could hear the disciplined fire of the lasfusils break up and the screams of Guardsmen echo about the ruins of the palace. Heaving upwards, the corpus-captain lifted the colossal weight of the bell slightly, allowing the rim to clear the buckled chestplate of the Chaplain. Kersh heard Shadrath take a laboured breath, then the sounds of slaughter. The beast was among the Guardsmen, tearing and gutting its way through the Charnel Guard with hateful ease.

Within moments the thing was back. Down on all fours, the daemon charged at Kersh. It smouldered with the scorch tracks of las-bolts that had found their mark, and steamed with the blood of the Guardsmen it had butchered. Kersh held his ground as Chaplain Shadrath squirmed his way out from under the Great Bell. At the last moment, Kersh released his grip. The bell came back down on the Chaplain’s pauldron, trapping his arm and causing the Excoriator to grunt in pain and exertion. The daemon hit the metal of the instrument with the dome of its elongated cranium – its twisted horns ringing against the surface. Snatching the relic-gladius from his belt, the Scourge allowed the weight of its bulbous pommel to carry the blade around with centrifugal certainty before slashing down through the beast’s willowy arm.

Kersh’s stroke took off the limb at the elbow. But though such a loss might have given most enemies pause for thought, the daemon seemed oblivious. It spat its gall and fed its rage with a blinding counter. Using the dribbling stump of the same limb, the monster smacked the gladius out of the Scourge’s grip with bone-ringing force. Pushing itself off the bell with its hind-talons, the daemon blazed at the Excoriator. Slamming the length

of its skull against his chest and midriff, the beast ran the corpus-captain into the opposite wall. Stone crumbled and masonry fell as the creature butted the Space Marine repeatedly into the unforgiving surface. Kersh tried to reach for the hilt of his remaining gladius – the only weapon he had left – but was forced to grab on to the monster’s horns in order to prepare himself for the next brutal impact.

Twisting the hydraulic sinew of his armoured wrist, Kersh broke off a length of the fiend’s horn and thrust it into the thing’s hideous visage. The reaction was immediate. Its head came up and its jaws flashed open, wider than the Scourge thought possible. Gagging under the creature’s gorebreath, Kersh once again grabbed the torturous cage of horn that protruded from the daemon’s skull, forcing it back. As the Excoriator fought to force the monster back, the slack length of bloodlustful tongue suddenly became solid and sharp, like a speartip. Kersh intuitively craned his head out of harm’s way, as the tongue shot out like a slaughterhouse groxgun. Puncturing the wall, the repellent tongue retracted. The Scourge threw his head the other way, only to have the devilish tip nick the side of his head and impale the brickwork.

Out of nowhere Kersh heard the familiar crack of a bolt pistol. The beast seemed to arch and screech its vexation before rocketing away, allowing several rounds to pluck at the stone about the Scourge. Falling to a crouch, Kersh saw that Chaplain Shadrath – his shoulder still trapped beneath the Great Bell – had got his other gauntlet to the corpus-captain’s Mark II pistol. The daemon was back down on all fours, bounding this way and that, causing each of the Chaplain’s unsteady shots to narrowly miss. Leaping up onto the side of the bell once more, it forced the instrument down with its infernal weight, causing the Chaplain to gasp and drop the weapon. Pinning his wrist to the floor with one wicked hind-talon, the beast reared its other above Shadrath’s cracked helm in readiness for the kill.

The ruins were suddenly filled with the clamour of bolt-fire. Brother Micah, masonry dust still cascading from his plate, took several determined – if shaky – steps around the Great Bell. His combat shield attachment was buckled but his bolter raged fully-automatic fury at the beast. The creature let loose an inhuman wail as the bolt-rounds plucked at its daemonflesh. With its stump and talons held out as an instinctive shield, and its digits and claws blasted off by the barrage, the monster backed away from the advancing champion.

As Micah's half-spent magazine ran dry, the mauled beast turned to find the Scourge standing behind it. The Excoriator stood tall and held a large chunk of ruined masonry above his head. His face was a strained mask of fury and physical effort. Smashing the small boulder down on the creature's long head, Kersh watched the daemon stagger back. Shaking dust, grit and rock fragments from its hellish form, the beast seemed momentarily dazed. Fearless and foolish, the Scourge ran at the monster, wrapping his arm around its neck, grabbing it by its repulsive tongue and clutching its head to his armoured side. He felt the spirit of his plate protest against such close proximity to the Chaos daemon. Kersh was beyond caring, however. Holding the beast in an armlock, the Scourge pummelled the beast with his other fist.

Kersh felt his being expand to accommodate the pure rage coursing through him. A natural gene-bred hatred of the Emperor's enemies, growing into something unnatural and monstrous. Fighting the warp-sired thing had given rise to something ugly and uncompromising within the Scourge, a primal thing beyond his Adeptus Astartes training and the cool conduct of battle. A feeling that superseded strategic frustration and a Space Marine's bottomless desire to win. Anger, indiscipline, anarchy. A lack of control that could only be described as bloodlust. Kersh became a ceramite chalice, spilling over with hot, mindless fury.

Spitting curses and oaths, beating and punching the monster, Kersh's actions were no longer his own. His eyes remained fixed on the rubble through which his boots and the monster's hind-talons stumbled. An image flashed before the Scourge's eyes. A momentary flicker. A memory, seared into the Space Marine's unconscious.

The crystalline wafer he'd found on his chest. The Emperor's Tarot card. The *Magnus Occularis*. The single, unflinching eye, its doom-laden orb staring through the Scourge and filling him with the chill sensation of a feeling equally unnatural in an Excoriator. Fear. Kersh remembered the Darkness. Dorn's gift. Dorn's curse. A galaxy undone. A future alone. Kersh could not see the revenant but he sensed he was there. Just like he had been in the living nightmare of the Darkness. The Scourge felt his heart freeze within his chest. A benumbing emptiness that extinguished the fires of wanton wrath gutting him like a burning building.

At once, Kersh was himself again. The fury gone. The spite steaming away before a Space Marine's singular purpose. The Scourge became aware once more of the monster in his grasp. The threat. The need to act. Kersh dragged the daemon over to the knotted carnage of the Great Bell's pulley system. Snatching a length of bell cord, the Scourge looped the thick rope around the daemon's macabre skull. As he released the beast he felt furious life return to its blasted limbs. Two remaining talons scraped across the ceramite of his shoulder plate before Kersh got to a second rope and began pulling arm-over-arm for his life. The daemon flew skywards, its legs swinging back and forth like a doll's, its neck and bulbous head snug in the improvised noose. It gagged, spat and hissed its brute vehemence. The Scourge held the beast there for a moment, taking no little satisfaction in the monster's spasmodic thrashing.

'Kersh!' came a call from above. The corpus-captain began an almost torturous return to his senses. It was Ezrachi. Kersh felt a tremble on the air. The welcome quake of a Thunderhawk's engines.

Two figures approached through the dust and mist. In one hand Brother Micah trained his reloaded boltgun on the snared beast. With his other he held up Chaplain Shadrath, freshly extricated from beneath the bell's crushing weight. Shadrath held the company standard in his fierce grip. They too stood entranced by the monster's jiggling and twitching. Patting the Chaplain's plate, the company champion allowed Shadrath to lean against the battered standard and brought his weapon into his shoulder. Micah angled the sights of his bolter up at the daemon. Kersh saw the fire in the champion's eyes.

'Save it,' the corpus-captain commanded, before adjusting his vox-channel. '*Gauntlet*, this is Kersh.' The Scourge returned to his ropework, hauling the beast up through the rock dust and gloom. 'Target lock, palace interior.'

The three Excoriators watched the daemon disappear above them. Kersh feverishly worked the bell cord, feeling the creature's livid desperation through the length of rope. The line suddenly went slack. Simultaneously the roar of heavy bolters echoed through the ruins and the haze above flickered with a steady stream of firepower.

A mangled form tumbled through the murk, striking the Great Bell and sending a thunderous death knell reverberating through the palace. The Excoriators looked down at the smoking remains of the daemon at the foot of the instrument. Whatever murderous, immaterial life had flowed through the daemonflesh had now left it. The corpse was black and shredded, punched through with bolt-rounds and mauled beyond grisly recognition.

'Are you wounded?' Micah put to his corpus-captain.

'No, but you are.'

'Are you all right?' the champion pressed.

'I am now,' Kersh told him, stepping over the infernal remains. Walking across the rubble, Kersh reclaimed his weapons.

‘What do you want me to do with it?’ Shadrath hissed.

Before leaving the chamber Kersh stopped and turned, taking one final look at the smouldering daemon. It was already beginning to lose its tenuous grip on reality, the red flesh bubbling and spitting. A bronze steam rose from the infernal corpse – its corporeal presence beginning to ebb away – threading through the smoke and slaughter. The Scourge would take no chances.

‘Burn it,’ Kersh told the Chaplain and left.



CHAPTER TEN

Necroplex

Brother Omar gunned the bike's throttle. The vehicle bucked with obedience, its machine-spirit hungry for the road. As a neophyte, Omar's flesh had yet to be worthy of the lash, and no dents, rents or craters marked his carapace – his armour bearing the ignoble sheen of battle virginity. With the fat tyres of the bike tearing up the grit of the lychway and his dark robes flowing behind him, Omar surged up along the column cavalcade.

With the appearance of the blood comet in the Certusian skies, cemetery world society collapsed. The wealthy and educated fled. Merchants sold their stock. Scribes and scriveners left their quills in their ink. Priests abandoned their flocks. Anyone with ears and coin had packed what they could carry and joined the crowds gathered about the mortuary lighters and hump shuttles on Memorial Space Port rockrete. Their ears were ringing with tales of the Keeler Comet and the death of worlds that followed in its wake. Their purses were soon emptied by greedy freighter captains whose crammed vessels hung in low orbit like last chances.

Such fear felt alien and craven to Omar – as it did to all Excoriators. As a Scout and brother of the Tenth Company, he was young enough to remember the doubts and uncertainties of childhood. Back beyond his years of psycho-surgical enhancement and cult instruction. A time when fathers ruled and a mother's embrace was everything. A time of nightmares, when darkness felt full of dread and danger.

Brother Omar remembered and he felt for the cemetery worlders left behind. Like children, the remaining Certusians seemed haunted by their ignorance. Their existence had been the Emperor's word, delivered daily through priestly lips and the reassuring drudgery of a hard day's labour with teat or shovel. Now they had neither. Newborns went unfed and the dead unburied. There was only blind panic. Infrastructure had swiftly broken down and early fears for basic requirements such as food and safety found expression in petty tyranny, violence and murders of seeming necessity.

It was for this reason that Corpus-Captain Kersh gave Squad Whip Keturah and his Scouts orders to ride out. To blast along the lychways and crow roads of the necroplex, across the sea of grave markers and stone sculpture, and through cenopost communities. In the absence of the Emperor's words, the corpus-captain thought it important that common Imperials had the example of the Emperor's flesh to comfort them. Even in such dark times, the sight of a hulking Adeptus Astartes – even a Scout – drew eyes and minds. Demigods walked among them.

Partly to escape the violence, raiding and looting that had swiftly engulfed the hamlets and foss-parishes, and partly because they knew no better, cemetery worlders began to move in ragged convoys on Obsequa City. Herd instinct had led the Certusians to do this, and as lychways intersected, the crowds and pilgrim processions grew larger and longer. This too had been encouraged by Corpus-Captain Kersh, who had too few

Excoriators and Charnel Guardsmen at his disposal to defend a world from what might follow in the blood comet's wake.

Omar, like his brother neophytes, had been instructed to ride across the tiny world, stopping briefly in each cenopost hamlet he rode through to order Certusians to move on to the capital. Obsequa City was designated a planetary holdpoint, to be further fortified by honoured members of the Fifth Company, and like a rescue vessel, the city took in as many as needed shelter – crowding the cells and domiciles of those who had escaped off-world and creating a tent shanty on the open and now empty expanse of the Memorial Space Port. It had taken Omar several days to reach the grave-lined shores of Lake Sanctity on the far side of the planet, and from there onwards he found that he was riding along the teeming lychways with the cavalcades rather than against the current of cemetery worlders. Omar had ridden amongst them all, vergermen and their families, gravediggers, foss-reeves, pallbearers and vestals, attending to the old, the sick and orphaned. Shabby masses, their rags covered with grave dust, pulling carts and carrying all they owned in the world.

The strategy was not popular amongst the members of the Tenth. Brother Kush had been briefly seconded to Squad Cicatrix during training rites on board the *Angelica Mortis*. There he had been exposed to the full hatred the Excoriators First Squad felt for their new commanding officer. Kush, in turn, had brought these opinions to his brother neophytes, who had swiftly begun to revel in similar derision of the unfavoured Scourge, his loss of the Chapter Stigmartyr and his affliction with the Darkness. The Scout dormitory had soon become a forum for a kind of hollow boasting and scorn that Omar tried his best to avoid. When Squad Whip Keturah had delivered orders to break out the bikes and take to the lychways, Omar had been secretly relieved. After Keturah had left, Kush and several other Scouts had questioned the wisdom of the Scourge's strategy. Omar had listened but said nothing. Kush claimed Kersh's seeming concern for mere

mortals was further weakness in the flawed commander – labelling it hesitation and cowardice when faced with the prospect of actual battle on the Vanaheim Cordon or Rorschach's World.

As Kush and his brothers went to leave the dormitory they had found the squad whip standing in the corridor. Keturah had run a hand through his silver mane and fixed them all with the cyclopean intensity of his bionic eye. Omar had withered under his gaze, but again opted for silence.

'I know there are mixed feelings about the corpus-captain amongst the Fifth Company,' Keturah finally said in steely syllables. 'No such confusion exists in this company. Do you understand? When you are corpus-captain, you can debate deployment and strategy. Until then you will follow orders without discussion. Is that clear? Zachariah Kersh has had more broken bones than you have bones all together. He's spilled more blood than entire companies have ever seen and has recent scars older than you. For Throne's sake, he won the Feast of Blades. He has wielded the sacred Sword of Sebastus – the primarch's own weapon. Above all, he's your commanding officer. And mine. Show some respect.'

'But, whip...' Kush had began.

'Brother Kush,' Keturah had said calmly, 'you will take a vow of silence in regards to this matter or I will have the Apothecary sew your mouth shut for the duration of this mission. Do we have an understanding?'

Kush nodded. 'Yes, squad whip.'

'Until I say otherwise,' Keturah had told Kush, 'you are forbidden from donning your shoulder carapace and gauntlets. Shed your field smock and cloak also. Cuirass and faulds only. I want your brothers to see the shame of your unspoilt flesh, to see your lack of battle scars and, by extension, your lack of judgement in this matter.'

'Yes, squad whip.'

After Keturah had left, Kush honoured his word to the squad whip. His lips said nothing. But they didn't have to. His eyes – burning with defiance

and meaning – did the talking.

On the lychway before him a throng had gathered, making it difficult for Omar to ride. There was light ahead and some isolated screams, prompting some Certusians to turn around and start pushing their way back through the oncoming crowd. Clutching at the brakes, the Scout brought his machine to a gravel-crunching halt. Turning, Omar took the bike out along a narrow walkway, leading between gravestones and statues, alongside a crypt belonging to some hive-world House or family. The swarm of cemetery worlders on the lychway seemed to have come to a stop at a cenopost ahead, and Omar gunned the bike down a slender pallbearer's track, riding up several burial mounds and clearing a line of gravestones in order to reach another track. This brought him out at the cenopost, a small collection of shacks and permanent hovels. These were built around the necroplex crosslyches and intersections dominated by a simple block cenotaph, carved in the semblance of the Adeptus Ministorum's symbol and inscribed with prayers and blessings. It also bore the hamlet's name. Little Amasec.

Immediately, Brother Omar saw the reason for the cavalcade's halting. The ground about the bike's chunky tyres was mushy and both bodies and body parts lay strewn across the crossroads in pools and puddles of blood. Several hovels were on fire, while a tiny market and a nearby brewhouse were beginning to take, streaming with smoke and filling the air with a murky haze. Omar rode around and between the bodies. Beyond the cenotaph the slaughter continued, and as the Scout idled the bike up to the far end of the hamlet he could see the lychway beyond littered with bodies. Cemetery worlders pounced upon, beaten, torn, bitten and ripped apart. A cavalcade just like the one Omar was riding along.

Parking the bike, Omar dismounted. Taking several squelchy steps out onto the lychway, cloaked in haze, the Scout squinted through the darkness. Something was moving up ahead. A dark shape making its way

along the road towards Little Amasec. A man in rags. He slipped and stumbled amongst the bodies, several times having to pick himself up.

‘What happened here?’ Omar called, demanding an answer. The man did not reply, though. The dark shape’s head seemed to suddenly angle. He looked up at the Excoriators Scout, framed in the burning village, before breaking into a run.

The neophyte’s brow furrowed. ‘Answer me, Certusian,’ he ordered. The man ran on. He was unarmed but something in the cemetery worlder’s gait told the Scout that he was not running to him but at him. As the figure closed and the cenopost flames flushed his features, Omar saw the madness in his face. Mindless, animal fury. With teeth bared like a snarling mongrel and sunken, bloodshot eyes, the cemetery worlder came at him.

‘Halt!’ Omar ordered, but the boom of his voice did nothing to the wretch. He came straight at him, leaping at the Excoriator as one might scale a statue. Omar’s boot came out in a simple but brutal front kick. The Certusian’s face cracked and he flew back towards the floor. With his shoulders striking flat into the grit, the man slid a little way through the gore before coming to a chest-heaving stop. Omar spun around and put the heel of his other boot across the madman’s neck, positioning his toe-tip against his chin.

The Certusian’s nose was now but a bloody crater in his face. Omar knew such a kick could have killed the mortal and should at least have knocked consciousness from him. There he was, however, spitting up teeth and gobbets of tongue that he’d bitten off. Something primal within the wretch would not let go, and before the Scout knew it, the lunatic was scratching and tearing at his boot like a rabid dog.

Brother Omar had heard of unfortunates afflicted with xenos infections and the infamous Zombie Plague, but the wretch seemed to demonstrate no evidence of alien contamination or living death. Inside his scrawny

ribcage a lean heart beat with rage; blood boiled through his veins; his eyes crackled with single-minded, murderous desire. Nor was the cemetery worlder enthralled or possessed by some denizen of the warp. His wrath was all his own. Omar could only reason that the Keeler Comet, blazing its bloody path through the Certusian skies, had some part to play in the strange phenomenon.

Looking up, Omar's enhanced vision detected further movement in the darkness. Smoke swirls and shadow overlapping shadow that betrayed the presence of more figures in the gloom. A horde of maniacs, blank and spent, wandering about the grave stones and cemetery fields, spleen-fired to instant rage by the sight of the Excoriator. He heard the unintelligible, glottal rasp of bestial intention and watched the first of the psychotics break ranks. They streamed towards him through the smoke – one, then two; ten, twenty, many more. The lychway was suddenly swamped with the running wretches, accompanied by others, scrambling across the gravestones, statues and stone sarcophagi of the burial grounds.

Omar snorted. Words would be of little use here. Twisting his foot, he broke the neck of the wretch beneath his boot. The man's limbs suddenly spasmed and then fell. Satisfied that the maniac was dead and not some necromantic puppet, the Scout stomped back to his bike. Slipping his combat shotgun from its holster on the bike subframe, Omar worked the pump action. The weapon was a work of squat inelegance. From the brute curves of its stock, through the angularity of its breech and barrel and the yawning darkness of its muzzle, the shotgun was a monster. Bringing the stock to his shoulder, the Scout brought the weapon up to face the oncoming horde.

The first wretched specimen, a gaunt-faced fosser, simply vanished in the path of the blast – turning into a bloody smear on the darkness. This did not dissuade a feral vestal, who surged past the gruel before Omar took her legs out from beneath her with a second shot. A hearsier lost his head

to the shotgun, followed by three further cemetery worlders cut to ribbons by fat pellets of scattershot. Brother Omar worked the pump-action on his weapon, calmly hammering the front line of the fast-advancing mob. As the shotgun clunked its emptiness, Omar brought his eye out from behind its sights to watch the second wave of maniacs run through the remains of the first and fly at him. From over his shoulder the Scout heard screams. These were not the shrieks of shock members of the cavalcade had made upon discovering the carnage at Little Amasec. The cavalcade was under attack.

Thumbing shells into the breech of the shotgun, Brother Omar backed towards his squat-set vehicle and re-mounted. Thumbing the gimbal lock on the handlebars, the Scout pulled the triggers on both grips. The belt-fed boltguns mounted on the front of the bike jerked to rhythmic life.

Omar swept the next line of gall-fevered crazies, aiming low and chopping through knees and groins with his automatic fire. The wretches tumbled and fell, creating a hurdle upon which much of the next wave faltered, falling themselves. Omar swept back across the line. The maniac cemetery worlders had looked up at the Excoriator with red eyes and hatred as they scrambled to pick themselves up. The Scout replied with bolt-rounds to the head as one by one, along the line of the prone and fallen, he split skulls and blew off faces. A verger, still wearing his cocked-hat and smashed spectacles, cleared the corpse mound with a half-naked hearsier close behind. Twisting the handlebars, Omar cut the pair in two with a savage stream of bolt-fire.

With the first few waves of maniacs put down and the darkness beyond giving birth to an unending horde of murderous unfortunates, Brother Omar secured the gimbal lock on his handlebars and revved the bike's heavy engine. Wheel-spinning around and spraying the livid masses with blood and grit, the Scout tore back across the crossroad at the source of the screaming. A curtain of sodden cemetery world earth followed the bike as

Omar shot across Little Amasec, swerving shacks and hovels before blasting through the black and burning remains of the cenopost's tiny market. With flames licking at his wheels, Omar hit the crowded lychway.

The cavalcade of Certusians were fleeing. Some were heading into the deserted hamlet but most were climbing for their lives across headstones and graven sculptures. Like a spooked herd they had bolted off the lychway together, away from a roaring horde of degenerates who were scrabbling across the crowded cemetery architecture on the other side of the road like animals. Several fossers tried to stand their ground with picks and shovels, but went down under sheer savagery and weight of numbers. With the fossers having their eyes gouged and throats torn out by their fellow Certusians, Omar resolved to give the escaping cavalcade every chance to get away from the berserk and blood-crazed.

As the cemetery worlders he was escorting were melting into the burial grounds, Omar had the luxury of the lychway largely to himself. Clutching at the triggers and with muzzles flashing, the Excoriator cut down the degenerates throwing themselves mindlessly across the road at the fleeing cavalcade. Bodies and body parts bounced off the Scout and the front of the bike as he surged through the bloody mist he was creating. Slamming home the brakes, Omar turned and skidded around, taking the legs out from two more crazies. As the bike came to a stop, he slid his shotgun from its side-holster and began blowing growling wretches from the prone forms of the felled fossers. The neophyte was too late to save the gravediggers, however, the fevered degenerates having already ripped their victims' bodies to shreds.

Holstering the emptied combat shotgun, Omar surged up the lychway at the hordes spilling out onto the grit. Once again the Excoriator let rip with his twin boltguns, cutting a gory path through the mob and providing a barrier of explosive firepower behind which members of the cavalcade could flee for their lives. The neophyte thought about voxing for

assistance. One of his brother Scouts could not be more than an hour's ride away. He also considered calling for one of the Fifth's Thunderhawks to provide air support and an evacuation for the fleeing cavalcade of cemetery worlders. He discounted the thoughts almost immediately. He would not be a burden to his squad, his whip or his company. The cavalcade's safety had fallen to the Scout and the Scout alone. The wretches about him were mindless savages; they were great in number but only mortal, and they were his enemy to vanquish.

Rather than the Certusians, the seething rabble were now very much intent on venting their quenchless wrath on the Space Marine. A whippet-like child leapt from an angelic statue with thoughtless abandon, landing on the Excoriator's shoulders and clawing into his carapace and face with her sharp nails. The momentum almost unbalanced the Scout who took to snatching at his back with one hand. This cut his firepower in half. Although the single, mounted boltgun continued to acquit itself in ploughing through the lean bodies of the savages, it failed to stop a stonecutter who dashed his head with the opportunistic swing of a recovered shovel or a pair of madmen running an abandoned cart into the path of the oncoming bike.

The bike's front wheel began to waver, and with only one hand on the handlebars and blood streaming down into his eyes from the gash on his forehead, Brother Omar strayed onto the burial ground verge. The bike smashed through two headstones before striking a sarcophagal monument at high speed. Omar flew off the bike and over the stone architecture. He felt his legs pass over his shoulders and the back of his head smack through the top of another grave marker. The Scout finally struck the base of a saint's statue with a bone-quaking jolt before coming to rest, upside down – his head askew and shoulders on the ground, while his back and legs rested against the side of the plinth.

Taking a few moments for himself, Brother Omar blinked sense back into his being. He could see the broken body of the crazed child nearby. She had not survived the crash. Shapes were moving in the darkness about him. Blood-mental savages, intent on slaughter. Within seconds the Excoriator was buried in pummelling fists, eye-scratching claws and stamping boots. There were lank bodies everywhere. The horde – like a school of predatory fish or a flock of raptors, redirecting their path – were upon him.

The frenzy continued. Rolling around and getting his boots firmly on the ground, Omar pushed for the sky. Degenerates rained about him, tumbling from the blood-furious mound they had formed. Shaking a ragged usher from his shoulder, Omar brought up his bolt pistol – freshly drawn from his belt. Single bolts thudded through the foreheads and faces of the savages. He spun around, felling the mob gathered about him. As a chorister scrambled to right himself, the Scout shot his jaw off before turning and grabbing the usher – who had flown back at the Excoriator with his bad teeth bared – burying the bolt pistol in his stomach and sending the last of the bolts through the unfortunate.

The pistol was empty, but it had bought him a few moments. In the distance, Brother Omar could hear fresh screams of the dying. The screeches and calls for help were coming from the cavalcade, who had escaped the horde that had come down on him but had seemingly ran into another, prowling the necroscape and moving in like wolves on the commotion at the cenopost. Omar couldn't imagine how many groups of cemetery world refugees had wandered into the bloodbath trap that was Little Amasec.

There were degenerate Certusians everywhere, in front and behind. Omar had stirred up a nest of stingwings in announcing his bombastic resistance with the shotgun and bike. Wretches from both the burial grounds and the crossroads were coming at him. All Omar knew was the

gnashing of blood-stained teeth and the thuggish barrage of fists and feet that the mob threw at him. The savages even came from above, with maniacs so desperate for a piece of the Scout that they climbed up the backs of their compatriots and leapt at him. Taller than all of them, Omar commanded a view of his enemy, a sea of madmen and mayhem as far as he could see into the darkness. Omar was angry at himself. He'd underestimated the mortals' numbers.

He had no time to reload the pistol; besides, he needed a weapon that took life at a faster pace and didn't rely on ammunition. Brother Omar unsheathed his combat knife. Neophytes trained with the honourable gladius but were not deemed worthy of an Adeptus Astartes blade until they attained the rank of Space Marine. With its clip point, cross guard, machete-length and cleaver-like cutting blade, a 'Scout's-only-friend' – as Squad Whip Keturah called them – was still a graceful taker of lives.

Brother Omar slashed and hacked through the wall of rabid flesh. He clipped heads and limbs from torsos; he cut blades from shovels and improvised clubs in half; he sliced, speared and stabbed, gutted and butchered his way through the horde. His cloak was heavy with gorespill and the ivory sheen of his Scout carapace was stained claret-red with the sheer volume of blood gushing, spraying and spurting about him. Wiping blood from his eyes all he could see were further faces, screwed up with malice presenting eyes that glinted murder.

Omar's blade suddenly hit something solid. Something that didn't slice like flesh or merely tug at the blade like cleaved bone. The Scout had swung with all his superhuman might and struck stone. The combat blade had cut into the corner of a gargoyle-encrusted vault, a small building in the shadow of which the melee had raged. Surrounded as he was, the ringing up his arm was the first the neophyte had known of the crypt entrance. When a flick of the wrist failed to retract the broadness of the blade, Omar tugged on the hilt with both hands. The stone refused to

surrender the blade, however, and once again the degenerates closed in. Teeth sank through his field smock and into the flesh of his arm, while his carapace back presented the savages with an irresistible opportunity. The Scout soon felt the weight of scores of the maniacs on him, and looking up, watched more scrawny shadows tumble down to join them from the vault roof.

Releasing the blade, Omar snatched at the wretches and tossed them away. Others he brained with his fists and tore limb from limb. Stumbling about like a hunchback under the sheer weight of crazies with their teeth and nails in him, the Scout began to buckle. A wretched specimen bit into his ear and ripped it off, prompting the Space Marine to clench his head in one fist. Omar took the degenerate's skull and hammered it into the crypt wall, pounding it until it shattered, crumbled and spilled its insides like an egg. The masses moved this way and that about him, each blood-mental savage wanting Adeptus Astartes blood on their hands.

Omar suddenly lost his footing, the ground seeming to disappear beneath him. Falling onto his back with literally hundreds of squirming and thrashing degenerates, the Scout came to the conclusion that he had tumbled into a hole. A freshly dug grave. A common enough sight on the cemetery world. There, with teeth in his thigh-flesh, arms and bloody face – with murderous hands around his neck, tearing at and under his shredding carapace – Brother Omar, Scout Marine and Excoriator, realised his fate. To be buried alive in mortal flesh and to be slowly clawed and mauled to his death.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

By the Blade

Zachariah Kersh stood atop the tower-steeple of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Sepulchre. It was much higher than the tiny hermitage tower of the Excoriators' dormitory. It had the second tallest spire and the best vantage point in the city. The tallest – the Obelisk – had suffered too much structural damage during the Scourge's battle with the daemon, and Pontifex Oliphant had given the order for his Ecclesiarchical palace to be carefully demolished. The colossal dome of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum commanded the best view in the city, but Palatine Sapphira of the Order of the August Vigil had forbidden use of the sacred site as a strategic consideration, the building and the remains of the Ecclesiarch and High Lord of Terra within rendering the ground holy. It wouldn't have taken Kersh much to countermand the Sister and force his agenda, but he needed the Adepta Sororitas onside and so allowed the Palatine the illusion of a refusal.

From a maintenance portico, with a pair of magnoculars to his one useful eye, Kersh surveyed the declining roofline of domes, cupolas, spires, monuments and bell-gables that gave Obsequa City its distinct Ecclesiarchical character. Kersh looked out across the darkness, dialling through the optical spectra of the device. A thermographic representation

of the city bleared into view. There were fires everywhere. Running battles between psychotic mobs and the Certusian Charnel Guard could be seen in the streets, the telltale glares of las-fire revealing the true scale of the problem. Kersh could hear the bark of enforcer shotguns even in the streets nearby and imagined Kraski's men putting down fellow Certusians with scattershot and bitterness.

Out across the expanse of Necroplex-South, Kersh could see the throngs of cemetery worlders, with simple lanterns and flaming torches dotted through their numbers, pouring into the city along arterial lychways. Kersh had sanctioned the strategy but that wouldn't have mattered. With the reports he was receiving regarding the nightmarish barbarism afflicting the burial ground communities, the corpus-captain had fully expected common Certusians to flock to the seeming safety of the planetary capital. Whether this was due to the spiritual sanctity they expected the relic-remains of the Ecclesiarch to provide, or the simple security offered by stone walls and thick narthex doors, was unclear. They had arrived in their thousands, and continued to do so. Much of the Charnel Guard were engaged in urban pacification and hastily organised 'Misery Squads' – so called for their unhappy duty of hunting and putting out of their misery cemetery worlders who had succumbed to the gall-fever and become a danger to themselves and other citizens. This left few ceremonial Guardsmen to man the city Lych Gates and process the stream of Certusian refugees. In response Kersh had despatched the Fifth Company's serfs and bondsmen – including his own – to take charge of the admittance and temporary housing of the masses in the crowded city.

Kersh tracked the powerful lamps of a Scout bike surging up along the columns of cemetery worlders towards the city. Lifting the magnoculars at the roar of engines overhead, he watched the Thunderhawk *Impunitas* pass above the city and bank. With all three of the company's remaining gunships now repaired and at his disposal, Kersh had ordered one standing

by on the rockrete of the Memorial Space Port, one to remain with the *Angelica Mortis* in orbit and one to maintain constant airborne patrols of Obsequa City and the surrounding necroplex.

Lowering the magnoculars, Kersh turned his head. Beneath his boots he could feel the supernatural cooling of the stone. He heard it cracking and blistering. Behind him stood the revenant in its ghoulish black plate, rippling with the rachidian contours of rib and bone. It waited like a thing eternal, as though it had all the time in the universe.

‘Ready?’ the Scourge said finally and disappeared through the maintenance arch followed by his solemn and silent haunter.

Down in the basilica nave, surrounded by pillars crafted in the baroque likeness of Imperial saints, and under the stained-glass gloom of the God-Emperor sat upon the Golden Throne in lead-lined representation, the corpus-captain had called a gathering. Kersh walked past Erasmus Oliphant, the young pontifex holding his crippled side awkwardly in the simple throne his frater menials had brought in for his comfort. Palatine Sapphira stood by his side, flanking the throne with two of her cobalt-plated Sisters, each armed with their distinctive Godwyn-Deaz-pattern bolters. Behind them huddled a small group of confessors, priests and deacons who were either too loyal to their pontifex to flee, or had been too late to arrange passage off-world with their Adeptus Ministorum colleagues. Kersh heard the hurried scuff of boots on the polished marble floor of the basilica, noting a shabby and tired-looking Proctor Kraski and Colquhoun’s replacement, Lord Lieutenant Laszlongia, enter the chamber via a side-arch.

With the mortals to his back, the corpus-captain stepped out before his Excoriator brothers. Kersh had assembled the significants of the Fifth Company, as well as the silver-haired squad whip of the Tenth Company Scouts, Silas Keturah. The whips of Squads Cicatrix, Castigir and Censura all stood in assembly, with squad second whips standing behind them.

Uriah Skase held himself with unusual stiffness, his shoulders reclined, chestplate thrust forwards and fingers interlaced behind his back. Kersh wasn't fooled by the chief whip's seeming respect and attention. The Scourge had seen the stance before and had indeed indulged in it himself. It came from a rawness and sensitivity of the back, where flesh itself had been flayed during the worst of 'the purge's' attentions. As Kersh suspected, Skase had continued to punish himself – pushing ritual observance beyond its primarch-communing function and into the dark realms of a shame-cycle and flagellation for flagellation's sake. Whips Ishmael and Joachim demonstrated no such deference, pretend or otherwise, and instead busied themselves with furtive glances and conspiratorial mutterings between themselves and the second whips.

Kersh stood, anger slowly building in the tautness of his scarred face as he waited for the squad whips to present themselves to their corpus-captain. While they did, with insolent tardiness, the Scourge's eye fell across Ezrachi and the skull-helmed Chaplain Shadrath on the opposite side of the nave. Keturah was with them. Last in line was Techmarine Dancred with his Thunderfire cannon, *Punisher*, which seemed to follow him everywhere. Only the Librarian, Melmoch, was missing. Brother Micah, the company champion's young face a nest of cuts, stitches and bruising, took his position at his corpus-captain's side. Beside him was Brother Novah, Brother Toralech's hasty replacement as company standard bearer. Young, like Micah, but quiet and uncertain, Novah held the battered and tattered standard of the Excoriators Fifth Company in one hand. Micah had assured Kersh that he was a first class warrior, and having originally fought in the same squad as the champion, was one of the few brothers he could trust. In the darkness of the aisle, the armoured revenant melted into the shadows.

'Brothers,' the corpus-captain began, 'I have gathered you here to share my resolutions, so that we may commit to a course of action and see it

through.'

'Rumour has it,' Skase interrupted, his voice echoing about the basilica's columns, 'that we are abandoning our pursuit of the renegade Alpha Legion and pointlessly garrisoning this pile of grave dust.' Murmurs of assent proceeded from the Excoriators about him.

Kersh would not be drawn.

'Chief whip, I have called members of this company to order and you will respect that.'

'I only—'

'Hold your tongue, damn it!' Kersh roared at him. 'When I want your insights I will be sure to ask for them. In the meantime you will act in accordance with your rank and responsibility, sir.'

The chief whip tensed and bridled, but Kersh saw Ishmael grab at his wrist. Skase shook free of the squad whip's grasp but remained silent, his jaw rigid with anger and eyes glistening.

With similar difficulty, the corpus-captain continued.

'The *Angelica Mortis* confirms that the Keeler Comet has passed Certus-Minor. I think we can assume that the comet's infernal influence is responsible for the mayhem and bloodshed on the planet surface. The cemetery world will pass through the comet's tail in the next eighteen hours, however, and only the Emperor knows what might happen then. Long range sensors and pict-scans confirm that an enemy armada has reached the outskirts of the system, trailing the comet at sub-light speed. We can assume this to be the Cholercaust Blood Crusade. We have little intelligence to go on in respect of the armada's numbers or composition. I won't lie to you. No world has survived the Cholercaust's attentions. The dead tell no tales. Estimates vary wildly from fifty to a thousand vessels. The Imperial Navy has verified sightings of cruisers belonging to the World Eaters...' Kersh allowed confirmation of their dread enemy to sink

in before continuing. ‘So we can assume Traitor Legionaries to be at the head of their numbers.’

The clockwork whir of Brother Dancred’s face preceded the Techmarine’s contribution. ‘You intend the Fifth Company to remain on Certus-Minor?’

Kersh paused.

‘I do, brother.’

A ripple of discontent washed through the squad whips and their seconds. ‘Corpus-Commander Bartimeus’s estimates place the Keeler Comet on a trajectory for the Segmentum Solar. We cannot afford the Blood Crusade’s further progression, nor allow its strength to grow by another conquered world. Not with Ancient Terra as a possible future target.’

‘What about the Vanaheim Cordon?’ Squad Whip Joachim ventured, his young eyes boring into the corpus-captain.

‘Be under no illusion,’ Kersh told them all, ‘the decision to stay is mine and mine alone. I will not surrender this part of the Emperor’s Imperium, no matter how small, to the Ruinous Powers – nor will I abandon the Emperor’s subjects, those who we were bred to protect, to torment and certain slaughter. This is, of course, largely academic. We have no astropath to call for reinforcement and without a Navigator, we cannot reinforce the Vanaheim Cordon with our own numbers.’

‘The *Avignor Star*?’ Ezrachi asked.

‘Their Navigator is dead,’ Kersh informed the Apothecary. ‘He inexplicably started bleeding from his mouth, his ears and his eyes. The ship’s surgeon tried his best but the Navigator could not be saved.’

‘The *Angelica Mortis* could make short-range jumps,’ Dancred said.

‘Yes,’ Kersh agreed. ‘And I have spoken with Corpus-Commander Bartimeus on the matter, but I have another destination for the strike cruiser. In the meantime, we have to face the reality of an imminent attack.’

With our number we can only afford to hold one strategic location and the city is our only real option. Pontifex Oliphant and I have arranged the recall of all Certusians from burial grounds and communities across the planet surface. They have made and continue to make their way here under the instruction of the Tenth Company Scouts. Whip Keturah, I believe you still have a number of your contingent outstanding.'

Silas Keturah fixed his corpus-captain with his single bionic eye.

'Brothers Taanach, Omar and Iscarion are still outstanding,' Keturah reported. He nodded his acknowledgement to the Techmarine beside him. 'Brother Iscarion reported issues with the vitality of his vehicle's machine-spirit.'

'I will apply the necessary oils and benedictions,' Dancred assured the squad whip.

'Taanach and Omar have made no vox contact,' Keturah informed the Scourge. 'Which is unusual.'

Kersh nodded his agreement. 'Go out with the *Impunitas*. Find them, Silas. We will need every brother in the dark hours to come.'

'You have a battle plan?' Ezrachi asked.

'One that was good enough to serve our ancestral brothers and parent Legion at the walls of the Imperial Palace,' Kersh told him. 'Brother Dancred will oversee the demolition of all buildings on the city exterior.' The Scourge paused, turned and looked at the young pontifex. He expected the ecclesiarch to offer some objection regarding the ancient lineage of the buildings or the holiness of the ground upon which they were to be collapsed. Oliphant hesitated and then nodded. The pontifex had seen up close the monstrous enemy that the Excoriators would be facing. 'We'll assume that an attack could come from any and all directions. The necroplex itself will impede large vehicles and slow the progress of mass charges on the city. There our bolters will do their worst.'

Several Excoriators nodded in grim appreciation. ‘Rubble mounds from the collapsed architecture will provide cover and elevation for our shooters, but more importantly an unbroken perimeter obstacle for our assailants should we have to fall back to the next line of buildings.’

‘What about the remaining citizenry?’ Oliphant asked through one side of his mouth.

Kersh hesitated. ‘The city is small but we simply do not have enough Excoriators, Charnel Guard and Adepta Sororitas to hold the line alone,’ he said.

‘You don’t have any Adepta Sororitas,’ Palatine Sapphira informed him with cool conviction. ‘My Sisters and I will be in the vault below the Memorial Mausoleum with the relic remains of his Reverence, Umberto II.’

‘I need your bolters on that perimeter.’

‘You can’t have them. I’m sorry.’

The Excoriator and Sister looked hard at each other.

‘You will be when we’re overrun by the enemy.’

‘You have your orders, corpus-captain, and I have mine.’

‘My orders invariably focus on saving the living.’

‘I’m afraid mine don’t,’ Sapphira told him harshly. ‘That many might fall today is regrettable, but nothing compared to the comfort and spiritual fortitude Umberto II’s sacred bones will give to future billions. See, corpus-captain – you must worry about the living but I must look to the yet to live.’

Kersh’s lip curled. He would get nowhere with the Sisters of the August Vigil.

‘The cemetery worlders will have to provide the extra coverage,’ Kersh said with regret.

‘And how do you propose they do that?’ Palatine Sapphira came back at him. Her voice was cold and cautious.

‘We will arm them from the city auxiliary armouries,’ the corpus-captain returned.

‘Impossible, that’s—’ Oliphant piped up, half out of his throne and tripping over his words.

‘Heresy,’ said Sister Sapphira, supplying the word for him. ‘That would break the *Decree Passive*. Should we survive the oncoming Cholercaust, we would all simply be executed for treason of faith.’

Kersh nodded, recalling his time at St Ethalberg.

‘Which is why Laszlongia would recruit them as Charnel Guard conscripts. They would be probitors, whiteshields – under the command of the lord lieutenant and the pontifex only in his role as planetary governor.’

‘I don’t like it,’ Sapphira said after a short pause. ‘It still smacks of insidiousness.’

‘I’m not asking you to like it,’ Kersh bit back. ‘And I’d simply call it expedience.’ He looked to the freshly promoted leader of the Certusian Charnel Guard.

‘My lord, you want to draft the citizenry into the ceremonial defence force?’

‘No,’ Kersh told him. ‘That’s what I want you to do. I’m sure under the severity of the circumstances, the Departmento Munitorum would hypothetically approve such measures.’

Proctor Kraski seemed to consider the proposal. The grizzled arbitrator finally said, ‘These here cemetery worlders are mainly diggers and labourers. Many can’t read and write anything beyond the most basic prayers. You’ve got a lot of women and children. None of the men have any combat experience.’

‘Would they know which end of a lasfusil was the most dangerous?’ Kersh put to the enforcer.

‘I expect so,’ Kraski said, chewing on his tobacco.

‘Well as long as they point that end in the general direction of the enemy, I’ll be happy.’ The Scourge looked from Kraski and the lord lieutenant to Oliphant. ‘The women and children can form a prayer cordon inside the perimeter.’

Pontifex Oliphant’s gaze moved about the floor. The ecclesiarch looked deeply unhappy and as though he were going to vomit on the basilica floor.

‘The Sister is right. The *Decree Passive* is not an obstacle to be circumvented. It is the God-Emperor’s law.’

‘Whether you designate them so or not,’ Kersh told him, ‘the Certusian people are your defence force. When the enemy attacks, they will have to fight for their lives. All I’m asking is that they also fight for everyone else’s. Pontifex, does not the God-Emperor fight on their side?’

The pontifex searched his soul and looked up at the dull stained-glass window above them. ‘Yes,’ he said tightly and left it at that.

‘These backwater wretches against the damned berserkers of the xiith Legion?’ Skase said with ill-disguised scorn. ‘You might as well offer them up on an altar to the Blood God yourself.’

‘There is another consideration,’ Ezrachi said, eager to take Kersh’s attention off the provocative Skase.

‘Apothecary?’

‘With so many losing their minds to this gall-fever, is it wise to indiscriminately arm the population?’

‘Do we know anything more of this madness?’ the corpus-captain asked.

‘Only that it isn’t physiological,’ the Apothecary replied. ‘And it doesn’t seem transmissible like a virus or infection. It is a malady of the mind. Men are no more susceptible than women, young no more than the old. All we do know is that the mental transformation from Certusian to savage is unpredictable, swift and that the first symptom is usually murderous bloodshed. I suspect it is some psychological condition brought on by the comet, but that is not for me as Apothecary to say.’

‘The lord lieutenant here is simply going to have to exercise his judgement. I suppose a cure is too much to hope for?’

Ezrachi grunted. ‘The same as for life, a bolt-round, administered to the heart or brain.’

‘What about our number?’ Kersh asked.

‘Beyond reports of brief visions and disturbed sleep, we seem unaffected. This is probably due to cult observance and psychoindoctrination, but again, I can’t know. I can run further tests.’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ the corpus-captain said. ‘I have a different duty for you to perform.’

‘Sir?’

‘Without delay I want you to begin extraction rites and harvest mature progenoid glands from all Excoriators with at least ten years’ service to the Chapter,’ the Scourge said gravely. The announcement was met with an immediate wall of shock, discontent and objection from the company whips and their seconds.

‘Kersh?’ Ezrachi said, falling out of formality.

‘We are facing an enemy infamous for its intolerance of survivors.’

‘You prepare for our failure,’ Squad Whip Joachim accused.

‘We are attrition fighters. We battle with the best but prepare for the worst. If we are faced with failure – and by Katafalque’s blood, I hope that we are not – then we should meet our doom knowing that our legacy lives on through the genetic heritage we bequeath. We do this in the best interests of the Chapter and not ourselves. I do not ask this of you, Dorn does – so that the Imperium’s future, as well as its present, might be secure.’

‘How would we do this?’ Ezrachi asked bleakly.

‘You would transport the collected gene-seed to the *Angelica Mortis* and oversee its safe storage and containment. The sacred seed would then travel on to the forge-world of Aetna Phall.’

‘Aetna Phall?’

‘It’s nearby,’ Kersh explained, ‘and reachable through the series of short warp jumps Brother Dancred alluded to.’

‘That will take months, this close to the Eye,’ the Apothecary informed him.

‘Yes,’ Kersh agreed. ‘But the Adeptus Mechanicus will appreciate the importance of the cargo and have the resources to see it on to Eschara. You would, of course, be there to impress such necessity upon them.’

‘You want me to accompany the seed?’

‘Our only Apothecary?’ Ishmael scathed. ‘And the company strike cruiser? This is madness.’

‘It is time you fully appreciated the nature of the foe you face,’ the corpus-captain told the squad whips gravely. ‘The Blood God’s servants do not orchestrate and strategise. They have no knowledge of failure – only success or the eternal darkness. They do not wound and incapacitate, attack and withdraw. Victory, both personal and galactic, is everything to them. They live for the death of their enemies and think on nothing but their blades steaming with warrior blood. There will be little for Apothecary Ezrachi to do here, once the fighting begins a-proper. As for the *Angelica Mortis* – what do you think the Cholercaust will do with her? The Chaos armada will crush the cruiser like a ration can. Which is why Corpus-Commander Bartimeus and the good Apothecary will see our future safely to the Mechanicus forge-world.’

‘I have heard enough,’ Chief Whip Skase told the Scourge. ‘It seems like you have our decimation pretty well planned out – from your decision that we should remain on this deadrock, to trapping us here without orbital support or transportation.’

‘My lord, the Adeptus Ministorum monitor *Apotheon* and several system ships remain,’ Pontifex Oliphant reminded the Excoriator, but Skase ignored the ecclesiarch.

‘Does this strike anyone else as particularly suicidal?’ the chief whip continued. ‘Is this the quality of tactical advice you gave to the Chapter Master on Ignis Prime? Haven’t the Alpha Legion made us pay deeply enough for your failures? Was Ichabod and the loss of the Stigmartyr not enough for you?’

‘He’s corpus-captain,’ Silas Keturah called coldly from the other side of the nave, ‘by Ichabod’s order.’

‘And was not Horus made Warmaster by the Emperor’s?’

The basilica fell to silence before the heretical suggestion of the chief whip’s statement.

‘You stand here,’ Kersh rumbled, stepping forth, ‘in this holy place, casting aspersions, feeding your fury and sowing the seed of discord in this company...’

‘If the Fifth had been mine, we would already have your lost Stigmartyr back in our possession and our plate would be speckled with traitor blood.’

‘And I think that you’d either be standing on Rorschach’s World scratching your head or in a pool of your own blood after walking into what even a child could see to be an obvious trap,’ Kersh bawled at him. ‘The Alpha Legion are serpents. They only allow you to know what they want you to know. You cannot trust such intelligence. It is either an ambush or a ruse to draw us away from our true duty.’

‘This is not our duty!’ Skase growled.

‘Yes, it is,’ the Apothecary interjected. ‘You were not there on St Ethalberg. We are bound by ancient pacts and promises, as was our Chapter Master. We serve Quesiah Ichabod and must honour his word, as you must honour your corpus-captain’s.’

‘Words...’ Skase marvelled. ‘You talk about words and dusty tracts. I’m talking about our Chapter’s honour and the blood of our enemies on our blades.’

‘Make no mistake,’ Kersh told the chief whip. ‘They are one and the same. What we fought in the palace was our enemy. Some kind of daemonic harbinger, heralding the bloodshed to come. You would have us run from that? Flee to safety, leaving mere mortals to face the servants of the Dark Gods alone? What would that do for our Chapter’s honour?’

‘You twist my words, Kersh – for you have no honest ones of your own. I will not take lessons in my Chapter’s honour from the likes of you. The Scourge, who failed his Chapter Master, who surrendered our beloved Stigmartyr to the enemy and routinely surrenders himself to his shameful affliction. And while Dorn himself curses you with his Darkness, Chaplain Shadrath runs the company by proxy.’

‘You go too far, Uriah,’ the Chaplain hissed.

‘We have not gone far enough,’ Skase insisted vehemently. ‘We need leadership. Not the fatalistic fantasies of a coward, unworthy to wear Katafalque’s symbol and colours. A failure, who wishes to sacrifice this company on the altar of his guilt and bring the taint of the Darkness to us all.’

‘Skase—’ Shadrath began.

‘I think that the last time I allow you to question my courage,’ Kersh told him through gritted teeth.

‘Well think on, Scourge,’ Skase shot back, taking a step towards the corpus-captain. ‘I demand Trial by the Blade.’

The vaulted chamber echoed with Skase’s challenge.

‘The corpus-captain has more than proved himself in the Feast,’ Ezrachi shouted.

‘Not to me,’ the chief whip said, slapping his boltgun against Ishmael’s chestplate to take. ‘And not to this company – who were denied representation due to our commitments on Vieglehaven – clearing up the Scourge’s mess. Perhaps the other attendant Chapters were easier to impress.’

Brother Micah stepped forwards to present himself, the company champion's eyes fixed on Skase and hungry for battle.

‘Micah, no,’ Kersh said softly, laying a gauntlet on his shoulder.

‘This Excoriator has forgotten himself and his proper station,’ the young Micah replied, not taking his eyes off the chief whip. ‘Let me put him in his place.’

Kersh shook his head.

‘This is an act of sedition,’ Ezrachi warned. ‘A mutinous revolt against the authority of your corpus-captain.’

‘I plot no more insurrection than the Warmaster's lieutenants did when they refused to join his ranks and fought for their distant Emperor,’ Skase told the Apothecary. ‘Besides, I encourage nothing more than company fealty in my squad. This is a personal grievance. As such, I have the right – as Excoriators and Dorn's Fists before me – to settle such disputes through the solemn contestation of a duel. My face will attest to the honour I have taken – and in my youth given – in such rituals.’

‘You would do this now, with the arch-enemy at our gates?’ Kersh said, shaking his head.

‘And now so would you,’ Skase told him, unsheathing his bolt pistol and handing it to his second whip. ‘For I see my accusations hit home. It would be a dishonour to bear them, Scourge. You must fight me.’

Chaplain Shadrath turned his half-skull face to Kersh, who slowly nodded without looking at him.

‘This is insane,’ Ezrachi erupted.

‘I must send for the blades,’ the Chaplain hissed. Such duels were usually fought with ceremonial weapons retained in the company chapel-reclusiam. Kersh drew his Mark II pistol and unhooked his chainsword, giving them to the Apothecary and Brother Micah.

‘No need,’ the Scourge said walking forwards. ‘We'll contend with what we have.’

Skase nodded his approval and drew his oiled gladius.

‘My lords,’ Oliphant called, getting to his feet. ‘You cannot shed blood in the—’ but Proctor Kraski put a hand on his shoulder and shook his grizzled head.

‘The Rite has been invoked and it has been answered,’ Chaplain Shadrath said, moving down the nave as Excoriators backed between pillars to give the combatants more room. From the shadows, the revenant watched with patient interest. ‘Trial by the Blade. As all Excoriators are equal in Dorn’s image, first blood goes to the victor, when blood is drawn from that image. Brothers will indicate their understanding.’

Kersh drew his relic-blade, taking several practise swings with the gladius. Both corpus-captain and chief whip acknowledged the Chaplain by kissing their right gauntlets.

‘Begin,’ Shadrath told them.

Skase was an ivory blur as he leapt at the Scourge with sword held high. As the blade came down, Kersh feigned a parry, only to slip out from under the cleaving motion. As Skase’s gladius chipped the stone of the basilica floor, Kersh slapped the back of his head with the flat of his relic blade.

‘You will have to do better than that, brother,’ Kersh told him.

The needling comment had its desired effect. Skase came back at him, his gladius glinting its arcs and curves in the candlelit gloom of the basilica. Kersh remained poised, deflecting the blade’s optimistic dance and arching his neck left and right to avoid the venomous stabbing motions the chief whip used to punctuate his spite-driven attacks. Indulging a towering parry, Kersh held the seething Skase at full stretch. Bringing up his left fist, he hammered his chief whip across the jaw before slashing back across his cheekbone with the knuckles of his gauntlet. Skase was battered back, sword in hand, but immediately brought his own

fingertips to his face. Stepping closer, Chaplain Shadrath leant in to check for any evidence of blood, but there was none.

‘Proceed,’ the Chaplain barked, backing away once more. Kersh brought his blade in low, but the chief whip battered it aside with an angry grunt. The assault gained in furiousness and before long Skase’s bladework began to lose its discipline. His lip wrinkled into a dogged, hate-fuelled snarl, and his gladius chopped and swept – demonstrating little interest in its target, the Scourge’s duel-scarred face.

‘Come on, meat!’ Kersh called.

Backing from the onslaught, his relic blade barely managing to turn his opponent’s aside, Kersh crashed through iron candelabra and shouldered a stone saint from his pedestal, sending him smashing simultaneously to Oliphant’s horror and the floor. Rounding a column, the Excoriators committed further blasphemies on the pillar-representation of Saint Proulx. Razored edges sparked off crafted stone as the two Space Marines fought for the advantage. Eventually the rhythmic slashing broke and the Scourge’s blade smacked Skase’s into the pillar, pinning the weapon. Kersh’s ceramite boot found the chief whip’s exposed side. The bone-shuddering impact took Skase off the ground, his gauntlet slipping free of his sword hilt and his armoured body clattering across the flags of the nave.

The Scourge ran down on the unarmed Excoriator, eager to end the needless conflict. As the whip shook his head and lifted his face in momentary confusion, Kersh swept in to deliver a duelling scar that Skase would never forget.

Further clattering distracted the Scourge. Before him, gliding across the polished basilica floor, clinked Ishmael’s blade. Squad Castigir’s whip had drawn and slid his own gladius to his battle-brother, and before Kersh knew it the metal of the blade was scraping his ribs. Skase’s thrust from the floor, combined with the force of Kersh running down on the blade had

created force enough to slip the sword tip between two ceramite plates and puncture up through the Excoriator's black carapace. The clash had barely begun, however. Kersh instinctively wrapped a fist around the blade, preventing it from penetrating further. Skase was now on his feet, his face contorted with loathing and the physical effort required to drive the sword home. The whip had little trouble wrapping his gauntlet about Kersh's fist, which in turn had gone momentarily limp around the grip of his gladius. The two held each other in a feverish grip, paralysed like the statues about them, with their brothers looking on.

His craggy face creased with concern, Ezrachi moved in, but the Scourge shook his head stiffly, bringing the Apothecary to a pause. Skase's eyes burned with the knowledge that he held the advantage, and Kersh saw the satisfaction ripple across his features as he tried to twist his blade within the Scourge. The gladius screeched against the ceramite of Kersh's artificer armour. The corpus-captain fought the compulsion to cry out as the blade's length tore through his black carapace.

'Sir!' Brother Micah implored.

'No!' Kersh croaked with brutal defiance.

The Scourge's arm came once more to life, surprising Skase and wrapping around the chief whip's neck like a constricting serpent. The two fell in a messy embrace, Skase still holding on to both the Scourge's clutched sword and the weapon buried in his corpus-captain's midriff. The Excoriators rolled, roaring like animals, their plate clashing and the vaulted chamber filling with intermittent gasps of pain and exertion. They were soon tumbling back and forth, with plate and limb slapping through a gathering pool of the Scourge's blood. The desperate struggle painted carnage across the basilica floor, with Kersh's hold finally slipping on his own gore and off Skase's armour.

The pair rolled, Skase's blade turning inside the corpus-captain's torso. Kersh went over the chief whip and ended up with his back resting against

the foot of one of the nave's many columns. Skase sat astride the bleeding Scourge, the corpus-captain's relic blade held between them. The chief whip's other hand still held its feverish grip on the gladius gutting his corpus-captain. Only Kersh's own pulverising hold on the blade prevented further tragedy. Skase snarled and pushed, forcing Kersh's own blade towards him. Leaning back against the pillar and into his pack, the Scourge quickly ran out of room to manoeuvre and could only watch the oiled length of the weapon edge towards him with cut-throat keenness.

'Chaplain!' Ezrachi called out.

'The conventions are clear,' Shadrath hissed, both Excoriators closing in with the rest of the gathering. 'First blood from the face.'

Skase's face quaked with the furious desire to win. He knew he had the Scourge and couldn't help a maniacal grin spreading across his ugly features.

'Do it, Uriah!' Squad Whip Ishmael roared from beside the column. He was joined in similar encouragement by Joachim and the squad seconds.

Skase's eyes flashed between Ishmael and Kersh; between his friend and his enemy. Unthinking, Skase leant into the thrust, putting his weight and hatred behind it. The blade shrieked through the corpus-captain's fingers. Kersh grunted as the gladius cross guard struck plate and the blade punched through his body and out his armoured back.

With his eyes wide open and his hand free, the Scourge grabbed the back of Skase's head. Ishmael and the seconds feasted on their corpus-captain's silent suffering and took the manoeuvre to be a death-grasp, a spasm of desperation.

'Let me take him,' Brother Micah called desperately – like a loyal hound, straining at his chain. Blinking and straining, Kersh shook his head.

Looking down on the gutted Scourge, Skase's mask began to fall. He hated Kersh, with every ounce of his being. He wanted to fight him. He wanted to best him. He didn't want to kill him. His knees resting in

Kersh's blood, with a sword buried in his corpus-captain's flank – that was what he seemed to have done.

Skase suddenly felt his head thrust forwards. Kersh's relic blade glimmered between them, still clutched by the pair. With the Scourge's gauntlet grasping the back of his skull, Skase felt an irresistible pull forwards. Releasing the hilt of the gladius he reached out to stop himself, only to slip as his bloody gauntlet failed to find purchase. He finally slapped his palm against the stone column and pushed back, but it was too late. Kersh's blade remained rigid between them, held in their desperate hands. The Scourge's lip came up, showing bloodied teeth as he forced the chief whip's face towards the relic blade's edge. As they stared across the mirrored surface of the blade, spitting hatred at one another, the Scourge twisted Skase's head, the back of his tonsured scalp firmly in the corpus-captain's grip.

Kersh suddenly relented, allowing Skase to pull his head back a little. The chief whip's own natural inclination to relax followed a millisecond after, as the Scourge knew it would. Pulling Skase's head to the side, instead of forwards, the Scourge ran the Excoriator's already disfigured face along the blade's razored edge. The sword sliced through flesh, muscle, cartilage and scored bone. Kersh flung him to one side, this time Skase rolling through some of his own gore.

The Excoriators looked on in stunned silence. Oliphant and the other mortals present gawped in fear and horror. Leaning against the pillar, Kersh tried to kick against the blood-slick floor. He was trying to get on his feet and when he failed, settled for simply angling the point of his relic blade at the squad seconds, Joachim and Ishmael – whose own blade still impaled the corpus-captain.

Ezrachi slapped the Chaplain on the pauldron and advanced on Kersh, but wild-eyed and skewered, the Scourge turned the tip of the gladius

towards the Apothecary. Prompted by Ezrachi, Shadrath hissed at the Fifth Company Excoriators.

‘Stand down!’

After a moment’s hesitation, their stabbing glares fell to the floor. ‘The Trial is at an end. Honour has been both given and taken. First blood to the corpus-captain. Let it be recorded that at this time and in this place, he was the victor. To the bested, we honour his scars as he now honours his opponent with vindication.’

Silas Keturah was down on his knees, his carapace speckled with Skase’s blood. The silver-haired Scout squad whip had torn Skase’s loincloth from his belt and used it like a rag to staunch the bleeding. Kersh had cut the chief whip’s face in half and the blood loss was considerable. The gathering looked to the prone Skase, with a bloody cloth to his face, to respond as the trial dictated. Keturah whispered proceedings into the chief whip’s gore-blocked ear. Skase tensed. His gauntlets became fists. He squirmed before finally becoming still. Keturah put his ear to the sodden cloth. Finally, the faint murmurs of the smothered Skase could be heard. Silas Keturah raised his head. His cheek was bloody.

‘The chief whip renounces his claims,’ the Scout announced.

All eyes came back to the skewered Kersh. The Scourge had managed to get to his feet and clutched at the weapon imbedded in his side. Still leaning against the pillar he jabbed the tip of his own relic blade at the surrounding Excoriators.

‘You think this a game?’ he bawled. ‘Is it not enough that there are thousands of degenerate maniacs at the system’s edge, baying for Imperial blood? Must we spill each other’s?’

The Scourge’s harsh words echoed around the basilica. ‘The fight is out there! This might be a pile of grave dust, but it is the Imperium, beneath our feet. I for one will not allow the Ruinous Powers principality here. They must take the air from my lungs, the blood from my body and the

steel from my heart first. Now you will renounce your weakness – as your chief whip has. You will do as your corpus-captain has asked – as your Chapter Master has asked. You will fight here as though it were our Escharan home world or Ancient Terra beneath your boots. For if you don't, it very soon might need to be. You will give up your gene-seed or I will cut it out of you myself, that Excoriators more worthy than yourselves might take your place in the coming storm. Do you understand me, brothers?'

Kersh held their gaze before slipping and faltering slightly. Ezrachi dared wait no more.

'Kersh, you're bleeding to death,' Ezrachi said, sweeping in. He pushed the relic blade to one side and began attending to the grievous wound in the Scourge's side. The corpus-captain winced as the Apothecary manipulated the blade that sat snug in his flesh. The Scourge still held his own towards the gathered Adeptus Astartes.

'You want to see blood?' he told them finally. 'Well, you've come to the right place. You will see plenty of your own and each other's, if you continue as you are. The World Eaters will see to that. Make no mistake, they will ensure it.'

Kersh glared at his Excoriators. 'Dismissed'.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Wound Within A Wound

With Brother Micah under one arm and the Apothecary under the other, Kersh was helped to a tablet bunk in the hermitage. Ezrachi had set up one of the sanctuary chambers as a temporary apothecarion.

‘I’m all right,’ the corpus-captain had insisted moodily.

‘You’re bleeding like a stuck pig,’ Ezrachi had carped back. Sat on the stone tablet, with Ezrachi and one of his Helix-serfs exploring the wound and gathering instruments, the Scourge looked over to the only other occupied bunk in the apothecarion. The Epistolary, Melmoch, lay unconscious on the tablet, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. Bethesda entered the chamber, light on her toes, with concern and urgency in her eyes. ‘Steel yourself, it’s going to hurt.’

In one practised motion, the Apothecary withdrew the gladius skewering the Scourge’s side. Kersh winced but remained silent. ‘Probably not as much as when it went in though, eh?’ Ezrachi chuckled, handing the bloody sword to Micah.

‘My lord?’ Bethesda said, but the Scourge was lost in thought.

‘He’ll live. As usual,’ the Apothecary reassured her. ‘Now make yourself useful, child, and get your master out of his sacred plate.’

This the absterge fell to immediately. Brother Micah turned the gore-smeared blade over in his hand.

‘Don’t you have anywhere else to be?’ Ezrachi said with irritation. ‘You could return that to Ishmael. I’m sure he’ll be needing it again soon enough.’ When Micah didn’t answer, the Apothecary added, ‘You think on the Trial? You think you would have done any better?’

‘The corpus-captain won the duel. How could I do any better than that?’ Micah said unhappily.

‘Good answer,’ Ezrachi replied, busy at work on the gushing wound.

‘He’s angry I didn’t let him champion my cause,’ Kersh said absently, still looking at Melmoch.

‘I *am* your champion,’ Micah said.

Kersh winced again. ‘You can take the next blade destined for my belly. How’s that? For now, I need you to find Brother Novah. Send him to me. I have orders to distribute. I need you out there. Ensure my orders are being followed. Oversee the beginning of the demolition. Work with the lord lieutenant and the Charnel Guard. I want recruits processed and armed. Establish emplacements, fire arcs and kill zones around the city perimeter. I want this city ready to defend itself. That is the cause – the company’s cause – that I wish you to champion.’

‘What of our number?’

‘The Fifth Company’s tactics will be more fluid and responsive to the nature, number and orientation of the threat presented. We need to expect anything. Go do your duty.’

‘Yes, corpus-captain,’ Micah replied. The champion stabbed the bloody gladius into a hermitage bench. ‘Brother Ishmael can collect this himself,’ he said with distaste, adopted his helmet and left.

As Bethesda stripped the Scourge of his plate, Ezrachi worked and his serfs stitched and stapled Kersh's insides back into some sense of order. The puncture in the black carapace, which fused his ribs together like a chestplate beneath his flesh, was harder to remedy. As the Apothecary completed the brief surgery and closed up the wound with a corkscrew needle, he gave the Scourge his report.

'I've administered growth hormone and applied a bonding agent – a surgical resin – to prevent further tearing along the carapace. The pain will fade over time. The resin will take an hour or so to set, so do your best to remain still.'

Bethesda held up the abdominal plate of ceramite through which the gladius had punched. 'Take that to Brother Dancred,' Ezrachi instructed.

'He has better things to do,' Kersh said suddenly. 'As do you, Apothecary.' Bethesda hesitated.

'Ask him for a temporary patch,' Ezrachi said. 'As I have performed on its wearer. The detail and artistry can wait – as indeed it does on the corpus-captain himself.'

'Where's Skase?' the Scourge demanded.

Ezrachi raised an eyebrow. 'Is he to be punished?'

'No,' Kersh said.

'He stabbed his commanding officer during a duel, an act it would not be unreasonable to characterise as treasonous or even an assassination attempt. He has dishonoured himself...'

'Then that will be punishment enough,' the Scourge shot back. 'That and a duty on this doomed world. Dishonoured or not, I can't spare a chief whip.'

'But I am to be spared such a duty?'

'Answer me. Where is Uriah Skase?'

'Being just as stubborn as you,' the Apothecary said. 'He probably has one of his squad stitching him up right now. You know how Excoriators are

about their duelling scars. They're probably making a right grox's ear of it. You did, of course, almost cut his entire face off, so perhaps I'd better go check on him.'

'Fine,' the Scourge said. 'Begin with Skase and Squad Cicatrix. I want this company's gene-seed harvested and you off-world in the next five hours.'

Staring hard at the Scourge as his serf collected his instruments, Ezrachi nodded silently and then made for the exit. At the door he turned.

'You know, Kersh. Just because you got me into this mess, doesn't mean you're obliged to provide me a way out. Getting the seed to safety is a noble pursuit, but so is sharing the risk here and keeping it alive and well in you and your brothers.'

The Scourge turned to him. 'Aetna Phall. Then, Eschara. You leave with this company's legacy in five hours, Apothecary. I suggest you begin.'

Ezrachi's crabby lips curled in a weak smile and the Apothecary left.

Kersh sat there for a while in the peace and quiet of the hermitage sanctuary. His side ached. His mind whirled. Was this what the Emperor wanted for him and his Excoriators? Was this his duty? Or was he needlessly damning the brothers under his command to certain slaughter? He thought of the worlds on the Keeler Comet's path, and the Space Marines who must have been caught up in the trap sprung by its malign influence. The decision to run or fight. Was he fighting simply to avoid further accusations of cowardice or weakness? Was the Cholercaust his self-inflicted punishment – as Uriah Skase indulged the guilt of failure on Veiglehaven and the loss of his brothers, was he too castigating himself? As Skase had made himself live the excesses of the lash, was Kersh dooming himself and his brothers to a battle they certainly could not win? Or was he so desperate to win back his Master's love and trust after the affliction of the Darkness that he saw the Blood God's disciples as a test to be passed? Not the falsehood of games and trials, represented through the

Feast of Blades or an honour duel. Would Kersh only be worthy to stand by his Chapter Master's side when he had faced the War-Given-Form and enough enemy blood had been spilt?

Holding his torso and slipping down from the tablet, Kersh took several steps and stretched his side a little. Perhaps real Adeptus Astartes captains knew nothing of the questions he'd asked himself. Perhaps in them, doubt was a distant memory of the past. He had presented a mask of confidence to his men; seemed sure in his orders – even in the face of their questioning; tried to earn his corpus-captaincy in word and deed. Yet, Zachariah Kersh felt the crushing uncertainty of fate spinning on a coin about him. Events were unfolding, irrespective of his unseemly doubts and out of his control. The mortals called them demigods, but in the harsh silence of that lonely moment, Kersh felt the emptiness of insignificance – deep like the darkness of space, a vast oblivion in which his fighting spirit guttered like a candle flame and unimportance was complete. Kersh felt cold and alone.

Standing as he was, he noticed for the first time an object on Melmoch's chest. Like that the Scourge had woken to find upon himself, the object was a card – a crystalline tarot wafer used by witchbreeds to present portents, divine futures and shed light on facets of the Emperor's will. Standing over the comatose Epistolary, Kersh picked up the card and turned it over in his fingers. On it was the representation of a colossal, rune-inscribed bell tower, imposing and ancient, with the dilapidated majesty of Terran hives stretching out beyond. The words *Campana Spiritus-Perditus* underscribed the illustration, but Kersh knew the image well. Every Adeptus Astartes did. It was the Bell of Lost Souls on Ancient Terra, housed in the Tower of Heroes, known to toll its doom-laden lament only at the death of true heroes of the Imperium.

Kersh felt cold. The unnatural absence of heat in the air. Looking up he saw the revenant, standing on the other side of the tablet, looking down at

the psyker. With a sickening pause, the being looked up at the corpus-captain. Its teeth chattered in its macabre maw, and through the rent in its helm, the Scourge felt the attention of an eye within the bald socket of the thing's skull, glowing an otherworldly red.

‘So this is you,’ Kersh said, presenting the tarot wafer. The horror merely stared back, never speaking, never acknowledging its hauntee with word or deed. ‘What does this mean?’ the Scourge demanded. The revenant merely stared at the Excoriator. ‘I want to know what this means, you sorry-looking, good-for-nothing fiend.’ Again, the phantom did not respond. It simply watched the fury building within the corpus-captain with grotesque fascination and icy patience. Kersh turned away. He looked at the card and then back at the revenant. He half expected it to be gone as was its frustrating habit, melting into the ether of reality. It remained, however, standing over the unconscious Librarian.

‘False prophet,’ Kersh told it with growing bitterness. ‘At first I thought you a bad dream – a resonance of the Darkness. Something I’d brought back. Then some manifestation of surgical error, a hallucination or insanity earned through drill and scalpel. For a moment I allowed myself the comfort of thinking you had answers. That you were ghosting me for a reason I would come to understand. Some sign of a greater scheme. Surely, proof that I truly have lost my mind. Now I just think I’m damned. Come to the notice of some pollutive entity or spirit that delights in tormenting me with its dark attentions. Do my struggles entertain you, wraith?’

The being looked down on Melmoch with ghoulish serenity before staring back at the seething Scourge. It reached out with a single, bony digit – protruding from a broken ceramite fingertip – and pointed to the tarot card in the Excoriator's hand. Colour began to bleed from the wafer, until atom by atom the card disintegrated before Kersh's eye, streaming away on some perverse, immaterial breeze.

‘More dark riddles? Could you be any more cryptic, you bastard thing?’

The hand that had been holding the card became a fist and the raw tension in the Scourge's arm, a blow. Several stitches snapped in Kersh's side as the Excoriator launched his attack, throwing a punch at the being. As the fist flew, Kersh winded himself against Melmoch's stone tablet. His knuckles met no resistance, however. Instead of ceramite and bone, the Scourge's fist hit agitated nothingness, the spit and crackle of soul-static and shadow. What horrified the corpus-captain more was the fact that the armoured phantom actually seemed to be there and it was his own fist and arm that had assumed a ghostly translucence. Instinctively withdrawing his hand and clutching it to his chest, the Excoriator was relieved to find that it had re-assumed its corporeality. It was flesh and blood once more.

The candles about the chamber suddenly died to glowing wick-tips. The sanctuary became thick with a darkness that even the Space Marine's enhanced vision struggled to pierce. Even the revenant in his midnight plate could not be seen. Then, like a targeter, the wraith's lurid red eye cut through the murk, fixed on the Excoriator. Before the Scourge, appeared an unnatural light. The phantasmic outline of the legionnaire flickered and danced with the auric flame of ethereal damnation. Kersh watched, entranced by this being of the beyond. Not noticing that the very darkness itself had been set alight, but the mere offending presence of the thing. The gilded flames took and spread, swamping the corpus-captain in an immaterial inferno. The soulfire blazed to brightness, enveloping the revenant in light and immersing the Scourge in cool, blinding brilliance.

When Kersh opened his eye the chamber had returned to blackness. The candle wicks reassumed their glow before igniting once more. The temporary apothecarion, including the still form of Melmoch, seemed untouched by the ethereal firestorm, but the ghoulish revenant was gone. The Scourge stumbled across to his bunk and leant against the stone tablet, probing his stitches with fat fingers.

The sanctuary door opened and Ishmael entered. The squad whip met Kersh's blank gaze before walking over to the hermitage bench, his face dark like a burgeoning storm. Standing next to Melmoch, Ishmael grasped the hilt of his blood-smeared sword and plucked it from the ferruswood surface of the bench. He seemed to stare at the gladius for a moment.

'Thinking about finishing what your blade started, Squad Whip Ishmael?' the Scourge called over his shoulder, his words barbed and accusatory. After a short hesitation, Ishmael looked around at the Scourge. A decision was made.

'Melmoch's awake,' the squad whip replied.

'What?' Kersh said, still with an edge to his voice. The whip's response had caught him off guard.

'Brother Melmoch,' Ishmael told him, his eyes still slits of insolence, 'is conscious.' Kersh approached the stone tablet. Indeed, the Librarian's eyes were fluttering open and staring glaze-eyed at the ceiling. 'Corpus-captain,' Ishmael acknowledged in a low voice before slipping out of the sanctuary.

'Melmoch,' Kersh greeted the Epistolary as he stood over him.

The Librarian sat up, leaning back on his arms. He licked his lips.

'I'm thirsty,' he said. It was a statement, but Kersh, still clutching his side, poured a small bowl of water from a ceramic pitcher and offered it to the psyker. Taking the bowl, Melmoch drank deeply, allowing rivulets of water to stream down from the corners of his mouth. 'The apothecarion?' he asked. Kersh nodded.

'You've been out a while, brother.'

'I heard voices,' Melmoch said. Kersh felt himself tense.

'Brother Ishmael was here...'

'Whooh,' Melmoch said, dropping the empty bowl and reaching for his head.

Crunching through the shattered ceramic, Kersh put a hand on the psyker's shoulder. 'What is it? Is it your gift?'

'Yes,' Melmoch moaned.

'Is it compromised?'

'Quite the opposite,' the psyker told him, his face criss-crossed with lines of pain and tension.

'You have the skill?'

Melmoch's eyes opened wide and bright, and he spoke. His gaze was piercing to the point of discomfort and his words echoed around the inside of Kersh's mind.

'There is pain here like you would not believe. Not in this body but in the very fabric of existence. The dull agony of our savagery is a galactic affliction. The hot blood of ill will and the mindless brutality of our species sustaining its insatiable desire. Our kind were bred to trade in such currency. With each bolt and blow we feed the beast. Here and now...' The Librarian trailed off. His eyes momentarily glazed before searing back to focus. 'Here and now – this time and this place is a wound within a wound. An injury internal, like a bottomless pit discovered in the deepest trench.'

'You speak of the Cholercaust.'

'The screams,' Melmoch marvelled. 'The never-ending shrieks of slaughterlust, fear and rage, layered, echoing, bleeding into one another like a spiritual static. The starvation of reason – food for a god.'

'Melmoch, I don't–'

'It speaks through me, but to us all. You can hear it in the drawing of a blade and the *clunk* of a firing mechanism. You can feel it in your face and fingers – in the snarl and the fists you make when you want to end an existence. It's there – in the back of your mind, finding expression in the necessity of violence. It calls to you, shredding your nerve and urging the wanton abandon that every being craves – building, bubbling, brimming.

Threatening to spill over into glorious reality where both power and blood flow.'

'The gall-fever,' Kersh agreed.

'The futility of fighting fire with fire. A spiral of degeneration. The War-Given-Form. It will stop at nothing until we have all become the instruments of its boundless wrath. So much hate.'

'Is that why you took this from the Ecclesiarch's shrine?' Kersh asked, dipping his hand into a belt pouch and extracting the small urn the psyker had used to put himself out. The Librarian immediately flinched in its presence. 'All of the witchbreeds are dead. Navigators, astropaths – everyone.'

'The Skull Taker knows we're here,' the Epistolary said, not taking his eyes off the orb container with its agonising contents: the God-Emperor's psi-negative essence, dust of the divine. 'It knows our gorestink, the copper tang of our blood. We are candles in the darkness to such an entity, flaring every time we lay our hands on a weapon or indulge our spite. It hates the witch most of all. A loathing beyond your all-too-human unease and disgust. The witch's soul burns bright. The witch is a coward who shuns the unthinking urgency of the hand and whose agency is the warp. That is why the witch dies first at the Blood God's hand. I needed to douse that flame, to retreat into the darkness and gather my strength – or, Adeptus Astartes or not, I would have shared the same fate as the unfortunates of whom you spoke.'

'Melmoch,' Kersh said, trying to get the psyker to focus. 'I need to know if you can reach beyond the screaming – beyond the influence of the Cholercaust and this cursed comet.'

'You wish me to send an astrotelepathic message?'

'Yes. Several. Can you do that?'

Melmoch got down from the stone tablet and steadied himself. 'I can try.'

‘We need to appraise the Vanaheim Cordon of our status,’ Kersh said, ‘and the Terran-bound trajectory of the Keeler Comet. Their contingents must hold station. We cannot afford the Cholercaust to slip by into Segmentum Solar.’

‘And the others?’

‘Long range, narrow-band requests for reinforcement to the Viper Legion on Hellionii Reticuli,’ the corpus-captain instructed. ‘The Novamarines at Belis Quora and the Angels Eradicant stationed at Port Kreel.’ Melmoch went to interrupt but Kersh had more for him. ‘And a subsector, wide-band appeal for assistance. There were rumours the White Consuls were moving out of the Ephesia Nebula. We could get lucky.’

Melmoch looked hard at the Scourge.

‘Of course, I will do all that you ask. You must know – the magnitude of the enemy force we are facing...’ The Librarian didn’t have the words. ‘Even if we were reinforced, the time it would take for another contingent to reach us – the Cholercaust will be gone and our corpses will have been long stamped into the grave dust.’

‘A little optimism too much to expect?’ Kersh said.

‘Optimism’s a little hard to come by,’ Melmoch said. ‘I’m only being realistic about our chances.’

‘Does not the God-Emperor fight on our side?’ Kersh asked. Melmoch’s brow furrowed, surprised at such a reference from the corpus-captain.

‘He does,’ the Epistolary replied suspiciously.

‘Then I suppose you had better take it up with him.’

PART THREE

For whom the bell tolls...



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Heavenfall

Brother Omar stumbled through the mist. It was as though the clouds were too tired to take their own weight and had settled like ephemeral behemoths on the necroscape. Thick and noxious, the miasma stank of evil, threaded through as it was with a dull spectrum of unnatural colour, like oil spreading through water. Above the Excoriators Scout, the overcast sky – all but indistinguishable from the burial ground-hugging mist – glowed with atmospheric agitation. It was as though the heavens were alight. It was a bad sign. Certus-Minor was passing through the tail of the comet, Omar presumed.

The neophyte was a mess. His carapace was but a feral worlder's loincloth, shredded and hanging in tatters about his waist. His muscular torso glistened with his own blood, decorated all over as it was with nicks, bites and slices. A ragged strip from his long-abandoned cloak served as a bandana to keep the gore from his eyes, and his recovered combat blade dangled loosely from his exhausted grip like a machete. With only a primordial will to live sustaining the Excoriator, Omar had crawled up through the bodies, breaking bones and crushing skulls with his bare hands. With the roaring masses swarming about him, the Scout's combat

blade had been knocked free. Too much of a temptation to the bloodthirsty wretches, the razor-sharp weapon had been picked up and used on the Scout, slashing him feebly across the shoulder. Back in the Excoriator's possession the weapon did its worst, however. Recalling training exercises on Cretacia, the Scout cut through bodies like death world jungle. For hours Omar had hacked back and forth, putting one foot in front of the other, leaving a trail of slaughter through the howling crowds. This, in turn, fuelled the frenzy further as maniacs descended upon the twitching corpses of the decapitated and limbless, finishing them off with god-pleasing ferocity.

Eventually, Omar reached the periphery of the horde. Continuing to cut a path to freedom, he staggered into the fog and left the screams of fury and death behind him. Mind-numb and blood-drenched, the Scout tried to orientate himself, settling on a seemingly arterial lychway in the assumed direction of Obsequa City. The neophyte was fairly sure that it was the same road upon which he had ridden out; but in the swirling fogbank, and surrounded by grave markers, statues and mausolea that all looked the same, he could have been walking in entirely the wrong direction.

A rumble and a quake beneath his feet brought the Excoriator back to his weary senses. Lifting his head and squinting, Omar could make out little. Through the murk of the mist he saw momentary streaks of fire giving the impression of something falling from the heavens. This was soon lost in the obscurity, until the Scout felt the further tremor of impacts through the soles of his gore-splattered boots.

Lifting the combat blade with one muscle-torn arm, and his knees in an attempt to galvanise his sluggish legs into a run, Omar advanced in the direction of the sound and sensation. Through the fog Omar began to make out a glow, then the flicker of small fires. Before long he found himself at the edge of a small crater, the impact zone a site of incandescent earth and destruction. Gravestones and the coffins that had been buried beneath

them had been churned up and lay smashed amongst the debris of shattered bone and masonry. Moving on, the Scout encountered several more glowing craters, the undoubted sites of meteoric impact, rock, ice and ancient metals falling away from the comet and raining to the Certusian surface from its streaming tail.

Something did not seem quite right to the Excoriators Scout. Each of the impact craters was strewn with remains and coffin fragments. At the centre of each lay a single casket. They were untouched by the crash and steaming quietly in the night. Some were all but buried, while others lay across the bottoms of the craters. Climbing down into a hot trench, Omar inspected the fourth such object he had encountered. Unlike the flimsy stasis caskets used in the Certusian burial services, it was tall, broad and baroque. It stuck upright out of the ground at the bottom of the crater and was crafted from some dark, adamantine alloy. It was decorated with fretwork and ornamental art; Omar could make out some kind of bird, embroiled in flame.

Working his way around the object – which despite being surrounded by glowing, razed earth, was strangely cool to the touch – the Scout discovered Chapter designations and battle honours. Damage to the metal sarcophagus had obscured the name of the Chapter but did reveal its Founding as the unfortunate Twenty-First. Its honour roll was one a First Founding Legion would be proud of, including the Apostatic Wars, the Great Malagantine Purge, the Golgotha Castigations, the Battle of Lycanthos Drift, the Second Scouring of the Black Myriad and the Badabian Tyrannicide.

Nestling the tip of his combat blade between lid and sarcophagus, Brother Omar twisted the weapon and broke the pressure seal. The object gave a loud moan of relief and the Scout proceeded to prise open the top half of the lid. Swinging open, the lid bounced on its chunky hinge, presenting a dark interior. An empty interior. Looking deep inside, Omar

found nothing. No remains of the Adeptus Astartes battle-brother he expected to find within. On the inside of the lid the Scout discovered a simple plaque identifying a gene-code in symbol and number, a name, rank and company dictum. Brother-Sergeant Attica Centurius, Honoured First Company: *In dedicato imperatum ultra articulo mortis*. 'For the Emperor beyond the point of death.'

Something screamed overhead. Closing the lid and crouching, Omar looked up at the hazy sky. There were more streaks blazing across the firmament. Many more. It was as if the filthy heavens had opened and fire was falling to the cemetery world surface. The Scout felt the first impact through the floor and the cool alloy of the sarcophagus. Then a second and a third. They were close and getting closer. Soon they were almost continuous, with objects rocketing down from the sky and thunderbolting into the burial grounds. At first Omar had thought it a meteor storm, the full wrath of the comet brought to bear on the planet surface. He had even considered the barrage a further heavenfall of the mysterious sarcophagi. The Scout didn't relish being beneath either as they rained from the sky at searing speed.

Then he heard it. Something indescribably horrible announcing its arrival through the fog. Not a meteorite or an empty sarcophagus. The Excoriator climbed out of the crater and began a low walk to the lychway. There were other sounds now. An ungainly flapping overhead. The gargle-hiss of something hatching to the neophyte's right. The tremble of footfalls, colossal and closing from behind. A screech close by that went straight through the Scout and caused his eyes to bleed. Omar's stealthy advance turned into a march, and the march into a run. He no longer felt the agony in his arms and the weight in his legs. Horrors were raining about him, things infernal and impossible. Brother Omar ran into the darkness, crunching along the gravel track that he hoped to the Emperor would lead him to Obsequa City, his battle-brothers and a loaded boltgun.

The Scourge stood atop the masonry scarp. Techmarine Dancred admitted to having little trouble demolishing the exterior walls, chapels and habitations – ancient and already crumbling as they were. Now these buildings were a perimeter of steep stone wreckage, providing Obsequa City's defenders with protection, elevated fire arcs and a workable, if ramshackle, battlement upon which to station heavy weapon emplacements and themselves. Conversely, it presented an assaulting enemy with a tiring and time-consuming climb, hopefully giving the Charnel Guard and their recent recruits opportunity to riddle their attackers with las-bolts.

Kersh had instructed the Techmarine to demolish a second row of buildings and a third in concentric circles around the exterior of the city. In the two interior masonry mounds, the corps-captain had ordered narrow rat-runs excavated by hand at intervals along the impromptu battlement. These in turn were imbedded with the last of the armoury demolition charges, with screw-lever detonators situated at the rat-run end. Kersh fully expected to order strategic retreats and planned on the rat-runs giving the Certusians and Excoriators the ability to pull back to a waiting secondary and tertiary palisade if overwhelmed. The demolitions would then collapse the runs after use, preventing enemy troops following and forcing them to embark on another las-slashing climb, giving the fleeing cemetery worlders and Charnel Guard time to set up carried weaponry in new emplacements.

The shattered-stone parapet swarmed with fearful Certusians, men, mostly, who had been selected by the lord lieutenant to bolster the ceremonial numbers of the Charnel Guardsmen on the perimeter. Some had been armed with auxiliary lasfusils from the defence force armouries, while others had to contend with scuffed and dusty remnants from storage – autoguns and stub-service carbines. Rough emplacements boasted heavy stubbers, battered incinerator units, mortars and the occasional autocannon. Where firearms weren't available, improvised

weaponry in the form of picks and shovels were carried in the sweaty palms of grave fossers and hearsiers.

Punctuating the line of cemetery worlders were the Charnel Guard themselves. The dour Guardsmen were dressed in dusty black flak, swathed in sable cloaks and aiming their single-shot lasfusils over the rubble palisade. Their ceremonial duties had ill-prepared the Guardsmen for the kind of meat-grinding battle ahead, the Certusian soldiers better versed in the rites of death than the art of dealing it to the Emperor's enemies. Kersh bit at his mangled bottom lip and watched a lance-lieutenant straighten a Guardsman's cloak and dust off his shoulder when he should have been modulating the beam-focus on his lasfusil.

In a rough gun emplacement nearby, Kersh spotted his personal serfs. Amongst the rubble, Oren was leaning into the stock of a brute autocannon. Old Enoch was stacking ammunition crates behind the weapon, while Bethesda spoke to several unarmed Certusians whose duty it was to run further ammunition to the emplacement. When the assault began, a good deal would rest on the ability of the heavy weapons to keep firing. That was why in the main Kersh had ordered Chapter serfs to take responsibility for the emplacements. They were more likely to hold their nerve in the face of the enemy and do their duty. As the absterge turned she pointed out the Scourge to the cemetery worlders she was addressing – no doubt to bolster their faith and confidence. She risked a brief smile at her master which Kersh saw but didn't acknowledge. As she turned back he saw the powerpack, looped cable and chunky las-pistol attached to the belt of her robes. It was Bethesda's job to keep the supply line running. An emplacement without ammunition was an invitation to disaster.

The night air was still and an evil-smelling fog bank was rolling in across the burial grounds, reducing visibility and range. Peering along the battlement with the keen sight of his remaining eye, Kersh saw Brother Micah. The company champion had not been happy about being away

from the Scourge's side, but the corpus-captain had insisted he needed a spread of experience and loyalty around the perimeter. Micah had had to settle for the next section along, barely a sprint away along the ruin palisade. He brought up a fist to the sky and then kissed it, which Kersh proceeded to mimic.

The city was strangely quiet. Along Kersh's section of the perimeter there was tension and dread etched into the face of every Certusian the corpus-captain settled his eye on. Women, children and a sparse sprinkling of remaining preachers ran back and forth between the city centre and the perimeter line, up and down the vertiginous, cobbled cuttingways and alleys with water, food and ammunition.

The thousands not employed in such service were gathered in the cramped cloisters, quads and plazas about the Memorial Mausoleum, holding a candlelight vigil with Pontifex Oliphant and creating a prayer cordon around the resting place of Umberto II. The Memorial Mausoleum's vault – where the ancient remains of the former High Lord of Terra and Ecclesiarch resided – was deep enough, it was said, to survive an apocalyptic strike by an asteroid. It was there, the safest place on the planet, that Kersh had intended Oliphant to hide.

This, after the corpus-captain had argued at length with Palatine Sapphira and, with grave reservation, that the Sister of the August Vigil had consented to allow a small number of significants to occupy the sacred chamber. She had been worried about body heat elevating the tiny vault's temperature above a preservative optimum. Oliphant had undone the corpus-captain's hard work with the Sister, however, insisting that he share the same fate as his people. Kersh had been angry at first, but had been secretly impressed with the cripple; he had never observed such concern in a priest or planetary governor before. The Excoriator was at least a little reassured that the pontifex had chosen the Memorial Mausoleum as the

site of his flock's gathering, under the dispassionate gaze of the Sisters of Battle, stationed about the mausoleum with their primed boltguns.

The city between the limits and the heights was all but empty. Citizens ran supplies down blood-splattered streets as Proctor Kraski and his enforcers herded the last of the city-based hordes and fire-lighting crazies into tight alleys and cul-de-sacs. There they went to work with their combat shotguns, putting the mobs out of their degenerate misery. Kersh could hear the howls and screams of rage and death echoing about the city's lofty walls, tunnels and winding stairwells. In the tallest towers and the busy architecture of the most elevated rooftops, Scout Whip Keturah was stationed with Squad Contritus, watching and waiting – the empty streets below and the misty necroplex beyond the perimeter line falling under the constant sweep of their magnocular scopes.

Keturah had returned early from his search. Two of his Scouts were still missing, but when fireballs started tumbling out of the unnatural sky and thundering into the burial grounds, the Scout whip had abandoned the sweep – unwilling to risk the Thunderhawk *Impunitas* in the hellstorm. Kersh had ordered the remainder of his Scouts stationed about the perimeter with the other Excoriators, in small groups. At ease, the corpus-captain expected the sight of the Angels and aspirants to reinforce the nerves of the Guardsmen and cemetery world militia. In battle he expected them to remain loose and flexible – holding ground but clustering as the rapidly-changing circumstances of battle changed. Where the line was breached – and the Scourge was confident that it would be – he needed his Adeptus Astartes to swiftly move in, destroy the threat and repel the enemy advance.

Standing with him on the palisade was Squad Whip Ishmael and a member of Squad Castigir, Brother Kale. The Excoriators whip paced up and down, barking the impetuous orders of a tyrant down on the line. Under the eyes of the Adeptus Astartes the Certusians hurried to meet his

booming expectations, but they little understood what the Excoriator was talking about. Kale looked on, his flamer resting in his grip, his eyes on the ominous bank of mist that hung in the night air like a curtain of dread. Beyond was the darkness and the graveyard expanse. There was something new out there in the burial grounds. Something weird and unnatural. They all knew this because they could hear strange noises rolling out of the still obscurity. Kersh listened to the enemy, the approach of the host. He could hear wet rasping, the chitinous clickety-click of movement, the horrible cracking of metamorphosis, chuntering, hissing, shrieking and what sounded like the song of some dying ocean behemoth layered over everything else. There were muffled voices, too, close yet distant, speaking to no one and everyone in a dark tongue that was neither human nor xenos but otherworldly and entrancing.

When *Impunitas* had returned with reports of orbital bombardment further south, beyond the Great Lakes, Kersh feared the worst. Obsequa City would not survive a pounding from the void and Kersh's meagre defences had not been designed with such remote engagement in mind. The Scourge thought he could rely on the Blood God's servants to meet them blade to blade. They were not known for their prosecution, or even tolerance, of such long-range warfare. Kersh's experience of the berserker factions had taught him that beyond the ancient warships of the Traitor Legions, the War-Given-Form favoured simple cultships. The Cholercaust armada would likely be made up of armed freighters, fat transports and plundered system ships, loaded to piratical proportions – ready to disgorge their savage cargos of human detritus in a swarm of battered lighters, barges, haulage brigs, tugs and hump shuttles, all reinforced and outfitted as simple drop-ships.

Corpus-Commander Bartimeus, in his last vox-transmission from the departing *Angelica Mortis*, confirmed the Cholercaust's approach from the system's edge. No one vessel, however – not even the bastardised sprint

traders and void-clippers ahead of the armada, straining at the leash and burning out their sub-light engines with bloodthirsty impatience – had reached the system core. Kersh had urged the strike cruiser on with its precious cargo of gene-seed and intelligence, instructing Bartimeus to assume an escape vector towards the cemetery world's bleak sun, hopefully masking the vessel's signature in the stellar static.

The Scourge thought on Ezrachi and the brusque corpus-commander. He had felt the Apothecary's absence immediately, having come to value if not always appreciate the grizzled veteran's advice. Kersh knew that the Excoriators of the Fifth would also miss the *Angelica Mortis*, the strike cruiser being their only hope of exodus. A lifeline cut. Their home, gone. The corpus-captain knew that the thought of the warship carrying the company's genetic future to safety would console some of the Space Marines, but for some the sore loss of the *Angelica Mortis* would only be drowned in the hot distraction of battle. For that reason, Kersh willed their enemy on.

It was Melmoch who had provided the answer to Kersh's questions. What was the nature of the orbital bombardment? If not the Cholercaust, then what was out on the burial grounds, haunting the mist and chilling Certusians to the bone with its weirdness, wailing and nonsensical whispers? The Librarian told him that the Keeler Comet was no ordinary astral body. It was no longer a simple amalgam of ice, rock and metal plummeting through the void, enslaved to an orbit and the long chain of gravity. It had punched through the Eye of Terror and had changed, its nature abnormal, its purpose warped. Like a claw, tearing at the very fabric of reality, the blood comet had opened rents in time and space, tainting the darkness and creating an immaterial breach through which the raw essence of the warp could bleed. The Epistolary told Kersh, pointing up at the unnatural flux of the sky, that he suspected the comet's tail was such a rift, and that the unfiltered insanity of the warp was pouring out into the void

before falling towards Certus-Minor with gravitational certainty to streak down through the cemetery world's atmosphere. Trying to reassure the Scourge, the psyker hypothesised that weak entities and warpforms might burn up on descent, and that the grip other such creatures had on reality might be weakened by such a scorching. What horrified Kersh further was Melmoch's belief that anything resilient enough to survive planetfall and impact would be suitably difficult to kill.

‘Anything?’ Kersh asked.

‘Nothing,’ Kale replied. He held an auspex out before him, scanning the thick murk. ‘No movement, no heat signature, no emissions.’

‘Well, there's clearly something out there,’ Ishmael bit back. The squad whip was wearing his lightning claws and watching searing energy arc between the polished surfaces of his talons.

Minutes passed. Kale continued to sweep the necroplex but detected nothing. Ishmael took out his impatience on the already terrified mortals on the battlement. Then Kersh heard it. In the distance. Along the perimeter. Amongst the sibilant cacophony emanating from the mist. The rhythmic chatter of a heavy stubber.

‘Corpus-captain,’ Kersh's vox-bead crackled. ‘Enemy contacts.’ It was Brother Novah. Kersh had stationed the newly-promoted standard bearer with Chaplain Shadrath some way to the east. The chug of the stubber could be heard much clearer over the vox-channel, and the corpus-captain also detected the ragged *whoosh* of lasfusils and the Emperor-pleasing crash of boltguns through the static. ‘The chief whip, Brother Dancred and the lord lieutenant – all reporting enemy contact, sir.’

Kersh visualised the tiny city, tinier still since Brother Dancred's demolitions. He considered the relative locations of the reports. It seemed initial assaults were coming in from the north and east.

‘What about Joachim, the Epistolary, Second Whip Scarioch?’

‘Nothing, my lord.’

Then Kersh heard the isolated reports of nervous trigger fingers. Behind a collapsed cloister-pillar two Charnel Guardsmen had punched several holes in the fog bank with their lasfusils. The single bolts faded into the mist and the lance-lieutenant fell on the two soldiers with harsh and equally nervous words. The Charnel Guard officer was cut off in mid-stream by the *chudder* of a stub-carbine and the deeper crash of Oren's autocannon. Vague suggestions became shadows and shadows rapidly became horrific threats coming out of the mist at the battlement. The night sizzled to life as a hail of poorly aimed las-bolts lanced the miasma. The autocannon and a heavy stubber further up the palisade gave better accounts of themselves – the cannon in particular chewing up the advancing forms before they had even had a chance to make themselves known.

Kersh unclipped his chainsword and held the barbed tip of the silent weapon out beside Ishmael. He'd hoped the squad whip might return the battle-brotherly gesture and tap the back of his lightning claw against the weapon. Ishmael just gave the Scourge a look of sour disgust, slapped on his helmet and started advancing.

'Sir,' Kale called. Kersh didn't know if the Excoriator had seen his squad whip's snub. The Space Marine held up the auspex. 'I've got nothing.'

Kersh grunted. Enemies that eluded the scanners were not good news for the Excoriators.

'If you can see it and it moves, burn it,' Kersh told Kale. Re-attaching the auspex to his belt and adopting his helmet, the Excoriator ran up the perimeter, adjusting the nozzle aperture on his weapon for a blanket burn.

Firing the chainsword to life, the Scourge gunned the weapon to shrieking lethality. Slipping his own helm over his head and firing the pressure seals, he watched monstrous forms swoop, bound and scuttle from the fog. As the warp-spawned swarm grew, more of the immaterial

creatures made it through the gauntlet of the las-fire. Kersh watched the autocannon and heavy stubber continue to do good work, ripping up etherforms and blowing what appeared to be limbs and appendages from the fearless horrors. The storm of las-fire that had greeted the first appearance of the entities immediately began to thin, causing Kersh to march forwards. It was as he feared. As more of the myriad monstrosities revealed themselves, common Certusians had shifted from panic-stricken trigger pumping to mind-scalding horror. The cemetery worlders and a number of Charnel Guard proceeded to gawp at the spectacle, their fragile minds overwhelmed by the impossible vision unfolding before their eyes. Some recoiled and slammed their backs to the battlement ruins, refusing to believe what they were seeing. Others fell to weeping and vomiting. Many simply could not take their eyes of the gut-curdling sight of the warp-spewed nightmares and froze up, clutching their silent weapons uselessly to their chests.

Several flying beasts corkscrewed their haphazard way through the streams of heavy weapons fire and dissipating curtain of las-bolts. Their repugnance even stirred deep-buried feelings of disgust in Kersh, looking as they did like giant insects that had been turned inside out. They swooped in low over the battlement on deformed multi-wings. Ishmael ran at the monsters, leaping off a shattered arch and reaching for the open night sky with his lightning claws. The talons crackled and steamed as the first beast flew straight into them. The creature sliced into an ugly mess on the rubble behind the squad whip before raining skywards in a shower of immaterial dissipation. Ishmael landed and, risking a swift look over his shoulder, brought up his bolt pistol and hammered several rounds into a second oncoming glider.

A third fiend rolled into a spin with its ragged wings, bypassing Ishmael and coming at Kersh. The Scourge feinted right and then turned back, sweeping down with the angry teeth of the chainsword. The weapon

chugged through a large wing and tore a rent down the monster's flank, causing it to stream entrails across the crumbling masonry and smash its remaining wings in a crash-landing. The corpus-captain watched the mess stream into a cyclonic scattering of dark emotion and wastage. Bethesda ran forwards from her position protecting the ammunition supply line. Holding the chunky laspistol in both hands like a carbine, cable trailing to the humming powerpack on her belt, the absterge lanced the downed entity with automatic las-fire.

Following Ishmael to the palisade, Kersh saw the squad whip roar savagely down the line of militia and Charnel Guardsmen. As encouragement to keep firing, the Excoriator stepped up onto the parapet and blasted single bolts from his pistol down the steep rubble of the battlement, plugging the swollen abdomens of obscene scuttlers.

'Fire, you worthless wretches!' Ishmael bawled, stabbing the talon-tips of a lightning claw down the line in accusation. 'Fire or I'll make you wish you had, you merelings! I'll feed you to these beasts to give the rest something to aim at!'

A wall of insanity came at the battlement. Spindle-limbed arachnid-maws that jumped from gravestone to gravestone. Fleshy urchin-like beings that rolled across the ground on pneumatic spines, spearing all in their path. Osseous shafts growing out of the mist and impaling Guardsmen, before violently projecting hydric stalks of cartilage into the bodies of nearby victims to create a reticulated network of skewered bodies. Conical torsos, twitching with single-clawed stumps and slimy mouths that stream-vomited corrosive bile all about them. Blooms of floating cephalogeists, draping their victims in manes of life-sapping tentacles. Voracious, protoplasmic absorbers. Beasts that were claws and nothing else. Cancroid growths that spread across the ground, rocky surfaces and living tissue with sickening speed. A carpet of larval horrors that escaped the worst of the suppression fire and wriggled up through the

loose rubble. Kersh saw cemetery worlders tearing at their own faces as the glassy elvers slithered into ears, mouths and eyes before writhing and exploding in a bloody, reproductive shower of empyreal birth.

Kersh fought through the spray of ichor and gobbets of warpflesh. He sawed through bestial nightmares and chopped limb-things from corporeal entities that simply grew back. He took the head from a Khymeric carnivore before cleaving the helical tusk from a screamer that swooped at him on triangular, pectoral wings. The Scourge booted aside a spongy mass of stubby eye-stalks before stamping down on the disappearing tail of a slinking gorgopede. He cut a fat, serpentine fluke from the lance-lieutenant's back only to find that it had already eaten his head and had been pushing down into his body. The air was thick with death. The battlement was swamped with horror. Immaterial entities – hungry for souls – were everywhere, and the Scourge was enveloped in a whirlwind of blade-banished dissipation as monstrosities about him died and departed reality.

The Scourge didn't know how long he had been fighting. The sea of spawn had just kept coming – monsters buzzing above, crawling over and slithering through the flesh-mounds of the slain. He had barely been allowed a moment's independent thought. His superhuman body had been enslaved to necessity – arching, reaching, barging and slamming his way through the havoc. The chainsword shimmered in his grip, so hot was the weapon in its constant state of carnage. Over the vox-bead he'd heard a similar story from around the entirety of the perimeter. He thought he'd heard reports of cemetery worlders and Charnel Guard abandoning their posts in mind-numbing terror. He'd heard of Second Whip Azareth and Brother Lemuel's sections pushed back to the second perimeter battlement and Techmarine Dancred's completely overrun.

Suddenly the path ahead of Kersh was clear. Misshapen entities became even more so as they dissolved into a blur of cannon-blasted mess. The

corpus-captain thought of Oren, the moody serf proving himself behind the stock of the heavy weapon, feverishly twisting the autocannon's length this way and that on its squat tripod, mulching otherworldly miscreations in tight, controlled sweeps. Through ichor-spattered optics Kersh could see Kale doing his worst with his flamer. The Excoriator was holding part of the palisade all by himself, indulging in broad burns that sanitised the tainted rubble and roasted a labyrinthine network of bodies, shot through with the explorative shafts of a bone monster – gargling, corrupted Guardsmen and all. Brother Micah was working his way down to him, sweeping a swarm of spindly spider-creatures from his path with conservative bolter blasts while bludgeoning his way through the spiny legs of a larger chitinid with his barrel and combat shield attachment.

From what the Scourge could see, the autocannon emplacement with Brothers Micah and Kale were the only contingent holding the battlement. The cemetery worlders had fled through the rat-run, back towards the city. Some of the Charnel Guard had held their ground but had been overwhelmed by warp entities that stripped their flesh and picked their bones. Spinning around, Kersh ducked beneath the legs of a fang-faced strider. The thing had been charging at him and had snapped at the corpus-captain with an elongated jaw, malformed and twisted with surplus teeth. The Scourge heard who he thought was Micah over the vox, but couldn't make out what the company champion was saying. Kersh flicked out his wrist and brought the raging tip of the chainsword up, shearing off one of the strider's gangly legs.

Peering through the mist, the corpus-captain spotted Ishmael down amongst the gravestones of the necroplex. The squad whip was fighting like a cornered cat, his lightning claws flashing through warp flesh, slicing and stabbing.

'Ishmael!' Kersh yelled, but the Excoriator was too far out. Looking along his faltering section of the battlement and then down at the

struggling squad whip, Kersh came to a decision. ‘Pull back!’ he yelled across the thunder of the autocannon. Riddling ground-hugging abominations with automatic las-fire, Bethesda covered the retreat as Oren and Old Enoch began separating the cannon from its mount and running the length of the white-hot weapon down the rat-run. Kale provided a wall of flame behind him and started to back towards the evacuation route.

The Scourge clambered up onto the parapet and cut his way through a conjoined monstrosity of legs and torsos. With every skidding step down the flesh-littered scarp his chainsword took an existence. A gossamer-winged whip-tail landed on his helmet from behind and proceeded to dig at the ceramite with its slender pincers. Snatching the thing by the tail, Kersh threw it into the rubble-strewn floor and crunched it underfoot. With a tiny etherquake, the thing became scraps of ash and nothingness. Through the throng of mayhem the Scourge watched the squad whip fight deeper and deeper into the immaterial ranks. The flood of malformed horror continued to roll in from the darkness of the burial grounds, washing up with mindless, soul-ravenous insanity against the rocky battlement. With unreal forms dying about them, the Excoriators were enveloped in curtains of warp essence that streamed for the night sky in torrents of instability.

‘Ishmael!’ Kersh managed as he sheared off limbs and plunged the shredding tip of the chainsword through warp-sculpted bodies. As the corpus-captain pushed deeper through the ranks, so did Ishmael. The Excoriator wouldn’t be stopped. He seemed only to exist for the killing. He responded to no entreaties – vox-transmitted or otherwise – and seemed completely unaware of his tactical vulnerability, leading a one-warrior spearhead through the ether-swarm. His lightning claws were an electrical storm sweeping through the plague of madness. His motions were decimate yet disturbing in their automotronic fervour – like the

Excoriator was killing for the sake of it and had little idea of where he was.

‘Squad Whip Ishmael, respond!’ Kersh called across the vox-channel but only heard a continuous, guttural growl across the channel in response. Already, the swathe of destruction the squad whip had cut through the chaos was closing up. He saw the arc of a lightning claw blaze in the distance. Like a swimmer forced down below the waves, the Scourge was suddenly swamped by warp effluence. There was monstrosity everywhere. Things were on his back. His boot was held fast in the mantrap jaws of some scuttling beast. Claws and jaws of abominate designs and dimensions snapped at his armoured form, and he was forced to hold up an outstretched gauntlet to block a stream of bile jetting at his faceplate and obscuring his optics. In his ears he heard Brother Micah over the vox, but he couldn’t tell if the champion was talking to him.

Kersh found himself faltering. There were beasts all around and the sheer weight of creatures climbing upon his shoulders – and the weight of the entities crawling up onto their backs – forced the Scourge down onto his armoured knees. His hands hit the ichorial mire that was the cemetery world earth, and for the first time in hours the raging shriek of the chainsword chugged to a full stop. In amongst the forest of bestial legs, lying across a carpet of half-slain freakery, was a form Kersh recognised. Splattered from head to foot with blood, both black and fresh, and with carapace tatters decorating his stabbed and sliced flesh, one of Keturah’s neophytes was slowly crawling across the landscape of carcasses. Half dead already and all but indistinguishable from the dissipating cadaverscape, an Excoriators Scout had made it back through the horror of the immaterial incursion.

‘Excoriator!’ the corpus-captain called, but the only response the Scout could make was to crane his head upwards and roll over onto his back. Kersh saw for the first time the full extent of his injuries. Four cavernous

puncture wounds decorated his stomach – equidistant and gushing with the Scout’s own blood. The unmistakable wound of a lightning claw. In his battle-blindness, Ishmael had gutted a brother Excoriator and slashed him down the face with a disfiguring swipe of his sword before moving on to his next victim. The squad whip had not even halted in realisation. He was lost to the kill.

Through his mauled face the Scout looked up at his corpus-captain. ‘S-s-sir...’

‘Save it,’ Kersh told the neophyte. ‘I’m getting you back to the city.’

Roaring with exertion the Scourge got back to his feet. Abominations fell from his shoulders and the sickening mass of soul-sucking aberration about him instinctively backed away. It was not enough to save them from the monomolecular fury of Kersh’s chainsword as he whirled around, tearing through bodies in a three-hundred-and-sixty degree arc of serrated savagery. This alone, however, was not enough to save the Scourge. He had fought too far into the maelstrom and had been claimed by the current of interdimensional madness. Etherspawn were everywhere and it was all Kersh could do to decapitate, disembowel and clip appendages from the twisted screechers about him and the fallen Scout.

Bodies began to fall about him. Things that looked like heads and pulsing abdomens began opening up in sizzling *plunks* of light and ethereal fluids. The curtains of insanity parted and Brother Micah appeared, protecting himself from a warp-stew-spitting cluster-bud with his steaming shield attachment before hammering back with a mulching burst of bolter-fire. Bizarre forms reaching out for the champion thudded and dropped as covering fire from the nearest of the city belfries and tower tops cut a fresh path through the army of confusion. All about him, the monstrous dead lost their forms and shot for the heavens in bursts of twisting ephemera. Kersh could imagine Squad Contritus on their bellies, their sniper rifles resting in the cradles of bipods, their eyes to their

magnocular scopes, dropping abomination after abomination, working their way through to the corpus-captain. The Scourge had little doubt that their orders came from the company champion.

‘Micah!’ Kersh called, grabbing one of the Scout’s outstretched hands. Cutting through the long neck of an oncoming freak thing with a bolter blast, Micah rested the weapon in one arm and took the Scout’s other bloodied palm with his free gauntlet.

‘We’ve got to go – now!’ Micah roared. A sudden tremor beneath the corpus-captain’s boots convinced him not to question the champion’s wisdom. It was followed by a second, third and fourth. As the two Excoriators ran, dragging the moaning Scout behind them through the morass of bodies, Kersh got the impression of something above them. Something unnatural in form and colossal in size was striding towards the city on impossibly spindly legs. Every time one of the behemoth’s cloven feet hit cemetery world soil, the ground beneath the Excoriators bounced and quaked.

‘Go-go-go!’ Micah urged as the Space Marines stormed across the carnage of the necroplex and up the scree-slope of the rubble battlement. About them enemies closed in and dropped, heads and bodies lanced through with sniping las-bolts. Those monstrosities making it through had an introductory blast from Micah’s boltgun or a flesh-shearing swipe of the corpus-captain’s chainsword to greet them.

Kersh heard the staccato of gunfire. Squinting up through the ethereal mist, the corpus-captain saw the twin twinkles of heavy bolters in the sky. Their sound was drowned out by the air-shuddering moan of the gargantuan entity above them.

‘It’s the *Gauntlet*,’ Micah called between strides and bolt-blasts, indicating that he had called the Thunderhawk in. The Space Marines ran on, dragging the wounded Scout. Kersh heard the familiar crash of the Thunderhawk’s battlecannon. Both the Scourge and his champion

involuntarily ducked their helmets as the gunship swept in low and over their heads. Peering up Kersh could see the after-inferno of the explosive shell that had ripped into the flank of the beast above. Watching the *Gauntlet*'s engine triplex blaze away, Kersh felt the heavens rumble with otherworldly agony. The colossal aberrant had taken the shot like some megafaunic giant of the plains, only to totter on its willowy legs and fall similarly so to the side. As the mist began to churn and rush about them, the Scourge slowed and slid down onto his knee, prompting Micah to do the same. The mist suddenly changed direction and came back at them as the monster's dimensions pounded into the necroplex. Kersh was almost knocked from his crouch by the impact as a sea of bestial screams erupted and were suddenly silenced by the pulverising weight of the colossus. The etherquake was palpable, the hideous wash of unreality rolling about them as so many creatures died.

Kersh and Micah were back on their feet, hauling the Scout up and over the battlement. Above them the abomination's spindly leg quivered. It terminated in a webbed hoof that seemed to point to the dome of the Memorial Mausoleum like an instruction to its warp spawn kindred. On the parapet the Excoriators could see that the freakish invaders had taken the perimeter as their own. Only a rent-armoured Kale stood at the entrance to the rat-run, his flamer blazing billows of promethium about the approach – roasting anything that made a scuttle or arachnoid stride for the bolt-hole.

Along the palisade Kersh could see the indescribable horror of the behemoth's head. Its malformed skull had hit the battlement and pounded straight through the masonry and shattered rockcrete. As Kersh and Micah closed on the flame-streaming Kale, he heard the bark of Oren's autocannon reassume its flesh-mangling orison. The serfs had successfully fallen back to the second perimeter and the heavy weapon was even joined by the optimistic flash of the occasional lasfusil, fired blindly from the

parapet. Kersh was glad of the autocannon's accompaniment. Below the second concentric battlement the Scout sniper cover fire couldn't reach them. The gibbering hordes had made effective use of the dying behemoth's fall, however, crawling up behind and over their warped cousin and giving the heavy weapon little open ground to acquire the advancing insanity.

Something Brother Micah assumed to be dead suddenly erupted in tentacles. The champion sidestepped the elastic reach of the first few, but dragging the injured Scout gave little room for manoeuvre and one of the thin appendages wound itself viciously around his leg. Pulling away from the horror, Micah plugged at it with single shots from his bolter, but a second grappler wrapped itself around the weapon. The tentacle around the champion's leg bled some kind of caustic revenge from the feeler's hook-suckers and the ceramite began to sizzle and smoulder. Micah yelled out in frustration and it took the gnashing teeth of Kersh's chainsword to slice the tentacles from their beast-host. As Micah ripped the remainder of the appendage from his leg and bolter, the Scourge buried the tip of his sword in the creature's thorax, gunning the barbed chain to full shredding majesty and despatching the monster.

The Excoriators ran. The horde closed.

Bolting down through the rat-run, the steep sides of the second battlement threatening to cascade down upon them, Kersh and Micah pounded on – the Scout Marine's blood-drenched and ragdoll body pulled behind them. Kale backed into the gap after them, the flamer's incessant inferno even more devastating and concentrated within the rat-run's narrow dimensions. Charred skeletal obscenities propelled themselves through the wall of flame only to end up on the carpet of scorched and sky-streaming remains that other freak creatures sprang through to get to the Space Marines.

The Excoriator's flamer chugged dry, and Kale threw the deadweight of the weapon at the nearest rawbone ganglefiend. The Excoriator's bolt pistol cleared his belt holster. Still backing away, Brother Kale blasted furiously at the onrushing abominations. An absorber gushed its gelatinous way up the rat-run – it too enhanced by the bolt-hole's funnelling narrowness. The amorphous spume-form soaked up the pistol's defiance before swallowing Brother Kale whole.

Kersh and Micah ran on, forcing their armour's spirits to greater feats of fibre-bundled athleticism. The rat-run exit beckoned. Kersh saw Bethesda at the opening, the screw-handle detonator in her slender hands. The Excoriators heard an appalling roar of agony but could not stop. As the Adeptus Astartes exploded out of the rat-run, the Scourge's absterge twisted the detonator. Strategically planted demolition charges along the length of the bolt-hole fired, demolishing the gap and collapsing the run. Tonnes of rubble and fragmented masonry cascaded down, blocking off the escape route and burying the freakish abominations chasing the Excoriators.

As the dust cloud settled, with the autocannon hammering above them, Kersh surveyed the scene. Everyone, from the limping Micah to Bethesda to the Charnel Guardsman hiding down behind the remnant of a shattered spire, looked aghast. Turning, Kersh looked down on the miserable Scout he'd pulled out of the horror of the necroplex. He was glaze-eyed, twitching and mumbling to himself. Also, half of him was missing.

The absorber's clotted immateriality had gushed up behind them and had swamped the Space Marine Scout's legs and abdomen. Digesting them like it had Kale, the creature had left half an Excoriator. For a few moments that seemed like an eternity, nobody spoke.

'Find something you can use as a stretcher,' the Scourge said to Bethesda, 'then have a team of runners take him up to his Tenth Company brothers.'

The absterge bolted off to carry out her master's orders. Kersh's eyes fell on the terrified Guardsman. 'You,' the Scourge said in a tone that blistered with fury and disappointment. 'Get on that perimeter, now...'

The Charnel Guardsman snatched up his lasfusil in numb dread and ran back up the palisade to take his position on the battlement.

Hobbling around whilst slapping a chunky magazine into his boltgun, Brother Micah turned to the Scourge. The company champion kissed his fist in honour of Dorn.

'You ready?'

'No,' Kersh answered honestly, but followed the Excoriator up towards the autocannon emplacement, leaving behind the neophyte in his pain, shock and mumbling torment.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Syzygy

I wish this were a dream.

The horror of the warp was visited upon Certus-Minor. The cemetery world was flash-fried in the insanity of battle as the planet's unfortunate orbit passed through the tail of the Keeler Comet. The unfiltered dross of Chaos – gathered like scum at stagnant borders between our reality and its own – pouring through the rift and raining down on this tiny part of the Imperium.

We fought for twenty hours straight, knee-deep in abomination, holding our nerve and retaining our sanity amongst the madness of raw havoc taken form. The Fifth Company held its ground and earned great honour in the field of battle. If the shoreline of dead flesh is anything to go by, decorating the city perimeter, the odds were appalling. For twenty hours the heavenfallen swept down on us, drawn unthinking to Obsequa City like a lighthouse of soulfire, hungry for our humanity. We fought like we had never done before, our superhuman bodies pushed to their limit. Hearts thundered blood around our bodies. Reactions crackled like lightning.

Eyes only saw enemies. Arms burned numb defiance – living extensions of our blessed blades and bolters. We took life without strategy. Technique and the art of battle were mere memories. We killed through necessity, for behind every enemy entity lay another and another, and it was all we could do to survive.

In the twentieth hour of bloodshed the aberrations stopped. Numbers of the warped began to dwindle. The masses thinned and our efforts became easier. We pushed the monsters back to the first perimeter, and on the lost battlement we decimated their remaining number. This was no battle tactic. The beasts had simply spent themselves in mindlessly assaulting the city. There were no more to kill because we had killed them all.

Although the Fifth Company has achieved a great victory over Chaos, it was not without cost. Brothers Ebenezar, Tycharias, Moliath, Ashkelon and Techmarine Dancred have lost their lives to the horde. Their bodies are laid out as custom dictates, with all the horror of their battle wounds on display. Tycharias particularly is a mess. Dancred is a butchered carcass of Adeptus Astartes flesh and twisted, claw-mauled hydraulics, electrical systems and bionic framing. The Techmarine fought bravely, but his position on the line was overrun and the abominations pushed on into the city. Members of Squad Contritus were instrumental in holding the invasion back – their sniping talents put to the test as the steep streets of the Saint Bartolomé-East district became wall-to-wall Chaotics. The Excoriators Scouts thinned out the misshapen mass with precision fire, giving Skase and several of his Squad Cicatrix brethren time to redeploy and push the monsters back. It took several bombing runs by the Thunderhawk Impunitas to fully sanitise the vicinity of hellspawn and their taint, however, leaving the district a derelict waste.

Whereas my Excoriators have upheld their proud tradition of attrition, I must accept responsibility for the failure of almost everyone else. I ask too much of the cemetery world's common humanity. Without the weakness of

Imperial citizenry there would be no need for the Adeptus Astartes, and nothing has made this clearer than the manner of the Certusian retreat. History records the accomplishments of all-too-ordinary men: the war for Armageddon, the Euphrassic Massacres and the numerous Black Crusade honours of battle-hardened Cadians. Our species can be strong and our spirit beyond measure. This is what is celebrated in the myth and legend of song and saga. But for every Imperial citizen who has ever held their ground in the face of the xenos invader, the heretical traitor or Chaos marauder, a thousand have fled. It is in the fear and dread of those thousand that the Imperium's doom is written. Men, women and children in whose trembling hands weapons turn to water. The faint-hearted majority who run for their lives in the expectation that others will save them. Perhaps the Adeptus Astartes are to blame for this. The Imperium's strength is its weakness. The existence of demigods turns common men into bystanders. They catch a glimpse of the divine and consider themselves beyond the calculus of fate. The Emperor's Angels will save them. They are witnesses to the clash of good and evil in the galaxy, failing to recognise that it is upon their collective shoulders that the destiny of an empire resides.

For all my gene-bred superiority and Angel's arrogance, I find it hard to blame them. I am more than human and yet, on the dark fringes of my understanding – lapping against the bedrock of my warrior heritage, my training and experience – I feel it too. The vertiginous, ice-water plunge of fear, simple and pure. The irrational and almost irresistible desire to run, to take oneself away from the source of danger and disgust. How common humanity manages to steel itself for such a storm of chemistry and emotion is an everyday miracle in itself. That most fly when I need them to fight is regrettable. Unlike Skase and Joachim, spitting their curses and bawling remonstrations at fear-wrought statues of Certusian cowardice, I cannot find it in myself to hate these mortals. My sacrifice is my own. I do it for

the Emperor and not for them. In truth, I feel nothing for their survival. We share nothing like a brotherly bond – although amongst the Fifth that too has been sadly lacking. Should they survive, neither they nor their progeny will go on to change the Imperium. Their continued existence means only one thing to me: the denial of enemy victory. I suspect that the gall-fever and the madness of an immaterial incursion are simply intended to soften us for the body blow. The Cholercaust is coming. The Ruinous Powers wish to take this world and its people from me. They will be denied. They will fail. I will ensure it.

With Brother Novah I stalk the smouldering ruins of Saint Bartolomé-East. A crater and fireball-ravaged remnants are all that remain. With the Fifth Company battle standard held high, Novah crunches through the scorched rubble. He scans the battered landscape for any signs of corruption with his boltgun while relaying orders back and forth over the vox-channels.

‘Second Whip Scarioch has been confirmed as missing.’

I nod. Novah continues. ‘Second Whip Etham repeats his request to go out and search for Brother Ishmael.’

‘Denied,’ I snap back. ‘Ishmael is lost. Tell Etham that Squad Castigir is his responsibility now and he needs to start acting like it.’

‘Brother Simeon is up at the Memorial Mausoleum as instructed. He reports burning bodies in the plaza. It looks like the Sisters opened fire on the crowd.’

‘The Sisters?’

I stop and consider Palatine Sapphira. It would be hard to imagine the stoic Sister succumbing to the frenzy and torching Certusians for sport.

‘They claim they were attacked.’

‘By ether-filth?’ It seemed unlikely that rift forms had penetrated that far into the city, even from Saint Bartolomé-East.

‘Cemetery worlders,’ Novah replies.

The gall-fever. The city churning. I shake my head. The influence of Chaos within and without the perimeter. In the wake of the initial assault, abandoned by many of the cemetery worlders and up to my helmet in immaterial filth, I had little time to consider the consequence of mass desertion. While I was fighting for my life and the lives of others, hundreds upon hundreds of wild-eyed Certusians were running uphill towards the spiritual safety of the Memorial Mausoleum. Out of their minds with fear, militiamen, members of ammunition supply chains and terrified Charnel Guardsmen fled screaming from the unleashed horror of the warp and the desperate gunfire barely keeping it at bay. For some – their minds broken – the screams would have turned to howls and anguish, and then anger. The line between fear and fury is one easy to cross in the fragile, erratic mind of a mere mortal. With the gall-fever firmly taken root, the cemetery worlders would have torn into the thousands at prayer about the walls of the great Mausoleum, some deserters still with weapons in hand.

Faced with unreasoning mobs of murderers – men intent on slaughtering all, even their own friends and families – I can imagine that Palatine Sapphira had little choice but to order her flamer-wielding Sisters to torch the rabid interlopers.

‘Have Brother Simeon set his serfs to organising labour parties from the cemetery worlders,’ I order Novah. ‘I need them to move bodies – they should be good at that.’

As we search through the charred remains of cloisters and chapels, I outline to the standard bearer how I want the bodies of dead defenders and penetrating spawn moved from the battlements and dumped outside the perimeter. I order the last of the city’s promethium barrels tipped out across the cadaver mounds of the fallen – a fuel-soaked hillock of flesh, both Certusian and immaterial – surrounding the perimeter.

The orders keep coming. Command structure and a sense of purpose nourish the aftermath of battle. Having stood amongst the killing fields of

innumerable conflicts, I know that disbelief, shock and a sense of fatalism are soon to set in, combated only by leadership and labour. Without hard work the mind is allowed to dwell – on horrors experienced, the odds of survival and the futility of resistance.

I instruct Lord Lieutenant Laszlongia to reorganise his Charnel Guardsmen. I am now only interested in men who have proved their worth. Men of strong mind and spirit who held the line. Men who now know what they are facing and have the resolve to kill it. I order Laszlongia to recover weapons and ammunition and, with my Excoriators, re-establish themselves on the exterior perimeter. The blood-splattered battlements are ours again. For how long I cannot know.

The Impunitas hovers above the desolation and I feel the sights of her heavy bolters watching over me and the company standard. The Gauntlet I have despatched off across the necroplex to ensure that deadly pockets of auspex-defying entities do not haunt the mist. A second wave of abominations at this point would be tactically unlikely, based upon their presented behaviour, but prematurely devastating to corpse trains and combat-unprepared perimeters.

‘What of the Cholercaust – estimated time of planetfall?’ I put to the standard bearer. As we approach a seemingly resilient structure amongst the shattered and soot-stained landscape of destruction he achieves vox contact with the only vessel remaining in orbit around Certus-Minor. All other system ships departed under the protective wing of the Angelica Mortis with only the Adeptus Ministorum defence monitor Apotheon left behind.

‘The Apotheon confirms the first of the armada’s vessels breaching the asteroid field and entering the system core.’

‘How long?’

‘At present speed the advance vessels should reach Certus-Minor in a little under eight hours standard,’ Novah tells me. I imagine the lonely

defence monitor holding station above the cemetery world with her tiny engines, the reinforced shielding of her bulbous Voss prow, her grim batteries of fat cannon and the underslung length of her powerful lance quad, nestling beneath the vessel's armoured keel.

'My compliments to the commander and cleric,' I say, and mean it. The Apotheon has the best view of the Cholercaust in the system. They know what is coming. To hold position and charge weapons ready for engagement in the face of such suicidal odds is nothing short of adamantium nerve. 'Tell him to ignore the cultships and freighters. Any damage his vessel can visit upon Traitor Astartes cruisers, frigates and gunships on the approach is most welcome.'

I think about wishing the captain luck but the words die on my lips. The Apotheon will be a boarder-ravaged wreck soon and the captain will shortly be dead. Since he knows this, it seems ridiculous to extend even the vaguest of optimistic wishes.

Novah spots something charred and leathery flapping in a depression nearby and moves off to plug the surviving thing with bolt-rounds. I advance up the smoking steps of the building before me – the only one in the immediate area not to have fallen in the bomb blast. Its exterior is cracked and scorched, but symbols in the stonework above the iron doors identify the building as the precinct house of the enforcers.

Putting a boot to the metal doors I enter cautiously. The inside of the building is untouched, protected by the thick walls of the precinct exterior. A perfect place for some otherworldly horror to hide from the Impunitas's bombing run. The armoury is empty and a breeze from the open door disturbs vellum pages on the desks in the scriptoria. They float to the floor where they promptly begin to blotch and soak up blood recently spilt there. Several enforcers lie there also, one without a head and two others with ragged holes blown through their carapace and chests. Moving through the deserted precinct house, past the chastenoria, a booth-verispex and the

provostery, I move down into the dungeon. An empty combat shotgun lies abandoned on the stairs. Here the cells are empty, bar one.

Sitting on a bench, behind thick adamantine alloy bars, is Proctor Kraski. The enforcer's scuffed armour is ripped and blasted, while his head leans to one side and his mouth is open. Tobacco juice dribbles from the corner of his mouth and down through his beard, pitter-pattering on the polished cell floor. Something crunches under my boot and lifting it I find a key, clearly thrown out of the cell by Kraski after he locked himself in.

'Proctor,' I call, my voice bouncing unsettlingly around the cell block. Clutching the bars with my gauntlet, one power-armoured tug forces the simple lock and I step inside the cage. Grabbing Kraski by his shaggy hair I lift his head up. 'Proctor,' I call at him again. His eyes have rolled over white but seem to quiver a little as though he is fitting. Suddenly I find out why.

In the open mouth I see something horrible looking back out at me. Several spindly legs erupt from between the enforcer's tobacco-stained teeth. An arachnoid being slips its tiny abdomen out of the opening and runs along my arm and across my armoured chest. All legs, the beast had crammed itself inside Kraski's skull and devoured the contents.

Recoiling with revulsion, my pack slams into the bars of the cell. I knock the monstrosity onto the floor where it clearly considers scrabbling back at me. Dipping my hand into my holster I soon dissuade it with several floor-pulverising blasts from my bolt pistol. The horror scuttles across the floor and up the stairs before I'm even out of the cell. Holding the Mark II in both hands I smack my pauldrons into walls, aiming around corners – expecting the thing to jump at my face. The ground floor of the precinct house confronts me with a fresh nightmare of hiding places, but a swift staccato of bolt-rounds outside persuades me that the beast has fled the building.

Shouldering my way through the iron doors I see Brother Novah waving me to follow with the battle standard as he jumps from one piece of smouldering rubble to the next. I catch up with him at the boundary of destruction, where even a chapel-cryptia had weathered the bomb blast.

'In here,' Novah hisses, angling his bolter at a hole in the wall. Advancing through the brick-blasted opening, bolt pistol held before me, I creep into the darkness of the chapel-cryptia. Lowering the battle standard to get it inside, Novah follows. The interior – usually lit by candles – is a nest of shadows. A stained-glass portal above admits only gloom, and the centre of the chamber is dominated by a sunken stone stairwell down into a crypt. About the chapel are plinths bearing coffins of weathered stone, the brittle lids of which bear raised representations of minor Imperial saints. One is ajar.

Jabbing my Mark II over at the coffin, Novah and I move quietly through the chamber. We both freeze as our sensitive hearing picks up on a scuffling within the coffin. With Novah's bolter aimed at the stone box, I count us down with ceramite fingers from three to one. Tearing off the lid with one hand I thrust my pistol into the darkness with the other.

There is a scream, which neither of us expect, and my finger twitches against the Mark II's trigger. There is a young girl inside – alive and terrified; a dirty-faced cemetery worlder, hiding in the coffin. I hold my gauntlet up, as much an indication to her that we are no threat as an order to Brother Novah not to shoot. The foundling lets rip again with another shrill scream.

Following her eyes I see that she is looking at the battle standard and the rift-spider running down its shaft. Novah's response is immediate. He smacks the banner against the floor, propelling the thing down into the darkness of the crypt.

'Down!' I yell at the shrieking child, prompting her to duck back into the stone coffin. Aiming my pistol down the steps I thumb the weapon to

automatic and illuminate the thick darkness with a stabbing stream of firepower. The monster vaults straight back at me from the murk of the crypt, forcing me to drop the weapon. With my gauntlets out in front of me I hold the warp-strong thing at bay as it scrabbles for my face. ‘Novah!’

‘Do it!’ the standard bearer shouts.

Grasping one of the creature’s legs I swing it around, smacking its thrashing body against the chapel wall before hooking its obscene form back around and smashing through the stone torso of a nearby statue. Knocked senseless but still very intent on crawling into my skull, the thing spasms in my grip. I toss it into the air above the crypt where Brother Novah shreds the abomination with a precision burst of bolter-fire. With a reality-searing pop the creature vanishes and a light shimmer twirls for the roof. After a moment or two of silence, Novah says, ‘Are you all right, sir?’

I nod in response and walk over to the stupefied child. She looks up at me with blank, fearful eyes. Plucking her delicately from her hiding place in the coffin, I hand her to Novah who holds her in the crook of his elbow, beneath the Fifth Company’s battle standard. Pushing open the ferruswood chapel-cryptia door with the muzzle of his bolter, I hear him call in the end of our sweep of the demolished district.

I recover my pistol and re-holster the weapon. I find myself staring at the open stone coffin, its frail lid now shattered pieces on the floor. I think of the girl hiding within – the surreal nature of the moment we discovered her. Peering inside I can see something in the bare bottom of the coffin and I pick it out. It’s a crystalline wafer, a card from the Emperor’s Tarot. I look about, searching the shadows for the revenant, but he is nowhere to be seen.

I turn the card over in my fingertips. The wafer bears the image of a stellar eclipse – a moon covering all but the coronal ring of a distant sun –

as viewed from an aligned planetoid. Under the representation is a single word: Umbra.

I feel the ghostly flutter of inspiration pass through the pit of my stomach – a sensation usually reserved for moments of inventive daring in combat, seconds before I wrong-foot my opponent with an unexpected slice of the blade or wholeheartedly commit to some bold and unpredictable manoeuvre. A sensation that has saved my life many times and taken the lives of my enemies many more. I am held there in the moment, stunned witness to the birth of an idea so audacious that it brings an involuntary smile to my mauled lips.

I am there, smiling grimly at the wafer, long enough for Brother Novah to return. He has vox-messages.

‘Corpus-captain,’ he says, still holding the mortal child. ‘Squad Whip Joachim for you, sir. He requests that you and Epistolary Melmoch meet him in the Sepulchre Square. He says it’s important.’

‘Fine,’ I reply. Then add, ‘Vox back Brother Simeon. Inform him that I am on my way up to the Memorial Mausoleum. Tell him I want to see the pontifex. Tell him...’ I hesitate. ‘Tell him it’s important.’



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cessation

His name had been Scarioch. He had been a brother Excoriator, a member of Squad Censura and a squad second whip. Hours before, it had been enough for him to serve his squad whip, to honour his company and fight for his Emperor. Katafalque's words had been his guide and Dorn's deeds his example. He had been an Adeptus Astartes – an Angel of the Imperium.

All this was nothing to him now.

He-Who-Had-Been-Scarioch now only thought in shades of red. He felt only a feral injustice – a hatred for everything he had been, for order and discipline, for honour and instruction, for spiteful subservience. For the first time the Space Marine felt the full potential of his superhuman form. He enjoyed the torrent of unbridled strength coursing through his bulging veins, brawn pumped to slabs of stone, the senses of a death world predator and the thunder of hearts in his chest.

The Space Marine felt only the beginning of the end. He had become something else, something new and powerful, something that lived only for the end of others. The crack of skulls. The whisper of razored edges

through soft flesh. The thud of blades buried in bodies. The spurt of sliced jugulars. The snapping of necks and spines. The sighs and gasps of the dying. The splash of footsteps in pools of spilt blood. All this He-Who-Had-Been-Scarioch could feel just beyond his aching fingertips. He desired nothing more than to make these murderous fantasies fact and his inability to enact the blood-lush nightmare only fuelled his building rage further.

They had done this to him, his so-called brothers. The killing, the slaughter – it had to continue. The craven Angels of the corpse-Emperor failed to see this. Dastards all, they had mobbed him like cowards, holding him down and prising the steaming sword from his hand. Not before the Scarioch-Thing had broken a few more jaws and noses with his brow and flailing knuckles. When he would not soothe to the lullaby of their weakling words and fraternal entreaties, they cut the cable-fibres of his armour and stripped him of his pack power-plant. They stretched his arms behind him and bound his wrists behind a cloister-pillar, using the bent length of a nearby railing bar.

The berserker thrashed against the deadweight of his plate. The pillar groaned. The metal of his bindings squealed and contorted. The raging Angel strained and struggled against his captivity. His teeth clenched and his gums oozed blood. The whites of his eyes were thread-shattered and deep red while his Adeptus Astartes flesh ruptured with the mosaic distension of bruising and exertion.

About him, forgotten brothers paced and stared, infuriatingly out of reach. Some clutched boltguns and pistols – cowards shrinking behind their killing machines. The Scarioch-Thing thought he could smell their fear. Their weakness appalled him and fed the fires of his hatred. They looked down on him with an apoplexy-stirring mixture of superiority and sadness. Their pity gunned the engines of wrath booming inside his chest. More intolerable weakness. Blood stormed through his veins – the

sacramental essence of the War-Given-Form. He no longer had words. His mouth opened and serpentine hatred leaked from his spoiling soul.

The Emperor's meek-seed had plenty to say, but their words seemed distant, almost unintelligible. He-Who-Had-Been-Scarioch detested them all.

Joachim – but a battle-virgin compared to him – who had been elevated to whip. Melmoch the mutant with his witch-ways. Brother Boaz, who had bested him once in the practise cages and had never allowed him to forget it. The disgraced chief whip, Uriah Skase, who had failed so completely when demanding Trial by the Blade. And Zachariah Kersh, Scourge of the Fifth Company, the warrior who failed his Chapter Master, surrendered his standard and dropped his blade. Him, the Scarioch-Thing hated the most.

The Excoriators looked at Scarioch.

'He is taken,' Melmoch said. 'The gall-fever has him.'

'You seem awfully eager to write him off, witchbreed,' Joachim shot back. 'Perhaps you suffer the fever, too.'

'His soul is but a plaything for the Ruinous Powers now,' Melmoch replied.

'Like yours?'

Melmoch let the goading insult wash over him. 'Is that what you would want for your brother?'

'Skase?' Joachim urged.

'Can't we just keep him secure?' Brother Boaz offered.

'Like a caged animal?' Melmoch asked.

'Until the fever passes...'

'This will not pass,' the Epistolary told him. 'He is the Blood God's now. The first of our kind to fall to his hunger.'

'He's not the first,' the Scourge said with regret. 'Ishmael is lost to us, also.'

'We don't know that,' Skase growled back.

‘You know what must be done,’ Kersh said.

‘Skase...’ Joachim pleaded.

He-Who-Had-Been-Scarioch seared into the chief whip with his bloody, anathemic eyes. The words exchanged around him boiled his blood with their meaninglessness.

Uriah Skase brought up his bolt pistol. The damned Excoriator looked up the length of its chunky barrel at his chief whip.

‘I’m sorry, brother.’

The Scarioch-Thing snarled.

Skase fired.

Kersh entered the square. There were people everywhere. All of the small plazas, dirge-cloisters and devotional quads were swamped with cemetery worlders. The throngs parted for him, Adeptus Astartes as he was, even though the Certusians had precious little space and what little they had they had devoted to blankets, shroud tents and tiny shrines. Like pilgrims, the Certusians had gathered in the shadow of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum, thousands of them. Despite their need and number, the distribution of water and food was orderly and the atmosphere dour and reverent. Many of the cemetery worlders were at prayer and those who weren’t bowed their heads respectfully as the corpus-captain moved through the parting crowds.

With Excoriators and the remaining Charnel Guard holding the city perimeter, and Squad Whip Keturah’s Scouts haunting the towers and belfries of Obsequa City, creating a city-maze of kill zones, common Certusians had been forced to make do with the harsh stone of the squares and the cobbles of the tight esplanades for beds. Kersh walked through them all: women and children, the old, the sick, Oliphant’s remaining priests and the droves of newly arrived menfolk – those who could not cope with the horror of the front line and had fled their stations on the perimeter during the initial assaults. The Excoriator saw what exposure to the madness of the warp did to ordinary mortals. Some men rocked like

infants, others couldn't stop weeping while others had gone mute. Some were babblers, incessantly speaking of the horrors they had seen, while others had simply crawled under a blanket and had not come out.

'The pontifex?' Kersh put to a preacher carrying a water-satchel and distributing drinking water.

The priest directed him to the next plaza where the scene was altogether different. Kersh nodded to a Sister of Battle in full armour and hefting the bulk of a heavy flamer. He couldn't help wondering what havoc the scorched nozzles of the weapon might wreak on the city perimeter. Beyond, Kersh began to get an idea. The plaza was stained with soot. Smoke drifted from blast marks, and macabre cages of incinerated bodies decorated the blackened stone where the roasted bones of tightly-packed mobs had melted and warped into giant works of demented art. Amongst these scenes of charred horror, parents attempted to comfort their children, and cemetery worlders tried to concentrate on their devotions.

Framed in the imposing architecture of the Memorial Mausoleum, Kersh found Pontifex Oliphant hobbling between the still smouldering remains, administering last rites to the dead. Several soot-smeared labourers with picks and saws had the unenviable duty of separating the merged forms while stone-faced vestals carried coffins across the plaza and tried their best to fit the twisted skeletons inside. Kersh noted that the Sisters of the August Vigil had stationed themselves about the crowds as well as on the nearby porch-barbican. A meltagun-wielding shadow in cobalt power armour watched the proceedings impassively from nearby.

'Corpus-captain,' Oliphant greeted him, the ghost of a smile on his slanted lips.

'How are you coping, pontifex?' Kersh asked.

Dragging his slack leg and shoulder, the ecclesiarch turned. 'Don't worry about me, corpus-captain. I have my life, which is more than I can say for these unfortunate souls here.'

Kersh bit at his bottom lip. ‘Pontifex,’ the Excoriator began uncomfortably. ‘I want to apologise for your losses here—’

‘Corpus-captain, please...’

‘No,’ Kersh pressed. ‘The strategy was mine and it failed. Certusians abandoned their posts and fled back through the city where my Scouts had no orders to fire upon them.’

‘You could have had no idea...’

‘I could have and I should have. It takes a particular breed of man to face the arch-enemy, to hold his nerve and keep his mind. There are sights men in their multitude were not meant to see. Evils that should remain unknown. Horrors to which humanity should not be subjected. Beings in whose presence mortals succumb to madness.’

‘What of those that are more than mortal? Are you immune to such experiences?’

‘No, pontifex, we are not,’ Kersh told him honestly. ‘But it is the purpose for which we have been bred and we do not shirk from it.’

Oliphant watched two vestals carry away the black, encrusted remains of a heat-warped skeleton. Kersh saw him lift one young woman’s face with one of his grim smiles.

‘I was conducting the prayer vigil. The people, patient and in great number, gathered in the open spaces around the Mausoleum. We gave thanks to the great Umberto II – whose spirit watches over us on this darkest of nights – and the God-Emperor, whose servants are never far away.’ Oliphant gave the Excoriator a meaningful stare, confirming to the corpus-captain that he was referring to the Adeptus Astartes. ‘We were engaged in our prayer cordon when our number were surprised by shouting from the streets beyond. Forgive me, corpus-captain, but at first we thought the enemy might have bypassed your insufficient number. When wives saw their husbands, and children their fathers, the crowd rejoiced. Until the killing started. I will not describe the bitter spectacle – not in the

presence of the dead for whom we would wish nothing but an eternal peace. Many died, and in the mayhem it was impossible to tell murderer from victim. In the end, Palatine Sapphira ordered her Sisters to take blunt but decisive action to put an end to the atrocity. They cleansed the afflicted crowds with holy flame and...' the pontifex struggled, seeming not to have further words for the description, '...that was an end to it.'

'Pontifex,' Kersh said, seeing the pain on the man's face: his physical infirmity, the grief he felt for his people, and the spiritual agony he suffered at having such carnage taint the sacred earth of his cemetery world. The Excoriator felt it only fair to prepare the ecclesiarch for the truth that more was coming. 'Let me speak plainly, as a warrior. What you have seen is but the beginning. The comet's malign influence has turned your people against themselves and further bolstered the enemy's number. My Epistolary suspects that the horrors we have witnessed thus far are merely immaterial overspill, the detritus of the warp, bleeding through into our existence. The Cholercaust is yet even to arrive. When it does, it will make what we have seen so far seem like nothing. An invasion made up of countless cultists, the Blood God's daemonkin and, worst of all, our Traitor brothers – the World Eaters. They are Angels insatiable in their thirst for slaughter, unparalleled in their desire for wanton carnage. They were and unfortunately still are amongst the best the immortals have to offer on the battlefield. They head a Blood Crusade that has never known defeat – that has sundered hundreds of Imperial worlds – and they will kill everything on the surface of this planet.'

The ecclesiarch's half-smile began to fall.

'You are saying that defeat is certain. That you can't protect us...'

'I'm not sure anyone can,' Kersh told him honestly.

'But, I heard you tell your Angels–'

'They are warriors,' Kersh said, shaking his head. 'They need to hear that. We are sustained by our faith.'

‘Faith in yourselves...’

‘Yes,’ Kersh nodded. ‘But to you I offer solemn truths. We are few in the face of legion. My men and I will fight for you. We will fight with the last of our strength, with but a single breath in our lungs and a single drop of blood left in our bodies. But when we fall – and we will, for the equations of battle are cold and certain – your people will be put to the blade.’

Oliphant’s head began to bob gently with dark understanding. Then he looked at the Excoriator with warm eyes and his simple smile.

‘You have your faith,’ he told Kersh, ‘and I have mine. You remember, when we first met, I said that I knew you would come?’

‘I do.’

‘He came to me, corpus-captain.’

‘He?’

‘The God-Emperor...’

‘Pontifex, with respect, you would not be the first cleric to claim to have experienced a divine visitation,’ Kersh said softly.

‘I know not whether I were dreaming or awake,’ Oliphant continued, staring off into the distance. ‘The God-Emperor came to me. Glorious in His corpse-lord’s plate – black as the depths of space – yet impossible to look upon, like a sun or the fierce glare of some bright star.’

Kersh couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘You have seen this?’

‘Many times,’ Oliphant confirmed, his gaze still fixed some way distant. ‘Before you arrived. And since. It is how I knew His Angels were coming. That help was on its way. That we were destined for the Adeptus Astartes’ protection.’

‘You see him still?’

‘From time to time,’ Oliphant smiled. ‘He walks among us. He is in the corner of the eye, in the shadows, waiting to reveal His true purpose. It is His mysterious way.’

‘I don’t know what that is,’ Kersh told him honestly. ‘But I don’t think it is your God-Emperor.’

‘We shall see, sir,’ the pontifex said. ‘He will reveal Himself to you in due course.’ Kersh grunted. ‘The God-Emperor fights on our side, Angel. Have faith in that.’

Kersh thought of the Emperor – now all but a corpse on his sarcophagus-throne.

‘Pontifex,’ the Scourge said. ‘The Adeptus Astartes live for victory and the Great Dorn has shown us that there are many kinds. Stood amongst the corpses in the Imperial Palace, with the Emperor – all but dead – returned to the safety of its thick walls, the primarch would have felt little desire to celebrate victory. Walking from the deathtrap of the Eternal Fortress – a survivor of Iron Warriors ingenuity and the Iron Cage – Dorn would have felt no jubilation. These were not victories in a traditional sense – those to which mortals aspire when they see demigods crafted in stone and bronze, and hear of the exploits of heroes. Demetrius Katafalque, in the *Architecture of Agony* teaches us that these were victories, that frustration of the arch-enemy’s desires and the impediment of evil is a kind of victory. That in a galaxy perpetually at war – in an existence of continuous slaughter – survival is victory.’

‘What are you saying?’ Oliphant mumbled, entranced by the Excoriator’s words.

‘Do you trust me, pontifex?’

‘I do, Angel.’

‘And do your people trust you? Will they do as you ask – no matter how strange and daunting the road you ask them to take?’

‘They are my flock. I am their shepherd. The God-Emperor shows me the path that I might lead and they follow.’

Kersh looked around at the crowds of cemetery worlders. He imagined the Certusians in their thousands and thousands, huddled about the

Memorial Mausoleum. He took a deep breath and nodded slowly to himself.

‘Gather your flock, pontifex,’ the Scourge told him finally, ‘and as many shovels as you can lay your hands on. Your people take the crow road tonight...’

Sister Sapphira rose from the baptismal waters of the communal font. Rivulets of holy water cascaded down and around the curves of her purified flesh. Droplets splashed against the surface of the pool and then spattered the cool floor of the chancery as the palatine stepped out into the towels and attentions of her Sisters.

She stood there in silence as members of her mission proceeded to dry her and dash her with consecrated ash from an itinerant stoup. All the while, incense burned from globes suspended from the ceiling and prayers were whispered by the attending women. As Sapphira’s limbs, torso and bust were bound with sackcloth ribbon, Sister Klaudia – wearing her cornette and ceremonial robes – read from Saint Severa’s *Articles of Faith and Flame* and offered blessings to her palatine and superior.

Sapphira felt the sting of the baptismal bath, replaced by the chill of the chancery air, in turn replaced by the raw irritation of the sackcloth. The chamber-candles flickered, allowing the shadows to momentarily encroach. About the chancery pillars and devotional stonework of the entrance-archway, the palatine thought she saw movement. The Sister’s spine became host to an irrepressible shiver and her bare flesh pimpled. Her nightmare had returned. A giant in midnight plate. An emissary of death. A vision of netherworld insanity.

It had haunted her. She could feel its presence, like a predator stalking its prey. A thing of the beyond, come to test her faith. She had sensed it while at devotion, during lonely sentinel duty and down in the consecrated vault, where she attended upon the sacred bones of Umberto II and her obligations of protection and preservation. She had even awoken to the

nightmare watching her sleep in her private cell. From the darkness Sapphira saw the glow of unnatural life, the radiance of an eye watching her through the rent of a battle-smashed helm. It was the horrid attention of that eye and visions of the ghostly warrior that drove Sapphira to hope that her own eyes deceived her. She prayed to Saint Severa and Umberto II for guidance, and had almost begged confession of Pontifex Oliphant. She could not bring herself to confide in her Sisterhood – especially at a time of such uncertainty. With the discovery of the Ruinous monument and the arrival of the Adeptus Astartes, there never seemed to be an appropriate time to admit her affliction, and Sister Sapphira had taken refuge in the regularity of baptismal baths, consecrational dustings and blessings.

The light of the all-seeing eye dimmed as two Sisters in the slender, cobalt plate of their calling entered the chancery. It had been the breeze accompanying the Sisters' entry to the mission-house that had initially guttered the candles. The first cradled a heavy flamer while the second held a meltagun to her breast. Presenting themselves before their palatine, the pair of dominiante Sisters placed their weapons on the floor and rose, taking off their helmets. Sister Klaudia concluded her blessings and stepped aside to acknowledge Sister Lemora and Sister Casiope.

'Sisters,' Klaudia acknowledged. 'With what justification do you disturb the palatine?'

'The Adeptus Astartes have visited the pontifex,' Casiope reported, nodding first to Klaudia before addressing her superior.

'And?' Sapphira prompted.

'The cemetery worlders are being moved from the city centre and out onto the necroplex,' Sister Lemora confirmed.

'The necroplex?' the palatine marvelled. 'Out beyond the perimeter?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'Insanity.'

'Yes, my lady.'

‘Palatine,’ Sister Klaudia said. ‘I fear the Excoriators are not to be trusted.’

‘They are the Emperor’s Angels, Sister,’ Sapphira reminded her. ‘You think them corrupted?’

‘I think they’re Dorn’s savages,’ Klaudia told her honestly. ‘They fight like dogs amongst themselves and this Scourge that leads them is detested and distrusted even amongst his own kind.’

‘What do you think?’ Sapphira put to the other two Sisters.

‘They are gene-breeds, engineered for battle,’ Lemora said. ‘I think they’ve probably settled on using the Certusians as cannon fodder.’

‘You?’

‘The cemetery worlders are not my concern,’ Casiope told her. ‘We are the Sisters of the August Vigil. Our first duty must be to Umberto II’s sacred remains. The Cholercaust is here. Planetfall is imminent. It’s time to withdraw to the vault.’

Sapphira remained silent for a moment, her eyes searching the darkness. She turned to Sister Klaudia.

‘Begin preparations to garrison the vault,’ the palatine told her. Klaudia nodded in satisfaction. ‘Back to your posts,’ she said to Lemora and Casiope. ‘I will see the Scourge and determine the Adeptus Astartes’ intentions. My armour!’ she called, and the Sisters surrounding her peeled away to recover their palatine’s plate.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Apotheon

‘Commander!’

Lieutenant Heiss knocked again briskly on the cabin door. She looked at the matt reflection of herself in the scuffed metal. Even in such a surface she could see her auburn curls and freckled face. ‘Commander,’ she called again. ‘We’ve had a vox from the surface. New orders from the Adeptus Astartes.’

Heiss had been on the bridge of the Adeptus Ministorum defence monitor *Apotheon* when the message had been received. She had never spoken to an Emperor’s Angel before and would have been more anxious but for the vision of approaching destruction that dominated the lancet viewscreen.

Below the thick-set monitor, the cemetery world of Certus-Minor turned slowly. With cloud-cover the colour of soured milk and a surface mostly made up of graven stone, the small planet looked vulnerable and alone in the depths of the cosmos. *Apotheon* held station above a glassy lake near the north pole, watching over the Ecclesiarchy world like a pugnacious

watchdog. The monitor had been the only vessel to remain, with the necrofreighters and transports long gone and even the system ships fled. But dread and the crushing weight of responsibility only really settled on the lieutenant when the Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser *Angelica Mortis* departed on a course for the Adeptus Mechanicus forge-world of Aetna Phall.

The *Apotheon* had remained on station, a silent observer as the Keeler Comet had approached. Heiss had then witnessed the second strangest thing she had ever seen in her relatively sheltered life. Above Certus-Minor the comet changed course. It was as though the blood-red ball of ice, rock and metal had simply changed its mind and turned, heading away from the planet on a different trajectory. When Commander Vanderberg asked her to calculate a new destination, the cogitator had offered the Vulcanis system as the most likely heading, with Ultrageddon and Voss Prime possibilities. One thing the cogitator was certain about, however, was that the Keeler Comet's present course would take it into Segmentum Solar and on towards Holy Terra.

The strangest thing Heiss had ever seen had been the tail following the comet, a sanguine stream of dust and gas, the middle of which was a glimmering fracture. It appeared to Heiss like the comet nucleus was a zipper, opening a breach in the unstable fabric of reality behind it. She had watched as swarms of otherworldly beings bled through the haemorrhage, before being pulled towards the nearby cemetery world by the planet's gravitational field. She had taken some solace in the way the distant beasts seem to streak towards the planet, burning up like meteorites on a fiery entry, but vox-casts from Obsequa City reported heavy fighting, confirming that much of the daemonkin swarm had found its way to the surface to test the defenders.

'Commander Vanderberg!' Heiss called. When again she heard nothing behind the cabin door, she pulled the plunger beside it. The bulkhead gave

a hydraulic wheeze and the heavy door yawned open. ‘Sir, forgive my trespassing, but we have orders from the Adeptus Astartes... Sir?’

Heiss took a brief look around the cabin. The commander’s bunk was empty, as was his private chartroom. The first the lieutenant knew of Vanderberg was the sound of her boot in the commander’s blood. Vanderberg was sat at his ferruswood writing desk. The *Apotheon*’s log sat on the desk surface next to a data-slate bearing a message to the commander’s sister on Scintilla. He had got no further than, ‘My Dearest Greta...’

‘Commander...’ Heiss mouthed as she edged around. Vanderberg’s eyes had rolled over but his face was just as baggy and kindly as ever. His arms had fallen down by the side of the ferruswood chair, and both wrists still dribbled with the captain’s life. Stepping forwards into the pool of blood, Heiss kicked the surgical kris Vanderberg had used across the floor. The lieutenant reasoned the commander had probably taken it from the ship’s small infirmary. Placing her fingers against his neck, she failed to find a pulse.

Heiss stood there for a moment, uncertain. Then, slowly she turned and walked out of the cabin, leaving bloody footprints behind her. As her strides took her towards the bridge they became quicker and more determined. There was very little to do about the situation. The commander was dead. She was the only other commissioned officer on board the ship and the Adeptus Astartes had issued orders.

Walking onto the bridge, she found Midshipman Randt where she had left him, looking stricken and uncomfortable in command of the bridge under such dire circumstances. Padre Gnarl’s stood by the captain’s throne in his preacher’s robes, the gangly priest looking like a gargoyle thanks to his bald head and hooked nose. All Adeptus Ministorum vessels carried a padre as a requirement, and although Gnarl’s could be uppity and meddlesome, Heiss was glad to see him on the bridge where he was a

calming influence. Beyond were a number of the monitor's bridge staff and ghoulish servitors.

'Thank the God-Emperor,' Randt blurted as Heiss entered. 'The Adeptus Astartes still await the commander's confirmation.'

'Confirm the order,' Heiss called across the bridge with confidence, before sitting down in the commander's throne.

Gnarls frowned and stood behind the throne before leaning in close.

'Where's the commander?' he asked with his hooked nose over her shoulder. Heiss looked over at Randt, who was busy confirming the Excoriators' orders with the planet surface.

'Vanderberg's dead,' Heiss told him simply, without looking at the priest. 'By his own hand.'

Gnarls started to say something, but stopped himself and nodded slowly. He moved around to the other side of the throne, pulling his vestments about him.

'Obsequa City confirms,' Randt announced. 'We are no longer to observe. The *Apotheon* is ordered to disrupt the enemy approach and landing. We are to favour cruisers and gunships over freighters and cultships.'

'Acknowledge the order,' Heiss said to him. 'And wish them luck. Send our regards to the pontifex. Inform him that the Adeptus Ministorum defence monitor *Apotheon* will do the God-Emperor's work in the heavens and that we shall remain on this vox-frequency for as long as we can. *Apotheon* out.'

Heiss looked up at Gnarls, who gave her another, unhappy nod.

'It's down to you now,' he told her simply, which was probably the nicest thing he'd ever said to her.

'Helm, set an equatorial intercept course and accelerate to ramming speed.'

'Aye.'

‘Mister Randt, open channels with the portside and starboard gun-decks, as well as the keel lance section. Have the engineeer informed that the lance is about to fire.’

‘Yes, lieutenant.’

‘Padre Gnarl’s...’

‘Yes, lieutenant?’

‘Would you be so good as to join the boatswain and help organise the repelling parties. I will keep *Apotheon* out of the enemy’s grasp, but should they grapple us I would like all airlocks and exterior bulkheads welded shut and barricaded from the inside. If they want in, let’s at least force them to cut their way in.’

‘I would be happy to represent your interests amongst the repelling parties, lieutenant. May the God-Emperor be with you.’

‘And with you, padre.’

With that the preacher left the bridge to seek out a weapon and the boatswain.

As the defence monitor’s reinforced Voss prow dropped, the approaching Cholercaust fleet filled the lancet screen. It was colossal, larger than any Imperial fleet Heiss had seen gathered, and she had seen a few, having served on a Navy cutter above Ultrageddon as a young ensign. It held no tactical configuration, with vessels spread far and wide like an ugly smear across the darkness of space. Smaller vessels didn’t bother to keep station on their larger counterparts and cruisers held no formation at all. The armada’s shape and organisation was merely a result of the fastest vessels, and most fervid, engine-overloading captains, streaking out in front, while the swarm of fat freighters, berserker-laden giga-tankers, renegade Guard transports and Traitor Astartes vessels formed a miasma of frustration, hatred and rage behind. About the fleet swarmed sub-light gunships, brigs, tugs and small system ships, each carrying their own blood-crazed crews and killers. Behind the armada trailed a tail of wrecks and burn-outs:

damaged, crippled and engine-cored vessels that still burst at the bulkheads with murderous hordes but were forced to either limp on behind the main fleet or be towed by other craft.

The Cholercaust had arrived and it was ready to disgorge the insane, the bloodthirsty and the daemonic on the tiny cemetery world that was its prey. The defence monitor's feeble engines pushed the heavily-armoured vessel towards ramming speed; Heiss had the *Apotheon* come at the tip of the approaching fleet from the pole.

'W-w-where's the commander?' Randt put to Heiss. The midshipman expected to see his captain on the bridge during such a serious engagement.

'The commander is indisposed,' the lieutenant called back. 'Now, ready lance!'

'Lance charging,' the midshipman answered.

'Find me a target, Mister Randt,' Heiss ordered, and watched as the defence monitor's runebank spat out a list of trajectories. Heiss couldn't imagine what the monstrous Chaos captains called their vessels now, but the list of missing, stolen, surrendered, mutinous and captured merchantmen that made up the Cholercaust's vanguard streamed across the screen. 'Magnify,' Heiss called. A lancet screen blinked before closing on the approaching rush of vessels. The flanks of the ships displayed faded names and designations: the *Aurigan*, *Coquette*, the *Trazior Franchise*, *Sunpiper*.

'Cultships, Mister Randt,' Heiss told him. 'Seized freighters packed with Chaotics and volunteer degenerates, no doubt.'

'I have a target, commander,' Randt told her. 'A positive identification. Frigate, *Spite*, Goremongers Space Marine Chapter.'

'That's more like it. Target that renegade Adeptus Astartes escort.'

'Enginarium reports lance charged. Awaiting your order.'

'Mister Randt?'

‘Target lock: thorax and batteries.’

Heiss stared at the Traitor Angel vessel. She tried to imagine the superhuman mayhem and chaos on board. Beings who if before her on the battlefield would be twice her size, brimming with the insatiable desire to kill; who would mindlessly end her in the space of a blink. She clutched the arms of the captain’s throne.

‘Fire.’

The lancet screen flashed retina-scorching white. The *Apotheon*’s mighty lance, underslung along the length of the defence monitor’s keel, answered the call. A thick beam of pure energy erupted from the Adeptus Ministorum vessel, crossing the vanguard of the colossal fleet like a cannonball across the bow. As Heiss and the bridge crew looked on with wide eyes and hope in their hearts, the beam seared straight through the traitor frigate. Their aim was perfect. The thorax section of the vessel vaporised and, as the sizzling beam of energy flickered and died, both the command decks and swollen engine column of the Adeptus Astartes vessel fell away in different, void-tormented sections.

A cheer exploded across the bridge, and even Heiss found herself on her feet.

‘All right,’ she called. ‘Focus. Mister Randt, have the lance charged for a second target.’

Heiss felt the *Apotheon* follow the path of the beam, on a collision course for the enemy armada. Her second target was a portly Imperial Guard transport, the traitor vessel decorated with feral world petroglyphs and indigenous art. Her third, a monstrous vessel that appeared a mind-scalding fusion of metal hull and red daemonflesh. The horror-ship took the *Apotheon*’s fury straight in its bloated abdomen of an engine column. Instead of disintegrating like the Goremongers frigate, or exploding like the traitor transport, the possessed vessel began to ripple, tremble and spume – like a wounded wild animal suffering violent death-throes. When

the lance beam punched straight through the mutant-ship, the thing started vomiting globule-clouds of zero-gravity blood. It snatched out with hooks, claws and tentacular appendages, entangling nearby cultships, before tearing them apart in void-drowning fury.

With the Adeptus Ministorum defence monitor plunging down the cemetery world's ivory curvature and cutting pack leaders in two with its brutal lance, Heiss and her crew were making themselves known to the Cholercaust fleet. Tempted by the prospect of first blood, bastardised raiders and the cannibal crews of piratical marauders surged towards the *Apotheon*. Heiss pushed the monitor's feeble engines to their limit. The vessel crossed the blood-thirsty bows of the enemy ships and presented the gaping muzzles of its waiting battery of cannon.

'Fire as you bear!' Lieutenant Heiss commanded. At Midshipman Randt's relaying of the order the starboard battery began a ragged, punishing barrage. Laser blasts thundered down the lengths of Chaos raiders and slaughtermen. Light and fire blazed its way through the oncoming vessels, torching warrior-cramped compartments from their prows to their sterns. 'Give the order to fire at will,' Heiss told Randt as the *Apotheon* completed its first broadside. The bridge crew watched a myriad of vandalised brigs, gunships and cutters punch through the debris field of spearhead derelicts and wreckage. Streaking out from them were a swarm of smaller vessels still – hump shuttles, fortified life-rafts, launches and assault boats, all packed with homicidal thugs, honed blades and hull-cutting equipment.

'Lieutenant...'

'Give Padre Gnarl and the boatswain the order, prepare to repel boarders,' Heiss said tightly.

'Lieutenant!' Randt shouted. Heiss saw it. A Khornate cultship. A heavy transport – wall-to-wall with the Blood God's murderous acolytes – passing across their own Voss prow section. It was all happening so fast.

The lance. The continuous, crashing gunfire of the battery. The impending boarding action. The armada without end, Chaos vessels passing behind and about the lone defence monitor. The ships would be on an unswerving course for Certus-Minor – where from low orbit the Cholercaust fleet would launch an apocalyptic landing, its Thunderhawks, drop-ships, pods, lighters, barges, carriers, haulage skiffs and junkers numerous enough to black out the stars. From this nightmare ramshackle of craft a vast army of insane blood-crusaders would spill. Cultists, Chaotics, daemons and Traitor Angels. Uncountable. Unstoppable.

The lieutenant's lip curled. 'Are we at ramming speed?'

The young Randt looked at her grimly.

'Almost, lieutenant.'

'I want to hit her amidships, do you understand, Mister Randt?' Heiss said. The midshipman nodded. Heiss stared at the fat transport towards which they were streaking with the queasy certainty of a torpedo. Heiss licked her lips. 'I want to break her back...'



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Unto Dust

The shovel bit into the cemetery world grit. Woodes Sprenger had been a grave fossor his whole life. Under his sweat-soaked shirt and dust-coat he was tough and lean; he handled his spade with speed and a working man's determination. Tossing earth up out of the grave with hypnotic rhythm, the fossor's blade finally hit metal. Scraping off the rusty surface of the stasis casket, Woodes kicked footholds into the side of the grave and used the tip of the shovel to prise open the coffin.

The stench of stale death rose to meet the Certusian. He coughed and covered his mouth. Reaching up for his gas-lamp by the graveside, Woodes brought it down to explore the coffin's contents. This was borderline sacrilege for the grave fossor, whose job – like thousands of others – was to bury the dead sent to reside in the sacred cemetery world earth and dig up caskets whose tenure had expired to make way for further cadaver arrivals. Only the wealthy and advantaged could afford a plot on Certus-Minor. They were buried, the stasis-field generators on their sarcophagi deactivated and removed, and the dead allowed to rot in peace – as cemetery world custom dictated. Common fossors never went

into the coffins – only grave robbers ever did. In this way, breaking the seals and prising open the casket went against every fibre of Woodes's spiritual being, and he would not have been doing so – even given the dire circumstances on Certus-Minor – unless the pontifex himself and the Emperor's Angels had given the order.

Inside the casket Woodes found the remains of a woman. A desiccated skeleton buried in the copious material of an extravagant grave gown. Woodes expected that she was spire nobility from some distant hive-world. The bones of her fingers were adorned with the precious metal and stone of rings, and the vertebrae of her neck were a tangled nest of priceless jewellery. The empty sockets of her skull leered up at the grave fossor and Woodes coughed again. Leaning in close, Woodes checked the system of wires running down the depth of the grave between the sculpted tombstone and the casket. Pulling the wire cord, Woodes set off the mournful peal of the bell positioned in the decorative detail of the marker.

Against the tombstone Woodes saw his weapon, the autorifle he'd been issued – with the scuff-scratched stock, crescent clips and long barrel shroud. The noisy weapon that had saved his life and those of others during the first battlement assaults. With Donalbain he'd held his ground, despite wanting to run from the terror and madness with his fellow fossors and Certusians.

Climbing out of the grave in a well-practised motion, Woodes picked up a small stone from the surrounding soil and posted it through the mouth of a cherubim crafted in the stone. He heard the tinny clatter of the stone as it fell down through the metal pipe connecting the tombstone to the casket and providing it with an air source.

Checking such safety mechanisms was usually the verger's duty. Personally, Woodes had only been present at one premature exhumation. It had been in the Asphodel-East field close to where Woodes had lived. He had been summoned from his shack by Father Deodat, a passing preacher

who had heard a bell from the lychway. Father Deodat, Woodes, Donalbain and several other fossers from the cenopost searched for the marker and sent for shovels before proceeding to dig up the grave on the preacher's orders. The bell rang incessantly, and within the casket the cemetery worlders found an Imperial Guard officer – a dragoon in full dress uniform – who had been buried with his plumed helmet and gleaming sabre. The officer had been confused, claustrophobic and out of his mind with fear. In the darkness of the sarcophagus his frantic fingers had found the wire cord, and after an experimental pull had produced the chime of the bell, the Guardsman had proceeded to ring it in the hope that someone would discover him.

Woodes never saw the Imperial Guard officer again. Father Deodat informed the fosser, however, that the officer had told him that he'd been part of an eradication force sent to the jungle world of Yasargil to exterminate the k'nib infestation there. The last thing the officer recalled was being stung by a hanging creeper and reporting to the camp infirmary. Deodat hypothesised that his subsequent paralysis was taken for death, and that the colonel's body had been stasis-shipped from Yasargil to Pyra and from his home world to Certus-Minor. As the alien toxin wore off, the dragoon found himself confronted with the horror of being buried alive.

Nearby, Woodes heard the spade of his brother-in-law Donalbain crunch through the earth. Shovelfuls of dirt flew up out of a grave and landed in a neat pile next to the crisply cut hole. Donalbain was a fosser like Woodes and lived in the same cenopost hamlet.

'This is insane...' Woodes said to himself. He looked about him in the darkness. Nearby, cemetery worlders were dragging carts bearing barrels of promethium through the mounds of bodies that surrounded the city perimeter like a hillock or new battlement. The miserable teams pulled their carts through the corpse-piles of daemon insanity, pumping plungers and spraying the fallen nightmares with precious fuel.

‘It’s what the pontifex ordered,’ Donalbain said. Woodes hadn’t noticed the silence of the fossor’s shovel. Donalbain was taller than his brother-in-law and portlier around the belly; he’d worked up a significant sweat digging the grave so quickly. The Certusian noticed an Excoriators Space Marine stood upon the perimeter battlement, Obsequa City reaching up behind him. The Adeptus Astartes warrior watched them from the continuous mountain of rubble, casting his helmeted gaze up and down the line at other cemetery worlders hard at work clearing the dead and warped flesh of immaterial entities, and digging up graves. Donalbain shuddered. He had no idea how effective the Space Marine’s enhanced vision was in the darkness or, indeed, how good his hearing was. ‘The Angels ordered it also, so get back to work.’

Woodes thought of the thousands of graves being dug around the battlement perimeter. Graves that were situated where the necroplex met the city limits. Graves that had witnessed the worst of the fighting so far and been hidden beneath the daemon creatures storming the city as heavy gun emplacements and the blessed weapons of the Emperor’s Angels had ripped through them. ‘Insanity,’ he said again.

He watched two figures approach, picking their steps carefully through the gravestones, ichor-soaked earth and mangled bodies of the spawn-monstrosities. The first was his wife, Goody, dressed in her bonnet, shawl and fleece boots. Her face was soot-stained, tight and grim, but in that moment, with the grave at his feet and the shovel in his hand, she had never looked better to him. Goody had her arm around their daughter, Nyzette, and her delicate hand over the young girl’s eyes. She did not want the child to see the horror of the warped bodies through which they trudged. The child clutched a home-made rag doll of Saint Astrid to her. Woodes’s chest ached for the both of them. As they got closer, he walked to them, embracing both in his sinewy arms.

‘Papa!’ Nyzette said as she felt his lips against her forehead. He kissed Goody, holding both her and the child close to him – feeling a fearful passion for his wife that he hadn’t felt for a number of years.

‘Woodes...’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘It’s going to be all right,’ he told her. ‘You will be safe and you’ll be together. That’s the important thing.’

‘Papa, stay with us,’ the young girl chided.

‘I can’t, my little blessing.’

‘No, papa...’

‘You must be strong and stay with your mother. You will hide and be safe, but papa must fight – you know, like he did before, when you and mama stayed with Aunt Merelda up near Great Umberto’s tomb.’

‘Papa!’

‘Peace, child. I will be with him,’ Donalbain said, smiling as he came up behind them. Goody moved from her husband’s embrace to her brother-in-law. The large fosser looked down at her. ‘Where’s your sister?’

‘Merelda’s on her way down with the boys,’ Goody replied before returning to the arms of her husband.

‘Have you got everything?’ Woodes asked her as Donalbain picked up Nyzette.

‘Everything the pontifex instructed us to take,’ Goody replied, taking a sling bag from her shoulder. She pulled a roll of blankets from the bag and as she did caught a glimpse of the open grave behind Woodes, the open coffin and the skeletal woman within. ‘Oh, Holy Throne,’ she exclaimed, clasping her mouth with her hand.

‘Don’t look at it,’ Woodes said, taking one of the blankets and covering the desiccated cadaver.

‘Can’t we remove it?’ Goody said, horrified.

‘Not without arousing suspicion,’ Donalbain said, angling the child’s head away. ‘Besides, disturbing the grave is desecration enough.’

Removing the body before the end of tenure? That's sacrilege. The pontifex would not hear of it.'

'What else have you got there?'

Goody opened the bag to show her husband the meagre rations of food she'd managed to collect and the water satchel she'd filled from one of the city's holy fountains. She also had a small, pack-powered handlamp and a bunch of black lilies. The flowers grew along the Certusian lakeshores and were used for decorative arrangements during burial ceremonies. Goody aimed to use them to mask the musty grave-stench of the coffin. Woodes caught sight of a small knife. A stiletto shearing-blade, hidden amongst the death-blooms. He caught Goody's eye and nodded bleakly. If events did not unfold according to plan, with silence from above and provisions spent, the blade would become the most essential of her gathered items.

Woodes looked at his wife, her gaunt but beautiful face. He took her again in a tight embrace. Over her shoulder he saw Donalbain nod. Woodes's eyes drifted skywards to the darkness, knowing that they had little time, that the enemy would not wait. Looking down he saw that there were now several Excoriators stood on the rubble battlement looking down at them. The Emperor's Angels were still like statues in their scarred plate, impassive and beyond the concerns of mortal men.

'All right,' the fosser said finally, feeling Goody's slender body against his own. 'Quickly, into the casket.' Helping his wife down into the grave and taking his child from her uncle, Woodes kissed Nyzette and passed the terrified child down to his wife stood in the coffin. Goody smiled – a gesture, under the circumstances, so telling in its strength and generosity that it brought tears that streaked the fosser's gravedust-smeared cheeks. The mother and child curled up around one another in the space allowed by the sarcophagus occupant. Using the slingbag as a pillow and a second blanket for warmth, the terrified pair looked up at Woodes and Donalbain. 'Remember,' Woodes began, 'only ring the bell when you hear others.'

Wait as long as you can. You cannot alert the enemy to your presence.’ His wife nodded.

‘You stay alive,’ Goody told them. ‘Both of you.’

‘I will see you soon,’ Woodes promised. And he meant it.

Moving around to the other side of the grave, Donalbain used his shovel to close the lid. Resting the tip of the blade against the rusty lid he pressed down and re-sealed the casket. Woodes tapped on the top of the coffin with his own shovel and was rewarded with a knock in return.

With Donalbain looking for Merelda and his own young ones, the two cemetery worlders began tossing sacred Certusian earth down onto the casket and into the hole. With each disbelieving shovelful, Woodes shook his head. He could not fully reconcile in his mind the fact that he had just buried his own wife and daughter alive. That all about him, fathers, husbands, brothers and sons were doing the same for their loved ones.

The only thing that kept his arms moving and the shovel blade slicing through the mound of soil was the knowledge that they would all be safer below ground than above it when the Cholercaust arrived. That they would hopefully be spared the wanton butchery of the Chaos degenerates. With their families as safe as they could make them, the disturbed earth patted down and the promethium-soaked, misshapen daemon-forms dragged back over the burial site, Woodes snatched up his autorifle. Making the sign of the aquila, he knelt down in front of the grave marker. It bore the name *Erzsebet Dorota Catallus*. He would not forget it. An ice-water determination built in the pit of his stomach. A cold fury he held in reserve for the bastard invaders who were bringing death and destruction to his tiny part of the Imperium. Carrying their weapons and shovels, the cemetery worlders began to make their way back up towards the battlement, to take their positions and ready themselves for the carnage ahead.

I have been watching for a while. This is what it is to lead. A moment's inspiration, the hot quake of an idea or strategy in the privacy of the mind. Abstraction given form through word and order, followed by the rapid shift of men's hearts. Even Angels, who need to be led no less. Loyalty. Pride. Trust. Action. Before your eyes, command becomes reality. What you saw in the orderly, bloodless theatre of the mind unfolds in the drawing of blades and the priming of firing mechanisms. It rapidly devolves into a nightmarish version of your imaginings, replete with deadly, unseen movements, fears that find their form. That's what it is to lead, to dip the toe of one's boot into the calm, crystal waters of possibility, but to march on as you find yourself up to your helmet in the raging torrent of your brothers' blood.

Standing atop the perimeter battlement, I survey the killing fields. A sea of obscene bodies swallowing up the graven architecture of mausolea, tombstones and statues. Out there, amongst the past chaos of battle, are the cemetery worlders. Those it is clear I am here to protect. The duty I was bred to perform. A little of the Emperor's burden taken on my shoulders. What had been the silent insanity of a strategy in my mind is now consigned to history. I told Pontifex Oliphant and for his sins the ecclesiarch lent his words to my own. Thousands of cemetery worlders, ordered to bury their Certusian kin alive. The brief spark of mortal existence, burning brightly under the ground, where blood-soaked minds would not think to look for them.

For a moment I think my revenant returned. I have not seen his ghastly form in a little while. Where he haunted the shadows, there is now but empty darkness. His bale eye gazes upon some other unfortunate, for it no longer looks upon me. I should feel reassured. While I had grown accustomed to the being's attentions and fell presence, it was either the manifestation of an unnatural existence or some symptom of a fractured mind. Neither were particularly attractive prospects and I should feel relieved at the thing's absence. Still, I find myself looking. In the gloom of the Long Night; in the reflection of glass darkly; in the corner of my eye.

I feel brother Excoriators about me. They, I know are there. Immortals on the rubble palisade. Like me, come to watch what common men will do at the word of an Angel. With the slice and cut of shovels through gritty earth on the air, we watch – silently impressed. It can't be easy to dig a grave for your loved ones. Less easy still to fill one containing them.

'Anything?' I ask.

Melmoch is beside me.

'No astrotelepathic communication,' the Epistolary answers. 'Nothing from the hosts and destinations to whom I appealed. I can only reason that the comet's malign influence is too much of a barrier for my skill.'

I nod. 'Thank you for trying,' I say as we watch the cemetery worlders go about their solemn task. 'You think the dust will mask them?'

The Epistolary considers the question.

'This place is saturated with death,' the Librarian concludes. 'The earth is sacred and overpowering in its purpose. We see what we expect to see. The enemy will see a cemetery. He will taste loss. He will smell the stench of death. The Blood God's servants are warriors all. Their unthinking art is murder. Their weapon of choice is carnage – not the shovel. I think our charges safe.'

I nod my acknowledgement and appreciation of the Epistolary's support.

'What if no one survives?' Chief Whip Skase asks grimly, his mind soaked with bloody thoughts.

'Then we lose,' I answer – a statement of the obvious. 'We get to rot above the ground while those we sought to protect – the Emperor's subjects – are left to do so below us. That is why we must fight. Fight and survive. The Blood God's disciples have come here to battle, and we will give them one. In doing so we shall take their eyes off the prize – their intended slaughter of innocents and through this the sundering of this world. We fight to win, but if we lose, I want to go to my death knowing that our enemy will leave sated and swiftly move on. Like a poor

marksman, the Blood God will have missed his target and his followers would have failed him. Certus-Minor will not be some deadrock, bathed in slaughter and left behind by the Cholercaust like a cautionary tale. The cemetery worlders will live and the Imperium shall know it. The continued beating of mortal hearts shall give other worlds hope. They shall know that the Cholercaust can be beaten. It will put fire in their bellies and belief in their hearts. Perhaps we will not stop the Blood Crusade here. Perhaps we will not survive. But if we fail, we do so in the hope that others – both mortal and immortal – will succeed. Let that be our legacy.'

Brother Micah comes up behind us with the Fifth Company's Chaplain. Shadrath gives me the dread gaze of his half-skull helm.

'Brother Novah has word from the commander of the Apotheon. The defence monitor has engaged the enemy. She reports a vast Chaos fleet – vessels without number. The Blood God's warriors and minions. Their landing is under way. The Cholercaust is here.'

'The pontifex?' I ask.

Micah and Chaplain Shadrath part. Behind them is a Sister of Battle in cobalt plate, a boltgun in her slender gauntlets and a pair of bolt pistols at her hip. Palatine Sapphira of the Order of the August Vigil.

'Pontifex Oliphant is safe,' Sapphira tells me. 'He is down in Umberto II's vault with as many of his remaining priests and attendants as we could accommodate.'

'A kindness,' I return.

'The pontifex told me of your plan,' the Sister reveals. 'A kindness on your own part, corpus-captain – if a macabre one. My Sisters thought your interest in the Certusians lay only in feeding them as fodder to the enemy.'

'I'm happy to disappoint them.'

'The vault door is thick and crafted from adamantium. It should resist all but the most determined assault. I have garrisoned the vault with a squad of my Sisters, under a trustworthy subordinate. I offer myself and

the rest of my mission in defence of the city, where the holy work of the God-Emperor might be done.'

I hold out my gauntlet and take her own.

'You are most welcome, Sister,' I tell her. 'We are honoured to share the burden with you.'

Shadrath steps forwards, looking up into the sky.

'Chaplain?'

Carefully, he takes off his half-skull helmet, revealing his face. It is the first time I have gazed upon his features. The shock of white hair, the unsmiling mouth and the implacable lines of almost elemental determination are the primarch's own. Like Demetrius Katafalque before him, Shadrath had been blessed with the features of the Emperor's truest Angel. I follow his gaze to see the flash of gunfire in the sky overhead, the searing burn of the Apotheon's mighty lance.

'Let's to our posts,' Chaplain Shadrath rumbles, his eyes still on the deep expanse of the heavens above. 'Rogal Dorn waits for us at the Eternity Gate.'

We nod and walk slowly away, with the Chaplain's words still ringing in our ears. We are silent, for we have no words to better them.

PART FOUR

Deus Ex Damnation...



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cholercaust

Roaring.

The distant darkness gave up the rage-fuelled cacophony of murderous intention. The Blood God's disciples honoured him with their bombast. The stomach-curdling din of barbarism and animal fury. The Cholercaust had arrived and it wanted the cemetery world to know. A deafening barrage of ferocity, made up of personal, if mindless, expressions of individual hatred. Unsettling, in sheer volume alone.

In a demonstration of steadfastness – the kind Kersh reasoned the Charnel Guard and remaining Certusians would need to see – the Scourge stood atop the ichor-splattered battlement. Once again the Imperial forces would try to hold the rubble-mound perimeter, falling back concentrically as the need arose. With the cemetery worlders – vulnerable men, women and children – buried beneath the bordering necroplex, the narrow alleys, stairs and cloisters of the city could play their part if needed. And, if it came to it, the imposing architecture of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum had been established as a final fall-back position. Kersh

couldn't hope to win against the Blood God's unstoppable host, but the Excoriator planned on putting off the eventuality for as long as possible. The Fifth Company would sell their lives dearly and fight for as long as they could.

There was still a dim possibility that Epistolary Melmoch's appeal had reached out across the stars to a brother-Chapter. The Scourge rested his gauntlet on the angular edges of his gladius pommel. He had not entirely given up on the slim possibility that their kin could arrive to turn the tide. He hadn't burdened his Fifth Company brothers with such damning hope, though suspected it already beat in the hearts of each and every one. Regardless of such mortal folly, the howling tsunami of hate surging across the burial grounds at them was theirs alone.

The dread expectation was palpable. With his enhanced hearing the Scourge could hear the creak of Certusian fingers against triggers, the rapid beating of hearts in serf-manned gun emplacements, and the deep and determined breathing of Excoriators in their battle-helms. Then he saw it. The first offerings of the darkness. Chaos martyrs. The Cholercaust meat shield. Bodies moved through the necroplex, racing towards Obsequa City, the battlement perimeter and certain death.

The Scourge swore. He recognised them immediately. Blood-crazed cemetery worlders. Victims of the gall-fever that had swept the planet in the wake of the Keeler Comet. Husbands, mothers, children. Certusians all. Drawn to Obsequa City like a plague of moths irresistibly summoned to a flame. Kersh felt their urge to kill across the graves. He felt the Charnel Guard and surviving members of the hastily created Certusian militia tighten at the sight of their kindred: neighbours, friends, family. He felt the bile rising within him, his hatred for the servants of darkness and their barbarous tactics. Over the vox-channel, the corpus-captain heard similar confirmations from along the line. The Thunderhawk *Impunitas*, circling high above the city, also reported incoming targets. Peering up

into the sky, the corpus-captain watched the stars blink. He got the impression of an ungainly daemon-flock, thunderbolting above them on leathery wings.

Kersh looked back down at the havoc storming its way across the burial grounds towards them. He hated himself for the order he was about to give. He could not afford to waste their hardest-hitting ammunition on such cannon-fodder, yet couldn't allow the masses to swamp the battlement in expectation of hand-to-hand combat alone.

'All battle-brothers and Sisters on the perimeter to hold fire,' he commanded across the channel. 'Heavy weapons to hold fire. Guardsmen and militia to fire at will.'

Shots were hesitant at first, sporadic bolts of light flung across the expanse followed by brief chatters of auto- and stub-fire. The busy landscape of the necroscape impeded the advance of the blood-mental Certusians in a way that it hadn't done so with the many-limbed spawn-swarm of the immaterial incursion. Crazies and cemetery world killers found it difficult to charge at the front line when hampered by the expanse of tombstones, statues and funeral architecture that was the necroplex. This made the howling madmen easier targets, even for the ceremonial Charnel Guard and ill-trained militia, and before long the perimeter lit up the night with a streaming lightshow of near-continuous las-fire. Auto-fire ripped through bodies clambering over grave markers and graven obstacles. Stub-round-riddled torsos lay draped over decorative stone sarcophagi, and lunatics joined the corpse-carpet of warp-spewed forms from the earlier assault.

Above him, Kersh could hear the *whoosh* of sniper fire punctuating the distant hammering of the *Impunitas*'s heavy bolters. Over the vox, estimations of the aerial assault had jumped. Both the *Impunitas* and venerable *Gauntlet* were preoccupied with shredding their way through storm fronts of red daemonflesh, while Whip Keturah and Squad Contritus

reported the ragged, broken bodies of winged daemon-predators raining from the heavens. Keturah's Scouts were doing their best to support the Thunderhawks with sizzling sniper fire that cut through the beastforms as they swooped through the narrow spaces between the city towers, spires and belfries.

A blood-freezing shriek erupted from the Imperial line as a shotgun-armed verger left his post and started tearing up the rubble with wild blasts of scattershot. As nearby Guardsmen and cemetery worlders scrambled for cover, the Scourge dipped his hand into his holster. Within a blink the Mark II bolt pistol was out. Without taking his eyes from the chaos of the necroplex, Kersh gunned down the gall-fevered unfortunate. Before the maniac hit crumbled masonry the Mark II was sat back snug in its sporran. The afflicted were no longer a threat to innocent Certusians, but Kersh had made it clear that such infections and defections could still disrupt the integrity of the line and should be dealt with decisively.

Before the battlement, the corpus-captain witnessed a massacre. Every time a bolt from a lasfusil seared through a rabid, unarmed Certusian, another took their place. And another. And another. The stink of fresh death seemed only to send the following fossers, shack-wives and deranged hearsiers into a further frenzy, causing them to double their already fevered efforts to reach the perimeter and wreak havoc.

Others began to emerge through the death and thinning cemetery world gall-thralls. Kersh saw the glint of starlight in unsheathed blades, the flash of optimistic small-arms fire and the macabre flesh desecration of the Blood God's soul-pledged. He saw wires, chains and pins, plucked through faces; knife-crafted tattoos of obscene Khornate symbols, inked in darkness; eyes that were bile-yellow with spite, teeth that were blood-clenched, and skin that was withered with the burden of diabolic patronage. The Regna-Rouge. The Anarchan Razorbacks. The Hellion Dawn. The Krugarian Turncoats. The blade-venerate Gornan Venals. The

Attilan Traitor 32nd. The Frater Vulgariate. The Necromundan ‘Crazy’ Eights. Clan Gamibal of the feared Vessorine Janissaries. The Deathfest. The Bloodsaken. Thousands besides: butcher-baptised slave-soldiers from a myriad of conquered worlds, traitor Guardsmen, heretic militia, mutants, fallen mercenaries, piratical raiders, bestial abhumans, Chaos cultists. All Kersh had fought before on battlefields bordering the Eye of Terror. All had gone down under the Excoriators’ blades. Never before, however, had Kersh seen so much Ruinous detritus gathered in one place.

‘Open fire!’ the Scourge roared.

The bolters of the Sisters of Battle and his brother-Excoriators joined the barrage of las-bolts and lesser weaponry from the battlement, which in turn competed with the dissonant thunder of heavy stubber and autocannon gun emplacements. The collective force of such a release annihilated the remaining rows of cannon-fodder Certusians and knocked the advancing mobs of cultist killers from their feet. As they gunned back furiously from behind crumbling gravestones, other skulltakers barged past. Some simply could not restrain themselves, like mad dogs off their leashes. Others were forced forwards by the sheer weight of numbers behind them, desperate to get into battle and honour the War-Given-Form through deed and death. They too met their end in a torso-punching, head-blasting, limb-shearing broadside of bolts, bullets, light and devastation.

Kersh stood atop the rubble with his bolt pistol clutched in both gauntlets. Those cultist minions who did stumble successfully through the leadstorm to start crunching up the scree-side of the battlement were introduced to the corpus-captain’s merciless marksmanship. One by one, Kersh dropped oncoming Guardsmen, self-mutilated acolytes and hideous mutants. They all hungered for his end, but instead had to settle for a bolt-round to the head.

As the Scourge plugged away, with the blood-crazed masses a wall of feverish flesh pushing ever closer through the blizzard of suppression fire,

he felt a gauntlet on his pauldron. It was Brother Micah, the company champion's combat shield and boltgun combination resting on his armoured hip.

'Down!' was all Kersh heard.

Micah pushed him to one side with savage insistence. Off balance, the corpus-captain fell faceplate-first into the rubble, turning behind him just in time to see an unfolding disaster. It was the *Impunitas*.

The Thunderhawk had fallen from the sky. It clipped the spiretops of several steeples before ploughing straight through a tower-monolith and cleaving the tiered minaret roof from a pilgrim almshouse. The gunship was swarming with daemonic furies, and its cockpit canopy was splattered with gore. For a moment everything became a maelstrom as the *Impunitas* struck the ground with her blunt nose, bulldozed through the perimeter defences and smashed through the improvised battlement. Reeling from the force of the impact still quaking through the ground and his plate, Kersh felt the slipstream of a wing pass over the back of his pack.

Scrambling to his feet in the unfolding aftermath of the crash, Kersh watched the shattered Thunderhawk plunge straight through the ranks of the lost, smearing cultists into the sacred Certusian earth. The gunship listed and its smashed tail began to skid around, shearing gravestones off at their foundations. The *Impunitas* finally came to rest in the burial ground, leaning the fractured edge of its surviving wing against a single-storey sepulchre. Her graceful form was a crash-mangled mess and her thick plate buckled and rent. Smoke poured from her smashed-open troop compartment, and a single engine still raged in futile determination.

The corpus-captain's raw frustration and anger could not find expression in words. Throwing a clenched fist out at the floor he snarled within his helmet. Beyond the catastrophic loss of the Thunderhawk, his section of the perimeter had been reduced to ruins. Gun emplacements lay toppled and silent; Excoriators and Sisters of Battle were missing; Charnel

Guardsmen lay broken and screaming; and there was a gaping hole knocked clean through at least two of the concentric battlements.

As Kersh stomped through the obliteration, hands reached out for him. Certusian fighters and Guardsmen had been crushed and rolled beneath the Thunderhawk's hull. Nearby, the Scourge saw the half-sheared corpse of Old Enoch, his seneschal – his fragile body crumpled like an insect by the falling gunship. Mumbling a blessing, Kersh took the coiled length of 'the purge' from the serf's belt and dropped the looped lash over the hilts of his swords. Bethesda and Oren he found dazed but alive a little way distant. The absterge had been fortunate, bearing only cuts and savage bruises from head to foot. The lictor had broken his ritual arm and winced as Kersh got him to his feet.

'Get on the cannon,' the Scourge ordered, indicating the languishing autocannon and the boxes of ammunition strewn across the pulverised rubble. As surviving Charnel Guardsmen emerged from the gaps and crevices into which they had pressed themselves, they began to search for their abandoned lasfusils. As Sister Casiope and Battle-Brother Nebuzar of Squad Castigir ran down the perimeter towards him, Kersh bawled, 'Regroup and hold the line!'

The pair nodded, which was Kersh's sign to bolt off along the ugly scar the Thunderhawk had carved into the battlement. 'Micah!' Kersh called, 'Micah!', but the champion answered neither across the vox nor in person. There were bodies everywhere, Certusians and Guardsmen who could have little imagined that their deaths would have stalked up behind them. Brothers Salamis and Benzoheth were with them also, their ancient plate crushed like ration cans. Benzoheth's boltgun was buckled and smashed, but his brother's had escaped the worst of the Thunderhawk's attentions. Scooping up the weapon, Kersh let it dangle in his hand. As he came across the broken bodies of furies still trying to flap their useless wings, the Scourge stamped down on their daemon spines or put single bolts

through the skulls of the hellish monstrosities. The corpus-captain strode on with the etherquakes of the fiends' bodies detonating behind him. Twisters of flame raged for the heavens as their daemon-essence returned to the warp.

Out beyond the battlement it was pure carnage. Cultists had miserably lost their argument with the *Impunitas* and had been compacted into the floor and each other.

Kersh found Brother Micah near the tail of the Thunderhawk. Above, a single gunship engine continued to cycle, firing up with blazing brilliance and roasting the air before dying down to an idle chug – then building up once again to fruitless ignition. The champion's distinctive boltgun lay abandoned nearby, pointing towards the armoured boots of a body blanketed in the caped wings of a daemon fury. As the corpus-captain watched the sharp vertebrae and shoulder blades of the thing move beneath its infernal flesh with sickening fascination, he shattered its outstretched wing with a burst of fire from the bolter. The beast turned with spite and snapped like a crocodilian as it crawled across the bodies towards the Scourge. A soul-hunger raged in its horrid eyes.

'Back, warp-sired thing!' Kersh roared, blowing a ragged hole in the other wing before plucking at the monster's daemonhide with single rounds. The creature backed away, hissing and sniping. The corpus-captain stepped forwards to where the beast had been, hovering over Micah like a vampiric bat. Kersh's lip wrinkled. The champion's earnest features had gone – along with most of the contents of his skull. Kersh turned on the creature that had been feeding on him. It had used the moments the Scourge had chosen to look upon the fallen champion well, creeping swiftly up through the crash wreckage. By the time he had set his eye upon it again the monster was almost upon him. Blasting through the beast's ribcage and up into its repugnant head, the Scourge pivoted and put the remaining rounds of the magazine into further winged monstrosities that

were slipping out from the Thunderhawk's interior through great gashes in the *Impunitas*'s hull. With every infernal ending, a corkscrew of hate-spitting flame wound its way towards the stars. Kersh could only imagine what the furies had done to the gunship's crew.

The devastation caused by the crash had only momentarily pushed back the enemy ranks. Already the cult armies of the Cholercaust were swallowing up the vacuum, stamping the unfortunates that had been ahead of them into the dirt and running down on the perimeter's weakened defences with hellish glee – hatefully delighted to get an opportunity to honour their bloody master. Looking back at his section of the line, where the Thunderhawk had demolished its way through his forces and the battlements upon which they were standing, Kersh found only the barest indication of a defence in evidence. The blood cultists were closing, and would march straight through the opening and into the city.

Tossing the empty boltgun away, Kersh slipped his Scourge's gladius from its sheath on his belt. He moved out towards the Thunderhawk's creaking wing, which was balanced upon the roof of a single-storey sepulchre. Cultist warriors were already there with him, the nearest, fastest and most desperate of their kind. Kersh had never seen such fearlessness in mere mortals before. They came at him – an Adeptus Astartes – without dread or doubt. A Krugarian Turncoat jumped down from the wing, his bald head gore-spattered and his filthy trench coat flapping behind him. He dappled Kersh's chestplate with rapid fire from his lascarbine before the Excoriator batted the weapon to the floor with the flat of his blade and gutted the traitor. Incredibly, a Vessorine Janissary came at him with a knife, and even more incredibly got it to the Scourge's plate. Watching the puny blade score paint, Kersh seized the clansman by his carapace and flung him into the *Impunitas*'s side, shattering every bone in his body.

A butcher-priest of the Frater Vulgariate came next with a bellow and a rusty chainsword. Knocking the blur of brain-speckled teeth aside with his

cross guard, Kersh turned his power armoured bulk into the priest's reach. Slipping the gladius between his arms, the Scourge cut through the dark ecclesiarch's wrists. The chainsword dropped and died. The frater fell back, waving his gore-spouting stumps. Two slave converts died swiftly on the tip of Kersh's blade, as he slammed it through the both of them. The mongrel-faced mutant that came up behind as he administered such mercy had to settle for the blade's aquila pommel, caving its way through his snaggle-toothed face.

Hordes were already racing past the Excoriator, intent on flooding the gap in the line. With their backs to him were armoured Volscani Cataphracts, death cult assassins from 'The Covenant' and a cannibal ogryn from the Bad Moons of Goethe. Hanging from the ruined wing by a single hydraulic pintle and belt feed was one of the *Impunitas*'s twin-linked heavy bolters. Cutting through the gunship impulse cabling with his blade and shearing away the tensioned piston-trigger, Kersh sank his gauntlets into the firing mechanism, clutching at rods, pins and levers. Pulling at a robust lever, the Scourge was rewarded with a kick from the right-hand heavy bolter. The round blasted up into the wing's armour plating. Angling the bolters around on their hydraulic pintle and clutching both levers like the brakes on a bike, Kersh unleashed the devastating weapon on the storming mob.

The twin-linked heavy bolters bucked like beasts of burden reined in and under control. The barrels breathed flash-fires from their gaping muzzles, and two streams of blistering, brute-calibre firepower reached across the battlefield for the enemy. As Kersh angled the monstrous weapons around, lines of cultists disappeared in a bloodspittle haze of sweeping death. Assassins of 'The Covenant', so lithe and barbarically graceful, were mercilessly turned to chum before the gunship-mounted weapon. The Volscani Cataphracts' armour was nothing to Kersh's firepower and droves of the traitor Guardsmen were cut down in a furore of clot-splashing

eruptions. The feral ogryn, Kersh simply cut down to size by scything straight through the thick muscle and bone of his legs and watching the limbless giant crash to the ground.

Through gritted teeth the Scourge continued his diamantine-tipped decontamination of the necroplex. The heads of mutants and already mindless spawn were popped off like ripe pustules. The Deathfest lived up to their name as Kersh and his heavy bolters turned several of their foetid number into a celebratory display of gore-spritz and screams. The Regna-Rouge became a dying commemoration of their colours in the Excoriator's leadstorm, their unblooded blades and torturer's instruments falling uselessly from bolt-severed hands. It was carnage.

The fallen *Impunitas* continued to feed ammunition. The weapon blazed with impunity. Kersh killed everything in his feverish fire-arc. Soon the area before his decimated section of the line was a twitching field of corpses and bloody smog. With satisfaction, he heard Oren and Bethesda's autocannon strike up its murderous orison. He saw Brother Nebuzar standing on the battlement, directing hastily regrouped Charnel Guard and cemetery world volunteers to new hold points. Lasfusils had once again started to lance the burial ground with searing bolts of light, and the nozzles of Sister Casiope's heavy flamer were turning the crash-dozed gap in the rubble battlement into a blazing inferno of light and flesh-melting heat.

He heard him first. Fortunately for the Scourge, the Blood God's disciples honoured their deity on the battlefield rather than in the temple, and with war cries rather than prayers. The deep boom of a boorish roar behind Kersh drowned out even the heavy bolters. The Scourge threw the twin-linked weapon around on its hydraulic mount. Before him was a Traitor Astartes, a rust-armoured warrior of the Goremongers renegade Chapter, with a crackling battleaxe swinging about his head.

'Blood for the Blood Go—'

Kersh yanked on the levers as the pintle completed its spasmodic rotation. The Goremonger disappeared in a blur of point-blank bolt fury. Through the miasma of shredded flesh and ceramite fragments, the corpus-captain turned the heavy bolters on the renegade Angel's warband, a blood cult mob of degenerate killers and acolytes who had seen the Goremonger's heresy and leadership as a divine expression of the Blood God's power and legitimacy. How could an Angel of the Emperor be wrong? The warband found out as the Scourge mashed through them with his belt-fed monstrosity.

Beyond, Kersh could see an ocean of human detritus. An unending army of ruthless killers. The Cholercaust's slaughterkin, united in common purpose: to work through the private deviancy of their murderous inclination while simultaneously feeding their faith and daemon deity with acts of wanton annihilation. The cult invaders just kept coming, birthed by darkness, and beyond the gloom, Kersh could hear the savage howls of maniacs-in-waiting.

Amongst the slave-soldiers, traitors and Chaos cultists, Kersh picked out increasing numbers of Adeptus Astartes, false prophets for the ravaging masses, and Ruinous warbands of blood-brothers who had embraced heresy together. Lost Angels who had fallen to the Blood God's predatory temptations and indulged their base desire to kill over the Emperor's need for them to do so. Space Marines who had forgotten themselves. Those who had regressed. Those who were now no more than agonising expressions of the savagery from which they were originally crafted. The Scourge favoured these with the Thunderhawk's remaining wrath. With 1.00 calibre mercy, the Scourge ended their torment and that of their followers. The Goremongers. The Sanguine Sons. The mad Angels of the Thunder Barons. The renegade Red Heralds. The Cleaved. The Angels Apocrypha. The Brazen Guard. The bone-dusted Skulltakers.

They came at him undaunted. Furious at his mere existence. He was a warrior to be defeated. An Adeptus Astartes. A son of Dorn. One after another they tried to rush him, cleaving aside cultists, spawn and traitor soldiers to get to him. To earn his skull for the War-Given-Form. Kersh kept killing. The ivory of his armour became a blood-misted red. The heavy bolter muzzles glowed with the heat of incessant usage. A gene-bred monstrosity – some aborted, primogenerated abomination – charged at Kersh with self-loathing and fury. The bastard-breed wore scraps of armour and the colours of the Sanguine Sons, but was a half-botched attempt at demigodhood. Malformed, insane and unfeeling – the sorry creature soaked up the heavy bolters' punishment and bounded on. The head shot that should have ended the beast was stopped by armour plating welded to its deformed skull, and it took everything the weapon had to punch through both metal and thick bone to reach what little brain the monster had.

As the abominate dropped and skidded past Kersh, the Scourge realised that the distraction had cost him. Three Angels Apocrypha had worked their way around the crashed Thunderhawk to surprise him from the other side. Helmless and sporting long hair and rapier-like blades that crackled with a dark energy, the Chaos Space Marines looked identical. Their skin was deathly pale against the sable blood-filth of their patched and studded plate. The renegades hissed and swept in with vampiric speed and appetite. Kersh barely had time to release his finger-cramping grip on the heavy bolters and slap a palm on his gladius hilt.

The first died without the blade having to clear its scabbard. There was a flash from the side of the first Angel's head. He fell to one side and struck the gunship's wing before falling and sitting in the grave dust. Half of his head had been burned out by a precision sniper shot. About the Scourge were the corpses of killers and cultists that Kersh couldn't remember slaying. They too had the telltale head craters of Adeptus Astartes

marksmanship. Up in the towers and steeples of the cemetery world city, a member of Squad Contritus had the Scourge in his sights and was watching his corpus-captain's back.

The Angels were so fast that Kersh's blade was still not free of its sheath as the second sped past his falling compatriot. He was met with an ugly kick from the Scourge. Reeling from the Excoriator's boot against his chestplate, the Traitor stumbled some distance back. Throughout the body-piling carnage of the Scourge's resistance, the *Impunitas*'s remaining engine had gone through the wretched and repetitive cycle of firing up and dying down. As the heretic Angel stumbled back into the rocket's wake, the intense heat of the rhythmic burn set alight his hair and scoured the paint from his ceramite. His pallid skin melted from his skull, and as the engine built up to full intensity, sending a tremble through the crashed Thunderhawk, the renegade was lost in the air-scorching heat of the afterburner.

Kersh felt sudden and excruciating pain lance through his midriff. The third Angel Apocrypha had leant into a savage thrust, skewering his power blade through the Scourge's stomach plate and through his side. As the Chaos Space Marine withdrew his rapier, Kersh let out a half-stifled howl of agony. The heretic seemed to enjoy the Excoriator's suffering, until the Scourge drew his gladius out of its scabbard and the blade up across the Traitor's face, wiping the spiteful satisfaction from it. With blood streaming into his eyes from the vicious gash, the Angel Apocrypha also failed to see the Scourge's fist fly at him, the pommel of the sword held within it breaking the warrior's jaw. The rapier vaulted for the Scourge again, but blood-blind the Angel struck wide.

Grabbing the Chaos Space Marine by the wrist and holding the crackling blade away from him, Kersh twisted the gladius around in his other hand before plunging it down through a ceramite patch on the Blood Crusader's chestplate. The blade squealed through the weak spot, punctured

reinforced ribcage and slid down into the Chaos Space Marine's chest. Squirming the hilt around like an aircraft joystick, Kersh watched the Angel Apocrypha experience the blade twisting through his innards. Black blood gushed up and out of the sides of the doomed warrior's mouth. Releasing him, Kersh allowed the weight of the warrior's plate to carry him to a gasping death on the cemetery world earth and free his blade.

A grunt from the Anarchan Razorbacks was suddenly beside him, attempting to beat him with the stock of a shotgun, while a stitch-faced pirate raider – with her mouth sliced into a frown – started blasting away wildly with a pair of autopistols. Clutching his side, Kersh despatched her with shearing economy and speed. He took a step towards the twin-linked heavy bolter but found himself distracted by the bodies being tossed into the air above the advancing mob before him. A cloven-hoofed beast of living plate was thundering through the cultist throng at high speed, its brazen bulk a seemingly unstoppable force. The quadruped's long head sported a thick brass horn, sharpened to a cruel spike, while its eyes were windows to a volcanic fury. Its broad body was a clinker-built nightmare of layered bronze plate and shredded octagon-mail. The infernal beast cared for nothing, trampling slave-soldiers, gore-swiping Bloodsaken berserkers and barging aside armoured Red Herald Chaos Space Marines with its heavy metal heft.

Snatching his bolt pistol from its sporran, Kersh thrashed the trigger, sending round after round at the daemon beast. It was the definition of an easy target and getting easier with every cloven stride, but the rounds simply glanced pathetically off the living bronze hide. With the infernal engine just steps away, Kersh threw himself painfully to one side. The beast continued its relentless charge, furiously goring the underplate of the Thunderhawk's wing, before surging on and smashing straight through the twin-linked heavy bolters. The metal monster cannonaded past. On the ground, Kersh watched the beast weather a hail of las-bolts from Charnel

Guard fusils, stubgun and auto-fire, as well as the slash of Scout sniper rifle blasts from the towers and belfries. An advancing wall of metal and sparks, the beast continued along its juggernaut path towards the break in the battlement.

Kersh felt a tremble through his plate. The ground was quaking again. As he got to his boots, the corpus-captain watched hate-jubilant cultists roaring the hellsteed on, before they were struck and impaled from behind – left broken-backed and crucified across the horned heads of newly arrived beasts. The Scourge shook his head in silent disbelief, witness to a diabolic stampede. Soon there were more armoured chargers than Kersh could count, and the Excoriator found himself backing towards the doomed front line.

Unclipping a krak grenade, the Scourge took several further steps backwards. As well as the living metal beasts – in the absence of the heavy bolter's relentless murder – renegade Angels, berserkers and the Blood God's champions were leading the cult armies of the Cholercaust back at Kersh's decimated section of the perimeter. With grim resolve, the Scourge tossed the unprimed grenade into the silent booster exhaust of the cycling engine. As he ran back towards Obsequa City he heard the grenade bounce and rattle around the inside of the jet mechanism. He heard the engine begin its final, fruitless attempt to re-launch the downed Thunderhawk.

As Kersh reached the havoc of the destroyed battlement and the mess the unstoppable metal monster had made of his remaining sentinels, the corpus-captain looked back. The Thunderhawk's remaining booster had built to a strangled screech. The engine fired. The grenade exploded. The wreck of the *Impunitas* shuddered. A staggered detonation rippled through the derelict craft: the engine, the fuel compartments, the ammunition stores. The gunship became a radiating blastwave of force, flame and armour-plate frag. Cultist soldiers were shredded where they stood.

Renegade Angels and Chaos champions were cooked within their plate, and even stampeding daemon beaststeeds were knocked from their fleet footing and onto their clinker-constructed backs, where they remained, kicking out helplessly in a steam-snorting effort to right themselves.

Kersh found Brother Nebuzar dead – gored straight through by the rampaging bronze monitor train. The beast had ignored the irritation of las-bolts dancing off its hide and bypassed the remainder of the Charnel Guard, instead storming straight at the cemetery world city. As the brazen mount careened through the walls of chapels, hermitages and cloisters, bulldozing its frenzied way through foundations and keystones, towers began to topple and steeples fell in on themselves.

Looking back at the benighted battlefield, Kersh saw the Thunderhawk's explosion die back to a flame-swathed wreck. The promethium-soaked mound of cadavers and daemonflesh upon which the crashed gunship had come to rest caught, and the Scourge watched the inferno race away in both directions. Within minutes Obsequa City would be surrounded by a furious ring of light and fire.

Along his section of the perimeter, the corpus-captain saw cultists and slave-soldiers thrashing in the flames. He saw a hammer-wielding Thunder Baron stride through the blaze in scorched plate as though it were nothing. The renegade Angel was followed by several lesser berserkers, who burst from the wall of flame at a sprint, flak and furs alight with the flesh melting from their cruel bones. They didn't get far, the demented warriors succumbing to the firestorms they had become long before they reached the ruined battlement. The daemonherd would not, and could not, be stopped. Those monsters not caught in the initial blast had thundered on, shaking the ground upon which they stomped, shielded from the worst of the pyremound by their hide plating.

The corpus-captain had no idea how other sections of the perimeter had fared. They could have already fallen or – without crashing gunships and a

daemon drove to worry about – have held against the Cholercaust's murderous masses and madness. All he did know was that his vox had been a constant stream of messages and reports that he could barely hear above the rapid-fire cacophony of the twin-linked heavy bolters and Khornate battle-cries. Regardless of how his brothers elsewhere had fared, their first line of defence was about to fall. With the promethium holding the worst of the cultist furore back, but the daemon charge an uncontrollable certainty, Kersh decided grimly that the battle wouldn't afford him a better time to retreat. He set his vox to an open channel.

‘Fifth Company, this is the Scourge. The perimeter is breached. Prepare for close-quarters assault. Fall back to the city. Do it now.’



CHAPTER NINETEEN

World Eaters

The abbey bell tower of the Black Ministry shook with the force of some distant calamity. Brother Omar of the Tenth Company watched dust fall from the belfry rafters. The Scout had been leant against a balistraria pillar near to the great wheels of the abbey bell. Omar followed the dust descending to the floor and settled his eyes on the empty space where his legs should have been. The incredible thing was that he could still feel them: the twitch of every muscle, the stretch of every tendon and the creak of thick joints and bones.

It had been deemed all but a miracle that he had made it back to Obsequa City through the immaterial incursion. He remembered little of his entry, but had been told the Scourge himself had dragged his bruised and bloody body to safety – well, most of it. The Scout didn't recall the agonies associated with the loss of his legs, which he considered a small blessing. He was currently benefiting from morphia and augmetics left behind by Apothecary Ezrachi, with drips, lines and transfusion satchels trailing from the cauterised stump of his lower torso. The Scout still wore his battle-battered carapace vest and pauldrons, and rather than languish in

some hermitage or with the Sisters in the Mausoleum vault, he had volunteered for any useful duty he could perform. With no little admiration and the assurance that he would make a fine Excoriators battle-brother, Silas Keturah gave Omar a pair of magnoculars and his own bolt pistol. The Scout was charged with spotting and vox-relaying observations from the bell tower straight to the squad whip himself. The reports had made grim listening.

‘Take that, you ugly son of a whore...’

Omar heard the *whoosh* of Scout Kush’s sniper rifle as the weapon spat out another skull-emptying bolt. Omar grunted. Kush was a despicable neophyte and a disgrace to the name of Demetrius Katafalque, but he had the eyes of a hawk and the murderous desire to see every shot go home. Omar had even spotted for the Scout with his magnoculars, drawing the sniper fire down on a warband of helmless screamers from the renegade Brazen Guard, and assorted degenerates attempting to rush Corpus-Captain Kersh in the wake of the *Impunitas*’s crash. Mostly, Kush had rested the sniper rifle’s long barrel against a balistraria pillar and plugged incessantly away, his eye to the magnoscope and a neat pile of powerpacks stacked beside his knee. ‘Come on, you Ruinous filth – stick your head out,’ the Scout murmured absently to himself. Kush fired. With a smirk of satisfaction and without taking his eye from the lens, the Scout ejected another spent pack and slipped another into the rifle’s breech from the pile.

Omar brought the magnoculars back to his eyes and surveyed the carnage on the city perimeter, which was no less horrifying in night-vision. Even from the bell tower’s vantage, the Scout only had a view of Necroplex-South and East. From the belfry it became obvious what the Excoriators’ problem would be. Sheer numbers. Wave after wave of slaves and cultist soldiers stormed from the distant darkness. They never seemed to stop, and ran full speed at the city along the lychways and clambered

across funereal architecture of the burial grounds with contorted face of fury and frustration. Spread through their colossal number were armoured champions and renegade Angels sporting blades of wicked design and obscene dimensions. Omar had also spotted daemonkin and monstrous beasts from hellish planes of existence to bolster the Cholercaust's already formidable assault capabilities.

On the south and east perimeters, at least, the Excoriators had fared reasonably well against the Blood Crusaders, flak and fevered flesh being no match for the Angels' boltguns. The Charnel Guard and hastily recruited Certusian militia did their part also, the kill zones before the battlements a hailstorm of light, lead and gun emplacement fire. The Blood God's warped champions and renegade Adeptus Astartes – using slave-soldiers as meat shields – closed the gap and created havoc for the perimeter. Their deity-pleasing antics and the brutal insanity of their assaults tested the nerve of the Guardsmen and cemetery worlders, and where Skulltaker Space Marines and berserkers breached the line and scrambled up through the firepower onto the scree battlement, massacres unfolded. The real problem, as Omar could see from the bell tower, were the daemon monstrosities the Blood God had bequeathed the Cholercaust, blessed manifestations of Ruinous destruction and murderous power crafted in corporeal form.

On the Necroplex-East perimeter, Omar had watched Brothers Damaris and Judah hacked to pieces by a small horde of bloodletting arch-fiends with hell-red hides and smouldering blades. Daemon engines of dark metal and diabolic soulfire sliced and pounded their defective way up through the defences and Epistolary Melmoch's Charnel Guardsmen. A charging herd of armoured steeds had smashed through the Scourge's section like a spooked drove of grox, scattering his sentinels and forcing them to abandon their posts and emplacements. Omar had spotted a possessed Salamander – bearing the mark and scale of the renegade Dragon Warriors

on his warp-tormented form – cut through the Sisters of Battle supporting Brother Simeon, and just about everything else on the southern perimeter.

Worst of all, the Scout had witnessed the merciless decimation of Second Whip Azareth's section by what could only be described as one of the Blood God's own. A mighty horned daemon, standing many times taller than an Adeptus Astartes and hate-wrought from ancient enmity, had appeared out of the night like a colossus. Where it walked, the ground shook beneath its cloven hooves. Its wings hung about its massive shoulders like the plate shielding of a battleship, and in one huge claw it clutched a flint axe, roughly hewn in its entirety from daemon world bedrock. With the razor edge of the weapon, the primordial beast swept the necroplex and battlement, ripping through scores of cultists and Charnel Guardsmen with equal indifference and creating small lakes of spilt blood. The monstrous greater daemon jangled with brass plate, mail and chain, and bawled its unquenchable fury from eyes, anger-flared nostrils and a snarl-retracted mouth, which glowed with the elemental fires burning within.

Omar watched cemetery worlders flee before the great beast, only to be cut down by another rubble-grazing sweep of its axe, while Second Whip Azareth stood his ground. The Scout's heart beat with Chapter pride as the Excoriator took the fight to the furious behemoth, dwarfed by the size of the beast and the carnage it effortlessly created. Omar looked on, sickened, as a Space Marine disappeared beneath one of the beast's brazen hooves, brought down by the monster as though he were nothing more than an irritation.

The Scout thought the gargantuan daemon might simply stride across the battlement unopposed and begin levelling the city with its primeval weapon and crushing fist. That was until the battle-scarred shape of the venerable *Gauntlet* had swooped in, drifting about the monster just out of reach of its building-cleaving axe. The gunship's heavy bolter fire danced

off the greater daemon's hide, prompting the beast to cloak itself in the mighty expanse of its leathery wings, until the *Gauntlet* slammed a Hellstrike missile into the horror. The beast fell back, knocked from its hooves by the force of the explosion. Hundreds of the Blood God's slave-soldiers were crushed beneath its ancient form, and hundreds more were thrown from their feet by the quake of the monster's descent. Shaking its appalling head, a wing blast-shattered and aflame, the daemon had scrambled furiously to its feet. The pilot of the *Gauntlet* expertly gained altitude, keeping the Thunderhawk out of the flint axe's considerable reach, while at the same time drawing the enraged beast away from the city. Like some reptilian death world predator, mindlessly consumed with the pursuit of its prey, the greater daemon trailed the venerable *Gauntlet*, its battle-ire continually stoked by the annoyance of the gunship's heavy bolters, the burn of its lascannons and intermittent flooring by the Thunderhawk's Hellstrike missiles.

Kush screamed.

As Omar pulled the magnoculars from his face he saw the sniper suddenly pass before him in an ugly blur. Showering masonry told the Scout that something had struck the bell tower, taking out Brother Kush as the sniper had so many others. The Excoriator hadn't been struck by a las-bolt or marksman's bullet. A winged monstrosity had hit the belfry wall like a thunderbolt, smashing through the stone gap that had served Kush's aim so well, and cannonballing into the Scout. As both Excoriator and beast came to a savage halt against the opposite wall – Kush wrapped up in the creature's talons and bat-like wings – Omar heard the Scout scream again. The scream swiftly became a gargle and then a crunch as the monster bit out the Excoriator's throat.

The thing left Kush's corpse and, still streaming with masonry dust, crawled horribly across the belfry at Omar. The Scout managed to get off a couple of bolts from Squad Whip Keturah's pistol before the beast was

upon him. Using the weapon as a knuckleduster, Omar slammed the fury's gargoylesque head to one side. Its dagger-teeth came straight back at him, and it was all the Excoriator could do to clutch his fingers around its lower jaw and keep it from his face. Omar felt himself instinctively kicking out with legs that weren't there. After the momentary strain of a struggle, with the daemon's warp-fuelled strength getting the better of the Excoriator's bulging arms, Omar clicked the bolt pistol to fully automatic with his thumb and nestled the squat muzzle of the weapon under the beast's chin. Yanking on the trigger, Omar sent a continuous stream of fire through the monster's head. Bolt-rounds tore through the fury's infernal brain and out the top of its gnarled skull. Seconds later, the thing was a deadweight of flesh on top of him – the murderous gleam gone from its eye.

Thumbing a stud, Omar ejected the spent bolt pistol clip. Heaving the beast off his torso, the Excoriator pushed himself onto his chest and, trailing lines and drips, crawled arm-over-arm across to Kush. He stopped momentarily as the fire soul-storm tore out of the fury's leathery remains and scorched its way up through the belfry. As Omar reached Kush it was obvious that the Scout was dead. His head hung limply from his torso by his spine and a ribbon of flesh.

Omar's chin dropped. Without Kush, and with his battle-brothers fighting for their lives, the Scout would not be leaving the bell tower. He prised a chunky grenade from Kush's hand. During his brief struggle with the beast, Kush had snatched it from his belt but never got as far as priming the krak grenade and blowing both himself and the daemon-monster to oblivion. Omar slipped the grenade down into his carapace. Snatching up Kush's sniper rifle, he grunted. For a neophyte, he wasn't particularly good with a rifle, close-quarters combat being his chosen specialism. Sliding the weapon along the belfry floor, he made for the hole in the wall made by the daemon's entrance. Pushing himself up against a balistraria pillar, the Excoriator primed the rifle.

As he was doing so a bright twinkle in the sky drew his attention. At first he thought it must be glimmer of lance-fire in orbit, but as it began to streak down towards Obsequa City and was joined by a busy constellation of other ominous lights, Omar recognised them for what they were. Adeptus Astartes drop-pods. A swarm of them, deployed from some Cholercaust cruiser and raining down like a storm of death.

There was little Omar could do about the audacious enemy assault. His rifle could not hit a rapidly descending insertion craft and would not penetrate its armour even if it did. All the Scout could hope for was that whatever came out of the pods would oblige his questionable marksmanship on the ground.

The Scout aimed the sniper rifle down into the tight alleyways, stepwells and cloisters. Adjusting the magnification on the powerful scope for his eye, Omar nestled the weapon against a bruised shoulder. He brought his finger off the trigger as a fleeing member of the Charnel Guard flashed before the scope, running for his life down a posternway. An armoured beast thundered past, zigzagging its way across the narrow alley, crashing its shoulders into the masonry of bordering buildings. The thing lowered its head, and with a furious charge, gored the unfortunate Guardsman before stomping on. The monster passed out of sight. Leaning into the stone of the belfry wall, Omar felt the tower shudder as the beast collided with the abbey's foundations.

With dust raining down about him, the Excoriator concentrated on his rifle's cross hairs and the heretic prey that might pass before them.

The Dreadclaw's rocket roared its kamikaze delight. The drop-pod was ancient, corrupt of spirit and falling apart. Its nameplate had once read *Darkheart*, but was now a flashburned smear – the result of an ill-advised insertion through the caustic cloud-cover of the Kassandrund hive-world. The *Darkheart* had later been appeased by the blood of innocent hivers, battle-splashed and splattered across the Dreadclaw's malevolent plate.

As another atmospheric stabiliser was ripped from its hull by the raging descent, the craft began to pitch and wobble. The sickening motion tore at the Dreadclaw's superstructure, and the pod gave a metallic whine of internal agony. Inside the craft, amongst the swaying chains, trembling brass strutage and the stench of old gore, eight sons of Angron strained against their descent cages. Their plate was brazen horror, embellishing the blood-red sheen of gore-speckled ceramite. Spikes – both metal and warped bone – adorned their battle-blessed forms, and their helms were ghastly and extravagant. Weapons ached in their racks for the taste of first blood.

Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh stood with a brain-dashed boot on the long defunct guidance runebank that occupied the centre of the compartment. It mattered little to the Traitor Legionaries that the runebank was dead and silent. The *Darkheart* would guide them to slaughter as it always had. The World Eaters champion held on to ceiling chains with both gauntlets – his only descent precaution. As the Dreadclaw had tumbled away from the battle-barge *Rancour*, part of a low orbital swarm delivering the shock troops of the Blood God to the cemetery world, Umbragg had indulged his psychosis. The cybernetic implants buried deep in the primordial depths of his brain flushed the World Eater with a hatred unbound. His mind was an open wound, a twisted knot of psychosurgical scar tissue, only good for killing.

The World Eater loathed the long sub-light journeys between massacres. The *Rancour* was an adamantium prison, Lord Havloc their craven watchdog. Havloc was indeed blessed of Decimate Khorne – but Umbragg could not find it in himself to feel similar appreciation. Wars should not be fought from the command throne of a battleship. The weakling Imperium was an empire of dirt – dirt that it was Umbragg's murderous duty to saturate with the coward-blood of the False Emperor's subjects. To baptise with the teeth of his axe and the wrath of the Blood God's grace. But the

Cholercaust followed the Pilgrim, and the Pilgrim – the Right Claw of Khorne – followed the crimson comet, the corporeal manifestation of the Blood God's will. Therefore, the sacrilegious inactivity of the armada's progress had to be endured. It had to be suffered – like the slow passing of the blade across the flesh – until finally, the comet led the chosen of Khorne back to Ancient Terra and on towards an empire's end.

On the approach to the tiny Ecclesiarchy world, Umbragg had felt the stirring. The Cholercaust's communal desire to kill. The infighting. The self-slaughter. The flaying of flesh from decapitated skulls. The disciples of the War-Given-Form, at one with their true purpose. The brute simplicity of mass invasion. The slaughterous advantage of strength and number – the Blood God's potency realising and realised in the tsunami of gore spilt before his warrior-subjects' blades.

Like magma churning inside the rock prison of a volcano, the exalted rage of the berserker built within Umbragg. He watched the unworthy slave-soldiers of the Blood Crusade fall on the planet in their thousands and thousands – all hate-twisted, battle-hungry and eager to catch the Blood God's eye. With them went Khorne's blessings – the daemonic expression of the War-Given-Form's presence on the field. Carnage-fired beasts, engines, powers and princes, killing shrines to the Skull Lord's decimate will. With unbearable restraint – his ancient bones literally shaking with the desire to war – Umbragg watched the aspirant champions of the Cholercaust take their place in mob-ranks of common killers. Warlords and butchers, their prodigious taking of life had warmed the Ruinous overlord to them.

Amongst these were bands of tainted Angels. A young and fallen brotherhood. Warriors whose shame it had been not to see the slaughter of the Heresy and the apocalypse wrought on the sacred soil of Ancient Terra: Goremongers, Skulltakers, Angels Apocrypha, the Blood Storm, Thunder Barons. It was only after the renegades – young in the ways of the blade –

had thinned out the enemy, leaving only the worthiest skulls for the taking, that the Pilgrim unleashed his warbands of World Eaters.

Ancient, superhuman flesh within Traitor plate, driven by a mind without doubt or fear. The World Eaters were the very living expression of the Blood God's destructive power. His daemons might be a bloodthirsty essence, tapped directly from Khorne's primordial fury, but it was thousands of years of bloodshed, committed in the Blood God's name by the death-defying sons of Angron, that fuelled such ancient power. In this way, daemonkin might be part of the War-Given-Form, but the War-Given-Form was part of Umbragg and his xiith Legion brethren's desire eternal to see the galaxy burn.

As the Dreadclaw gave another sickening wobble and the fresh screech of lower atmospheric descent assailed the drop-pod's exterior, Umbragg's berserker fury broke its banks. The enemy was close. His axes would sing through priest-flesh. The red glory of lives ended would fountain about him in glorious, hateful celebration. A roar built within his cavernous chest – a raw unburdening that was matched by the caged warriors of his warband, the *Clysm*. The *Darkheart* shook with the World Eaters' rage. Umbragg began to smash his spiked elbows into the compartment wall and his fists into the brass ceiling. The dim memory of an ancient alarm fired and the craft's interior flashed a pleasing alternation of red emergency lighting and darkness. The World Eaters howled their savage frustration – their cybernetically enhanced hatred for the constraints of the *Rancour*, for the rattling Dreadclaw, for the cemetery world victims-to-be and the Imperium they represented, for their fellow Blood Crusaders, for each other, and for themselves.

Like a redirected torrent, murderous thoughts and desires flooded Umbragg, flowing through his psychosurgically savaged brain. The Brazen Fleshed warrior no longer wanted to kill; he needed to kill. The *Darkheart* was bleeding. The World Eaters had smashed the compartment plating and

torn out cabling, hydraulics and mesh-hosing. Blood and ichor sprayed from the damaged section, bathing the Traitor Angels in a crimson shower. Forcing his pack to the wall and wrapping thick ceiling chains about his arms with savage circles of the wrist, Umbragg prepared for the Dreadclaw's landing.

Before the World Eater knew it, the *Darkheart* had buried its gear-talons in cemetery world earth. The shock of the brutal landing was forgotten instantly, swallowed whole by the berserker instinct to break free and kill. With the bone-shattering impact of the landing still reverberating through him, Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh had unthinkingly hit the disembarkation stud and snatched his blessed chainaxes, *Pain* and *Suffering*, from their compartment mounts. Freed from their descent cages, the World Eaters berserkers of the *Clysm* dropped down through the retracting bulkhead.

As soon as their ceramite boots hit the planet surface, the Chaos Space Marines' helmet optics scanned for life signs and heat signatures. The *Darkheart* had punched its way through a cathedral roof, and the Dreadclaw's landing talons were buried in the stone floor of the nave. Their optics cut through the dust and debris to reveal warm bodies running down an ambulatory parallel to the cathedral wall. The warband broke into a run, the World Eaters pounding across the nave at the stone wall with an insatiable appetite for violence.

Umbragg reached the wall first, shouldering his power armoured way straight through the masonry to appear like a conjured daemon before the shocked and terrified stream of Charnel Guard and armed cemetery worlders flooding into the passageway. The mortals were already running for their lives from something, and Umbragg feasted on their fear. They ran straight at his axes. Gunning them to full fury, the World Eater cut, cleaved and butchered his way through the screaming mayhem. The *Clysm* joined him, slaking their own thirst for blood effortlessly spilt. The World

Eaters descended into a brutal frenzy, chainswords hacking off limbs, axes biting through bodies and bolt pistols taking off heads. Umbragg felt the release of carnage accomplished, the god-pleasing sensation of blood pattering in sheets and sprays across his Traitor plate.

Bolts from lasfusils sizzled pointlessly off the champion as wall-to-wall Certusians were sacrificed on the twin altars of *Pain* and *Suffering*.

Suddenly the source of the cemetery worlders' panic appeared, crashing into walls and pulverising the cobbled ambulatory. A brazen-plate beast with a serrated crescent horn and armoured hump charged up through the Guardsmen and fossers, eyes ablaze with animal anger, a monster out of control. It gored and trampled a path through the fleeing crowd, stamping and swinging its razor-horn to the left and right. Umbragg watched the ripple of bodies as they bounced off and over the daemon's hump. As the kill before him was stolen by the creature's stampede, the World Eater stepped to one side and buried his chainaxes, in quick succession, in the living metal flesh of the beast. The Chaos Space Marine's weapons chugged deep into the monster. The juggernaut crashed on, bouncing from one smashed wall into another until it collapsed, the beast's momentum ploughing its horned head through the dust, debris and cobbled floor. Streams of brazen flame erupted from its fallen form, funnelling through chinks and rents in its armoured hide. The dark energy spiralled upwards, carrying fragments of clinker plate and great brass rivets with it.

Umbragg turned back with a triumphant bellow of rage, his fists to the sky. About him World Eaters continued to cleave through the Charnel Guardsmen. Two cemetery worlders were suddenly before him, dappling his chestplate with rifles that were loud, annoying and pitifully ineffective. Looking down on the taller of the two fossers, the World Eater swung out the back of his gauntlet. Swatting the puny mortal aside, Umbragg took off his head with the backslash.

‘Donalbain!’ the second Certusian yelled, his voice shot through with the weakness of useless human emotion. Shock turned instantly to anger – a feeling Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh could appreciate – and the fosser ran at the armoured giant, smashing at his ceramite plating with the scuffed butt of his rifle. Within his helm, the World Eater licked his cracked and aged lips. Clasp ing the weakling mortal by both his head and shoulder, the World Eater tore in two different directions. With ease the Certusian’s screaming head broke from his thrashing torso. Tossing both aside, Umbragg showed his bloody palms to the sky. With the massacre coming to an end about him, Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh snorted.

‘Find me Angels!’ he bawled at his dark brethren.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Endgame

I can feel the city slipping away from me. I am Adeptus Astartes. Sentiment is nothing to a demigod. Death is a way of life. That the citizens of the Imperium fall is of no consequence to an Angel of the Emperor. We save as many as we can – as I have here on the cemetery world. Men fall, but the Imperium endures. The city is slipping from me as a game of regicide from a master. There is a difference, however, between feeling defeat and knowing defeat. I am warrior enough to know I am beaten. My heart beats for my Emperor. I will never lay down my weapons. I will never give up. While I live, my enemies' lives will pay forfeit. My spirit is unbreakable. These things I feel. What I know is the difference between strategic success and tactical failure – and I have failed.

I see now, as I fight pauldron-to-pauldron with my Excoriator brothers, the anatomy of a world's demise. I see now how the Cholercaust Blood Crusade sundered planet after Imperial planet, and how it will go on doing so – right up to the Vanaheim Cordon and beyond. Through Segmentum Solar and the core systems; right up to an unsuspecting Ancient Terra. Unsuspecting, because none know what I know now. They will underestimate the Keeler Comet and its strange ability to turn a

population against itself, creating reinforcement for an army as yet unarrived. What they will see as an astral body – a returning visitor – I know as a gateway to Chaos. They will not call for reinforcement, as others have failed to do, until far too late. They will fail to appreciate the Cholercaust's number and overestimate their own. They will make a stand – as I have done – because that is what warriors do. They will stand aghast, as I do now, at the Cholercaust's speed and hunger for annihilation. They will not imagine that a force could end a world in all but a day, overrunning an entire planet with heretic, renegade and daemon. Finally, with Traitor Legionaries – the Blood God's chosen – falling from the stars and hunting them for sport, they will see how easily they have fallen and the horror that awaits others for whom the same mistakes are equally inevitable.

We are trapped.

Falling back from the perimeter it became swiftly apparent that all other sections had failed to hold as I had. The Charnel Guard are decimated and many of my brothers have fallen. Palatine Sapphira and several of her Sisters remain, along with a small collection of Chapter serfs – including my own. Beyond that, only Excoriators survive. The sons of Dorn, who fought their hardest and made the enemy pay in blood for every retreating step. The remaining Angels of the Fifth Company, holding off impossible numbers, as they pair and group up. Brothers finding each other, protecting each other's backs, knowing in their hearts that here in these tight ambulatories and posternways – in the shadow of Umberto II's great Mausoleum – they are to die together.

With a cultist army – even with an Adeptus Astartes contingent – we might have stood a chance. The Blood God sends us monsters, daemoniac entities against which our weapons know limitation. And now, pushed back into the steep streets and narrow alleys, with the full force of the Cholercaust swallowing Obsequa City, we find our retreat compromised.

From the sky they send us their best. Shock troops to finish off the most stalwart resistance. To end us quickly. The Eaters of Worlds. Now I know we are doomed.

‘What now?’ Skase calls above the din of battle. The air is thick with the chug of chain weapons, including my own, and Brother Boaz and Squad Whip Joachim are using the last of their grenades. The cloistrium is open but the cacophony bounces off the walls right back at us. We have heard nothing from the north-western contingents. Second Whip Etham and Brothers Lemuel and Zurion sighted Sisters of Battle in the St Gorgonia district and received some surviving support from Keturah’s Scouts. Nothing has been heard from any of them in over an hour, and drop-pods did seem to hit the far side of the city hardest.

‘The Mausoleum!’ I yell back, but my words are drowned by the whoosh of Sister Casiope’s heavy flamer. The good Sister has been doing the Emperor’s work with the weapon, using it to greatest effect in the cramped environs of the narrow city streets. Flame has gutted the alleys and archways of our uphill escape route, forcing back countless hordes of cultists baying for our blood or else flash-stripping them of their flesh and turning them into corpses dancing and flailing through an inferno. Sapphira and Sister Zillah finish off any warp-spawned malevolents creeping through the flames, while my absterge holds up her wounded brother, blasting the occasional cultist who makes it over a roof or through a building with her chunky laspistol.

‘What?’ Skase calls back, his gladius twanged back off the teeth of a World Eater’s chainsword.

‘Close quarters!’ Brother Simeon calls, dropping his empty boltgun. One of the Blood God’s armoured disciples falls before the last of the weapon’s wrath, only for another berserker to come straight at Simeon with an axe. Bringing his gladius out of its sheath, my battle-brother’s blade is smacked aside by the raging action of the Chaos Space Marine’s chain weapon. The

last few bolt-rounds from my Mark II go into buying Simeon a few moments of time, my offering glancing off the World Eater's pauldron and helm, knocking the Traitor to one side and off balance.

'The Mausoleum roof!' I yell to Skase. 'It's the safest place for a pick-up.'

Brother Eliam dies horribly before me, the thrashing axes of several World Eaters brothers hacking his armoured body apart. With his blood across my face, I send the butt of my empty pistol across the faceplate of the nearest of his berserker killers, only to have the hallowed weapon smashed out of my grip with the flat of his axe. I turn. As I do, I unclip my chainsword and bring the flared blade to gory life. Bringing the blade around and up, I chew through the World Eater from the navel to the throat.

'Novah can't raise the Gauntlet,' Skase insists, his gladius blade having found its way past the chainsword and into the madman's neck. As he twists the gladius there is a crunch and the World Eater's grip goes slack, silencing his weapon.

'Still the best holdpoint,' I bawl as my chainsword tangles momentarily with a World Eater's axe. 'Thick walls, and Sister Sapphira claims that the ceremonial gate is an adamantine alloy.'

The bastard-sons of Angron are among us. World Eaters pour into the cloistrium, wolfishly drawn down on us by the stench of our loyalty. Bolt-rounds don't stop them. Grenades don't stop them. They push on fearlessly through our bottlenecks and gauntlets, stepping through the mangled corpses of their Traitor brethren to get to us. Each maniac Angel sustains the grievous wounds of two of his loyalist kind. They hear nothing but pain and see nothing but victims. They feel... nothing. Duty is not enough for them. They live for battle, but even that seems insufficient to satisfy the kill-wired berserkers. They want our blood. They want our skulls for their Ruinous lord and nothing, it seems, is going to stop them.

Squad Whip Joachim fights for his life – a gladius in each gauntlet, a World Eater on each flank. One of the Traitors has been blessed by his merciless god with a bone-spiked club on one arm. He swings the flesh-weapon at the Excoriator but hits his mindless compatriot by accident. The Chaos Space Marine turns on his afflicted battle-brother with his axe, and moments later the madmen are fighting each other. This is a small mercy since already there is another of Angron's supersons swinging his ravenous blade at the squad whip.

I feel the moment. I feel the city slipping away on the regicide board, and then I feel the pieces swept from the board by an angry fist. It's the heavy flamer. I hear it chug, gasp and run dry. I can hardly be surprised. Sister Casiope has roasted a legion of slave-soldiers in the alleyways leading into the cloistrium. As the flamer falls silent, the Sister unhooks the support straps and shrugs off the weapon, bringing the half-clip she has left in her boltgun to bear. We all feel the heavy weapon's absence, the beginning of an end. Even though the alleyways are still flame-filled mayhem, cultists and Blood Crusaders sprint through the inferno – blades held high. Bubbling and crackling, writhed in orange tongues of hot fury, the slave-soldiers of Khorne make their doomed assault.

The palatine and her Sisters drop the killers with merciful rounds, but as the bodies begin to trip, tumble and burn, others run the gauntlet of the firestorm alley. Blood-red daemons of the Ruinous pantheon sprint horribly through the flames. They look similar to the herald-thing I faced in the Obelisk, but no two of the monstrosities look truly alike. They leap and land on the Sisters with arachnid precision, gutting and stabbing the Adepta Sororitas with supernaturally frenzied thrusts of their hellforged blades. Flashes of light and the bark of Sapphira's bolt pistols force the monsters from her prone form. As she blasts away, one of the things thrashes this way and that. Rounds tear off horn-tips, claws and a foot, but

it doesn't stop the beast leaping straight back on the Sister and savaging her again.

Crackling energy suddenly leaps across the open space of the cloistrium. The searing soul lightning had passed through the bodies of several slave-soldiers crowding a side-alley. The mortals explode on contact, their torsos detonating in a fine shower of blood-spittle. The silver arc of warp-drawn power slams into the lesser daemon, as it huddles over the Sister of Battle, and throws it into the far wall. It struggles, thrashes and claws against the stream of power until it too is vaporised in an explosive gore-cloud of red mist.

Epistolary Melmoch and Chaplain Shadrath burst into the cloistrium from the alleyway. Melmoch isn't smiling. He looks tired and drawn – his eyes sunken and his talent a burden. He carries his force scythe in both hands, discharging another soul-scalding burst of energy at the daemons picking over the remains of the dead Adepta Sororitas. Second Whip Azareth is behind them, plugging the alleyway with single discharges from his boltgun. Priming his last grenade, the second whip bounces it down the alleyway at their rabid pursuers. The alleyway flashes and collapses in a rolling dustbank of masonry and pulverised rockcrete.

My heart lifts at the sight of the three Excoriators, but the reinforcement is not enough to save us. More howling World Eaters barge into the cloistrium, their pauldrons clashing in an effort to push past one another and get to us first. I choose my targets and favour manoeuvres for economy. My chainsword flicks and jabs, cleaves and slices. World Eaters get my attention for barely a moment. Just enough for the thrashing teeth of my blade to turn their own aside, take off a gauntlet at the wrist or excavate a hole in the chest. For a moment I imagine the horror before the walls of the Imperial Palace, the onslaught of the World Eaters and the lives they must have taken with their devastating combination of martial skill, fearlessness and bottomless hatred. Few of my opponents drop to the

floor. I don't have the spare seconds it would take to finish them, and before I have turned to face another Traitor Space Marine, his berserker brother – who had the attention of my chainblade moments before – is back on his feet and hacking away.

The hellish melee has forced us back together. Skase and I find ourselves back to back, slapping aside angry blades coming for each other's plate while at the same time negotiating the murderous thrusts and slashes of multiple World Eaters assailants. The moment that began with Sister Casiope's flamer continues to unravel. I feel the bite of a chainaxe through my thigh plate. The teeth of some other unseen weapon glances off my shoulder plate, ripping up the ceramite but failing to reach flesh. Brother Simeon's serf Amos runs before me towards the body of his fallen master. A hulking World Eaters champion steps on Simeon's armoured form and pulls free the daemon battleaxe he buried there. I see Amos hacked cleanly in half by the soul-hungry weapon.

As Amos falls aside in two pieces, Chaplain Shadrath appears – his midnight plate glistening with the serf's blood. Holding his crozius arcanum up like a religious icon he commands the hulk and his cursed weapon back. The monstrous World Eater seems uncertain for a moment – a trait I have yet to experience in my Traitor opponents. Suddenly furious with itself, the battleaxe comes up over its head and down on Shadrath. The Chaplain knocks it to one side with his crozius, which seems to glow with a spiritual luminescence, before smashing at the giant's ancient plate with his sacred staff of office.

World Eaters Space Marines continue to flood the cloistrium, each more blood-hungry than the last. I can hear the gunning of chainblades echoing in the ambulatory beyond, indicating even more of the Traitors, eager to cut up what is left of us. Epistolary Melmoch's unnatural powers continue to be a boon, dwindling though they might be with the Librarian's building exhaustion. Streaks of soul lightning keep a gathering horde of lesser

hellions at bay, the furious monsters seemingly drawn down on Palatine Sapphira and her affronting badges of faith. Sapphira is run through and can barely get up, but Melmoch continues to fight over her struggling form, his force scythe sweeping the space about them, the psychically-charged weapon sparking off hellblades and lopping off daemon limbs.

Brother Novah stands at the centre of the chaos. The Adeptus Astartes holds the company standard proud and high, a heart-stabbing provocation to the World Eaters degenerates roaring their way into the cloistrium. Novah clutches his boltgun in his other hand and appears to be the only Excoriator with any ammunition left for the bastard warriors of Khorne. They come at Novah – at the standard, really – screaming their obscene oaths and swinging their raging axes. Second Whip Azareth goes down under the blitz of blades, pieces of the Excoriator flying out of the frenzy. Novah puts bolt blasts into several Chaos Space Marines, but the irresistible draw of the standard drives the mindless warriors on, World Eaters running straight into the blazing path of the Excoriator's murderous gunfire.

It is a massacre. I don't know what I expected. The carnage about me is all the Cholercaust came to Certus-Minor to do. The swift and bloody annihilation of the Blood God's enemies. A world, dead in a day. The flames have died down in the alleyways and wall-to-wall cultist warriors race for our skulls. Red, reptilian hellhounds bound over their number. The beasts spit and hiss, their brazen claws tearing up the cobbles as the daemon mongrels run at us. A pack of the monsters spreads out across the cloistrium, the black leathery sail-skin of their neck frills erect and aggressive. They sink their fang-filled jaws into our ceramite, tearing at legs and hanging off our arms. Two of the beasts snap at Brother Boaz, causing the Excoriator to swipe at them with his blade. He slashes the first beast across its horn-buds and scaly face. The second is saved by the spiked, brass collar around its neck. As the gladius sparks off the collar,

the moment's distraction costs the Excoriator – a mangled World Eater getting back off the ground and to his berserker's feet. I call out, but by the time Boaz turns, the Traitor Legionary's chainsword has already taken off the Excoriator's head.

Fury builds inside me. I feel something dark and unseen wrestling for my soul. My anger and frustration feed it. A question without words chimes through my being like the clash of two blades. A proposal. A dark bargain. The unrivalled power of my enemies. The fearless, mindless instincts of a predator – with all the bloodthirsty prowess and indestructibility that comes with them – in exchange for my surrender. Not to my enemy, who deserves my enmity, my skill and my blade, but to my rage. I see the World Eaters – once the Emperor's Angels – live the benefits of such surrender. I envy their power and certitude. I see their blades butcher the supermen under my command and wonder what I might be able to do with such fury. Might I, the Scourge, be able to turn the tide of battle? My boundless wrath and the desire to avenge my brothers, forged into a weapon. My body a raw lump of brazen metal – able to withstand anything the enemy might throw at me. My mind an instrument of vengeance. My arm the executor of divine will...

A chainaxe buzzes past my head. There is blood. I think I might have just lost an ear. A World Eater, with a brass, mechanical claw for an arm, snaps out for my head. I retract, but the Traitor's brazen pincer snaps closed about my chainsword – stopping it dead. The claw cuts through the weapon, rendering it a tip-sheared, chugging mess. I abandon the weapon, slipping my Scourge's gladius from its scabbard. I spin the sword around the index digit of my left gauntlet before bringing the weapon down on the claw. The blade rings off the obscene bionic attachment. The World Eater's axe comes for me again. Claw. Axe. Claw. Axe. Each time, the gladius drives them aside. I know I can kill this monstrous combat machine. I have seen his death flash before my eyes. I know the fury I will have to unleash

in order to end him. In order to end all of them. I am a moment away from damnation and I know it. A scream brings me back to my senses.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Bethesda. My lictor, Oren, is on the floor, two of the daemon hounds feasting on the serf. A third has the tips of its teeth around Bethesda's ankle, dragging the absterge away. My dark desire to kill the World Eater is greater than ever. Somehow I resist it. Instead of driving my blade through the gore-speckled degenerate, I turn in close and slam my shoulder into the Traitor's chest. He gets my elbow across his faceplate before I grab the heavy metal claw and heave the Chaos Space Marine over my pack and pauldron. He crashes into the cobbles.

I watch Bethesda screaming, her body dragged away through the gore, the whites of her eyes bright and pleading. Without ammunition and the serf too far away for my blade, there is only one thing I can do. Slapping my gauntlet down on my belt I find 'the purge' where I left it, coiled over the hilt of my other blade. Like my plate, the whip's braided length is smeared in blood-drizzle. I crack the length of the leather flail. It fails to wrap itself around her wrist as I might have hoped and instead snaps against the cobbled floor nearby. This should not surprise me. 'The purge' is not exactly the weapon of choice for an Adeptus Astartes. In her desperation and fear, the absterge strikes out with her fingers and snatches at the tip of the weapon with her pale fingers. She yelps in agony as I pull on its length, hauling her back towards me. The fiendhound bites further up the serf's leg and scrabbles against the stone floor with its brass talons.

I feel an immediate pressure on my leg. Looking down at the World Eater on the floor I see that he has his claw around my knee. The bionic shears through my plate under hydraulic insistence and I feel its crushing attentions on my flesh. Turning the gladius back around in my left hand, I stab down into the Chaos Space Marine's shoulder. Slipping the tip of the

blade between the monstrous bionic attachment and the warped flesh of the Angel, I thrash back and forth with the sword hilt like a gearstick, cutting through tendons and hydraulic piping. As the claw releases me I bring up my boot and stamp down on the World Eater's extravagant helm. The helmet twists and something snaps. I hope it is the Traitor's neck.

I heave at the whip's length, but two further daemon beasts have sunk their maws into Bethesda's flailing legs. They drag at her, and my boots skid across the cloistrium floor. She screams again. The blood-smeared 'purge' begins to slip through my power-armoured grip.

'Melmoch!' I call. I hate to. Palatine Sapphira's body has been snatched by fleet-of-claw blood-heralds. The Epistolary doesn't even know, since he is surrounded by cultists and slave-soldiers, which he cuts down like a reaper with his force scythe. The psyker spots me and my desperate tug of war with the hounds. He angles the shaft of the scythe at the beast, and with his kindly face now a hollow mask of exhaustion, desperation and fury, the Librarian sends an energy storm of arcing power at the hounds.

Impossibly the destructive stream deviates and crackles harmlessly about the savage monsters. Furious, the Librarian sends another blast of soul lightning at the beasts, but it too sears wide. The spiked collars the creatures are wearing glow with an unnatural energy, seemingly protecting the hellhounds from Melmoch's psychic barrage. The whip slips from my fingers and the monsters drag the shrieking serf into a narrow alley.

The terrible cacophony of battle grows. Skase, Chaplain Shadrath and I do what we can to prevent the storm front of mulching axes and Traitor bolt-fire from turning us into Escharan chum. Melmoch sweeps the sizzling blade of his force scythe repeatedly through the meat-grinding crush of the cultist crowds, slicing through torsos and daemonflesh in a desperate attempt to hold the Cholercaustians back. Novah drops his empty boltgun, and his gladius joins ours, the company standard held high above our

heads. Only Squad Whip Joachim fights on alone in the centre ground, beating back three rapid World Eaters with his remaining blade and a steel nerve alone.

A shockwave of revulsion and otherworldly dread passes through me. A face has appeared at an ambulatory entrance. As the cultists thin, a colossal hand grasps the brick corner of a block-domicilia. Muscular fingers of daemonflesh terminate in metal claws, and the tough hide of the palm is etched with blasphemous runes and symbols. Heavy chain adorns the wrist, and moving up behind it, peering through the ambulatory gap and into the god-pleasing bloodshed of the cloistrium, is the face of a greater daemon, old as murder and ugly as an eternity of sin. It's all ferocity-taut flesh, flared nostrils, bared tusks and canines. I can feel its destructive power in eyes that burn with the infinitely-focused heat of hatred. Amongst the din of battle I did not even notice the distant thunder of the great being's approach.

The long reach of its palm goes out and it seizes Joachim from behind, its fingers wrapping around the struggling Excoriator, his arms and his weapon. With ease, the greater daemon squeezes. Joachim screeches. The squad whip's pack and plate crumple, and with nowhere else to go, the Angel's flesh and blood erupt from the daemon's tight-closed fist in a fountain of unspeakable horror. I die a little inside myself. It ends here, it seems. Drowned in cultist mayhem while being hacked apart by the Traitor World Eaters, with daemons picking over our bones and the fearful semblance of the Blood God himself looking on with primordial satisfaction.

This would be a distracting notion enough, amongst the bolt-rounds and roaring teeth of chainaxes – but then the sepulchre wall behind me explodes.

Sharp fragments of ancient brick, stone and mortar flew across the cloistrium like shrapnel. The remainder of the sepulchre wall fell away in

large pieces, revealing the interior of the repository to the stars. Chewing up the rubble and masonry on the polished sepulchre floor, *Punisher* rolled out on its rugged tracks. The Thunderfire cannon's quad-barrelled muzzles smoked with the demolishing blast, and the targeting reticula mounted on its back blazed with the life of its machine-spirit through the billowing dust cloud.

During the initial assault, with *Punisher* having received its locking and loading libations, ritual targeting protocols, prayers and appeasements from Frater Astrotechnicus Dancred, the Thunderfire cannon had dutifully held its part of the perimeter. Dancred had attached a caterpillar flatbed trailer to the itinerant cannon to aid self-loading and assigned *Punisher* its own part of the battlement to defend. Unconcerned by fleeing cemetery worlders, dying Guardsmen and the horror of otherworldly threats, the machine prioritised enemy targets according to a simple equation based upon size and closing distance. This had seen the Thunderfire cannon through the horror of the immaterial assault and helped the ordnance hold the line all but alone on its eastern section of the battlement.

Following the invasion, with no further catechisa or protocol forthcoming in the wake of Techmarine Dancred's death, the cannon had merely continued its still, silent vigil of the eastern battlement. Dancred had provided the cannon's machine-spirit with *modus-contingencia*, including an inner-city 'hunt and destroy' protocol, should the battlement be overrun in the initial assault. Since the perimeter had held, *Punisher* simply waited – quiet and unnoticed by forces re-fortifying the section in preparation for the incoming Cholercaust. Charnel Guardsmen, Sisters of Battle and Excoriators assumed that the cannon was dead, like the Techmarine it had taken to following like a faithful hound.

With the resurgence of hostilities on the eastern perimeter, the *Punisher* returned to automotive and explosive life. As the Cholercaust swamped battlements all over the city, including the one upon which the cannon was

unsuspectingly stationed, *Punisher* fell to its ‘hunt and destroy’ duties in the small, sloped streets and alleyways of the cemetery world city.

As the dust cleared, fresh targets presented themselves in profusion. Heretics. Daemonic entities. Enemy Adeptus Astartes. The completion of a cold equation prompted *Punisher*’s quad-barrel to start cycling and its trailer feed system to begin loading the rotating breeches. A large etherform attempting to enter the cloistrium received *Punisher*’s initial attention. The creature received an explosive shell in the face as well as several follow-up shots that momentarily drove it back to a less threatening range. Lesser entities attempted to rush the cannon, but the *Punisher* stopped them in their tracks with a succession of volleys at the kill zone before the cannon, turning the creatures into scraps of smouldering daemonflesh. The cannon targeted the foundations of a nearby building in order to economically stall the advance of multiple heretic signatures. The old hermitage wall to which the foundation belonged collapsed, burying the heretics in an avalanche of stone as well as temporarily blocking off the entry point, which the Thunderfire cannon’s machine-spirit had swiftly designated as tactically significant.

The enemy Adeptus Astartes closed with the cannon, but *Punisher* detected only small arms and close-quarter weaponry. The Thunderfire cannon sent a rhythmic barrage at the advancing contingent, blasting power-armoured bodies apart and around the confines of the cloistrium. The assault defied the machine-spirit’s calculations, and *Punisher* found itself turning its barrels time and again back to the enemy Adeptus Astartes, who even with body parts blown off, continued in their attempts to reach the cannon.

As the Thunderfire cannon blasted the cloistrium to rock dust, it felt the surface contact of a gauntlet pat it on its ceramite exterior shell. Several Adeptus Astartes in Chapter colours were exiting the cloistrium up a stairwell situated in the building through which the Thunderfire cannon

had just passed. Discounting the gesture as non-threatening, and confirming plate markings as those belonging to Excoriators company command, the cannon decided to hold its current station and carry out the spiritual necessities of its ‘hunt and destroy’ protocol.

‘Anything from Padre Gnarl?’ Commander Heiss of the *Apotheon* demanded. She sat on the edge of her throne, her slender hands forming a pyramid over her nose and mouth. Midshipman Randt had a vox-speaker to his ear. He shook his head. The small bridge was silent. Ensigns clung grimly to pulpit rails, listening to the sound of murder and mayhem in distant parts of the ship. Even sickly servitors had stopped chattering their lingua-technis. Deck lamps flickered on and off, and pict-screens displayed ghostly static. The lancet viewport had a spidery crack running through it from the *Apotheon*’s last ramming attempt.

‘Last transmission reported boarders on all decks,’ Randt said. ‘Nothing from the padre or the boatswain since then.’

‘Gun batteries?’

‘All gun crews assigned to the repelling parties.’

‘Enginarium?’

‘The engineer and his menials have barricaded themselves in. They confirm critical damage to the mainstage engines due to sabotage and vandalism.’

‘What do we have?’

‘Life support – for now,’ the midshipman informed her. ‘Vox-comms, auspectia and targeting all still on line. Limited manoeuvrability through docking thrusters and, of course, the lance... But that depends upon the enginarium holding out.’

Heiss nodded slowly.

The lone defence monitor had made good on its promise to take the fight to the invading Cholercaust fleet. The *Apotheon*’s lance had visited crippling damage on a score of bloated troop transports, Adeptus Astartes frigates and daemonic vessels, as well as destroying outright an Infidel-

class raider displaying traitor colours. The monitor had also managed to damage several other craft with strikes from her reinforced Voss prow. The larger vessels, including a Traitor battle-barge, paid the *Apotheon* no heed. No Cholercaustian would offend their Blood God with distant and cowardly thunder from their cannons. Nearly the entire Chaos fleet was now in equatorial low orbit around Certus-Minor, having disgorged their bays and freight compartments of all description of overladen landing craft. Several smaller ships, piratical marauders and assault boats had managed to acquire the defence monitor, deploying grapnels and hull-mounted harpoons to entangle the *Apotheon* before cutting her open and flooding the Adeptus Ministorum vessel with cannibalistic killers.

Heiss jumped as a solitary impact struck the command deck bulkhead. They had been expecting it and still it had made her heart leap in her chest. She had ordered the bulkhead sealed off and put two members of the Naval security team on the door. It seemed ridiculous now as the two flak-armoured figures backed from the thunder building on the bulkhead with their lascarbines clutched to their sides. The boarders had reached the bridge – which meant that they must have finished their slaughter spree and picking through the innards of the repelling parties. The bulkhead was designed to resist the void in the event of a hull breach and so had a fair chance of holding the fists, rifle butts and improvised rams of the cannibal marauders. Still, all eyes remained on the metal and pressure wheel of the door. All but Midshipman Randt's. He was looking at the *Apotheon*'s long range auspectral scope, and up at the cracked lancet bridge port. For a few moments he could not speak. He simply looked back and forth between scope and armaplas.

‘Commander...’

Heiss looked at him, and then at what he was looking at through the viewport. She got up out of her throne.

‘W-what is it?’ she murmured. Others turned and saw.

The prow of the defence monitor was drifting around from the creamy curvature of the cemetery world to the darkness of the void, where the Keeler Comet was making its unnatural pass, the bloody smear of the comet's tail tracing its almost sentient change of direction and parabolic turn around the planet. This, like the colossal fleet that had been following the wandering comet like an omen, had been startling enough. Out beyond the melt-streaming surface of the bloody berg of ice, rock and metal, though, was something truly shocking. A colossal vessel. Larger than anything Heiss had witnessed over Ultrageddon, Cypra Mundi or Port Maw. Everyone on the bridge stared, and for a moment the horror that awaited them behind the bulkhead was forgotten.

‘Dimensions...’

The midshipman had already checked. ‘Estimated six hundred and seventy cubic kilometres.’

Heiss shook her head. It was bigger than the Keeler Comet, bigger than Certus-Minor's dwarf moons.

‘What is it?’ Randt marvelled. ‘A hulk?’

‘Magnification!’ the commander snapped, and Randt had the portside lancet bring up the craft in greater detail. Beyond its sheer size, the glorious architecture of the craft was breathtaking. Colossal lancets, arches and stained-glass observation ports. The clean lines of Gothic design and detail: mullions, transoms, fan vaults, spandrels, quatrefoils and clerestory layering. Void steeples and etherspires reached up from great halls, cathedrex and monasterial superstructures all nestled between sensoria, the elongated barrels of long-range lances, nova cannon and squat plasma cannonades. The magnificent weaponry, as well as the gargantuan Scartix engine coils upon which the structures and emplacements sat, was long lost to the Imperium. Cutting the behemoth in four were solar wings of burnished adamantium, giving the vessel the bold and unusual design of two Imperial aquilas – one slotted within the other.

Four armoured wings. Four engine coil talons. A monasterial body of supra-Gothic splendour. Four sculpted heads of aquiline majesty, between which the vast craft hid a far larger weapon, the yawning mouth of an enormous torpedo launch tube.

‘Closer...’ Heiss ordered and the screen rendered maximum magnification.

Close up the craft’s Gothic magnificence assumed the macabre and chilling status of a ruin. The vessel seemed completely without power, as evidenced in the expanse of black glass, the tall dark arches and empty lancet ports. The vessel was running without lamps or nav-strobes and seemed devoid of the kind of pods, hump shuttles and barges that might be expected to swarm around a structure of its size. The cold stone and metal of its massive construction was stunning from a distance, but close up was gaunt and weathered. The stone was cracked, granular and disintegrating, the victim of an eternity of etherical erosion. The solar inlaying was shattered, and the great adamantium expanse and detail of the wings was tarnished with even greater age. In places, it seemed the only thing holding the integrity of the structure together were the growths of warpsidium and immaterial deposits spreading out from the nooks like a sterile cancer. Stranger still, the craft wouldn’t have been visible at all against the backdrop of the empty space were it not for the spectral fire that burned across every surface and suffused the derelict vessel with a golden, phantasmal glow.

‘Chaos reinforcements?’ Randt asked finally.

Heiss snorted at the thought that the Cholercaust actually required reinforcing.

‘Looks like an Adeptus Astartes vessel. A monastery or star fortress,’ she replied. ‘Any signature readings, identicoda, hell – a nameplate?’

The midshipman moved along the runebank and put his eye to a monocular viewer. He double checked his reading with a nearby cogitator.

‘Nothing.’ he said. ‘She doesn’t match any known records. As far as the Imperium is concerned, she doesn’t exist.’

The incessant hammering on the bulkhead door grew as the corridor beyond filled with Khornate raiders. A nearby servitor’s jaw suddenly went to work on a stream of code-chatter that drew Randt to its runescreen.

‘I have a power signature,’ the midshipman called. ‘It’s arming torpedoes.’

The commander sat back down in her throne. ‘Ready thrusters for evasive manoeuvres.’

‘Aye, commander.’

‘Charge the lance for return fire.’

‘Aye.’

The bridge watched the ruined star fortress as the eyes of the colossal aquila heads lit up. The dark orbits of the colossal structures were vents for the great torpedo tube running between them, and they flared brightly as the spectral gleam of a warhead erupted from the star fortress’s primary weapon. Heiss watched the ghostly torpedo fly straight and true towards Certus-Minor. As it streaked away from the mobile monastery, she watched the aurulent ghostfire of its appearance suddenly intensify to a halo of plasmic propulsion.

‘Did you see that?’ Randt said. Heiss nodded in silence, heart in her mouth, as she watched an illusion sear into reality and that reality rocket into the side of the Keeler Comet.

‘God-Emperor...’ she mumbled, but it had already happened.

The Keeler Comet, which had been traversing the galaxy for aeons and had last passed through the Imperium ten thousand years before, exploded. The flash of the torpedo’s impact picked out the irregular shape of the Ruinous object before the destructive force of detonation ripped through the body, wracking it to its frozen core and smashing it into a billion astral

splinters. Within moments the comet was no longer there, just the bloody reminder of its void-smearing tail. Instead, the comet had become a rapidly tumbling apocalyptic heavenfall of blood-black ice shards, enormous rock fragments and rare metal nuggets, accelerating towards Certus-Minor at the speed of a bolt-round. The violently transformed Keeler had changed direction once again, this time blasted towards the cemetery world's all-embracing, gravitational pull.

Heiss and Randt stared at each other in horror. The flesh-hungry marauders at the bulkhead were forgotten. None of them would survive the coming armageddon.

'Thrusters, now!' Heiss shouted. The *Apotheon* might not have very much manoeuvrability, but what it did have the commander intended to exploit in getting the lance in position to blast incoming fragments of ice and debris on course to hit the vulnerable ship.

'Enemy vessels disengaging,' Randt reported.

Heiss took a deep breath of satisfaction. The pirate captains of the raiders and armed freighters that had grappled the *Apotheon* had no intention of weathering the coming storm with the defence monitor, and were doing their best to haul off. The Cholercaust fleet below, stationed in low orbit, would not be so fortunate. Unlike the marauders, they would not see catastrophe coming. The ravenous raiders swarming the blood-splattered decks of the *Apotheon* had been abandoned by their Chaos captains and continued in ignorance to breach the bridge bulkhead. The degenerates would not be denied their last supper and communion with the dark lord of blood and vengeance. They would get through the bulkhead eventually and when they did, it would be carnage on the command deck.

'Randt,' Heiss called.

'Commander?' the midshipman answered, a tremor in his voice.

'Get me the Adeptus Astartes.'

‘The Excoriators haven’t been responding to our vox-hailing,’ Randt told her. Heiss could imagine why.

‘Get me somebody. Anybody. The Excoriators have to know what is happening up here.’

Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh hunted like an animal through the lonely maze of ambulatories and tight alleys that was the cemetery world city. Like a predator of the deep, a clawed fiend stalking through the night or a mythic Fenrisian wolf, blood-tracking its doomed prey. He felt his ancient skin tighten over his blood-engorged, muscular frame. His brute biceps, globed shoulders and rockrete-hard chest pressed against the constraints of his World Eaters plate. He could feel the Blood God’s blessing – slabs of bronze, threading through the engineered tissue of his superhuman body like streaks of fat. Part flesh, part unfeeling lump of brazen indestructibility, Umbragg had served his master well.

With his warband, the *Clysm*, the World Eaters champion had fought on a thousand worlds, butchered human and alien alike in the name of wanton carnage, and brought glory to Khorne’s name through his prosecution of crusades, the slaughter of the Dark Prince of Pleasure’s perverse followers and the taking of skulls on an obscene scale. He had killed at the great Doombreed’s side, slayed with Skarbrand, murdered his own with Khârn the Betrayer and fought in every Black Crusade to ever strike fear into the weak heart of the Imperium. He had served with his daemon-father, the Primarch Angron himself, during the Dominion of Fire, on war-torn Armageddon and before the walls of the Imperial Palace on doomed Terra. Now, he served the Pilgrim – daemon prince and Right Claw of Khorne – leader of the Cholercaust Blood Crusade, who would take the Blood God’s disciples back to Ancient Terra and finish what they had started.

Blood-furious, Umbragg slowed to a trembling halt, his chainaxes like two silent scorpion claws held at his sides. They trembled not through fear – his scarred brain knew nothing of the emotion, bar what he saw others feel in his maniac presence – but through fury. His body quaked.

His gore-rusted plate rattled. Elsewhere in the city, his brothers had found their quarry. He heard bolt-fire and the scream of axes. He felt the death of innocents only streets away and glory stripped from him by lesser World Eaters. Warband brothers of the Anointed, the Crimson Covenant and Sons of Skalathrax had killed and been killed in a battle that had stricken the killer-crowded city like a blood clot to the heart.

In common with all of the Cholercaust's victories, the cemetery world had fallen swiftly and easily. Such a god-honouring burden was the World Eaters' to shoulder. They were the victims of their own vicious success. This was why the Pilgrim had led them on the blood comet's path. Only the heavily fortified worlds of Segmentum Solar and Terra itself held the challenge Khorne's servants demanded. Somewhere on the cemetery world, however, the Emperor's Angels were surviving, and this filled Umbragg's flesh with simultaneous rage and desire. The False Emperor's pawns had to be destroyed, but they had to die at Umbragg's hand. Only He of the Brazen Flesh deserved such a sacrifice.

His murderous instincts had led him away from the havoc and carnage, out through the cobbled, labyrinthine slope-streets of a district already torched and sundered. The tall walls of chapels, hermitages and domiciles smoked and curled with flame. Blood splattered the streets in acts of violence past enjoyed. Guardsmen with antiquated weaponry, thin flak and dressed in sombre and ridiculous ceremonial robes littered the gutters. The ease of their butchery was evident. Umbragg felt the fluttering heartbeat of a dying Certusian nearby.

A mindless slave-soldier, naked and smeared from head to foot in gore, burst from an alley and raced across the cobbles with a nail-spiked club. By the time Umbragg had stalked up to the scene, the feral world cult conscript had beaten the brains from the broken body of the Guardsman. Umbragg felt the mortal's heart hammer in his chest and then stop. He savoured the moment, but it only served to stoke his fury and remind him

of the emptiness inside his own chest that should have been filled with the murderous delight of gluttonous life-taking and the slaughter of heroes. Without even bringing the chainaxe to life, the World Eater bludgeoned the slave-soldier into the ground with the razored weight of the weapon.

The feral worlder died instantly. His heart stopped with sudden efficiency. Beyond, an Adeptus Astartes hung from the shattered, skeletal metalwork of a burned-out building. His helmetless face was black with blood and the severity of mob-issued beating. His plate had been rent and punctured. An arm was missing. The clean pits of bolt-rounds mottled the ivory of his armour. The embleme of his Chapter could just be made out on his axe-cleaved shoulder plate. The Excoriators. Umbragg snorted. Dorn's breed. A hateful derision started building in his twisted mind, but it died moments later. The World Eater's instincts had not brought him to the eye of the storm for nothing, to savour the abhorrent calm of aftermath. He felt the Blood God's eye on him, judging this wasted time. Here, away from the rush of daemoniacal destruction that the Cholercaust was bringing to other parts of the city.

Umbragg bridled. On the light breeze, he felt the fearful beating of other hearts. Out beyond the ancient stone of the walls, the burning buildings and the raging multitudes of tainted mortals, armoured slaughterkin and daemon madness. Amongst the overpowering stench of the tomb, the stale tang of old rot and the death-saturated scent of grave dust, Umbragg detected the sweet perfume of life and the living. There were mortals here – thousands of them – hidden from the inevitable and hoarding their skulls. Like a carnivore, enraptured at the prospect of fresh hunting grounds, Umbragg stood, his fists tight about his axe shafts; the primordial darkness of his brain struggling with what he could sense but could not see; his blood coursing with rage at the prospect of plots, scheming and trickery.

The World Eater did not see the ghost behind him. The darkness of a shadowy alcove that became a silhouette in the street smoke. The silhouette that became armoured detail. The revenant that became reality at the Traitor's back. Umbragg never saw the rachidian horror of bone-moulded plate or the auric flame that danced off the ceramite's bitter, black surface. He never saw the rent faceplate of the damned legionnaire appear over his brain-speckled shoulder, nor the burn of unnatural life glowing within the skull-socket of the being within. All the berserker heard was the nasty chatter of teeth before the cursed edge of the legionnaire's short sword slid across the World Eater's armoured neck. Passing through the plate like an apparition, the blade assumed its lethality within, its keen edge – honed to eternity – slicing through the World Eater's brazen flesh and cutting his throat to the bone.

Chainaxes clattered to the cobbles. The World Eater crashed to the floor in a heavy metal avalanche of ceramite and hatred. His killer had gone – vanished back into the smoke and ether from whence it came. Umbragg of the Brazen Flesh – World Eater, Traitor, mass-murderer and champion of Khorne – bled his remaining life into the gutter. Alone, the infamous monster and warrior-tyrant died an unknown death, his warped hearts beating their thunderous last in a street so small and insignificant to the rest of the galaxy that it didn't even have a name.

Zachariah Kersh could have little idea what had started in the streets below. The corpus-captain stomped along the roofside, his boots smashing through the tiles and punching into the lead and strutage beneath. The Excoriators had made good on their escape from the cloistrium, ascending through the floors of the sepulchre before smashing their way up into the roof using their fists and blades. A messy climb had taken them up through the balconies of a block-domicilia where, out of the range of pistol-fire, the Adeptus Astartes had watched the great *Punisher* silenced.

The honoured war machine had done the bloody work of ten immortals, blasting behemoths, turning cultist hordes to flesh-spat and driving

back hell-spawned daemons. It was the World Eaters that finally beat the cannon. It took a fair number of their brethren with its cold, calculating barrage of rhythmic havoc. The cloistrium became a smouldering pit of twisted ceramite and flesh that refused to die. World Eaters stormed the Thunderfire cannon's position, crawling, limbless, overcome with fury and frustration. Bastard-brothers of the Traitor Legion – attracted by the roar of battle and the copper-tinge of death on the air – threw themselves into the chaos, climbing over their wounded brethren who filled the ordnance-pounded crater the space had become. Other warbands visited their fury on adjoining walls, smashing through old brick and mortar with their hammers, axes and shoulders. It was through such an opening that heretic Angels of the Crimson Covenant gained access to the rear of the sepulchre and came up behind the itinerant cannon, hacking into its armoured shell and ammunition feed with their chainaxes.

Kersh leapt from the edge of the domicilia and across the street to the mezzanine of an opposing tower-obsequium. The mezzanine floor cracked and shuddered as Melmoch followed – the Epistolary looking like pale hell as he demolished a stained-glass window with his force scythe and climbed through. Novah, still clutching the company standard, helped the grievously injured Chaplain on the take-off. Kersh grabbed Shadrath's armour where a World Eater's battleaxe had opened up his plate, and helped him to the window. Beyond, the Epistolary smashed and clambered his way up through the tower.

With Brother Novah and Skase across, the Scourge risked a glance down at the street below. The roaring rose up to meet him. All he saw were the maniac multitudes. Thoroughfares and posternways crowded with cultist fighters, World Eaters and their armoured renegade cousins stomping barbarously through the throng, and daemons crawling up walls and bounding fiendishly between ledges.

Obsequa City was a testament to insanity. Churches, chancelleries and frater houses were raging infernos, lighting up the necroplex beyond – still a wild ocean of charging heretics and Chaos cultists. The night sky flashed with the occasional streak of lance-fire, although to Kersh's knowledge only the Adeptus Ministorum defence monitor *Apotheon* had remained.

‘Corpus-captain!’ Novah called, prompting the Scourge to duck in through the smashed window and follow the trail of destruction up through the tower. Every rooftop and steeple was an opportunity to climb higher. Every box-stoop and maintenance portico took a superhuman leap of faith, across the narrow spaces of cultist-filled streets and quads. Gargoyle-encrusted walls, drain conduits and masonry scaffolding helped the Excoriators work up through the steep, climbing architecture of the city and on towards the imposing structure and distinctive dome of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum.

As the Adeptus Astartes edged around cupolas, ran along apexes and braved the vertiginous heights of gable walls and slender diameters of bridging supports, they could hear the Cholercaustians below, screaming up the cobbled passages and stairwells to get ahead of them. Where slave-soldiers ascended the fussy architecture of the heights in their path, Kersh and Skase had stamping boots and the finger-slicing tips of their blades waiting. Daemons were a much bigger problem, with the horned heralds of the Blood God's pantheon forced to leap further and further as Epistolary Melmoch demolished spires and walkways behind the escaping Excoriators. A huge flock of winged furies had taken to circling the towertops surrounding the Mausoleum, occasionally forcing the Space Marines to take cover in alcoves or press themselves flat to roofs in order to escape a swarm-mauling of wings and daggered claws. The monstrous myriad plunged through minarets and thrashed their thunderbolt course through belfries and cathedral lunette windows. Kersh saw blasted specimens fall from the flock as they ritually circled an abbey tower on

the outskirts of the city, las-fire cutting daemons down with each pass. With horror the Scourge realised that one of Keturah's sniper Scouts had escaped attention and had maintained his isolated defence against the countless masses.

As he hauled himself up a steeple maintenance ladder, Kersh noticed that the almost clockwork circling of the daemon flock had failed to materialise. Peering around the copper tiling, the corpus-captain saw the flock molesting the abbey tower, crawling about the exterior and clawing through a balistraria. It became obvious to the Excoriator that this was how the Cholercaust had dealt with the Tenth Company sniper threat. As he ascended the ladder, the remaining Excoriators behind him, Kersh saw the bell tower light up. An explosion – a grenade, the Scourge suspected – had taken out the belfry, the sniper and a number of the daemons, which plummeted towards the ground on what was left of their smashed, flaming wings. Pausing on the ladder, Kersh rested his forehead against the cool metal and mouthed a cult observation – a ritual thanks for a brother's sacrifice. Sickened to the bottom of his stomach, the corpus-captain realised how many observances he had missed during the Long Night of the Cholercaust invasion.

As he reached the top of the maintenance ladder, Kersh leapt for the stone guttering of an adjacent shrine and hauled himself up onto the waterlogged expanse of its flat, modest roof. There the corpus-captain waited, both for his brothers and the daemon swarm's clawing dive through the rooftops.

'Chaplain!' Squad Whip Skase roared as Shadrath's flailing form was snatched from the ladder. It was sudden and shocking – even for the Adeptus Astartes warriors. The Scourge watched the Excoriators Chaplain dragged off into the night sky, tossed between the predatory daemons in the infernal flock. Shadrath was still fighting, but his crozius arcanum fell into the street below, ringing off the wall-clutching metal stairwells.

‘Keep moving!’ the Scourge called at the remaining Excoriators as they watched the Chaplain disappear.

Preoccupied with not falling to their deaths, and fighting off daemon aerial assaults with nothing but short swords, the Emperor’s Angels had little idea what was happening in shadowy streets storeys below their boots. Amongst the hallowed halls of sepulchres and sanctuaries, and in the ambulatories snaking between them, butchers were being butchered – and not by each other.

World Eaters of the Foresworn were lured into the pillared crypts below the Vault of Divine Transcendence, where ghostly apparitions stalked the armoured brutes, taking them one by one – infuriating their dwindling number further and making them ever easier to slaughter.

Slorak the Undying failed to live up to his name after unloading his bolt pistol’s entire magazine into an advancing, flame-swathed revenant and having his horned skull cleaved in two.

Berserker-brothers of the Bloodstorm issued their crude battle-cry before charging at two power armoured shadows in a corner of the Serenity Square. The World Eaters clearly thought the Angels were formerly encountered Excoriators. Their axe-wielding frenzy only served to hew rents and bloody gashes in each other’s plate, however, with the adamantium-toothed weapons passing clean through the warrior shades. Slave-soldiers, foaming at the mouth, found the Bloodstorm corpses gutted and piled at the centre of the square.

Techmarine Tezgavayn – more flesh warped over twisted machine than superman – was sent into a mechanical fury by phantom auspex returns amongst the statues of Imperial saints on the Boulevard of the Nine Sorrows. Smashing the statues to pieces, Tezgavayn was drawn to a solemn sculpture of Corvus the Sabine, where a clutch of ghostly grenades were waiting for the mechanical monstrosity. The grenades might have burned with a phantasmal glow but the armour-cracking explosions that

issued from them felt very real to the Traitor Techmarine, as his body and workings were blown across the boulevard.

Skull-draped Kronosian Warlords simply disappeared whilst trailing the progress of the Slaughterfiend daemon engine *Fellclaw* as it hunted for Adeptus Astartes sighted in the Viaticus Quarter. Lord Drakkar – Blood Champion and Traitor Angel figurehead for the Hellion Dawn sadists – was torched along with a hundred of his depraved followers in a blind alley known as ‘The Quietus’. Charred cultist survivors reported sightings of silent warriors in sable armour who corralled the Chaos lord and his sadists with flamers before cremating the crush.

With World Eaters stalked and slaughtered across the city by the revenant crusaders, and daemonkin instinctively giving the empyreal intruders a wide berth, Kersh and his Excoriators reached the Memorial Mausoleum ahead of the anarchy swallowing the city.

Sliding down the steep roof of a monastic cell-block, the tiles shattering before the toes of their boots, the Adeptus Astartes reached the edge of the St Aloysion Hospice. The porch balconies of individual cells looked out on the Mausoleum’s impressive architecture, and a narrow strait ran between the brother and sister wings. Plunging down onto the top floor balcony, Kersh led the way, dropping back and forth across the open space, the Space Marine crashing through some porches, while bounding between others. The descent was similarly awkward amongst his brother Excoriators, but with the cultist hordes of the Cholercaust surging up the streets and closing on the Mausoleum, every moment counted.

Kersh dropped the final few floors and skidded on the cobbles as he raced for the great metal doors of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum. He felt Brother Novah close behind, the standard still clutched feverishly in his gauntlets; an exhausted Melmoch trailed behind the bearer, and Skase brought up the rear. The arterial boulevards and thoroughfares released a deluge of cultist madness on the open ground before the

Mausoleum. The roaring had returned, as had the killer glint of a thousand eyes. Kersh felt the chill of cowardice shiver down his spine. He was not comfortable running from such a feeble foe, but numbers alone would prevent the Excoriators closing the Mausoleum's great doors if all four Space Marines did not get there first.

Kersh hurdled several bikes, the chunky, armoured cycles having been parked in an orderly row around the Mausoleum before their riders had been assigned their doomed sniping duties. Melmoch once again brought his devastating warp-drawn power to bear on the enemy. Flailing arcs of distilled death erupted from the Librarian's scythe-shaft. The energy danced across the front row of sprinting maniacs, detonating body after body and turning the riotous vanguards into a curtain of gore through which following slave-soldiers ran. The very essence of death was everywhere, like something you could touch and harness. The Excoriators Epistolary roared his denial and sent the second row the stomach-churning way of the first.

Kersh was in. Novah followed, the two Space Marines slamming their packs into the adamantium alloy of the massive door and heaving it across the tomb egress. Skase shot past Melmoch, literally skidding through the blood lapping against the exterior wall and in through the closing gap. Down on his chest, with Kersh and Novah putting their backs into the door, Skase yelled back furiously at the Librarian.

‘Melmoch, get in here – now!’

An Excoriator flashed through the opening, slipping down onto his side. It wasn't Melmoch. It was Squad Whip Ishmael. ‘Ishmael...’ Skase began, but the greeting died in the Excoriator's throat. Propping himself up on the tip of his crackling lightning claws, Ishmael looked up. Gone was the Escharan nobility of his calling and the eyes of a battle-brother and friend. Ishmael's eyes were claret red. His head was a nest of purple veins and

arteries, throbbing with blood and darkness. He was now Ishmael the animal. The animal that wanted to kill.

Both Excoriators scrambled to their feet on the cold marble floor of the Mausoleum antechamber. Ishmael came at his chief whip with savage sweeps of his power talons. Skase lightly deflected the blade tips with his gladius, not daring to risk the short sword against the full cutting capabilities of Ishmael's claws. Grabbing at the gall-fevered wrist of the squad whip, Skase turned and slammed the gladius straight through Ishmael's armoured palm. The squad whip took little heed of the bold move, chesting the Excoriator forwards and driving the claw-tips of his right gauntlet through Skase's suit pack.

Weaponless, the brute Ishmael expected his chief whip to back away and proceeded to slice off the gladius blade-length protruding from the back of his talon with his other claw. By the time he feasted his blood-swamped eyes on the Excoriator, Skase was coming straight back at him. The chief whip slammed the sole of his boot into the animal-Ishmael's chestplate, unbalancing the deviant and knocking him back towards the door.

The full weight of the advancing Cholercaust was behind the thick metal, with row upon blood-crazed row charging forwards against each other and the Mausoleum door in an effort to earn the Blood God's favour and end an Adeptus Astartes. The Scourge and Brother Novah continued in their desperate, marble-grazing efforts. Ishmael turned his unseeing eyes on his brothers. Novah was nearest, so Novah died first. Ishmael spun around and buried a crackling claw all the way up to the knuckle in the Fifth Company standard bearer. The standard itself jangled to the floor, and as Ishmael retracted his devastating talons, the butchered Excoriator followed it. Kersh immediately felt the effect on the door as hundreds of the Blood God's servants lent their weight to an irresistible entrance. A tattooed hiver managed to slip his emaciated and gore-slick form through the gap, along with a mass of clutching arms. The hiver screamed his

demented triumph, but Ishmael silenced the annoyance with a savage headbutt that brained the cultist. As the hiver scum dropped like a sack of lead weights, Ishmael swung back on the Excoriators. Skase ran at the blood-mad squad whip as Kersh tried to reach for his gladius. Ishmael spat his fury at both – the Excoriator’s murderous mind struggling to choose between the pair.

A stream of soul lightning struck the degenerate in the side, smashing him across the antechamber and into the thick stone wall of the Mausoleum. Ishmael clawed at the immaterial energy and snapped like a trapped beast. Melmoch was through the door. The Librarian was on his ceramite knees, still dripping with cultist blood from the carnage outside. Scrabbling beneath the warpstream, Skase joined his corpus-captain on the door. Launching their armoured frames at the adamantium alloy with renewed fervour, the Excoriators slammed it closed, shearing off the twitching limbs of slave-soldiers clawing their way through. As Skase held the great door closed, Kersh hauled at the pinion mechanism that drove a heavy adamantium bar across the portal and into the wall.

Warp lightning arced off Ishmael’s plate causing the dried blood that covered it to smoulder. Ishmael screeched his hatred of the psyker and his unnatural powers, flicking his claws out and leaning into the soul-scalding stream of energy. Melmoch’s face was similarly contorted, the Epistolary trying his best to angle the shaft of his force scythe and the otherworldly energies spilling from it at the squad whip. Blood bubbled behind Ishmael’s eyes and his nostrils split with snorting exertion. Pure hatred alone drove the squad whip’s canine teeth down out of his gums like fangs. Veins and arteries split his skin, and the Excoriator issued a horrifying scream. Ishmael exploded. Shards of ceramite shrapnel flew in all directions, *pranging* off the surface of the door and embedding themselves in the stone of the wall and floor. It rained blood inside the Mausoleum as

what was left of Ishmael coated the antechamber and the Excoriators within.

As the goremist settled, Kersh could see Melmoch on his knees. The Librarian's head was lowered and he was leaning against the shaft of his devastating weapon. The corpus-captain and his chief whip slid down the wet surface of the metal door beside Brother Novah in exhaustion. Kersh checked the Excoriator for any signs of life, but there were none. Ishmael had finished him.

The hammering was awful. The Cholercaust had run its course. Only the Excoriators remained, and every slaughter-crazed servant of the Blood God was either outside the Mausoleum's mighty walls or on their way there, to claim the few remaining skulls on the cemetery world in the name of their dark overlord. Kersh could imagine the tsunami of fists, boots, weapons and foreheads slamming against the unfeeling alloy of the great door. The nightmarish vision scarred his mind, the murderous crush of slave-soldiers, cultists, renegade Angels, daemons and World Eaters, all desperate to find a way inside.

Palatine Sapphira and the pontifex had told Kersh that the great door was the only entrance to the memorial tomb, and the corpus-captain believed them. He was not concerned about the ground floor. However, dotted across the Mausoleum's exterior architecture were ornamental embrasures and aquila-shaped boltslits, apertures through which the Sisters of the August Vigil might defend Umberto II's remains and his great Mausoleum from raids and civil unrest. Neither Palatine Sapphira or the tomb's architect could have imagined the defensive necessities required to hold a host the size and devastating capability of the Cholercaust at bay. The walls were strong and Kersh had some limited faith in the great entrance door, but the Excoriator knew that the Blood God's disciples would find a way in – the unmanned boltslits and embrasures in the upper storeys seemed a likely weakness.

Kersh's gaze settled on the Fifth Company's battle standard, still clutched in Novah's gauntlet. Skase was staring at the blood-speckled banner also. The two Excoriators looked hard at one another. Snatching up the standard, Kersh slipped Novah's gladius from his ceramite grip and handed it to the unarmed Skase.

'Melmoch, watch the door,' the Scourge ordered amongst the thunderous din of howling and shoulders striking the metal egress. Still on his knees, his eyes on the floor, Melmoch raised a weak hand.

Kersh ran through the anteroom and across the marble expanse of the Holy Sepulchre. Skase followed with difficulty. Ishmael's lightning claw had raked through the chief whip's pack, damaging the plant and some of the motive function hardware. The plate's power supply was waning and the unsupported deadweight of the ceramite was slowing the Excoriator.

As the Space Marines crossed the open space of the Mausoleum the funereal beauty of the building was lost upon them: the intricate scrolling on the wall internments; the silver lettering adorning the floor slabs, recording the names of past pontiffs and cardinals; loggia supports and fat sculpted pillars reaching up to the exquisite detail of the Mausoleum's domed ceiling – each hand-painted illustration a depiction of Umberto II's long and spiritually-productive life. Candles and incense burned from a thousand suspended sconces, and stern statues of ecclesiarchs already elevated to sainthood adorned the sepulchre space in a ring around a simple block-crypt of obsidian brick. A silver-plated elevator was used to transport clerics and Adepta Sororitas deep below the sepulchre to a small complex of condition-controlled crypt chambers residing behind a thick vault door.

Within, laid out for private pilgrimage and display, were the surviving remains of Umberto II – Ruling Ecclesiarch of the Adeptus Ministorum and High Lord of Terra. A circular gallery spiralled about the sepulchre's exterior, made up of marble steps and landings, providing access to the

wall-combs, vaultia and the upper storeys of the Mausoleum. It was the infuriating length of the gallery – winding around the sepulchre – that the Scourge and Skase negotiated. As they ran, the Excoriators could still hear the furious multitudes outside, echoing about the great dome, and could see the warp-spent Melmoch on his knees at the centre of the antechamber.

‘What now?’ Skase barked, as he drove his failing suit on along the gallery. Kersh didn’t respond, but he did keep pausing at intervals to stare out of the embrasure boltslits and allow the chief whip to catch up. Just before the locked entrance to the Sisters of Battle’s mission house, Kersh stopped and stared out through the stone aperture at the chaos beyond. The Memorial Mausoleum commanded the best view of Obsequa City that anyone could expect. The cemetery world capital wasn’t much to look at now: an inferno-tormented, partially demolished ruin, tainted with innocent blood, and a rockrete menagerie for murderous deviants, traitors and filth-entities from the warp. ‘Kersh!’ Skase said, soaking up the hopelessness beside him. ‘What are we going to do?’

The Scourge looked blankly at the Excoriator. He heard Melmoch call weakly from the sepulchre floor. Ignoring them both, Kersh took the mission house door off with a single strike of his boot. Striding across the small transeptory and past the cell-cloisters, Kersh moved swiftly through the sacristy and Lady Chapel. Near the palatine’s solitoria, Kersh found what he was looking for: the mission house armoury and the vox-berth.

‘Raid what’s left of the armoury. Grab us some weapons and grenades – something with punch,’ Kersh told Skase as he went to work on the frequency matrix of the vox-bank. Kersh heard Melmoch call again over the boom of the door assault below.

‘What for?’ Skase seared. ‘It’s over.’

Kersh dropped the vox-hailer and stormed at the chief whip. ‘I’ll tell you when it’s over!’

Skase fixed the Scourge with a gaze that was pure reason: no fear, no despair or sorrow.

‘The city’s lost,’ Skase shouted, ‘the Fifth is gone. You hear that?’ The chief whip let the rumble of mayhem intrude from outside. ‘They will get in, and when they do – no matter how hard we fight, no matter what honour we bring to the primarch or our Lord Katafalque – our blood will be theirs. They will end us, and those people out there, whom you confidently placed in the bosom of the earth, will rot there...’

Kersh roared his recriminations at the Excoriator, and Skase roared back.

‘Corpus-captain!’ Melmoch called. The two Space Marines burned into each other with accusatory eyes. Kersh looked out at the Holy Sepulchre and then back at Skase.

‘There is no dishonour in doubt,’ the Scourge told him. ‘You think Katafalque didn’t have doubts, out on the walls of the Imperial Palace? You think Dorn was not crippled by the deep melancholies of the unknown as he stood over the Emperor’s shattered form? There is no dishonour in doubt,’ Kersh repeated. ‘The measure of a primarch, a Chapter Master, a battle-brother, is what he does next. We are Excoriators. This is our burden. These are our trials. Trials of the mind, the spirit and the flesh. War through attrition. Victory through endurance, and we shall endure.’

Skase’s gaze drifted to the floor. He nodded, slowly and to himself.

‘Yes,’ he said, unlocking the seals on his gauntlets and slipping them off.

The vox crackled discordance before erupting with a solitary voice.

‘...please respond. This is His Beneficent Majesty’s planetary defence monitor *Apotheon* hailing Obsequa City – Fifth Company Adeptus Astartes Excoriators Chapter... Please respond.’

‘*Apotheon*, this is Corpus-Captain Zachariah Kersh of the Fifth. We receive.’

‘My lord,’ the voice crackled, ‘we’ve been trying to raise you. The interference...’

‘Listen to me carefully, mortal. I do not have time to ask you twice,’ Kersh boomed at the vox-hailer. ‘I saw your vengeance in the sky. I need to know your status.’

‘My lord, there is something I need—’

‘Mortal, believe me when I tell you that many lives – including my own – depend on the choice of your next words. Your status – have you been boarded?’

‘This is Commander Heiss,’ a female voice responded after a pause. ‘We have been boarded.’

‘Do you have steerage way and power to your weapons systems?’

‘Not for long, my lord. There has been a strange development up here,’ the commander replied.

‘Get ready for another one,’ Kersh told her, staring at maps and schemata located about the vox-berth. He proceeded to stab digits into a glyphpad on the vox-bank with the ceramite tip of his finger. ‘I’m sending you coordinates for a location on the planet’s surface. After examination of them you will reach the conclusion that the coordinates reside within Obsequa City, just outside the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum, to be exact.’

‘My lord...’

‘You will target these coordinates and manoeuvre your lance into position for an orbital strike in exactly fifteen minutes’ time.’

‘I can’t—’

‘You can, commander, and you will. That is a direct order. A great deal rides on whether you can find it within yourself to obey that order. Let me be clear. I am ordering you to destroy the Memorial Mausoleum.’

‘And a good part of the city,’ Heiss shot back.

‘Don’t concern yourself with that,’ the Scourge told her. ‘There is nobody left in the city.’ Kersh looked at Skase who was standing in the berth entrance holding a multimelta beside him in one hand and a heavy bolter in the other. Without his gauntlets he could only just get his thick fingers through the carryholds of the Sisters’ weaponry. The chief whip humped a pyrum-petrol fuel pack and had draped his battered shoulder plates with bandoliers of grenades and 1.00 calibre ammunition. The two Excoriators held each other’s grim gaze. ‘There is no dishonour in doubt, commander. The measure of us is what we do next. Fifteen minutes, commander. Good luck. Obsequa City out.’

As Heiss tried to interject, Kersh cut her off and dropped the vox-hailer.

‘That’s your plan?’ Skase said as the pair travelled back through the mission house transeptory.

‘I don’t plan on any of us being here in fifteen minutes,’ Kersh replied, the battle standard clutched tightly in his hand.

‘It took a lot of lives to get here,’ Skase said.

‘And now we’ve got the enemy where we want them, we’ll take a lot more.’

‘What about the people in the vault?’

‘The vault’s deep and the door’s thick. It will hold. If it could survive a meteorite impact, it’ll weather an orbital bombardment. Just.’

‘You can’t stop the Cholercaust with a single lance strike.’

‘No, but it will give these murderous bastards something to think about while we make good our withdrawal. I don’t care what they say about the Cholercaust. We have to endure – we have to survive this. Those people out there, counting on us, in the dark beneath the earth, have to survive this.’

‘Why? No planet ever has.’

‘But worlds will, once they hear of survivors. We will not stop the Cholercaust, but somebody will, somebody with hope in their heart,

resolution and belief – all three of which our survival will have put there.’

As Kersh and the chief whip stepped back out onto the gallery, the corpus-captain called, ‘Melmoch – we’re leaving.’ Kersh expected some kind of protest – a question at least – but it didn’t come. Looking over the balustrade, the two Excoriators saw the Librarian still on his knees on the antechamber floor. He was vomiting projectile streams of blood down onto the marble floor, a copious pool of which had built up around the psyker. ‘Melmoch!’ Kersh called. The roaring cacophony of the mob outside died to silence.

‘The gateway called Melmoch no longer resides in this vessel,’ the Excoriators heard the hordes outside drone in unison. The stone of the Mausoleum hummed with the chorus of voices. ‘His witch’s soul burns for eternity in the fires of my master’s ire, and it drowns in the boiling depths of his bile. I am the Pilgrim, the Prince of Pain and Right Claw of Khorne. My gene-breed flesh remembers slaughtering your kind on the ramparts of the False Emperor’s Palace, on distant Terra, many lives-taken ago. It wishes to remember again.’

Melmoch’s body began to rise above the bloody pool. Cloven hooves on thick, red legs erupted from the Librarian’s armoured knees. Great infernal claws punctured the Excoriator’s plate at the elbow, unfolding into appendages of red sinew and brazen talons. Melmoch’s armour disintegrated about the materialising beast, shards and fragments becoming embedded in the obscenely muscular daemonhide. A blood-drenched pauldron remained, the Stigmartyr symbol of the Excoriators briefly bursting into flame before smouldering to the blasphemous World Eaters jaw-glyph around a paint-bubbling globe. The Epistolary’s afflicted gaze and precious skull disappeared, swallowed whole by the Pilgrim’s gulping, dagger-toothed maw, which emerged like a surfacing ocean behemoth from the Librarian’s back and shoulders.

Shaking the freshly-morphed head from side to side, a pair of bullish horns speared their way out from the monster's temples. The thing itself did not speak, simply resorting to a foundation-shaking wrath-bellow of full realisation. With ease, the Pilgrim ripped the statue of a nearby saint out of the floor with his great claws and flung it at the Mausoleum door. The stone flew at the door, hitting the metal surface with infernal force. The door blasted open on its colossal hinges, crushing a score of slave-soldiers whose bodies were stamped into the ground by the flood of cultist pandemonium that raged into the Holy Sepulchre.

Kersh snatched a bandolier of grenades from Skase's shoulder as the Excoriator bent down to load the belt feed into the heavy bolter's breech. He snapped off several and tossed them across the breadth of the chamber, where they hit the gallery and bounced down the steps leading around and down towards the ground floor. The steps detonated, blasting the spiralling first floor gallery to dust along with the drove of blood cultists who had immediately mounted the stairwell.

Slapping shut the breech and balancing the heavy bolter on the balustrade, Skase began to hammer the endless hordes with blistering firepower. The Pilgrim tore another statue from the floor and tossed it through the air at the Excoriators. Skase leant aside and Kersh ducked as the sculpture of Saint Vatalis crashed through the embrasure behind him. Looking down on the hideous thing that had been Melmoch, Kersh came to understand the dire physical and spiritual dangers the psyker had been trying to avoid, when he put himself out during the Keeler Comet's arrival. Lifting his gaze, Kersh began to feel about his plate for the ornately decorated urn Melmoch had used. The negatively-charged dust within was used by the Sisters for consecrating Umberto II's shrine. The Epistolary had stolen the precious relic from the Mausoleum, and Kersh had intended on giving it back. Which he decided to do now.

Taking it in his hand, Kersh lobbed the urn like a grenade, over the balustrade and down onto the daemon World Eater. The pot smashed against the Pilgrim's horns, dousing the monster in the fine dust. The particles seared into the Pilgrim's daemonflesh on contact. The beast howled and screamed its torment as the psychic negativity not only broke down the horror's warp-crafted flesh but also ate away at the thing's tenuous link with reality.

'Die, you monstrous thing,' Kersh spat, as Skase continued to chew through the cultists swarming the chamber. The creature of Chaos clawed at its own dust-infected muscle and sinew, raking through its face and armoured chest. Cultists about the dissolving cage of bones screamed also and began savaging the beast with blades, nails and teeth. The surrounding slave-soldiers fell on the inner circle, tearing them apart, and before long the scene was a horrific orgy of butchery. Skase concentrated his mulching gunfire on the doorway, accompanied by throng-blasting grenades tossed by the Scourge, down through the antechamber.

A new and sickening sound rose up from the sepulchre floor. It sounded to Kersh like a thicket of trees all bending and breaking at the same time. The corpus-captain could hear snapping, fracturing and splintering. Below, at the heart of the carnage, the bodies of the dying and those who had killed them were being drawn into a bloody maelstrom. Bones were breaking and reaching out of cultist bodies, intertwining with the skeletal mesh of others in a macabre fusion, a daemon cage through which the shredded flesh and spilled gore of the cultists bubbled and swirled. Beneath the Excoriators, the Pilgrim was finding a new form. Feeding on the souls of his blood-pledged, the monster fought through the agonies Kersh had visited upon it and refused to release its terrible hold on the material universe. As more and more of the Blood God's disciples flooding the chamber were gore-assimilated by the thing, it grew. The Pilgrim's skin-rent skull emerged from the top of the carcass mountain, its

devastating claws also – although being a flesh-frame of grasping, scratching, flailing limbs, it was not short of such appendages. As it rose on its murderous altar of butchered bodies, the Pilgrim's eyes blazed white with hate and it reached out for the Emperor's Angels on the gallery.

‘Let's go!’ Kersh bawled, tugging at Skase's shoulder, but the chief whip shrugged him off, burying a fresh volley of bolt-rounds in the Pilgrim's grotesque embodiment.

‘It's not going to happen,’ Skase shouted between staccato blasts. He threw a thumb behind him. ‘The pack's shot. Power failure. My plate will only slow the both of us down.’

‘We can make it!’ the corpus-captain returned.

‘You can make it,’ Skase said, blasting at the Chosen of Khorne. ‘You must make it. Like you said, somebody's got to survive.’

With the Pilgrim growing horrifically before them, the Scourge stared at his chief whip. Skase nodded at the battle standard fluttering in Kersh's hand. ‘Keep it flying,’ he said. ‘I'll keep them entertained until the lightshow begins.’

Nodding silently, Kersh knelt down and primed the multi-melta, cycling the pyrum-petrol mix and activating the sub-molecular reaction chamber. Leaving the fuel pack on the floor, Kersh placed the heavy weapon on the balustrade. Without a word or a glance, Skase silenced the heavy bolter and moved across to the melta. He punched a vaporising beam of intense fusion through the howling Pilgrim-monstrosity before recalibrating the weapon and turning another patch of its flesh-armour to molten slag. With the bandolier in one hand and the Fifth Company's battle standard in the other, Kersh left the occupied Skase and stepped through the hole the statue had made in the wall.

Sidling out along the ledge, the Scourge looked down. The darkness below swarmed with movement, killers attracted by the bloodbath within the Mausoleum and eager to be part of it. Above, the sky was stranger still.

In low orbit Kersh could see the telltale signs of obliteration, vessels he could not see suddenly flaring into fireballs of destruction. With the *Apotheon's* lance hopefully aimed down over his head and Naval assistance light years away, Kersh could only reason that the insane captains of the Chaos fleet had decided to turn their guns on each other. It was certainly not unknown amongst the savage servants of the Blood God.

A sole winged fury swooped past, snapping at the Excoriator with its jaws. As it banked and tried to savage him again, Kersh swung the bandolier of grenades like a flail and smashed it in the wing, sending the thing careening off into the side of a building. Kersh could feel the precious seconds passing. Priming one of the grenades he let the bandolier drop into the unsuspecting crowd below. Giving the belt a few seconds advantage, and with the banner in his hand, Kersh too stepped off the ledge. There was simply no swift way down off the side of the colossal tomb. Kersh's plate buckled and cracked as he struck lower ledges and the unforgiving stone of architectural flourishes. He reached out with his hand to grab rims, boltslits and the limbs and wings of gargoyles. His boots found brief and occasional footing on carved ridges and representations that could not support his weight or the gathering force of his fall. The paint on his ceramite chipped and scuffed as he grazed the building's side.

Everything suddenly became white below as the grenades detonated in a chain reaction. The moment seemed to hesitate and Kersh felt himself momentarily slow as fiery lumps of flesh and masonry were rocketed skywards by the blast. The Scourge found himself suddenly winded as he landed on a pillartop, stomach first. He felt several things break inside. The impact had at least reined in the gathering speed of his fall, and as he rolled off, the few remaining storeys down the pillarside were uneventful. Taking in a breath, Kersh realised that he'd dropped the battle standard, and that the pole and banner had gone on ahead of him. When he struck the cobbles beside it, the epicentre of the devastating fragstorm moments

before, something snapped in his leg. The hot glow of agony washed up the limb. Getting up off the crumpled plating and pauldron on his arm, the Scourge looked down at the injury. The ceramite had split at the knee, as had his flesh, allowing a bone from his leg to erupt through the rent.

His face a mask of suppressed torture, Kersh scooped up the company standard and used it as a staff, taking the worst of the weight off the wounded leg. Reaching for his Scourge's blade, the corpus-captain clutched it feverishly in his other hand. The explosion had not gone unnoticed in the immediate vicinity and silhouettes were already running out of the smoke at him. Kersh had no time for strategy, skill or etiquette. Economy was imperative. As cultists rushed him they lost limbs and were barged aside as the Excoriator hobbled through the burned mist. A Goremongers Chaos Space Marine lost half his head, and before a World Eater had the chance to bring up the incredible length of his struggling chainsword, Kersh had turned the gladius over in his hand like a dagger and stabbed the Traitor Legionary straight through the helm with it.

Limping around the exterior of the Mausoleum as fast as his agony would allow, Kersh found what he was looking for: Keturah's Scout bikes. No longer parked in a neat line, the corpus-captain found that they had been knocked down both by the clambering hordes and the grenade detonations. Leaving the first two, which had received the worst of the grenades' attentions, Kersh hobbled around the third. Righting the vehicle and slipping his smashed leg over the saddle, he brought the bike's powerful engine to life. He hadn't ridden a bike since he was a neophyte himself, but it immediately came back to him. The solidity and weight of the vehicle. Its thick tyres and aching power, and the satisfaction derived from clinging to the handlebars as the galaxy streamed effortlessly by. It almost made him forget his leg.

Slipping the length of the company standard through the empty shotgun rack and down the side of the bike, Kersh flicked on the vehicle's powerful

arc lamp. The beam cut through the acrid murk, but where Kersh had expected to find demented cult-soldiers and renegades he found only a solitary armoured figure amongst bodies. His midnight revenant, the haunter of both his daydreams and nightmares. Kersh levelled his eyes at the silent Angel. The Scourge thought he knew now what the phantasm meant. At times he'd thought that it was a further affliction of the Darkness, at others some manifest damage to the brain inflicted by Ezrachi and his apothecarion aides. He'd questioned whether he'd gone mad; he'd heard of other forms of madness. Prophets, prognosticators and sometimes plain mortals who had glimpsed a little of a doom to come – in the same way as the soul-bound servants of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica with their tarot, or the solemn members of the Librarius. Certainly the death that Kersh had seen on Certus-Minor – the end of an Imperial world – warranted some kind of omen, and the dark revenant had been his. A chill warning of the brothers lost and the deaths to come.

Kersh drew his gladius and held the blade out across the handlebars, while providing support with his fingertips to the other grip. The revenant stood and watched him, the sinister light of its eye glimmering through the rent and across the darkness.

'Better get out of the way,' the Scourge told it, 'because I'm not stopping.'

As Khornate warrior-wretches ran at the Excoriator, Kersh let the back wheel of the bike screech and slide on the cobbles. Releasing the brake and allowing the vehicle to catapult away from the Blood God's minions, the Scourge blasted across the open space. Keeping his wheel straight and his accelerator at full wrench, the bike cannoned towards the ghostly Space Marine. The corpus-captain braced for impact. Seconds away from the phantom Kersh heard the rasping click of its teeth chattering. It was the last thing he heard before the bike passed straight through the revenant.

Swinging his head back, Kersh saw that the apparition had gone. It had disappeared, leaving only smoke swirling in the bike's wake.

Gunning the engine, Kersh rode the bike off the blind apex where the Mausoleum plaza met the downhill slope of an ambulatory. He'd been fortunate. He recognised the thoroughfare as an arterial route called the 'Via Ossium', the Road of Bones. Although bordered by the high walls of buildings and alleyways on both sides, the ambulatory was straight and steep, and was a ceremonial course running from the Memorial Mausoleum down to the Saint Bartolomé-East Lych Gate and out onto the necroplex.

As the heavy bike came shearing down, it crushed several unsuspecting cultists. Several others were brained against the wheelguard, lamp and the twin-linked boltguns adorning the handlebars, before their broken bodies were tossed aside by the merciless progression of the vehicle. The cobbled ambulatory was steep, and despite being one of the wider streets, was still cramped and narrow. The Scourge kept up his speed, allowing gravity to add to the bike's murderous velocity. Kersh held the handlebars straight and true as the thick wheels ploughed through limbs, bounced the scrawny bodies of slave-soldiers like rag dolls and crushed skulls.

A sudden explosion ahead sent a cold streak across the Excoriator's hearts. He spat in anger. For a moment he thought that the *Apotheon* had struck too early. The detonation blasted the side of a hermitage across the Road of Bones, throwing the bodies of feral warriors into the air and showering the area with brick. Resisting the urge to brake, Kersh rode the debris out, the bike lifted from the ground by a ramp of rubble. With fragments of stone blasted out before the wheel, the Scourge angled the soaring vehicle through a throng of disorientated daemon worshippers, decapitating several of them. Like the Excoriator, the warrior-acolytes had been wondering where the explosion had come from. Another, several

streets across from the Via Ossium, revealed the heavens as the impact origin.

Looking up into the night sky, the bloody trail of the Keeler Comet still smearing the firmament, Kersh saw a crowded constellation of fireballs. Something devastating was happening far above the city, and the Scourge could only imagine that some minor skirmish or competition for prey had prompted all-out war between vessels in the Cholercaust fleet. Meanwhile, shooting stars – which Kersh took for battle damage debris – streaked towards the planet surface like a deadly pyrotechnic display. The fiery hailstorm had already started hitting the necroplex and pieces were now striking the ruined city.

Most cultists were blinded by the bike's powerful lamp and the impossibility of an Adeptus Astartes hurtling towards them on two wheels at lethal speed. Others had the presence of mind to throw themselves and their weapons at the escaping Excoriator. Stub-rounds and scattershot rained off the Scourge's plate, while the bike shot through a forest of poorly timed blades and blunt weaponry. Hammers and spiked clubs bounced off his battered pauldrons prompting the Scourge to hold the handlebars steady with one hand, while holding out his gladius with the other. The short sword wasn't an ideal weapon to use mounted, but the partial impacts and opportunistic assaults were so close that it didn't seem to matter. Revving through mobs and maniacs, wheels slipping through blood and wreckage, Kersh hacked, slashed and lopped off body parts. As mayhem blurred past, he smashed jaws and broke faces with his fist, the blade still clutched within his fingers.

A Blood Storm Chaos Space Marine saw Kersh coming, and with a double-handed daemon blade, glowing with infernal possession, stood his ground in the middle of the ambulatory. The renegade assumed a striking stance and held the blade up behind his modest helm. The Scourge narrowed his eyes and risked the tiniest of course corrections. Sweeping

left across the road, Kersh brought his body and the gladius down low to the right. The skull-hungry blade sailed straight over the Excoriator, but as the bike accelerated away, the Blood Storm heretic tumbled, his leg sheared off at the knee.

As Kersh blazed down the ambulatory, away from the Memorial Mausoleum, he saw more of the impossible. Angels haunted the shadowy streets, passages and alleyways of the cemetery world city. Not Excoriators. Not the War-Given-Form's Traitor World Eaters. Not the heretic brothers of renegade Chapters and warbands that pledged their blades and superhuman efforts to the Blood God's cause. At first, Kersh thought he was seeing his phantom again, but as he shot past macabre butchery and ghostly gunfire, he realised that his revenant was not alone. His wraith-like brothers were seeping from the shadows, cutting daemons and Ruinous champions down with cold efficiency.

The damned legionnaires burned with an ethereal fire, their bone-sculpted armour a stygian nightmare of darkness and gilt flame. Every stride they took, though silent, was a step of fearless determination. Whereas World Eaters degenerates came at them with the heat of mindless fury and angry blades, the accursed crusaders were cold to the point of repose and ruin. They moved with the certainty of the grave and killed with the indomitable will of beings who already knew what it was to lose life and know the end. Their unnatural presence gave birth to a fear in their enemies that they had not known, an antiquated darkness beyond petty notions of survival or an agonising death. A nightfall of the soul. An eventuality so hopeless and final that their victims didn't dread the end of their existence – they feared not existing at all.

The daemon heralds of Khorne hunted phantoms in the labyrinthine expanse of the city, ethereal warriors who became one with darkness, only to inkblot into reality behind the spindly bloodletters and stalk towards them like otherworldly execution squads. Stampeding daemonstock,

driven beyond madness, demolished an empty city as they gored and charged at evaporating shadows – their brazen clinker-hide punctured and bolt-riddled with an aurelian storm of shot that was incorporeal as it left phantom weapons, only to cross the barrier into reality as it mauled its Ruinous targets. The spectral Angels strode through ravenous mobs of traitor Guard and war-thralls, the insubstantial nexus of enraged crossfire, swinging the brute angularity of their heavy barrels and magazines about them like clubs, smashing heads and spilling brains. World Eaters warbands and their blood-blessed champions were decimated by vaporous gunfire – the plate-ripping teeth of their axes and the gaping death of their pistols nothing against a Legion of the Damned who seemed incapable of dying.

Daemons leapt at Kersh from the roofs and sides of buildings, several gangle-limbed forms coming close to tearing the Adeptus Astartes from his saddle with their hooked claws. He fired the twin-linked bolters on the front of the bike, clearing a bloody path through the cultist-choked ambulatory. A female slave-soldier, attempting to get out of the bike's path, ended up clinging to the front of it – eye to eye with the Scourge. Pulling on the trigger, Kersh blew the soldier off with the twin-linked bolters.

Riding through the bloodhaze and aftermath, the Scourge didn't see the chainaxe coming for him. The weapon shredded up his shoulder just beneath his pauldron, and blood began to leak down the side of his plate and the bike. As he tore away from the threat, his hand momentarily uncertain on the handlebars, he heard the deep roar of boltguns, fired in spectral unison, blasting apart the axe-wielding renegade and the death cult assassins in amongst whom he was standing.

As Kersh's bike tore out of the chapels and dormitories of the city and into the smouldering devastation of Saint Bartolomé-East, the heavens truly fell. With a trail of soot streaming behind the bike from the cremated

district – the result of the *Impunitas*'s earlier bombing raids – Kersh bled and watched material that was clearly not ship wreckage rocket from the sky. Unnatural blocks of blood-black ice were raining down on the district and necroplex beyond like artillery fire. Easing the speeding bike around craters created by tumbling rock and exotic metal fragments, Kersh suddenly became aware of a monstrous hound bounding up behind the bike and attempting to tear at the back wheel with its knife-point teeth. Swiping unsuccessfully with his gladius, the Scourge attempted to barge the reptilian beast into the walls of gutted derelicts.

The beast either bounded over the obstacles or crashed its bony head straight through them. When the thing almost took his arm off with a jaw-rearing snap, Kersh turned away from the daemon hound. Standing in the road were a trio of damned legionnaires, their bolters aimed straight at the advancing Kersh. As the ghastly Angels blazed coldly away, Kersh brought up his arm instinctively. Unmolested by the immaterial rounds, the Excoriator brought down his arm, only for it to jump back up as he rode straight through the line of revenants. Holding on to the screeching bike, the Scourge cast a glance behind him to see the accursed crusaders melt into nothing, revealing the bolt-blasted carcass of the daemon dead on the cobbles.

Gunning down clots of cultists with his bolters as he rode on, Kersh was almost knocked from the bike by a meteorite strike that demolished what was left of a burning hospice. Out across the ravaged district, the corpus-captain's attention was arrested by the spectacle of a creature that had been less fortunate. Out in the wastes, the hulking greater daemon that had terrorised the Excoriator earlier stood impaled on a shard of ice which had fallen and speared the bloodthirster into the ground. Kersh sickeningly recalled the death of Squad Whip Joachim and thanked the Emperor for the daemon's spectacular misfortune.

With the bike's engine gunned excruciatingly to maximum speed, Kersh finally spotted the Lych Gate marking the limit of the city. A World Eater ran towards the road from a smashed chapel, his brass bolt pistols blazing – until a damned legionnaire stepped out from behind a blackened altar and gunned the Chaos Space Marine down from behind, ethereal bolts searing into his pack, through his warped body and out of his chestplate. The World Eater fell down by the roadside, one of his ornately crafted sidearms still aimed across the cobbles. As Kersh passed he felt a pair of bolt-rounds bore into his side. With the bike wobbling and the mauled Scourge fading fast, the sky lit up behind him.

A colossal stream of energy struck the city. For a moment, time seemed to stop. The ground seemed to shift below the wheels of Kersh's bike. As darkness returned, buildings were blasted apart by a ring of concentric destruction spreading throughout the cemetery world city. As Kersh shot through the open Lych Gate, destruction cascaded after him, an avalanche of masonry, flaming bodies, blood and dust.

With little left to destroy in the blitzed Saint Bartolomé-East district, Kersh avoided the worst of the debris-storm. A rolling dust cloud rapidly swallowed the bike and Excoriator, however, blinding the grievously wounded Scourge to the danger ahead. The bike's wheels left the ground without warning. Since Kersh hadn't hit anything, he reasoned that there simply wasn't any ground beneath him. The lychway had been pounded by a falling piece of the Keeler Comet minutes before, turning the width of the road into a crater. The bike began to fall, the front wheel not making the other side of the pit. As the front of the bike struck the crater wall, Kersh was flung like a piece of wreckage across the lychway. Bouncing and breaking along the track at all but lethal speed, the Excoriator tumbled to a plate-crushing stop by an ornate gravestone.

The half-dead Scourge blinked gore from his remaining eye. A gash across his face kept flooding the socket with blood. He might have lost

consciousness, but if he had, he didn't remember. As he moved his neck, pain streaked through the back of his head. Something was cracked or broken there. It was a living torment to move, but Kersh felt he had little choice. He was out on the necroplex. He sensed danger all about him.

Obsequa City lay behind him, a devastated mess of flaming wreckage and settling dust. The magnificent dome of the Umberto II Memorial Mausoleum was now a mountain of masonry. Many of the city centre cathedrals and temples had been wiped from the face of the cemetery world, but a good part of the city remained, albeit as a firestorm wracked ruin. Torched and shattered disciples of the Blood God who refused to give up the fight wandered the night with their murderous instincts still intact, even if their bodies were roasted and smashed. Damned legionnaires, incorporeal and impassive, hunted down such degenerate specimens without mercy, finishing what the lance strike had begun. The revenants had been unaffected by the city-levelling, star-hot beam of energy, with even those Angels directly below the orbital strike going about their vengeance oblivious to the destruction wrought around them.

Kersh limped agonisingly along the darkness of the lychway, daemon-haunted burial grounds on either side. He no longer had the company standard and had lost his Scourge's blade in the crash. Drawing his remaining gladius – his back-up blade – the Excoriator hobbled on. With blood leaking from both sides of his mangled plate and the gleaming sword held limply in a shattered hand, the Scourge didn't think to last long.

Destruction rained from the sky. Shattered pieces of ice had tumbled and rolled a path of annihilation through the Cholercaust fleet, cleaving vessels in half, destroying others outright and scattering smaller wolfpacks of raiders and pirates. Rock and immense warp-frozen shards of blood pounded the burial grounds – devastating the rabid hordes, blasting daemon entities back to the depths of the warp and laying waste to

Khorne's most frenzied warriors, decimate champions and able butchers. World Eaters raged at the heavens with their axes roaring and swords held high, shot through with white-hot metal nuggets that thunderbolted from the sky.

Kersh stomped on, blood-shod. A daemon herald leapt out over a crypt at the Scourge. He remembered raising his gladius but little else. Fading in and out of consciousness, the Excoriator found the daemon dead at his feet. Traitor Angels charged at him with oversized weapons and war cries, only to end up dead and bolt-punctured before him. An infernal predator swooped overhead, dive-bombing the corpus-captain, but that too found its way to a swift death on the ground. Kersh's failing sight revealed only movements in the murk. He heard deviant hordes fighting with each other. Warbands at war. Infernal rivalries settled in blood. All he recognised were the flame-swathed Angels of his salvation. A Legion of the Damned, moving about the graves like an army of ghosts, taking the fight to the Ruinous, executing the tainted and delivering doom to the Emperor's enemies.

The Scourge had fallen several times and stubbornly regained his feet, but as he collapsed once more, he found that he couldn't get up. With the cold creeping through his shattered plate and into his wounded body, Kersh found himself lying across a grave, his head propped against its stone marker. There, he hugged the polished, unbloodied gladius to his chest and waited for death in the battle-torn darkness.

Above, the blackness of the star-speckled firmament was still dotted with glowing embers, Cholercaust vessels that had lost their fight with colossal chunks of rock and ice and fallen into an explosion-wracked, decaying orbit around Certus-Minor. Such fragments still tumbled from the sky and obliterated the servants of Chaos still wandering the night. Squinting, Kersh thought he saw a vessel pass overhead. At first he thought it was falling to the cemetery world surface, growing larger as it

descended. But from its movements and the twinkle of cannon fire he realised that it was in high orbit, mopping up fleeing members of the Chaos armada. The Scourge watched it for a few moments, entranced – the vessel appeared to him like an Imperial aquila, passing across the heavens. He blinked, reasoning that he must have imagined the spectacle in his concussed and skull-fractured state. The vessel would have had to have been colossal in size to appear to him as it did, at such a distance.

Kersh closed his blood-crusted eye for a moment of peace, but when he opened it again his armoured revenant was standing above him. The damned legionnaire blazed an ethereal radiance over its rachidian plate. It was staring down at the Scourge through the crack in its helm, the warplustre of a sentience glowing from its skeletal eye socket. It said nothing. It did nothing for a while, not even chatter its teeth. In its midnight gauntlet it held the Excoriators Chapter's Fifth Company battle standard. Stabbing it into the earth beside the grave, the revenant let the blood-spattered banner flap in the breeze. In its other hand, between two exposed, skeletal digits, it held something else. The damned legionnaire dropped it on the Scourge's chest and walked away into nothingness, leaving Kersh on the field of battle. Alone.

MYSTERIUM FIDEI



EPILOGUE

God-Emperor

Approbator Vaskellen Quast dropped the distance between the Valkyrie's ramp and the carpet of burial ground carnage. With his meme-vox in his hand he bounded between bolt-mangled bodies and ran through the spoiling gore. Inquisitorial storm troopers from the 52nd Ranger Pelluciad were not far behind him, attending on the Ordo Obsoletus acolyte from a respectable distance.

Excoriators Thunderhawks had little trouble beating the Ordo Valkyrie across the festering necroplex to the reported location of the sole survivor, and by the time Quast trudged up behind them, Santiarch Balshazar and an honour guard of Excoriators Angels had surrounded the warrior – scattering the frater burn team who had almost incinerated him and the Sister Hospitallers who had barely begun attending to his grievous wounds. With Adeptus Astartes gunships circling overhead, the approbator slipped between the forest of hulking giants. Rounding their ancient, scar-annotated plate, Quast found the only living witness to the mysterious destruction of the Cholercaust Blood Crusade. The approbator was

bursting with questions, but like the Excoriators Space Marines stood solemnly about him, he remained silent.

Propped up against a tombstone, his armoured limbs laid out across grave dirt, was a mauled Angel. An Excoriators captain of the Fifth Company. His plate – formerly an ivory edifice like that worn by his brothers – was stained the red of death. Its inscriptions and preserved battle-scarring had been obliterated by the mutilation of recent carnage. The Angel's power armour was a rent, bolt-blasted shell of buckled ceramite, and the earth about him glistened with the moisture of his life quietly leaking away. His face was similarly plastered with blood – his enemies' and his own – and dusted with the soot of raging fires. His tonsure-shaven hair was matted and singed, his ear was missing and the dull glint of a ball-bearing shone out from one eye as evidence of former atrocities suffered. Breaking the crust of blood that had dried across the other eye, the Excoriator stared at them. His gaze was weak and uncomprehending, sensitive to the burgeoning Certusian sunrise.

The breeze ruffled the captain's battle standard, leaning slightly out of the ground as it was above him, playing with the brown-speckled material. At the sight of hulking silhouettes, cut out of the morning sky, the survivor clutched his gleaming short sword to his ruined chest. Unlike the wrecked Excoriator, and everything else on the cemetery world, the gladius was unblemished and unblooded. Quast was not a warrior, like the surrounding Space Marines, but the resplendent weapon held even his attention. The spartan honesty of its unadorned and heavy blade. The crafted angularity of its pommel. The three simple numerals stamped into the breadth of its cross guard: VII.

The approbator looked about him, his instincts taking his gaze to the Santiarch's own. The Excoriators Angels were looking at the sword rather than their wounded brother.

‘Captain, I...’

‘Approbator!’ Balshazar boomed, the warning in the Chapter Chaplain’s words irresistible. The Santiarch stepped forwards, drawing a gladius of his own. Kneeling before the survivor he offered the captain the blade. ‘I believe this belongs to you, Corpus-Captain Kersh.’

Kersh took the blade from the Chaplain and clutched it to him with the other. The second was equally bare, but while similarly functional and austere, lacked the clear craftsmanship of the first. The Santiarch went to reach for the other gladius, but the unspeaking warrior tightened his grip, holding the weapon to him. Quast looked from Balshazar to the one they called Kersh and back again.

‘You came for the sword?’ the approbator marvelled.

The Santiarch ignored him and addressed one of his gathered brethren. ‘Brother Japhet, signal the *Cerberus*. Inform Chapter Master Ichabod that we have discovered the Dornsblade. Tell him that it remains in Corpus-Captain Kersh’s care and will be transported to the battle-barge with the Chapter Scourge directly.’

‘No astrotelepathic appeal. No request for assistance. You were already on your way to Certus-Minor,’ Quast said. ‘To reclaim a sword?’

Santiarch stood to his full, imposing stature.

‘This is not any blade, approbator. This is the Sword of Sebastus. The Dornsblade. A sacred relic to the genetic progeny of Rogal Dorn. It was carried by the primarch himself during his trials in the Eternal Fortress and used to spill Traitor blood in the Battle of the Iron Cage. It is a symbol of our unbreakable unity and the sacrifice shared by the sons of Dorn despite the Legion-splintering accords of the Codex Astartes. It is a piece of Imperial history, sculpted, beaten and honed to a razor edge.’

‘And the captain stole the relic blade?’

‘Corpus-Captain Kersh earned the Dornsblade,’ Balshazar corrected the approbator, his gaze meeting the Scourge’s. ‘He won the honour of a year’s

custodianship at the centennial Feast of Blades. It is the corpus-captain's by right.'

'Then why reclaim it?'

'Kersh should have sent the Dornsblade back to the safety of our home world, Eschara, on the frigate *Scarifica*. Instead, he kept the blade and sent that one in its stead, an inception sword, given to neophytes in recognition of their ascension to true brotherhood.'

'Why would he do that?' Quast asked before kneeling down in the blood-soaked earth beside the silent Scourge. 'Captain, why would you do that?'

Kersh said nothing. He just stared up at the Santiarch.

'To force an audience with the Chapter Master, possibly,' Balshazar said, his deep voice finding its way to an accusatory edge. 'He'd been formerly denied one. His act could be one of Chapter politics. The corpus-captain's reasons are best known to himself. I know only this – if our passage had been easier and swifter here, then we might have faced the terrible odds evidenced about us as brothers, the Sword of Sebastus, thousands of years on, still bringing the sons of Rogal Dorn together.'

Quast leant in. The stink of gore rising from the Scourge's plate made the approbator recoil slightly.

'Corpus-captain, I am here representing the interests of the Holy Ordos. I must know what happened here. These are strange happenings indeed and explanations must be sought.'

Kersh moved suddenly, causing the approbator to retract further. In an agonising movement, and with fresh blood gushing from his ripped plate, Kersh dropped his neophyte's inception blade and reached for the gravestone behind him. It was torment to watch. Both Balshazar and the approbator wanted to assist the wounded Space Marine, but had little idea what he was doing. Slowly, the Scourge's ceramite fingertips reached for the sculpted stone of the grave marker. The stone was inscribed with a

name: *Erzsebet Dorota Catallus*. At its heart, like the thousands of gravestones surrounding them across the necroplex, was a small bell. Quast frowned, assuming the instrument to be part of some Ecclesiarchy ritual or cemetery world custom. With an effort-trembling fingertip, Kersh prodded the bell, sending out a tinny chime across the steaming burial grounds. He did this a second and a third time until suddenly, and surprisingly, the bell began to ring of its own accord.

Quast and the Santiarch looked at one another. About them, bells started ringing everywhere, each of the gravestones peeling with chimes of urgency and insistence. The approbator moved in closer to examine the grave marker. He saw the openings for air supply and the wire running from the bell and down into the earth. He turned back to Balshazar.

‘The dead are rising, Santiarch. Miracles indeed.’

‘Approbator!’ the Ranger Pelluciad sergeant called, standing next to a vox-pack-carrying storm trooper. ‘Dig teams report knocking from beneath the ruins of the Memorial Mausoleum. The new pontifex has begged assistance from the ordo and the Adeptus Astartes in excavating the survivors and the relic-remains of Umberto II.’

‘Inform the pontifex that we are going to need shovels,’ Quast called back. ‘Lots of shovels.’

As the chorus of bells rang across the killing fields, the approbator’s eyes settled on an object, half buried in the bloody earth. Picking it up and wiping it off, Quast discovered a crystalline wafer bearing a name and illustration. He had seen astropaths use such cards to divine possible futures – a tarot card. On the bottom of the wafer it stated *Deus Imperator* and pictured their corpse-lord, sat on his Golden Throne, amongst ancient apparatus of gold, steel and brass.

‘God-Emperor...’ Quast mouthed.

Looking down, the approbator saw another tarot wafer, and another – both amongst the carnage, sitting on the earth of newly dug graves. Burial

plots all about were marked with the cards and each bore the holy image of the God-Emperor. Quast shook his head. He had seen Guardsmen drop playing cards on enemy dead as a signature of their success – a practice of certain regiments – but never wafers deposited on the living; on battle survivors. Returning to the wounded Excoriator, the approbator showed him the cards.

‘What happened here?’ Quast asked the Scourge. He held up the crystalline wafers. ‘I must know. Tell me everything.’

‘...or the teachings of our lord-founder, Demetrius Katafalque. I know not what I saw on Certus-Minor. I’m not sure that I’m the best instrument of elucidation. I have lived a warrior’s life. A simple but essential existence of death and darkness, so that the light of the Imperium might shine brightly. What I experienced, others have known. Brothers who bear witness to a Legion of the Damned. An intervention from beyond. Aid unexplained, yet offered in silence and with the fury of ethereal vengeance – vanishing as swiftly as it appeared. I shall let Imperial scholars and the sophists of the Holy Ordos assign an explanation to this strange but welcome phenomenon, whether that be brothers lost on the Sea of Souls, a corruption beyond our understanding or the manifestation of a divine Will. I think that another Chapter – I forget which one – said it best. Their motto was In dedicato deus imperatum ultra articulo mortis: For the God-Emperor beyond the point of death. Perhaps these damned legionnaires had pledged themselves as such. Perhaps one day I shall know. There are worse fates in the galaxy for a battle-brother, intent on serving one’s God-Emperor into eternity.’

From *Damnation’s Calling* By Chapter Master Zachariah Kersh,
of the Excoriators Space Marine Chapter



WRATH OF IRON

CHRIS WRAIGHT

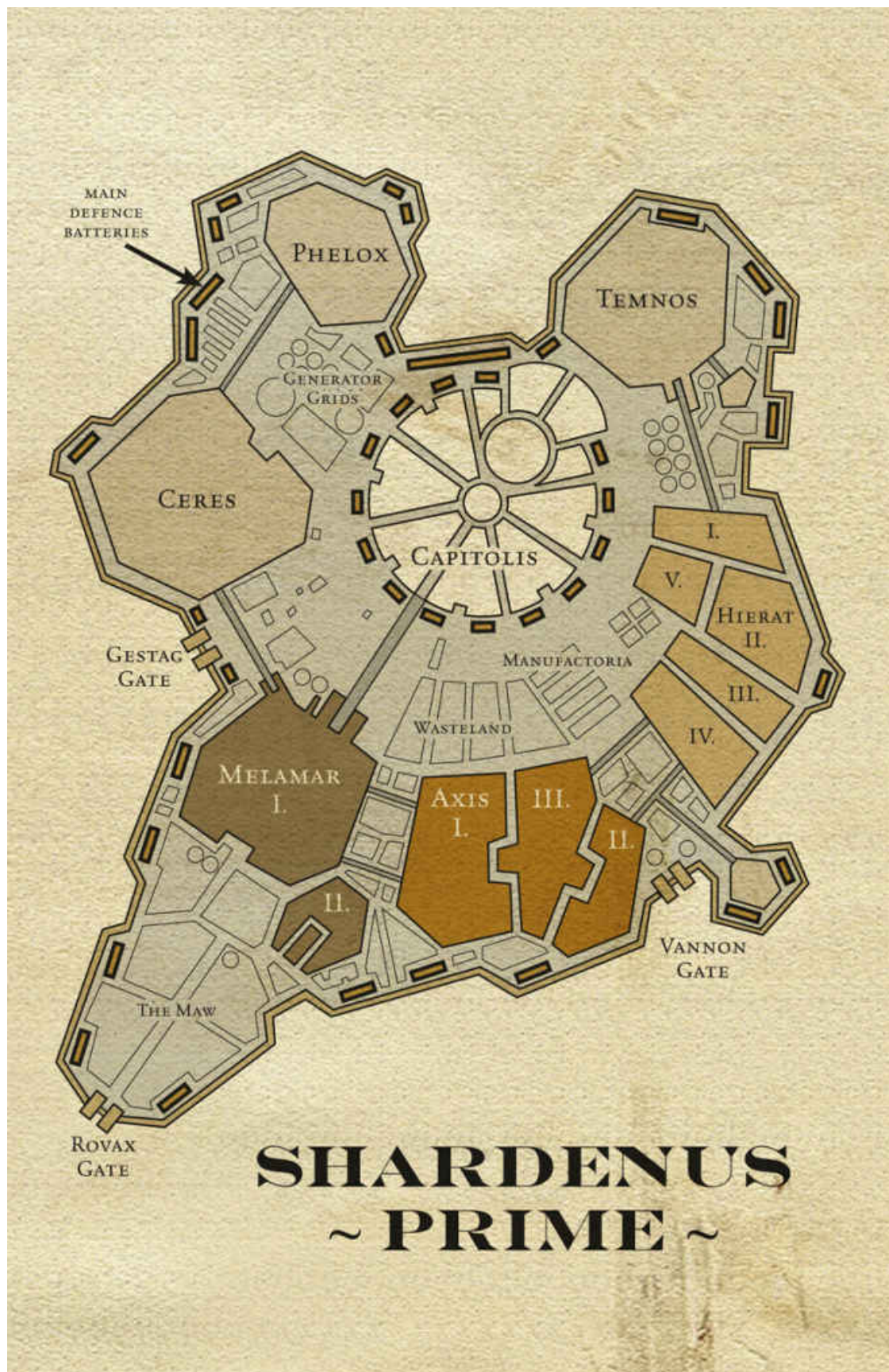


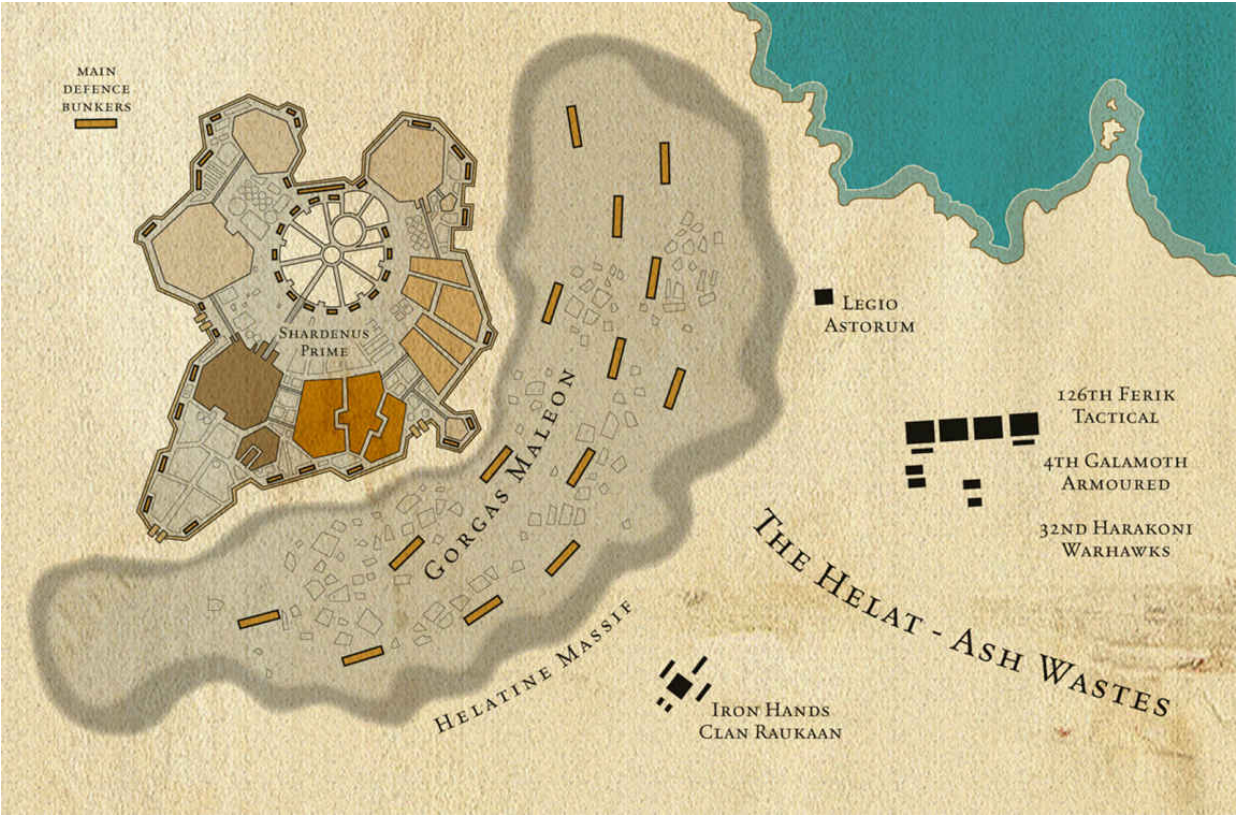
SHARDENUS

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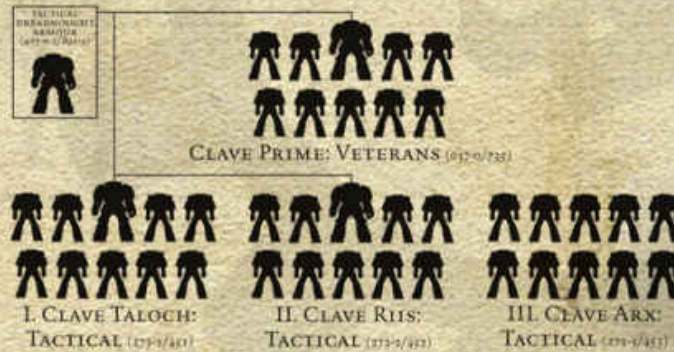
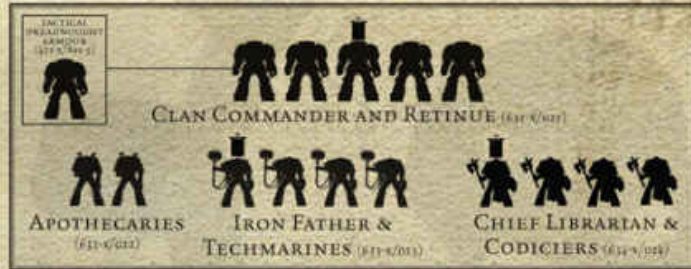
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CLAN RAUKAAN



WRATH OF IRON



Chris Wraight

They are not my hands.

This fact is forgotten by my brothers – inexplicably, it has always seemed to me. The hands are strong, to be sure, and have created great things for us all, but they are not mine. And that counts for something.

They forget that the silver on my arms comes from a beast that I vanquished. It is the mark of a great evil that I ended, and yet it persists within me. It is alien, artificial; an uneasy corollary to the superlative physical frame given to me by my father.

I would struggle to remove it now. The problem is not one of surgery, for I have no doubt my father's surgeons could remake me entirely if he gave them the command. No, I will not remove the silver from my flesh because I have learned to depend on it.

The fault is with my mind. I rely on the augmentation given to me by my metal gauntlets, so much so that the flesh beneath them is now little more than a memory.

It is a crutch, this silver. A day will come when I will strip it from me, lest I lose the power to master myself forever. Already my Legion's warriors replace their shield hands with metal in my honour, and so they too are learning to doubt the natural strength of their bodies. They must be weaned off this practice before it becomes a mania for them. Hatred of what is natural, of what is human, is the first and greatest of the corruptions.

So I record it here: when the time comes, I will strip my hands of their unnatural silver. I will instruct my Legion to recant their distrust of the flesh. I will turn them away from the gifts of the machine and bid them relearn the mysteries of flesh, bone and blood.

When my father's Crusade is over, this shall be my sacred task. When the fighting is done, I shall cure my Legion, and myself. For if fighting is all there is, if we may never pause to reflect on what such devotion to strength is doing to us, then our compulsion will only grow.

Already I see the madness that path leads to, and so I shall excise the silver from my hands. In doing so I shall weaken myself and my sons, but nonetheless it must be done.

The hands are strong, and have created great things, but they are not mine.

– *The Neimerel Scrolls*
Attributed to the Primarch Ferrus Manus



PROLOGUE

Captain Ulens Arela of the 12th Shardenus Imperial Guard Levy looked at the data flickering down his augur display and learned a little more about the manner in which he would die.

Some solid information existed amid the welter of static, but not enough to plan anything like a suitable response. One word – *Territo* – emerged again and again. That was, presumably, what the invaders were calling themselves. Other statistics lodged in his mind, mostly deployment patterns and landing vectors for the first wave.

They hadn't bothered with much encryption, so Arela's cogitative support had managed to crack a good deal of the traffic flitting around in low orbit. None of it reassured him, and most of it pointed to a swift and certain outcome.

On the basis of all he'd seen and heard, Ulens Arela guessed that he and his regiment had less than an hour before the end. That thought sat relatively well, given what he'd experienced over the past year. During that time he'd come to appreciate that death was hardly the worst thing that could happen to someone. As it transpired, there were many worse things, and he'd seen a few of them up close.

So he stared into the green strobe of the augur screen with little more than wry resignation on his scarred face. He issued no orders, and the three

hundred men crouched in Bunker F45 gave no indication that they expected any. They could all hear the thud and crack of orbital munitions detonating, and they could all feel the tremble in the earth as the city's defensive grids opened up. All across the ash plains of the Helat, they knew that millions of men, bunched together in similar bunkers and blast-trenches, would be feeling the same things, thinking the same things, fearing the same things.

Arela couldn't know with any precision what was going on in the skies above him. Shielded by metres of rockcrete, he couldn't see the heavy outlines of the troop landers as they slowly descended through the atmosphere. He couldn't see the paths of the tracer rockets as they streaked down to cover their descent, though he could feel the impacts where they hit close to the bunker. He couldn't see the enemy gunships as they spiralled down between the larger ships, strafing along the attack corridors and knocking out fixed artillery positions.

He knew enough, though. The augur readings gave him an idea of what Territo consisted of, and the force it represented was almost indecently overwhelming.

Are they are confused as we are? he thought idly. *Do the men in those carriers understand any more about this war than we do? Would they worship the Emperor, as we do, if they could just have things explained to them?*

Most significantly of all, Arela didn't detect the launch of the one craft among the many hundreds making planetfall that lay on an intercept course with F45's grid position. It would have been astonishing if he had done so, given the dense and growing volume of launches breaking out across the stratosphere. By then the invaders' assault craft had descended and were disgorging atmospheric flyers like bloated insects ejecting their teeming young. Far above them, capital ships maintained static positions in high orbit and provided a hammering rain of supporting fire.

Amid all of that, a lone vessel – an angular, heavy-set gunship in black livery – made its way planetwards, ducking and spiralling through the orgy of explosions and las-fire. Its course was erratic, programmed to evade targeting locks faster than they could be imposed. Like everything tearing towards the Helat it burned with violent atmospheric entry fires, making it look like an angry meteor.

Only when the gunship came within five kilometres of F45 did its trajectory pick up on the augur's warning matrices. A line of red runes blinked into life. Arela slammed his blast-visor down and glanced at the power-pack on his lasgun.

'Incoming,' he murmured into the vox, and the three hundred men within the bunker mirrored his actions. Their movements were calm and precise, just as he'd trained them to be, and the echo of three hundred visors snapping into place ran around the enclosed bunker.

'Positions,' said Arela.

Against his expectations, he found that his heart-rate had picked up. He ran his finger along the trigger of his lasgun. It felt smooth from frequent use.

The bunker, like all the rest overlooking the Helat, had been built to a simple design. A central hexagonal chamber, no more than three metres high and roughly thirty metres across, had been sunk into the dense igneous rock of the Helat's surface. Two-metre-thick layers of reinforced rockcrete enveloped the chamber, reinforced with bands of adamantium binding. On four sides of the bunker, narrow slits in the rockcrete had been bored at shoulder height, allowing the men inside a clear fire-arc over the ash plains to the east. The remaining two sides were buried in the steeply rising landscape as it broke and buckled up towards the city approaches. Tunnels ran underground, eventually linking up with the network of subterranean chambers that riddled the land as far as the Vannon Gate, though the blast doors leading to them were sealed and wired to blow.

No escape back towards the hives would be permitted; the frontline was to be held for as long as possible. Arela understood that perfectly, as did the men who lined up along the four firing walls, slotting their lasguns into the apertures and watching for the first targets to emerge.

Arela, seated on a swivelling steel chair in the centre of the bunker, oversaw their movements with satisfaction. Pict screens surrounded him, mounted on a lattice of metal struts.

‘Primary target inbound sector 5-6,’ said Arela calmly, watching the data on his augur refresh. ‘Keep an eye on your sensoria – we’ll get more of them soon.’

The floor vibrated as surface-to-air batteries cracked into life above the bunker. Arela switched to an external pict-feed and watched trails of ship-killer rockets stream up into the sky.

The gunship came in closer, fast and sheer, rolling away from clouds of exploding chaff and banking steeply. Arela’s sensors got a brief lock on it, just long enough to watch it dip to ground level and hover for a second on a thunderous carpet of engine-discharge. Then it lifted off again, thrusting powerfully back into the air amid a buffet of sensor-confusing static before the rocket launchers could get a decent fix.

‘So here we go,’ he said, watching the fuzzy outlines of landed troops emerge on the scanners – six, seven, maybe more – and clarify on the pict. ‘Let’s give them a welcome.’

Las-beams snapped out from the bunker, spiking across the smog-darkened battlefield. All along the hundred-kilometre-long front it was the same, and the augur soon clogged with feedback. Landers and troop carriers were making planetfall all across the plains. Some of them ran into hostile fire and exploded, scattering their contents across the ash, but plenty more were getting through.

Arela adjusted the dials on his instruments, trying to get a better picture. He could see men striding out of the murk towards them. The outlines

were big. *Huge*. They didn't seem to be in any hurry. Ten of them clarified on the sensoria, each one clad in plates of black armour. Their eyes shone red in the ash-gloom.

'Throne,' he whispered, still speaking over the comm, looking at the outline of their bodies and feeling suddenly cold. 'Drop them.'

The concentration of las-fire from Bunker F45 was dense and well-aimed. A whole thicket of white bolts flickered out from the firing slots. It wasn't panicky or random – it was straight out of the Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer.

It wasn't working. He saw one of the incoming giants stumble under a concentrated volley, but the rest shrugged off hits as if they were minor irritations. They kept coming, striding with eerie slowness, advancing across the crater-pocked landscape like armoured ghosts.

Arela switched views, zooming in for a closer look. Even as he did so, the single warrior who'd stumbled resumed its march.

'Keep firing!' he snapped, watching as the volume of las-beams dropped and became more ill-directed. One of the giants came within a few metres of the bunker's walls and dropped down beneath the lip of a blast crater. A second later, a rain of heavy impacts broke out across the leading edge of the rockcrete shielding. Huge blocks splintered, buckled and broke open, spinning into clouds of destruction as a maelstrom of projectiles hit the shielding and detonated.

'Hold position!' Arela ordered, getting up from his throne and drawing his own weapon. 'The first man to stop firing gets—'

He never finished. A huge explosion rocked the chamber. Men flew back from the firing slits, careening through the air as an entire section of shielding blew inwards. The air filled with the noise of screams, the shudder of more munitions going off and thick blooms of powdered rockcrete.

Arela crashed back into his chair before rolling away from it and across the floor. He heard more frantic snaps of las-beams before they were doused by a deluge of fire from much bigger, much noisier weapons.

He looked up. One wall of the bunker was demolished and the bodies of its defenders lay across the rubble. Those of his men who'd survived the explosion were now backing away from the breach, firing steadily.

Through the gap came a monster, nearly three metres high and encased in night-black power armour. Las-fire flickered from the curved surfaces of its battle-plate without making much impression. The monster carried a blunt-barrelled gun in both hands and fired in smooth, sweeping figures. Waves of explosive projectiles rippled across the enclosed space of the bunker, blasting apart the lines of defending troops.

Arela staggered to his feet, feeling groggy. He took aim and fired back at the monster, only to see his las-beam fizzle harmlessly against its breastplate. He adjusted his aim, going for the exposed cabling at the junction of its arm and chest, but another massive explosion threw him from his feet.

He went down hard, nearly blacking out as his helmet cracked against the floor. A hot trickle of blood ran down his temple as he pushed himself back up. For a moment, clouds of dust and bolter fire obscured what had happened, and he looked stupidly out through a cracked visor across the scene of desolation.

He saw two more monsters emerge from the swirling dust, firing their huge weapons steadily as they advanced. They picked off his men with silent efficiency. Some of the defending troops broke, racing across the half-ruined chamber to get to the doors at the rear, but they didn't get very far. Arela saw most of them torn clean in half as projectiles punched clean through them before exploding like grenades.

He dragged himself to his feet again, his head light and his stomach churning. It had all happened so quickly. Dimly, he could hear the thunder

of battle across the plains outside. Huge, grinding noises made the earth shake beneath him, and he could only guess at what kind of war engines had been landed.

One of the monsters turned from the slaughter to look in his direction. For a second, Arela stared right into its deathmask face. Two red eye-lenses stared back at him, glowing like twin embers in the smoke. The creature's vox-grille – a downturned, contemptuous snarl of metal – glinted in the light of explosions going off.

Arela ran straight towards the monster. With nowhere to go and no chance of survival, he opted for one final act of defiance. As he ran, he fired his pistol and drew a rapier from the scabbard at his belt.

For all its bulk, the monster was fast – breathtakingly fast. Before Arela had taken another stride he found himself lifted up from the ground, clenched at the neck by a massive black gauntlet. He gasped for breath and his legs kicked out uselessly. His captor squeezed, and Arela dropped his blade. His vision blurred, and it was all he could do to look his killer in the eye.

'I fight... for the Emperor,' he gasped, blurting it out as if that fact could alter anything.

A metallic growl issued from the monster's vox-grille.

'You do not,' it said, squeezing his neck and breaking his spine. 'We do.'

Arela's lifeless body fell to the ground with a thud. The monster turned its huge armoured shell around, watching impassively as its battle-brothers finished off the remaining resistance. The white hand device on its shoulder guard shone in sharp relief amid the judder and whirl of muzzle-flashes.

'Target secured,' came Brother Arran's voice over the comm.

Arela's killer – Brother-Sergeant Naim Morvox of Clave Arx, Clan Raukaan of the Iron Hands – nodded curtly before turning and striding

back to the breach in the bunker wall. From beyond the broken heaps of rockcrete and human flesh the sounds of battle raged unchecked.

‘Next,’ said Morvox, and stalked back out into the storm.

I:
PLANETFALL



CHAPTER ONE

Magos Ys leaned back in her throne and placed a polberry into her mouth. The skin of the fruit broke open across her tongue. Receptors lining her prosthetic tongue fed a data report containing material she had no interest in – acidic content, hazard breakdown, nutritional value – all of which she ignored. It did, however, taste pleasant.

<Link established.>

The notification flickered across the screed of information in her immediate noospheric vista, flagged up, as she'd requested, with a priority marker.

<Thank you,> she canted back. <Visual, please.>

Ys sat in the centre of an isolation chamber deep in the heart of the Adeptus Mechanicus liaison vessel *Factor Balance*. The chamber's metal walls were illuminated by suspended lumen-globes on low output. The space between them scarcely made room for its few contents – a single ironwork command throne, a hololith pillar with ivory scrollwork around the rim, a physical nodelink and a Vandire-epoch tripod table holding a brass bowl of polberries and a goblet of emreva.

Ys wore the deep crimson robes used by high-ranking magi. Hers were voluminous and covered all of her body save for the ends of her fingers. A

cowl hung over her face, obscuring the extent of her augmetic alteration and making her look, to a careless eye, almost human-normal.

She reached over to the bowl again with a six-fingered claw. As she did so the link from the Mechanicus heavy engine-carrier *Erasmus* fed through to the hololith pillar. A wavering outline in translucent green spun into existence over the ivory. It flickered, sheared, then stabilised into a man's face.

<Welcome, princeps,> Ys canted, chewing.

The face of Firax Lopi, commander of the Praxes battle-formation of Legio Astorum, nodded. His eyes looked a little glassy.

<How are you?> asked Ys.

<Tired,> canted Lopi. <Apologies – translation from Cyledes was uncomfortable.>

<I am sorry to hear it. Shall we do this another time?>

Lopi shook his head.

<No, no. I am grateful for you taking the trouble.>

<I will be brief, then. This is what you need to know.>

Ys blinked a report of the current Imperial deployment into the noosphere, fed directly from the ship's war-data collation facility.

<The Contqual subsector is still contested,> she canted. <Rauth's strategeos are confident of bringing the suppression to completion during your tour. Orentas and Valon capitulated during the last standard month, freeing up resources for the final assault on Shardenus.>

<Shardenus?> asked Lopi, sending a sceptical glyph along with the databurst. <Already?>

<Indeed,> canted Ys. <Rauth has marshalled his forces effectively.>

Lopi ran his hands through his cropped hair. The movement made his hololithic outline flicker.

<Commander Arven Rauth,> he canted. <The Iron Hand.>

Ys indicated a positive.

<What is your assessment of him?> asked Lopi. <My data is inconsistent.>

<I am not surprised,> canted Ys. <He divides opinion. Have you fought alongside the Iron Hands before?>

<No.>

<Then you will quickly determine the issues. The Iron Hands are an interesting subject for psychological study, and Rauth conforms to type. Do not expect flexibility. He is careful with his objectives but careless with his assets.>

Lopi frowned, and couched his response in a disapproval-formation.

<He will not be careless with mine,> he canted. <Perhaps it might be worth reminding him just what it takes to deploy a battle-formation at such notice.>

<We could,> she replied, <but it would make little difference.>

Ys felt the stirrings of what she might once have recognised as amusement.

<This is all you need to know about Rauth,> she explained. <He will never stop. Once set on his course, he will neither deviate nor slacken. I do not believe this to be a trait unique to him; I believe it to be a characteristic of the entire Chapter. A result, perhaps, of over-reliance on augmetics.>

The last point was delivered with an irony indicator, to which Lopi responded with a smile.

<Understood,> he canted. <Though, in my limited experience, that sounds like most Chapters.>

<Perhaps. I will leave you to make your own judgement.>

Lopi blinked and suppressed a yawn. Ys could see the fatigue lying heavily on his features and decided to bring the briefing to a speedy close. There would be much work ahead of them both before the Praxes formation would be ready for deployment, and bringing five Titan war

engines and nine mechanised skitarii battalions to theatre amounted to a significant logistical headache.

<The forces for the Shardenus operation are set,> she canted. <Rauth has overall command of the Territo battlegroup and also leads a full clan of Iron Hands.>

<Clan?>

<Chapter-specific designation, analogous to a Codex company: 136 Space Marines and 23,451 mortal auxiliaries deployed on five vessels including the strike cruiser *Kalach*. Four other clans are engaged throughout the subsector on other suppression missions, though from what I can gather they engage in little communication with one another.>

Lopi absorbed the information carefully.

<And the rest?> he asked.

<The Guard contingent is led by Lord General Raji Nethata. As we speak he is in the process of landing 127,000 troops, mostly drawn from the 126th Ferik Tactical. He also has command of two battalions of Harakoni drop-troops and seven battalions of heavy armour, plus the usual Naval support. I have uploaded the details to the core.>

<What do we know of Nethata?>

<A long service record, marked with seven distinguished commendations. Seventeen engagements are recorded with Martian involvement, and the tech-priests registered no complaints. Aside: I find myself admiring his mettle. He stood up to Rauth on several occasions during pre-deployment, and that is, I suspect, not easy for an unimproved human to do.>

Lopi raised an eyebrow.

<No doubt. So they have been at odds.>

<Sporadically. As I said, Rauth is careless of those he serves alongside. Casualty rates among the Guard have been several points higher than normal.>

<But Rauth's methods,> canted Lopi. <They obtain results.>

<Undeniably,> replied Ys. <Nethata appears to display concern for his men. He does not like seeing them used as expendable adjuncts to Rauth's enthusiasm.>

<How touching.>

<Is that sarcasm, princeps?> Ys reached for another polberry. <That is not like you.>

<Apologies. Perhaps I do need some rest. I will digest this information carefully, though – it has been useful. I see that, as ever, our Imperial brethren have their little issues to work through.>

<We all do, Firax.>

Lopi looked directly at her.

<That is true, magos,> he canted. <You will have your work cut out keeping an eye on them all. Let us keep in close touch, the two of us; we may find ourselves awkwardly positioned if we are called on to adjudicate.>

Ys sent a complex prefix to her response which indicated that there was no need to worry, and that she had already given the political side of her assignment a great deal of thought, as had the hierarchy back on Mars, but that she understood his concern.

<Noted,> was all she explicitly canted. <Everything, as always, will be kept under review.>

Fires still raged across the Helat. The wide ash plains east of Shardenus's principal hive cluster burned with a web of crimson trenches, making it look as if the crust of the planet had been scored open to expose the magma beneath. Skeletons of downed troop carriers and tangled tank-traps smouldered amid the torn-up earth, fanned by the warm wind that carried the ash.

New structures were already being built among the wreckage. Massive constructor vehicles had been landed – mobile gantries, corkscrew-nosed

excavators and earthmovers with segmented tracks and swaying extractor claws. Pits were dug, power plants installed, medicae facilities erected, blast walls lowered, artillery points established. Constant streams of atmospheric landers descended from the orbital carriers bringing munitions, stores and troops with them. Among the columns of lifters wheeled the attack craft of the Imperial Navy – blunt-nosed Marauder bombers trailing with goutts of smog, Lightning fighter escorts screaming along in tight formations, Vulture gunships lurking over construction sites with their fuselage lights blinking in the gloom.

With the first-stage assaults over, the Imperial commanders were gathering the enormous forces at their disposal in readiness for the assault on Shardenus's hive spires. Planetfall had been achieved with acceptable losses, mostly due to the fire unleashed by Navy destroyers from orbit as well as clinical strikes launched by Iron Hands tactical squads.

No one was under any illusion that the next stage would be as easy. The spire cluster of Shardenus Prime was void-shielded, ringed with artillery-studded walls and stuffed with millions of defenders. That fortress was the principal target, the nexus of the entire campaign, the linchpin upon which the fate of a dozen worlds and billions of lives rested.

Lord General Raji Nethata lifted a pair of gilt-edged magnoculars to his eyes and adjusted the focus. His view swept across kilometres of territory, seething with troop movements, before rising up from the plains to the Helatine Massif, across the industrial wasteland of the Gorgas Maleon and finally halting at the gates of the spire cluster itself.

Gigantic turrets rose high into the smoggy atmosphere of Shardenus. They looked less like human dwelling places and more like immense, fractured mountains of iron. Each gothic pinnacle of the conurbation reared up, terraced and pitted, in jagged lines of black against a rust-red sky.

It was a vision of hell, a smog-choked nightmare of hyper-industry and contamination. Even on maximum augmentation, his magnoculars revealed little detail on the flanks of the distant spires, but Nethata knew full well what went on within the dark metal walls of those gargantuan structures. He knew that millions of men and women lodged there, rammed into hab-units like rats stuck in a sewer. He knew that they worked fourteen-hour days in humming, clanging manufactoria, churning out lines of munitions and machine parts. He knew that they retired after those periods, exhausted, for scant rest in tiny rooms that stank of stale urine and were illuminated by flickering, insect-choked lumen-bars.

Above all, he knew that the core activities of humanity – eating, sleeping, making love, laughing, dreaming – were only fitfully remembered in there. Those people lived a half-existence of stress and drudgery, sustained in life only by the Imperium's endless, ravenous need to keep them on their feet long enough to produce more raw material for the galaxy-wide war machine.

Such souls had ceased to be individuals worthy of pity or consideration. They were components – ingredients – in the eternal feast, a feast upon which mightier forces gorged themselves.

Nethata knew all that. He'd seen the same acts played out across a hundred worlds, all wreathed in smog like Shardenus, all home to nothing more than toil and despair.

What lifts a man above that station? he thought to himself, peering through the lenses at the far-off object of his army's coming wrath. *What makes his life more than a futility?*

He put his magnoculars down and snapped the lens-covers closed. From his high vantage point on the command post's observation platform he looked out over the slowly forming shape of his army. Men, thousands of them, marched in columns across the ash plains, each one clasping a lasgun to his chest.

When he takes up a weapon. When he resists. Then, he is exalted.

‘Sir?’

Nethata snapped out of his introspection to see Slavo Heriat standing before him.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Rauth desires your presence,’ said Heriat. ‘Within the hour, if possible.’

Nethata clamped the magnoculars to his belt and turned away from the view. He faced Heriat, and said nothing for a while.

The two figures looked very different. Nethata was a short, vigorous man, still powerfully built and bullish despite two centuries of active service. His skin was the colour of burnt umber and his hair was as black as oil. His chin jutted forwards, giving him a belligerent, officious air, though when he spoke his voice was soft. His accent was that of his home world, the high-gravity planet Moal, something he’d not lost in all the years of campaign across the void. He wore the olive green uniform of the Ferik Tactical, neatly adorned with an array of Imperial decorations across his broad chest. A heavy urlwool cloak hung down his back, pinned at the shoulder with a stylised bronze aquila.

Commissar-General Slavo Heriat stood nearly a head taller than Nethata and was as lean and taut as a hunting hound. His flesh was a smooth pale grey, except around his eyes and nostrils where the skin had sunk into redness. Sores indicating the congenital condition skietica clustered at the edges of his thick-lipped mouth. He wore the long black leather coat favoured by his peers in the Commissariat, complete with orthodox high-peaked hat and iron-grey chest aquila.

A casual observer might have expected two such men to be at odds with one another, driven to disagreement by their obvious divergence in character and disposition. Such an observer would have been entirely wrong; for reasons that never strayed far from either of their minds, they

were inseparable. For a hundred years they had been like hilt and shaft, like blade and scabbard, like trigger and barrel – just two parts of the same weapon.

‘I have an observation, Heriat,’ said Nethata.

‘Do you, sir?’ asked Heriat.

‘I do. The men we kill on this world believe, fervently, that they are fighting for the Emperor.’

‘Yes, I’ve seen the same reports,’ said Heriat.

‘What do you make of it?’

Heriat’s expression was uninterested.

‘They are mistaken,’ he said. ‘Such error is fatal.’

‘So it is proving,’ Nethata said. ‘And yet, it is strange, all the same.’

Nethata looked back out across the ash plains, over to where his forces were mustering ready for the assault to come. Huge areas of cleared land were covered with prefabricated barrack-complexes. Columns of armoured vehicles, stained black from the ash, crawled slowly to the front.

‘This world is governed by powers who wish the ruin of humanity,’ he said. ‘My psykers froth at the mouth and warn me of horrors growing in those spires, and even I can feel it.’

He looked back to Heriat.

‘Why do they not sense it?’ he asked. ‘Why can’t they see what masters now rule over them?’

Heriat maintained his chilling, impassive stare. His eyes, red-rimmed and ringed with darkness, were as empty as a dead man’s.

‘It takes time to corrupt a world,’ he said. ‘And do not fool yourself – how many of our men understand why they fight? They follow orders. They believe what we tell them. I make sure of it.’

Nethata frowned.

‘I do not like that,’ he said. ‘The death of heretics brings me joy; the death of the ignorant does not.’

‘I have agents in the hives, already working,’ said Heriat. ‘If we can persuade them, they will rise up and join us; if not, we will kill them. In either case, their souls will be saved.’

Nethata smiled.

‘So clear,’ he said, almost to himself. ‘So clear.’

‘That it is, sir,’ Heriat said. ‘Better the ignorant die than the guilty live.’

The commissar glanced down at the chrono lodged in the armour of his forearm.

‘Rauth is waiting,’ he said.

Nethata lost his smile.

‘Yes, you said,’ he replied, remaining where he was and looking over to the spires on the horizon, knowing what horrors would be necessary to break them. His expression was bleak. ‘He can wait a little longer.’

Several kilometres south-west of Nethata’s command headquarters, a cluster of buildings had been raised from the ash. Like everything else on the Helat, they were prefabricated units – created in the forges of void-going starships and lifted down to the surface by a procession of landers. The buildings were unlike the ferrocrete bunkers of the Imperial Guard – their surfaces were clean and finely tooled, unmarked by regimental devices or fleet designations. No windows marred the symmetry of the outer walls, which glistened darkly in the dull red light of Shardenus’s smog-wreathed suns.

Though each structure had stood in place for less than a local diurnal cycle, they looked as if they had been there forever. Ash blew against the heavy foundations and slipped over the molecule-smooth outer finish.

A flyer descended sharply towards the largest of the buildings, its landing lights whirling through the smoggy air. The flyer was as black as the structures below it, and was also without insignia or decoration.

With a single belch of neon-blue flame it slowed its descent and hovered over a bleak landing strip. Squat landing braces extended smoothly from

their sheaths, flexing as the flyer made contact with the ground. Its main engines cut out, and a wash of smoke and steam slewed across the apron.

As soon as it was down, a number of figures emerged from the surrounding buildings. None of them were fully human. Some had traces of visible flesh in isolated patches; others looked entirely metallic. All moved on tracks and had complex motive units strapped to their backs. Most had more than two arms, each of which terminated in a variety of tools, weapons and interface nodes. Before the flyer's engines had fully wound down they began to fuss and tinker all over it, opening up service hatches and attaching refuelling tubes. Their impassive faces – little more than riveted plates of steel – gave nothing away as they worked.

In the wake of the servitors came five much larger figures – all over three metres tall and clad in the gigantic curves of Terminator armour. Four of them wore matt-black battle-plate with signs of heavy use on the ceramite. They carried double-barrelled boltguns and their helm-lenses glowed rust-red. Each wore a skeletal white hand device on their left shoulder guard and a skull-inset cog-wheel on their right. Imperial aquilae had been picked out in gunmetal-silver across their chests.

The fifth figure, in the lead, was clad similarly. His servos let out a low, grinding machine-hum as he moved. Like the others, every facet of his plate was painted a dull black, only relieved with stark white Chapter markings. Coils of tubing and clusters of pistons nestled amid the smooth curves of ceramite. Its armoured shell had been stripped back in several places, exposing panels of polished metalwork beneath.

None of those figures displayed any flesh. They looked like immense mobile statues, cast from chunks of black onyx and augmented with steel.

They came to a halt as a hatch in the side of the flyer opened, sending fresh gouts of steam tumbling across the ground. A single figure emerged from the hatch. He was clad much like the others, though his battle-plate was a dark blue – almost nightshade – rather than black. He carried the

white hand device on his left pauldron alongside the skull-and-coronet sigil of a Chief Librarian. His head was buried under an iron cowl, encrusted with dark crystals and an array of slender probes.

He nodded to the lead warrior – a brief gesture, barely perceptible amid all the interlocking layers of ceramite and cabling.

‘Lord clan commander,’ he said.

His voice was throaty and machine-filtered. His vowels were flat and the consonants tinny, as if the mortal vocal cords within had been stretched out and lodged within a mechanical audio-augmetic.

‘Telach,’ replied Clan Commander Arven Rauth, and his voice, though possibly a shade more resonant, possibly deeper, sounded almost the same. ‘Translation was efficient?’

‘It was.’

Rauth nodded again, satisfied, and turned away from the flyer. His escort parted to allow him to pass. Telach walked alongside Rauth, and the two giants crunched heavily towards the waiting shelter of the Iron Hands’ command complex.

‘How stands it?’ asked Telach.

‘Satisfactory,’ replied Rauth.

The two warriors spoke in Tergiza, the Medusan dialect used by all of Clan Raukaan. Little emotion was conveyed by that language, which, by human standards, used exceptionally rigid grammar and vocabulary.

‘From orbit, deployment looks complete,’ said Telach.

‘It is not. I have been promised Titans. More troops need landing. We have labour ahead of us.’

Heavy blast doors ground open before the two of them, and the warriors passed out of the swirling wind and into the sterile interior of the command complex. Orange strip-lumens glowed softly from metal walls, picking out the austere mesh of the construction material and highlighting

its utilitarian finish. The Iron Hands' boots clanked against the floor as they walked.

'The last time I consulted you,' said Telach, 'doubt existed over the pattern of the attack.'

'No doubt,' said Rauth, dismissively. 'Never any doubt. The mortal commander objected. His objection was considered and rejected.'

Telach's blue helm-mask turned slightly in Rauth's direction. It was the only expression of surprise he gave away.

'The mortal commander objected?' he repeated.

'Yes.'

'He is a brave man. What was his case?'

Something like a vox-distorted grunt escaped Rauth's helm.

'A brave man?' he said. The two of them reached the end of the corridor and turned left. The environment become several degrees colder as they went, and the orange light grew deeper. All around them, the faint whirr of machinery hung in the air. 'He ought to be. He was still wrong.'

Rauth paused before a set of heavily built doors. He raised his helm-mask towards a skull-shaped roundel in their centre and a beam of red light briefly flickered across his lenses. Something clunked from within the doors' housing, and they slid back to reveal a hexagonal chamber beyond.

'Come,' said Rauth. 'There are things you should know.'

The two of them entered the chamber, leaving their escort behind them on the other side of the doors.

The room was large, with enough space to accommodate fifty inhabitants with similar dimensions to Rauth. The ceiling arced upwards, braced by steel struts. Each of the six walls was blank and undecorated, made of the same dark metal as everything else in the complex, and there was no furniture of any description. In the centre of the chamber was a low

pillar, also hexagonal. A metal skull, highly polished, lay on it. Rauth and Telach stood on either side of the pillar, facing one another.

‘You came in from Orentas,’ said Rauth.

‘I did,’ said Telach.

‘That world is now pacified.’

‘It is. I judged that my presence was now required here.’

‘If you had not come, I would have summoned you.’

‘Then our thoughts are aligned.’

‘They are.’

The two of them spoke quickly, tightly, efficiently. Combined with the bizarre timbre of their vox-output, the effect was rather like two cogitators locked in a closed loop with one another. For such massive figures, the sound was strangely fleeting and insubstantial.

‘We control seventy-two per cent of the Contqual subsector,’ said Rauth. ‘The enemy is withdrawing across all active zones.’

‘Except this one.’

‘Including this one. Planetfall was achieved cleanly. They can no longer project force beyond the hive limits.’

Neither figure moved while they spoke. They stood rigidly, shoulders back, feet braced. The ambient orange light seemed to sink into the matt surface of their armour and disappear.

‘You should be pleased,’ said Telach.

‘You asked about the mortal,’ said Rauth.

‘Raji Nethata. I studied our data on him.’

‘He objects to the pace of the assault. He advocated alternative tactics, vocally, in our strategic briefings.’

‘What does he want?’ asked Telach.

‘Shardenus is a world of hives,’ said Rauth. ‘These here, the Prime cluster, constitute the governing centre of the planet. Many others exist across the northern continent. They process the planet’s food and weapon

stockpiles. He wanted to attack them first, to starve Shardenus Prime of supplies and wait for it to weaken.'

'They would be softer targets.'

'Yes. They would be destroyed in a month.'

'Then why reject it?'

'Time. I cannot wait for the principal hives to grow hungry.'

Rauth gestured, fractionally, with a single finger. A three-dimensional schematic of the Shardenus Prime hive cluster emerged over the skull, picked out in lines of bright orange. It rotated gently. As it did so, deployment runes and attack routes were overlaid, one by one.

'The hives can be taken by direct assault,' he said. 'We attack – here – and maintain a constantly moving front – here. The central hive will fall once the outer spires have been compromised.'

Telach looked at the schematic. Behind the black mask of his hood, it was impossible to read his expression.

'We have the weapons, the numbers, for this?' he asked.

'We do.'

Telach hesitated before replying.

'I see why Nethata objects,' he said. 'His forces will be ravaged.'

'Some will suffer. We will suffer. All suffer who uphold the will of the Emperor.'

'Why the requirement for speed? What is in those spires?'

'I do not know,' replied Rauth. His voice was as flat as ever, deadened by the blunt syllables of Tergiza. 'But I can guess.'

'And you cannot discuss this guess with mortals.'

'No. That is why I need you.'

Telach looked down at the rotating schematic, and said nothing. The wire-frame outlines of the hive spires reflected in his red helm-lenses.

'You have changed the least, out of all of us,' said Rauth. 'I do not pretend to like what you do, but I am not fool enough to discard it. The

forces we have encountered thus far are deluded but not mutated. As we progress, that will change. Within the central spires, only we will be able to fight the defenders. In the very centre, where the corruption started, perhaps only you will.'

Telach bowed.

'I am your servant,' he said.

Rauth inclined his head a fraction.

'A comm-signal from Khatir,' he announced. 'Nethata is here.'

'He will not like your plans any more than he did before.'

A faint noise escaped Rauth's heavy helm-mask, perhaps a vestigial expression of amusement from lips no longer accustomed to expressing much at all.

'He is mortal,' said Rauth. 'He does not have to like my orders; he only has to follow them.'



CHAPTER TWO

Valien crouched low and sniffed the air. It tasted the same as hive-air on any other world – caustic, recycled, thick with the stink of close-packed humanity.

He pressed himself against the sloping wall of the tunnel, blending into the darkness. The lumen-strips running along the length of the ceiling were defective and flickered badly. From somewhere far below came the sound of machinery working, and the hum of it made the tunnel walls vibrate to the touch.

Valien pulled the synthskin clear of his inner wrist, exposing his locator. Schematics of the Capitolis hive complex spun into hololithic detail in front of him, glowing softly in the dim light. He got his bearings quickly.

Level 54, Sector Aleph, Melamar Secundus spire. Seven routes back to safe-point.

The air stirred ahead of him. Valien extinguished the hololith and slipped the fabric of his black boiler-suit over his forearm. He pushed himself clear of the tunnel wall and let his toned body fall into a slouch. His keen eyes sank down into a hollow look of boredom and his supple cheeks slackened.

Three figures entered the tunnel from an access hatch at the far end. Two of them carried standard-issue sidearms. The third, a woman, wore the

uniform of a junior arbitrator and looked bulky in her armour.

‘You,’ she said through a helmet filter, sweeping a torch beam across him. ‘Function and tasking.’

Valien saluted clumsily, forcing his highly attuned physique to mimic poor conditioning.

‘Talex volenta,’ he said.

‘What?’ she asked, pointing her laspistol in his direction. ‘Say ag—’

Valien flicked his arm out, revealing the palm-sized needle gun. He shot the woman cleanly through the joint between her helmet and neck-guard. Her visor sprayed with blood and she went down messily, choking and gasping. Before her escorts had time to react he fired again, sending needles into their unprotected faces. They toppled on top of one another, leaking blood in thin streams from tiny puncture wounds.

Valien stowed the needle gun. The tunnel fell silent. For a few moments Valien remained perfectly still, watching for further interruptions. One of the defective lumens flickered, but otherwise nothing moved.

He relaxed and let his eyes run over the pile of bodies in front of him. Blood ran in trickles from the woman’s neck and onto the mesh-metal of the tunnel floor. As soon as he saw it, a pang of desire ran through him. He crouched down low, sniffing. A familiar aroma of sweat and copper filled his nostrils. His heartbeat picked up and his nostrils dilated.

It had been too long. Even given all his training, all his discipline, it had been far too long. He battled against his instincts for a little longer, knowing that to indulge himself would only make the withdrawal symptoms worse in the days to come.

He gave in. Like an animal, he lowered his head towards the trickles of blood and extended his tongue. The taste sent shivers of pleasure through his body. He forgot the filth around him and allowed himself to enjoy the moment. He licked again, sucking the hot liquid to the back of his throat

and savouring the thick texture as it slipped down. He closed his eyes, and smiled.

‘You.’

The voice startled him. He snapped his eyes open, instantly coiled for attack.

Careless!

‘Talex volenta,’ he snapped, whipping the needle gun into position.

Four figures had entered the tunnel from the same access hatch and stood about five metres away from him. They wore transparent visors, and Valien could see expressions of horror on their faces.

‘Relex amantis,’ said one of them, and Valien instantly relaxed.

He stood up, wiping a stray line of blood from his lips. The tiny muzzles of his needle gun slipped back into his gauntlet.

‘Respond quicker next time,’ he said. ‘I almost killed you.’

The man who’d given the code-phrase pulled his helmet from his head. He had dirty, sandy-coloured hair.

‘What were you doing?’ he asked, staring at the bodies on the floor.

‘Give me your name,’ said Valien, sharply.

The man finally dragged his eyes away from the corpses and looked Valien in the face.

‘Lieutenant Alend Marivo,’ he said. ‘9th Platoon, 3rd Company, 23rd Shardenus Imperial Guard. These are men from my unit. We have more waiting, spread out through the lower levels. All we need are orders.’

‘Good,’ said Valien, giving him a cold smile. He was aware of what effect his unusual features had on ordinary men, and he liked it. ‘Take me somewhere secure, and you shall have them.’

The hab-unit was as dirty and foetid as every other hab-unit in the lower Melamar Secundus sector. Shula Khadi had no idea when it had been built. She had no idea when the hives themselves had been built – as far as she was concerned, they might have stood forever.

She sat on her hard bunk and ran her fingers through short, dark hair. Khadi felt grimy and unwashed. A thin film of dirt caked her cheeks, the kind of soot-coloured dirt that every machinist on Shardenus wore perpetually on their skin. She didn't have a scheduled slot in the hygiene station for another two days, and even then she knew she wouldn't be able to scrub it all off – it would take more than five minutes of standing under a lukewarm trickle of recycled water with a handful of foamy dermacleanse to scour the filth of the hive from her flesh.

Occasionally she dreamed of being clean. She dreamed of a hypothetical state in which her clothes were free of lice, her skin was free of sores and her hair was glossy from cleanliness rather than shiny with grease. She knew that such a state was possible from the holovids on the communal picts, in which manicured speakers from the information departments delivered exhortations to the workers to improve faltering production rates. The speakers in those picts had tight, clean faces and crease-free uniforms. Khadi guessed that they lived somewhere at the top of the Capitolis, up in one of the domes that she had only ever seen from a distance through the hazy murk of the planet's atmosphere.

No one Khadi knew had skin like they did. All other workers in the Roll Yard manufactorium were as dishevelled and pallid as she was, and many were worse. That didn't stop her dreaming, though, and nor did it stop her making the most of the precious hygiene slots when they came. Then she scrubbed and scraped and rubbed until her fingers were raw.

It was important to have standards, even on a hellhole like Shardenus. That was how you kept it together, kept your chin up and your eyes clear and didn't end up in the forced labour asylums where the ranting crazies were shipped, never to come back.

A sharp hiss broke her train of thought as the door to her hab-unit slid open. She pushed herself from her bunk, irritated at the interruption.

Private time was scarce in a hive, and despite the lack of working locks on almost all of the unit doors, most people respected the sanctity of it.

Marivo walked in. He had a strange, half-sick look in his eyes. The lieutenant was still in uniform – the slate-grey tunic and breeches of the Shardenus regiments – but he'd taken his helmet off. He looked at her distractedly, as if he'd done something terrible or dangerous and couldn't quite get it out of his mind. His blond hair had been pressed down from helmet-wear, and looked greasy.

‘What?’ Khadi asked, putting her hands on her hips.

She didn't like Marivo. It wasn't so much what he did as what he was. In normal circumstances a Guard officer wouldn't have given a machinist a second glance, and for all that he pretended such things didn't matter now, they still did.

‘I made contact, Shula,’ said Marivo. ‘He was where he said he'd be. We're getting our tasking, and I need you with me.’

Khadi felt her stomach twist with worry. So this was it.

‘You did?’ she said. ‘What's he like?’

Marivo shot her a wry smile.

‘He's... he's odd. I don't know. We're assembled in the refectory – you can see for yourself.’

He didn't move. Marivo looked nervous, which was unsettling. Khadi had never seen him look nervous before – for all his faults, the man wasn't a coward.

‘This is what you wanted,’ she reminded him, not inclined to make him feel any better. ‘This was your decision.’

Marivo pressed a button on the panel beside him and the door hissed closed. The two of them stood in the tiny chamber, between them taking up most of the available room between bunk and door. His hard face looked almost haggard under the brutal strip-lumen.

‘You picked up the transmissions too,’ he said, accusingly. ‘You heard the same things I did. This is our *duty*.’

‘I know we need to get more organised,’ she said. ‘I just don’t know what they intend to do once it gets in here. I’m as scared of them as I am of everything else.’

She ran her hands through her hair, and saw that they were shaking.

‘I know what you think,’ she said. ‘You think the Guard will get in, put things to rights and recognise those who helped them do it. I hope you’re right, I really do, but I’m not like you. I prefer to keep my head down so it doesn’t get shot off, and it doesn’t matter much who’s holding the gun.’

Marivo shook his head disapprovingly.

‘Careful,’ he warned. ‘That’s—’

‘—dangerous talk. So it is.’

She slumped back against her bunk. Debating with Marivo exhausted her.

‘But there’s no point in discussing it,’ she said. ‘You’ve made contact with them, so that’s that. What do they want us to do?’

‘Like I said – we’re being briefed in the refectory. And I need you there.’

‘Why?’

‘You know why.’ Marivo smiled grimly. ‘I need someone who understands the underhive, someone who can talk to the others. I have trouble... sinking to your level.’

It was meant as a joke, but it fell flat and Khadi felt a spike of anger kindle inside her.

‘Get out,’ she said.

Marivo’s face fell.

‘Look, I’m—’

‘Just get out,’ said Khadi. ‘I’ll come when I’m ready.’

She turned away from him, her cheeks flushed.

‘If I’m that important to all this,’ she said, ‘then I’m sure he’ll wait.’

Marivo strode down the corridor from Khadi's hab-unit to the refectory, and his fists clenched. She made him angry. He'd tried everything to get along with her, from flattery, to indifference, to banter, to the kind of commanding tone he'd used with his platoon, and none of it had any effect.

He understood, and had always understood, why she and other manuals felt the way they did. The conspirators – as they called themselves when feeling flippant – were a mix of social strands that would never have been tolerated in less straitened times: Guard officers, machinists, gangers, medicae, hive officials, transit operatives, all shoved cheek-by-jowl and in constant fear of discovery.

Khadi, however, seemed to have a personal grudge against anyone not raised in the grime-swilling depths of the lower levels with the gang-tattoos and limb deformities to prove it. She'd been there right at the start, back when the rumours started coming out of the Capitolis that things had gone wrong. She'd run agitprop through the manufactoria floors at huge risk and had recruited half a dozen new conspirators even before official admissions had come over the communal vids to announce that something had changed.

Marivo still didn't know what had motivated her. His own ideals were simple – adoration of the Emperor, loathing of the heretic, the kind of thing he'd had drilled into him over seven years of active service in the local regiments. As for Khadi, a gutter-dwelling creature from the unlit bowels of Melamar Secundus, who knew what had provoked her into rebellion against the hive authority? Perhaps she'd always wanted to strike back against her betters. Perhaps, indeed, that was what motivated most of the lowlife that clustered around the conspirators like an airborne contagion.

Ever since Marivo had been pulled into the brotherhood he'd tried to work with her. He'd recognised her qualities immediately – the fierce, semi-savage expression that spoke of well-deep resolve, her physical

toughness, her clear vision of what needed to be done. Khadi would have made a fine Guard recruit if things had been different. Maybe she knew that. Maybe, deep down, that knowledge was what made her so damned prickly.

He reached the end of the corridor, over where the last of the lumen-strips gave out and the walls became patchy with old, caked grease. The floor was sticky and smelled of fish.

A green light flickered across a narrow grille in the door in front of him. He held still, feeling a prickle across his skin as the security beam ran a facial scan.

‘Refectory’s closed,’ came a voice from behind the door.

‘It’s me, Relat,’ said Marivo impatiently. ‘Open the door.’

The door pulled back to reveal a large chamber beyond. The refectory’s benches had been pulled together into a rough semicircle. Forty men and women sat at them, though none of them were eating. Most were manual workers and wore pale blue tunics and overalls. A few military uniforms were visible. A single black-visored arbitrator sat at the back in silence. Marivo slipped along to a vacant spot and sat like the rest of them.

They all faced a single figure in shabby work fatigues. He stood, shoulders back and hands clasped loosely in front of him. His skin was grey like a rad-gen worker. His features were indefinably odd, possibly hermaphroditic, or simply effeminate. Despite his shabby appearance his posture indicated a wiry and capable physique. He carried himself with an unconscious, almost arrogant, poise.

Marivo looked at him carefully, wondering if any of the blood he had seen him drink remained on the man’s chin. It didn’t, and he almost regretted that it didn’t.

‘You do not need to know my name,’ the man said. His voice was as strange as everything else about him. ‘I serve the Emperor, though, and you, by your presence here, have demonstrated that you serve Him also.’

The masters of this world no longer serve the Emperor, and so have become our mutual enemy. You have the chance to become heroes of the Imperium, and so should consider yourselves blessed beyond measure – few mortals ever have such a chance to serve.’

Marivo knew the man’s name; or, at least the name he’d given when they’d stumbled across him. Valien. A codename, presumably, one that changed with every assignment. He served under the Commissariat, so he said, and was an assassin. Not a Temple assassin, but from a death cult – Talica, he called it.

Marivo didn’t know what a death cult was, but he certainly knew what the Commissariat was.

‘Perhaps you think you understand what has been happening on Shardenus,’ said Valien. ‘You do not. For months you have been fed lies by your masters. Let me tell you the truth. The whole Contqual subsector is in rebellion, and has been in rebellion for a long time. Even now the armies of the Immortal Emperor are spread out across whole star systems to combat the contagion. As you sit here listening to me, millions of men are fighting across a hundred battlefields. They are fighting and dying, just as you will soon be called to fight and to die.’

Valien clearly enjoyed the sound of his own voice, and he placed a theatrical relish on each phrase.

‘The forces of treachery are being routed. Contqual is returning to the bosom of the Emperor, planet by planet, hive spire by hive spire. Shardenus is the last world to resist. Here, where the contagion began, the fighting will be fiercest. Some of your comrades will fight to resist the invader, believing themselves loyal. Others know the truth and will fight for the perversions they have carved out for themselves.’

A faint hiss from the back of the refectory announced the presence of a latecomer. Marivo glanced over to see Khadi entering, and looked away just as quickly.

‘The guilty will be punished,’ said Valien, looking as if he relished the prospect. ‘You will be acquainted with many of those destined to die. If so, harden your hearts. The fate of traitors is death, and the fate of assisting traitors is death. Very soon the Angels of Death will be here. When they come, all deception will be cast aside and the true nature of those whom you have been serving will become clear.’

The man’s voice lowered.

‘I will not say: do not be afraid, for to fear is to be human. But those who are coming have no fear.’

Marivo listened intently, waiting for the moment he knew was coming, the moment when he would discover what manner of celestial warrior had been unleashed to drag his world back into the ranks of the faithful.

‘We are fortunate indeed,’ said Valien, his grey mouth twisting into a smile. ‘Be joyful, faithful of Melamar Secundus, for it is the Iron Hands who have come to Shardenus.’



CHAPTER THREE

Nethata looked up.

Nothing. The sky remained swilled with ash and engine fumes – endless clouds of filth and oily exhaust remnants. The smog blew in eddies driven by the hot wind.

He looked down. The huge landing site was ready, cleared of lesser vehicles and as pristine as anything else on the planet. Lights flickered along its edges – on, off, on, off. Around its margins, seven thousand troops stood to attention, arranged in regimental formation and in full dress uniform.

Nethata adjusted his cloak. With a squeeze of his ring finger he shot a miniscule dose of tranquiloX into his bloodstream. He didn't need a heavy slug, but every little helped – dealing with Rauth was enough to give any man headaches.

'They're late,' said Heriat.

'They're never late,' said Nethata.

The two men stood on a dais at the southern end of the landing site, twenty metres high with a shallow flight of stairs leading to the summit. A red carpet had been draped across the top level, already dirty from drifting ash.

‘I wonder how old that is?’ said Nethata, idly.

‘Sir?’

‘For how many thousands of years have men greeted visitors on red carpets? Why do we still do it? Do you know how difficult it is to source the stuff in a warzone?’

Heriat didn’t reply. He turned his dead-eyed gaze back to the landing stages.

Nethata rolled his shoulders. They felt tense, despite the tranquilo. He was having to gland more of it every day and the reliance had begun to bother him. Not that he could have told Heriat about that, of course.

The summit of the dais held twenty men and women. Six were senior regimental officers from the Ferik battalions, by far the largest contingent of Imperial troops on Shardenus. They stood stiffly, ignoring the temptation to wipe flecks of ash from their faces. Among them were two company commanders from the Galamoth Armoured detachments, pale-skinned with black rebreathers over their mouths and nostrils. Yris Aikino of the Harakoni Warhawks stood well apart from the others, clad below the neck in carapace armour, his red hair in dreadlocks. The others – the Master of Navigators, the Psyker Primaris, Naval attachés, Administratum scribes, the usual roster – all held their hands to their mouths and tried not to breathe too deeply.

Only one member of Rauth’s contingent had deigned to attend. A lone Iron Hand stood at the back of the company, silent and brooding. Aside from the briefest of greetings to Nethata, the warrior had said nothing since arriving.

As he endured the wait, Nethata found himself musing on the possibility that the dais construction might fail to take the weight of the monster’s power armour and bring them all down in a tangled heap. Despite everything, that would amuse him.

Above them, the clouds parted. The wind changed direction, as if suddenly buffeted from above.

‘Ah,’ said Nethata. ‘Here we go.’

Heriat noticed the change as well, and whispered something into a comm-link embedded in his collar. Down at ground level, seven thousand troopers adjusted their stance and checked that they were in the correct position.

The clouds directly above the landing platform glowed like hot embers. A low growl broke out, distant at first, then stronger and more reverberating.

‘In all my years in service,’ said Nethata, ‘I have never seen one of them make planetfall.’

‘I have,’ said Heriat.

‘Is it worth the wait?’

Heriat shrugged.

‘You’ll be the judge of that.’

The clouds parted. A shaft of hot, red light lanced down, striking the landing site in the centre. The growl of massed engines grew to a roar. Even with aural dampeners operating, Nethata found the wall of sound impressive. For the troops down below, it must have been painfully loud.

The wind picked up, pulling at his cloak and ruffling its fur lining. A gale swirled around the dais, flinging ash in all directions. The shaft of light grew in size, turning into a column of thundering, trembling flame. Other shafts joined it, until five mighty pillars of fire streamed down from the heavens and on to the wide ferrocrete arena below.

Moving with stately precision, five gigantic mass conveyors broke through the tormented cloud cover and descended planetwards on a shimmering cushion of heat-wash. Five vast engines threw immense quantities of promethium-blaze into the atmosphere, and even from many hundreds of metres away Nethata could feel the raw heat of it against his

skin. Above the roar of the engines the structure of the landers themselves rose up in bronze and gold and crimson. The skull and cog insignia of the Adeptus Mechanicus was engraved into the sides of each one – ten metres in diameter and surrounded by strobing banks of lights. Above each insignia was another device: a black sun ringed with a coronet of electrical brilliance.

In stark contrast to the drab, functional vehicles of the Imperial Guard, these vessels were majestic creations. Every surface was covered in baroque bronze imagery – angels, demigods, mythical beasts, arcane machinery of long-forgotten provenance.

The earth beneath Nethata's feet vibrated like a drumskin. Huge waves of heat from the engine discharge rolled over the dais, prickling his skin. He could see soldiers in the front ranks down on the plain struggle to hold their positions, craning their necks to take in the massive vessels as they descended.

With a heavy, echoing crash, the lead conveyor touched down. It sat heavily on the landing site, rising up like some towering edifice from the ferrocrete. Flames from its colossal exhausts rippled away, and the throbbing roar from its engines slowly began to wind down.

Once on the tarmac, the lander's shape and purpose could more clearly be discerned. The ship was nearly twice as tall as it was deep and wide. Almost all of its bulk seemed to be taken up with a single immense load-bay. Tiny lights flickered at the very summit of the mass conveyor where, presumably, the bridge and control functions were housed.

The forward-facing flank of the ship was wreathed in steam. Despite that, two words could be made out across its surface, graven in High Gothic letters five metres high.

'Legio Astorum,' said Nethata, reading out loud. 'They enjoy advertising their presence, do they not?'

Heriat let slip a wry smile.

‘If I had such toys to play with,’ he said, ‘I would too.’

Nethata laughed.

Once all five vessels had touched down and the deafening engine noise had died away, nothing happened for a full seven minutes. The conveyors settled on their landing braces and the smoke and steam of the descent gradually drifted away. The honour guard of mortal troops waited patiently, none of them uttering a word.

Then, without warning, a long, jagged crack ran down the front of the lead vessel. It was followed by a series of echoing clangs from within, then the throaty sound of fresh machinery gearing up. Smoke poured from ducts along the vessel’s sides, and the crack slowly began to widen. Warning klaxons sounded from somewhere near ground level and a series of floodlights burst into life.

‘Here it comes...’ murmured Heriat, watching the spectacle as intently as everyone else.

Nethata felt his heart-rate pick up. Having served on so many campaigns, he was used to the sight of war machines in action. It was something else, however, to see the mysteries the adepts of the Machine-God employed in order to bring their divine engines to war.

The crack widened further. The flank of the conveyor parted to become two doors, each propelled outwards by banks of enormous pistons.

Two gigantic treads were revealed at ground level, each one many metres across and clad in thick blast armour. Nethata’s eyes moved upwards, scanning across two colossal leg columns, corded with pistons and segmented into huge panels. Above those massive legs was an armoured torso, angular and multi-faceted. Atop it all was a skull-like head, crowned with a dim row of cockpit lights protruding from under hunched, sloping shoulders.

It was vast – almost indescribably vast. Enormous weapons – multi-barrelled and snub-nosed – hung from housings on either side of its

flattened torso. Two more were mounted atop its armoured back like the dorsal spines of an animal. Steam cascaded down its flanks like cataracts down a mountainside.

Warlord, thought Nethata. *By the Throne, it's big.*

With a grind and shriek of metal, the doors settled into their open position. Clouds of smog and smoke subsided across the landing site.

Nethata watched, and waited.

The warning klaxons died out. Lights flickered into life along the machine's cockpit, and the acrid stink of void shield generators bled out into the air.

It didn't move. Nethata knew that the god-machine would not take a single step for several hours; not while the machine-spirit within was sluggish from the orbital drop. Days might pass before it would be ready to deploy on the battlefield.

But it was alive. Nethata could feel it, as could every other soul lined up to greet the lead Titan of Battlegroup Praxes. The Warlord-class engine *Terribilis Vindicta* had come to Shardenus, ready to march alongside four other Titans of the fabled Legio Astorum.

A sharp snap ran through the air, followed by the hiss and boom of vox-projectors powering up.

'*Lord General Raji Nethata,*' came a broadcast voice from the Titan, so loud that it made the men on ground level visibly shudder. '*Battlegroup Praxes, of Legio Astorum, the Collegia Titanica. Permission requested to deploy.*'

Nethata smiled. The formality was unusual and the courtesy unexpected. Rauth had summoned the engines to Shardenus, and if any permissions were required then they should have been directed to him. Perhaps the princeps – whoever he or she was – was signalling a desire to respect the sensitive divisions of power within the Imperial forces. Or perhaps, as

Rauth had not been able to attend, they merely addressed the most senior officer in front of them.

When he replied, his voice was similarly augmented, sent to a hundred relays placed across the landing site and audible from every corner of it.

‘Welcome to Shardenus, princeps,’ he said. ‘No permission is necessary; we are honoured to have you marching with us.’

At that, a wave of cheering broke out from the troops assembled on the fringes of the landing site. The demonstration of enthusiasm was hardly spontaneous – Heriat had made it quite clear to the company captains what kind of reception he expected for the Legio – but it was genuine all the same. Guardsmen were reassured by the presence of Titans. Unlike Space Marines, whose actions seemed to have little to do with their safety or protection, Titans were always visible, looming over the battlefield ready to unleash a hurricane of destructive hellfire at the enemy.

Nethata turned to Heriat, a satisfied smile on his lips. As he did so, the regimental commanders on the dais around him broke into shouts of acclamation.

‘Yes, I think it was,’ he said. ‘Definitely worth the wait.’

‘I wish to ask you a question,’ voxed Brother-Sergeant Naim Morvox over a private channel.

‘Now?’ replied Iron Father Havel Khatir.

‘Apologies. I am aware this is not a good time.’

‘Quickly, then.’

Morvox took a quick look around him. The other members of Clave Arx were hunkered down, just as he and Khatir were, beneath the jagged lip of a blast crater. Even at such close proximity to one another their black armour made them almost invisible against the rutted surface of the Gorgas Maleon. The warriors of his clave remained perfectly immobile, like discarded machines left to rust in the wind.

‘The assault on the hives will come soon,’ said Morvox, turning back to Khatir. ‘Why are we not preparing for that? Mortals can do this work.’

Khatir didn’t reply immediately. Morvox stared into the Iron Father’s helm-mask, sensing nothing of the mood underneath.

Perhaps Khatir no longer had moods. The Iron Father had been inducted into the Chapter a long time ago, and Morvox knew that much of his body would be augmetic. Some of those changes were surface-visible: an evidently bionic right leg and lower right arm. Like all members of the Chapter, his left hand had long been replaced with a mechanical facsimile, and it was likely most of his internal organs were either vat-grown substitutes or full-metal analogues.

Eventually, the Iron Father turned away from him, saying nothing. That was the only answer Morvox required.

I should not have asked the question, he thought.

Khatir snaked carefully higher up the crater slope, grinding his boots through the ash as he went. The sight was incongruous – like watching a giant ironclad beetle burrowing its way across a patch of broken earth. Once at the top, a faint whirr gave away subtle adjustments to Khatir’s bionic optics.

Morvox shuffled his way to Khatir’s side. Moving slowly, he lifted his helm above the crater’s edge, and let his helm filters sort through the clouds of black dust in front of him.

Ahead, no more than two hundred metres distant, was the object of their assignment.

The Gorgas had once been a thriving industrial zone, jammed with overspill manufactoria from the main hive cluster. Morvox remembered absorbing the tactical data while aboard the *Kalach* with the rest of theclave: 2.3 million inhabitants (estimate); 87 per cent employed in heavy/mid-heavy industry; 12 per cent military levy; prodigious, if irregular, production quotas; minimal protective establishment.

It had been that last fact that had doomed it. Once Territo's Navy blockade had commenced the fire from orbit had been relentless. With no voids to speak of, the Gorgas had been turned, within hours, into a havoc of burning metal and exploding incendiaries.

An orbital barrage of such magnitude left little behind it but dust. Morvox looked carefully from left to right at the results, unconsciously absorbing the terrain detail and assessing the best route across it.

Metal struts lay in twisted, skeletal piles across the pitted earth. A few walls remained in place, though most had been blasted apart, leaving empty, gaping spaces open to the elements. Promethium fires still burned in isolated patches, fed by the parched-dry air and desiccated soils.

On Morvox's left flank lay the ruins of a standard-pattern Ecclesiarchy chapel. The outlines of prefab stone angels were still visible lurking in the rubble, and their empty, cracked eyes gazed up at the heavens from where punishment had come.

On his right, by the look of the wreckage, had been a collection of old hab-units. The blocks must have once been six, maybe seven, storeys; now they were little more than indeterminate heaps of debris with the occasional steel doorframe poking up from the ruin.

2.3 million inhabitants.

Concentrate.

Directly in front of the crater was the target – a defence bunker, semi-buried by debris. Two of its turrets still looked operational. Morvox zoomed his helm-display in on them, judging fire capacity and arc coverage.

‘Two active fire-points,’ said Khatir, confirming. ‘Swivel-mounted cannons. Some small-arms from the walls.’

Morvox swept his gaze across the visible sections of the bunker walls, noting where long slits allowed the occupants to launch defensive fire. Like all the bunkers dotted across the Gorgas, the structure was hexagonal

and low-profile. Morvox knew the basic pattern from experience: a central chamber within, containing anything up to a hundred troops, would lead to a connecting tunnel network behind.

‘Anything else?’ asked Khatir.

‘No,’ said Morvox. ‘That’s all we need.’

The Iron Father nodded, and Morvox signalled the attack plan to the rest of the squad in the crater below.

‘Twin-flanks, standard split,’ he voxed. ‘We’ll take the doors.’

The Iron Hands moved instantly, none of them uttering a word but silently hoisting weapons into place and creeping up the slopes of the crater. The tactical squad split into two groups, the squad’s support weapons dividing between them. Morvox watched Brother Gergiz hoist a lascannon on to his shoulder just as Brother Sulzar did the same with the huge bulk of a missile launcher. Despite the weight of their weapons the two specialist Iron Hands moved nearly as quickly and smoothly as their unburdened brothers.

Morvox made a final assessment of distances before glance-checking his own bolter.

‘Forty-five seconds,’ he voxed to the group. ‘Suppression on twenty.’

The two teams clambered over the edge of the crater, one heading left, the other heading right. Skirting wide and ducking under the plentiful cover of the ruins, they slipped into the darkness on either flank.

Morvox and Khatir remained in the crater. The Iron Father didn’t carry a ranged weapon in his hands, but that didn’t make him any less dangerous than Morvox: his mag-locked thunder hammer and gauntlet-mounted flammers made Havel Khatir a daunting prospect up close.

Morvox watched his chrono carefully, barely noticing the runes on his proximity scanner showing the two halves of his squad getting into position on either side of the bunker.

Twenty seconds came up. Heavy weapons fire suddenly streaked out into the smog. A las-beam snapped out from Gergiz's position, as wide as a man's arm, and cracked into the bunker's left side. At the same time, a missile screamed across from the right, impacting in a booming crash. Bolter fire followed, heavy and accurate, splintering and shattering the bunker's outer armour.

One of the turrets, already damaged by the missile impact, was knocked out by the torrent of bolter rounds. The other one swung around to target the source of the lascannon blast. It unleashed a hail of return fire, but Morvox didn't need to consult his display to know that Gergiz had already moved on and was readying for another strike.

A volley of las-beams shot out from the bunker. The aim from the men within was reasonably disciplined, but they couldn't hope to hit much at such range and with such poor visibility. More bolter rounds impacted on the edges of the firing slits, cracking the lips of the rockcrete.

'Five seconds,' announced Morvox, more out of habit than necessity – Khatir had already readied two grenades.

By then the defensive fire had split into two. Las-beams shot out to the right and left of the bunker, frantically searching for targets hidden in the wreckage around it. The remaining autocannon turret managed to get a few more shots away before the weight of incoming bolter fire broke it open. Its barrels exploded with an echoing *crump*, sending shrapnel spinning high into the air.

'Zero,' said Morvox, and both he and Khatir exploded into movement.

The two Iron Hands broke from the edge of the crater and charged straight towards the bunker. As soon as they emerged into the open, the suppressing bolter fire from the hidden Iron Hands on both flanks altered direction, aiming higher and avoiding the leading edge of the bunker wall.

Khatir and Morvox went quickly, veering and weaving around the plentiful cover, each with primed grenades in hand. Neither uttered a

word – they ran silently, burning up the ground between them and the bunker walls like a pair of Medusan night-ghouls. The defenders inside the bunker concentrated their fire on the enemies they knew about, firing volley after volley out to the left and right flanks.

Morvox reached the bunker doors first and slammed his body into the wall to their left. At shoulder height was a narrow slit through which the defenders could fire. Morvox threw his grenade through the gap and crouched down.

As it went off, Khatir reached the other side of the doors. He shoved one of his own grenades through the firing slit on his right even as scream-laced explosions from Morvox's grenade broke out from inside the bunker. The doors bulged outwards, but held.

Khatir mag-locked his final grenade against the damaged doors, and crouched away from the explosion just as Morvox had done.

The two blasts went off together, wrapping the doors on either side in a crippling embrace of rolling flame. The door-metal buckled, cracking along its length.

Even before the blast-shock had died away, Khatir and Morvox had risen to their feet. They dropped shoulders in unison and crashed straight into the reeling barrier. The tortured metal shattered under the heavy impact.

Morvox straightened up and swept his bolter round in a low arc, scything through the dazed ranks of defenders ahead of him. Khatir opened up with his flamers, flooding the narrow space in a curtain of blood-red immolation. The claustrophobic interior was immediately filled with a riot of colour, noise, screaming and panic.

Morvox strode into the heart of it, calmly picking his targets. He sent short bursts of bolter rounds into those few defenders still capable of mounting some kind of resistance. Any who somehow got through his barrage were met with the embrace of Khatir's flamers.

Unleashed into combat, the Iron Father was a terrifying prospect. He went slowly, purposively, doling out streamers of fire from both clenched fists. Flames wrapped around his coal-black gauntlets, echoing the red of his helm-lenses. The visible metallic extensions to his armour, each of them looking like arcane torture devices from a lost age of nightmares, reflected the swirling patterns of destruction.

The two Iron Hands cleansed the bunker interior with cool efficiency. Neither spoke – they killed in silence, working from one side of the chamber to the other, purging the crowded space clean of life.

As they neared the far side, the remainder of Clave Arx joined them inside. Their heavy boots crunched through flak-jackets, armour plates and bones as they strode across the carpet of the slain. Just like Morvox and Khatir, they went silently.

Morvox reached another set of doors at the far end of the chamber.

‘Fierez, Malloch: secure the bunker,’ he voxed, reloading his bolter. ‘All others, with me.’

As Morvox spoke, Khatir strode up to the doors. He grabbed them in both hands and wrenched them open, pulling one clean from its frame. A tunnel led steeply down beyond, lit sparsely by faulty strip-lumens. Ten metres down the tunnel was another closed doorway.

Khatir paused for a second. Morvox could see the tell-tale flicker of his lens-mounted augurs as they ran a scan of the space beyond the closed doors.

‘Multiple targets on the far side,’ he reported. ‘Take it out.’

Sulzar stepped up, his missile launcher loaded and mounted on his shoulder. The rest of the clave withdrew, and Sulzar pressed the trigger.

A muffled explosion cracked out, and the entire tunnel disappeared in a maelstrom of dust and splintered metal. A cloud of earth flew back up through the open doorway, covering Sulzar in a layer of filth and blooming

out into the ruined bunker chamber. The lumens in the tunnel smashed, throwing it into near-complete darkness.

Morvox strode into the breach, not waiting for the debris to clear. His helm compensated for the low-vis, picking out targets amid the gloom. He saw two bodies reeling towards him, and sent bolter-rounds through both of them.

‘Caution,’ came Khatir’s voice over the vox. ‘I have residuals on the—’

Even as the Iron Father spoke, another body emerged from the clouds of dust. Morvox fired at it, but it shifted left, moving quickly. In its wake came another one like it – a humanoid figure, moving strangely, leaping from the tunnel walls like a simian and apparently unharmed by the explosion.

The one Morvox had missed lurched up towards him with a blade in its left hand. Morvox had a brief impression of two glowing eyes hurtling towards him before he lashed out with his gauntlet, crunching his armoured fist into the creature’s face and sending it tumbling back the way it had come. He spun on the ball of his right foot, backhanding its companion into the tunnel wall. As the creature bounced and crumpled down to the floor, he got a better look at it.

It was human-shaped, though slightly bigger than the soldiers who’d manned the bunker’s main chamber. Close-fitting armour enclosed its limbs, though the head was uncovered, revealing grey skin and luminous purple eyes. For a moment he thought of the xenos genestealers he’d faced on Terarga, but then he saw the marks of mutation and recognised features that had once been human.

More of them raced up the tunnel, and Morvox heard the whine of Khatir’s flamers gearing up. He pressed himself back against the tunnel wall just as a storm of blue-tinged flame thundered past him, slamming into the oncoming mutants and withering them instantly. They screamed

and thrashed as they burned, tearing at their popping eyes and rolling on the ground in agony.

Khatir strode past, feeding the conflagration. Morvox fell in behind the Iron Father. With Khatir in the lead, the clave swept down the length of the tunnel and broke through the demolished doorway at its base.

Beyond it was another chamber, ten metres across and cut roughly from the earth. Cables hung from the ceiling, fizzing angrily and throwing bizarre flickers of light across the space. Cogitator banks, destroyed by the missile blast, vomited showers of sparks across the floor as their machine-spirits dissipated. A series of pict screens around the edge of the room showed nothing but static.

Several more mutants sheltered there, some carrying projectile weapons, but their presence was an irrelevance. In the centre of the room lurked something else – a bloated monster of a man, over four metres tall and sickeningly obese. Folds of milk-white blubber, glistening with sweat, trembled as the creature swung its flabby arms around it. Its chins wobbled as its jaws opened, revealing several rows of teeth and a black flailing tongue. Its eyes were entirely white-less, and what remained of its podgy legs had folded under its massive bulk, broken and useless.

As the Iron Hands burst into the chamber, it whipped two flails sharply across at Khatir. The lashes were studded with dozens of spiked balls that detonated when they struck the Iron Father's battle-plate, dousing him in a hail of tiny spore explosions.

Khatir staggered, and the gout of flame from his gauntlets faltered.

Morvox took aim and fired. The round punched deep into the creature's flesh with a wet pop – and disappeared. No detonation rang out, and the monster merely winced as its blubber closed over the wound.

'Blades,' ordered Khatir, unlocking his thunder hammer from his back with a flourish. Its disruptor field rippled along the killing edge, piercing in the dusty darkness.

Morvox complied, stowing his bolter and unsheathing his own weapon, a wide-bladed short sword with a serrated lower edge.

Then the Iron Hands got to work, punching and slicing with their weapons, moving in concert and spreading out to evade each other's blows. Sulzar and Gergiz discarded their heavy weapons and went after the lesser mutants, leaving the remaining nine to attack the primary target.

The creature lashed out wildly, flinging its flails in whistling arcs. Every time one of the spiked barbs connected bursts of spores would explode from the impact. The particles clogged in airways and between armour-edges, burrowing deep and eating through metal like acid.

Morvox drove in close for a decisive stab and took a flail across the face of his helm. The force of the blow knocked him back a pace and his lenses clouded, swarming with spores. He jabbed out blindly and felt his blade bite. The edge sank deep into what felt like tar and was nearly pulled free of his grip. He hauled it out as his vision cleared, just in time to see the wound he'd inflicted close up.

He tensed, ready to dive back in. Only then did he see Khatir make his move. The Iron Father leapt high, propelled sharply upwards by his power armour, his hammer held above his head and pointing down.

The creature swung round, almost getting a limb in the way, but didn't move fast enough. Khatir swooped down onto it, plunging his hammerhead deep into the creature's neck. As he slammed the weapon down, the disruptor flared into crackling brilliance.

The creature screamed, its head locked back and almost severed clear by the wound at its neck. Khatir dragged the hammer down, using his momentum to carve a long, jagged rent from throat to chest. The disruptor field ripped the monster's blubber open, revealing a throbbing, bloody pulp within.

Morvox powered forwards, swiping his blade as he charged. The other Iron Hands did likewise, ignoring the threat of the flails and jointly

stabbing their swords deep into the flesh of the lurching mutant.

Clear fluids pumped out of six separate wounds, spraying across the black shells of the Iron Hands' armour. The monster shrieked with pain, but its resistance swiftly became enfeebled. Lines of oil-black blood ran down from its eyes as heavy slabs of fat and sinew slapped to the floor.

Khatir crunched deeper with huge, shuddering blows. A flail came down across his exposed breastplate, but he shrugged it off. With a final whirl, he spun his thunder hammer around and switched back across at the creature's bleeding neck. The head of it passed straight through, decapitating the monster with a flurry of blood, pus and fat. Its bulbous head flew through the air, eventually landing with a moist smack against the dirt floor.

The rest of its body twitched for a moment, still upright, before it slumped in on itself, subsiding in a slow-moving welter of sliding, toppling blubber.

Morvox withdrew from it carefully, watching for sudden movement.

None came. The remaining mutants had been killed, and the chamber fell quiet again. The last echoes of the fighting died away, to be replaced by the gentle bubbling of the monster's collapsed innards.

Khatir stalked over to where the creature's head had fallen, and picked it up.

'I will take this back,' he said. 'Lord Telach will wish to study it.'

Morvox nodded, letting his sword fall so the fluids on it could run free of the metal. As he did so, he noted autopsy readings scrolling across his retinal display. No life signs remained; the bunker had been cleansed.

'By your leave, then,' he said. 'Objective secured.'

Khatir mag-locked his thunder hammer and held the mutant's head by its hair.

'Leave given,' he replied.

Khatir looked at Morvox then, switching the vox to a private channel.

‘And, brother-sergeant,’ he added, ‘I trust you now see why this task was not judged fit for mortals.’

Morvox felt a spike of self-reproach. Khatir spoke, as always, with almost zero inflection, though the admonishment in his voice was clearly detectable.

‘I do, Iron Father,’ Morvox said, returning Khatir’s unreadable gaze. ‘Be assured, I will not question again.’



CHAPTER FOUR

They called it sky sickness. Khadi suffered from it, and hated it.

She clenched her jaw tight, trying to press out the squirm of nausea and keep her feet. She felt sweat prick at her temples and hoped it didn't show.

It usually passed. It was at its worst during the first few minutes, when a lifetime of being cooped up inside the claustrophobic interior of a hive suddenly gave way to the horrible, unnatural sight of sky above one's head.

She forced herself not to look down, where she knew the man-made canyon of terraced buttresses dropping swiftly over hundreds of levels would give her vertigo, nor to look up, where the arching vision of boiling ash clouds would make her feel even sicker. Khadi stared straight out, all the way across the yawning divide between Melamar Secundus and the target defence tower on the walls.

Marivo didn't seem to have noticed. He leaned against the iron railing, magnoculars clamped to his face, moving the lenses slowly up and down, left and right.

Just the two of them were there, stuck halfway up the precipitous southern flank of the hive spire on a forgotten service balcony. The wind clutched at them, moaning and whining around the smoggy heights.

Pinprick lights from the cluster shone out into the gloom, above them, below them, far off in the distance, all of them weak and indistinct.

‘I can see what he means,’ said Marivo. ‘This can be done.’

He handed her the magnoculars.

‘I pinned the location,’ he said. ‘Take a look, and tell me what you think.’

Khadi unclenched one hand from the railing and snatched the magnoculars. Moving stiffly, she looked into them, following the marker Marivo had left on the display.

Her eyes were drawn to the defence tower. It stood high up on the outer walls of the hive cluster, over five hundred metres away. Looking down on it from such a height afforded her a view of its transit tubes snaking out across the poisonous, filmy expanse of industrial wasteland between the spires.

‘What am I looking for?’ she asked.

‘A way across,’ said Marivo. ‘Valien showed me schematics. We can’t get through the transit tubes to the tower – they’ll be guarded too heavily. We move across the wasteland at ground level.’

Khadi felt her gorge rising as she moved the magnocular view down by a fraction. The defence tower looked very small through the scopes, though she knew that it was anything but. It housed massive batteries of defensive weaponry – lascannons, plasma cannons, heavy bolters, missile launchers. At the heart of it all were six volcano cannons, truly gigantic las-weapons designed for the express purpose of taking down super-heavy targets.

Shardenus Prime possessed many such defence towers, all spaced out along the hundreds of kilometres of perimeter wall, fully manned and bristling with ordnance. To the best of her knowledge the guns in those towers had never been fired in warfare, though the deafening monthly practice barrages launched by Guard commanders assured her that they were in fine working order.

‘The wasteland,’ she said, dryly. ‘We’ll last a few minutes, no more.’

‘Valien’s got us breathing gear,’ said Marivo. ‘He’s got us environment suits, weapons, auspexes, the lot. It’s not that far.’

Khadi put the magnoculars down and looked away from the dizzying view. As she turned her head she caught a brief glimpse of the smog-wreathed heights of the Axis Primus hive, and it made her feel worse.

‘You ever been down there?’ she asked, glaring at Marivo in challenge. ‘Rebreathers? They’ll clog before we get halfway. That’s why they built the transit tubes. It’s why they insulate the hives – if that stuff ever got inside...’

Marivo snatched back the magnoculars.

‘Throne, do you ever lose your mood?’ he asked, flipping the lens-caps closed and stowing the device away.

‘Not when I’m stuck with you.’

‘You don’t have a choice about that.’

‘Don’t remind me.’

Khadi pushed herself away from the railing and pressed her body back against the nearside wall of the balcony. Marivo remained perched out on the edge, sticking his head out into the void and swaying against the wind.

‘That’s what he has in mind,’ he said, speaking to himself as he worked through the plans. ‘We travel through the wasteland – they won’t expect us to be able to. Break in, place the charges, get back.’

Khadi listened to him speak. His voice carried an almost boyish enthusiasm. He looked so clean cut, with his cropped military hair and clean-shaved chin.

‘Agreed,’ she said. ‘Simple.’

Marivo shot her an irritated look.

‘Yes, it is,’ he snapped. ‘I can see a way to make this work.’

She fumbled her way towards the balcony doors, trying to keep the shaking in her hands from view.

‘We will all die down there,’ she added, not wanting to meet his eyes. ‘They’re all trained killers, and some of them are... worse.’

Marivo reached out and grabbed the edge of the door, preventing her from opening it.

‘Some of us are trained killers too,’ he said quietly. ‘I thought you were comfortable with that.’

‘Just open the door,’ said Khadi.

Marivo held his ground for a few seconds longer, then released it, shaking his head briefly in disappointment.

Khadi almost said something else then. She almost apologised, and almost tried to explain how bad the open sky made her feel, and almost explained how conflicted the coming war made her, and almost admitted how scared she was of it despite all her surface bluster.

Marivo wasn’t listening. He went back to the railing and started making calculations for the coming raid.

Khadi left him there and went through the open doorway, back into the close, stinking warmth of the hive tunnels.

Telach bent low over the apothecarion table, gently pulling apart the mutant’s flesh with a silver flenser. His helm-display, overlaid with medicae feedback runes, zoomed in on different areas, automatically panning for significant phenomena.

For a moment longer he kept looking, observing the way the mutant’s bloated cells had fused together into straggling ganglia. Even now, many hours after the creature had died, low-level metabolic activity still existed amid the swamp of semi-dried body fluids and membranes.

Telach felt his concentration begin to slip. He withdrew his flenser and stood up straight. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the resistance from his armour as he did so. At times his battle-plate felt like a second skin; at others, it felt like a monstrous burden.

He pondered removing it. That would free up his arms to act without the interference of the suit's nerve-muscle interface, but the procedure would take time and distract him further from the task at hand.

Telach remembered when he'd first donned power armour. Back then, more than two hundred years ago, he'd been a raw neophyte with only a standard stint in Raukaan's Scout detachment behind him. The honour had been overwhelming.

Then, as the long years had passed, more and more of his flesh had been cut away and replaced. The *itch*, he called it – that nagging, persistent desire to strip away the weakness of organic matter and replace it with mechanical components.

Such augmentation had made him better. It had made him faster, stronger, less prone to fatigue, more capable of endurance.

It had also eroded the distinction between his body and the armour that encased it. Some sections of his torso-cladding were now difficult to remove without the supervision of an Iron Father, so he rarely did so.

He could imagine a time when he and his armour would never part. He could imagine a time when the idea of removing his plate would be as ludicrous as taking off the skin he'd been born into. Already his bodily functions were almost perfectly discrete, locked within the complex embrace of ceramics, metals and plastics.

Telach suspected that Rauth was locked inside his Terminator plate, fused into it as perfectly as a heart lodged within a circulatory system. The clan's Iron Fathers certainly were, as were many of its sergeants.

Was that a bad thing? Was it not simply the logical outcome of everything his Chapter believed in?

Perhaps one day he would think so. But just then, standing alone in the apothecarion of the command complex on Shardenus with the dissected head of a dead mutant in front of him, Telach couldn't quite imagine himself ever truly believing it.

You embrace your corrupted flesh, he mused, looking at the eyeless slab of cold meat on the table. *We shun it. Which of us, I wonder, has the worse affliction?*

‘Lord Telach.’

Telach snapped back into the present, immediately aware of the impropriety of his thoughts. He might have been more tired than he’d admitted to himself.

He took a moment to compose himself before turning to face Rauth. The commander was accompanied by Iron Father Khatir, the one who’d brought the disembodied head in for study.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Rauth.

‘Perfectly, lord,’ said Telach, feeling his muscles pinch as he moved. ‘I was contemplating the nature of the mutant.’

Khatir looked down at the mutant’s flayed face. His helm-mask was disfigured with streaks of discolouration, as if acid had been thrown across it.

‘Mutation has but one nature,’ he said.

Telach felt a flash of irritation. Iron Fathers had the luxury of looking at the galaxy through an invariant lens. Librarians, who cast their souls adrift on the warp and witnessed the depths of changefulness there, could have no such comforting illusions.

‘The change is advanced,’ said Telach, addressing Rauth. ‘Tissue corruption is near-absolute. Morphic functions are well established. The specimen has been corrupted for many months.’

‘Can you be more precise?’ asked Rauth.

Telach had expected the question. Always, always, the quest for precision; it was pathological with Rauth, just like the itch.

‘Not with certainty,’ said Telach. ‘I will say this: if the specimen is typical, then mutation will be endemic in the spires.’

‘The bunker’s other defenders showed no signs,’ said Khatir.

‘To be expected,’ said Telach. ‘Plague spreads from the head down. We will encounter more mutants the closer we get to the Capitolis. The troops sent to defend the Helat and the Gorgas Maleon are the least tainted, the ones the traitors were happiest to see eliminated.’

‘So what was this thing doing outside the walls?’ Rauth asked.

‘I do not know,’ said Telach. ‘Perhaps stranded when the barrage began.’

‘No,’ said Khatir.

Both Rauth and Telach turned to look at the Iron Father.

‘It was a warning,’ he said. ‘To intimidate the mortals – the enemy wishes to show them what awaits them, what can happen to them if they are taken alive.’

Rauth thought about that, then nodded.

‘Accepted,’ he said. ‘We must prevent the Guard storming the remaining Gorgas bunkers – prepare kill-teams from Raukaan to eliminate any that still exist.’

‘What purpose would that serve?’ asked Telach. ‘We cannot shield them from this – once the mortals are inside the Capitolis they will see horror in plenty.’

‘By which time it will be too late to retreat,’ said Rauth. ‘I do not want them losing their nerve before the walls are taken.’

‘Nethata isn’t stupid,’ said Telach. ‘He has psykers on his staff and agents inside the hives – he knows almost as much as we do.’

‘I do not care what Nethata thinks he knows,’ said Rauth, as impassively as ever. ‘The attack on the walls is imminent, and I want the mortals kept out of kill missions until then. I will tell him so myself, just to be sure.’

Rauth looked down at the remnants of the mutant’s face. The contrast between the commander’s helm-mask – heavy, dark, synthetic – and the fleshy remains on the table could hardly have been more marked.

‘These things will terrify them,’ he said. ‘For as long as possible, I wish them to fear nothing but us.’

Valien paused for breath, hugging the shadows. He could feel his heart beating, and let his mind dwell on that for a while. He enjoyed the sensation of it. In moments of stillness he could imagine it throbbing within his ribcage.

Casket of blood, he thought. Sacred, essential. Made in the image of the Emperor's immortal heart which bleeds for all Mankind.

He crept a little further along the deserted corridor until he reached a bulkhead. The lights were sparse and dim, barring the metal in shadows. Somewhere up ahead, a circulation fan turned slowly within its wire cage, dragging stinking air out of the snaking corridor network and into vehicle-sized purifiers.

Purifiers. The term has no meaning in here. Everything was corrupt even before the traitors turned.

He shuffled behind the bulkhead and sank to his haunches. Even his stim-enhanced muscles needed rest, and he had been on his feet for several days.

He wore the uniform of a Shardenus arbitrator, one of the many thousands charged with maintaining order in the bulk of the cavernous hive structure. In normal circumstances he might have needed to work on the disguise a little, but with the spires under imminent attack and the interior in a state of fevered mobilisation, he stood little chance of being discovered.

He unbuttoned the top button of his synthleather jacket and breathed a little more freely. The air in Melamar Secundus's upper levels was marginally less nauseating than the faecal stink of the bowels, but it still made his throat ache. Shardenus had a problem with its air supply, something he'd reported back on many times to his superiors since penetrating the outer limits. Some of the filtration towers were vulnerable, and he'd fed the coordinates of those he knew about to Heriat. If they could somehow be destroyed, then the incoming rush of toxic gases from the wasteland zones would kill more of the defenders than lasguns would.

Heriat hadn't responded. Perhaps he wasn't interested in conquering a poisonous hellhole; perhaps he actually wanted to take Shardenus intact.

Valien withdrew a tube from under his suit and took a frugal sip of nutrient-rich liquid. He felt the familiar cocktail of relaxants, restoratives and clarifiers swim into his blood. He pulled his helmet off and let his head fall back against the warm metal of the bulkhead. For a moment he remained perfectly still, propped up against the walls, just another piece of detritus lodged in the crannies of the vast, creaking hive structure.

Words from the Talica creed crept into his consciousness.

From blood we came;

In blood we persist;

To blood we shall return.

Valien found it increasingly hard to reconstruct what his life had been like before Talica had taken him. He'd always had a peculiar gift for killing, as well as a fascination for the mechanics of the human body that had long drifted into the macabre even as a teenager.

He'd heard it said that the mark of a psychopath was a taste for tormenting animals. Valien found that notion interesting, seeing as how he'd started with people. Animals were wary and had no concept of despair; humans, on the other hand, were overly confident and had almost infinite capacity for anguish. They could be tricked so easily – a promise of food, or sex, or simply a kind word whispered in the shadows. Once snared, they were far more fragile than any animal, since they could imagine more. Valien had always used that against them first, conjuring up careful horrors while they still had use of their eyes and fingers, telling them in exacting detail what was going to happen before he went to fetch the gadgets.

Only now that the truth had been revealed to him did he see quite how empty such a life had been. Evil, according to the well-worn trope, was a banality, the mark of something lacking rather than something to be proud

of. He'd needed better direction back then, a channel through which to apply his boundless thirst for secret suffering.

Talica had given that to him. Talica had taught him the mysteries of the divine, and Talica had snatched him away from the futility of indulgent violence.

After that he'd killed for a higher purpose, schooled in the arts of the Cult and beholden to its precepts. He'd carved a bloody path across a dozen worlds, assuming whatever subtle form was needed and bringing the Emperor's silent vengeance to a thousand heretics. He'd still killed, but for a purpose.

Every so often he'd taste blood on his chin and remember the old days. When that happened he would reach out, palms sweaty, for the chins of his victims, lifting them up so they could see the eyes of their killer and hear the words he'd hiss into their ears. The smell of their bodies, mingled with the sharp stench of their fear and the machine-oil tang of spilled blood, would take him right back to where he'd started. In such a state he was capable of doing terrible things.

No mortal man was perfect. If he occasionally strayed from the path of righteousness then he was always sure to pay the appropriate penance once back at the temple. The Emperor had walked in human flesh once, and Valien felt sure that He understood the temptations placed in a man's way.

He licked his lips, half-ashamed, half-aroused. He could still see the girl's face from an hour ago in his mind's eye, the one from the foundry level – pleading, incredulous, terrified.

No mortal man was perfect.

He felt a twinge as the secure comms bead at his neck throbbed. He took a quick look up and down the corridor, checking that it was empty. Once certain, he withdrew a tiny communicator from his collar.

‘Valien,’ he said.

‘Heriat,’ came the reply. ‘What's your status?’

‘Melamar Secundus, Level 451, north-east sector.’

‘Update?’

‘Not much,’ Valien said. ‘Seven cells ready to go. I can disable another tower myself, so you should get a clear run.’

‘Negative,’ replied Heriat. ‘Give the cells free rein and switch to secondary tasking.’

Valien paused, calculating what he’d need to rearrange to make that possible. He was still embedded deep in the Melamar spires, and hadn’t computed exit routes in detail.

‘Understood,’ he said. ‘Timing?’

‘Move as soon as the cells are primed.’

‘What’s the rush?’

‘Nethata’s finalising attack plans,’ said Heriat. ‘He wants our agents away from the front before we come in.’

‘Fine by me.’

‘What’s it like in there?’

Heriat sounded genuinely curious, and Valien smiled to himself.

‘You’d like it,’ he said. ‘They’re scared. Lots of traffic between here and the central spires.’

‘Marks of corruption?’

‘Increasing. Melamar’s only partially tainted, but the closer you get the worse it becomes. Plenty of mutants coming through the transit tunnels. Unit cohesion’s still good in the garrisons, so you’ll get a fight.’

‘Oh, we know that,’ said Heriat, wearily. ‘So how are you?’

‘Me? I’m fine.’

‘Physical condition? Anything you need to report?’

Valien paused.

What is he talking about?

‘Uh, no. Absolutely not.’

The feed gave out for a moment, as if Heriat had muted it. A few seconds later he broke back in.

‘Then you have new orders,’ he said. ‘Shunted into your system – study them and signal back if anything’s unclear.’

‘I’ll take a look,’ he said, intrigued. ‘Anything fun?’

‘I doubt that,’ said Heriat. ‘Good luck.’

‘I didn’t think you believed in—’ said Valien, before realising the link had been cut.

He turned the communicator over and flicked a switch. His tasking scrolled across a holographic field in front of him, spelling in out in precise, military-format detail what Nethata expected of him.

Valien absorbed the order stream quickly, realising immediately what it meant.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I see.’

Rauth stood in the hexagonal audience chamber within the Iron Hands’ command headquarters. The space was empty, just as it had been when he’d briefed Telach. A low snarl of machinery thudded away under his feet, buried somewhere in the forges and armouries on lower levels. The light in the chamber, as ever, was set low, mimicking Medusa’s harsh environment.

Medusa and Shardenus shared certain characteristics. Both worlds were shrouded from the warmth of their suns by thick layers of cloud cover. Both had been formed from dark, unforgiving soils. For an Iron Hand, coming to such a place felt like coming home.

Rauth was not immune from such feelings. Over centuries of near-constant warfare he’d managed to purge almost all vestiges of sentiment from his semi-mechanical frame, but he still took a degree of pleasure in Shardenus’s smog-dark skies and acrid air. His long service had taken him to all manner of worlds, some with water-clear skies, some covered in

sparkling oceans, others bursting with vegetation, but it was the dark worlds that spoke most clearly to his soul.

When Rauth had been a mortal child, back in the twilight depths of his long memory, he'd heard tales of the Immortal Emperor and His infinite realm. Sitting in the interior of his clan's land engine, Rauth had imagined all of the Emperor's worlds as other Medusas – frost-cold, steel-hard, shadow-dark.

It had seemed to him then that the default state of humanity was to exist amid such scouring winds and clutching shadows. Only later had Rauth discovered that his home world was regarded by most of the Imperium as a place of dread and obscurity. Back when he had possessed greater human facility, that knowledge had stung his pride. Now that his emotions had been bled out of him by the slow working of his augmetics he cared very little what the ignorant masses of humanity thought of his heritage.

Nothing changed the truth: Mankind, as guided by the Emperor and the example of Manus, flourished in the face of hardship and became flaccid in the face of comfort. Medusa bred humans capable of achieving perfection, of transcending their structural weaknesses, and the Imperium would be a better, stronger place if all its worlds were Medusas.

A light flickered on top of the pillar in front of him. Rauth extinguished it with a gesture, and the doors to the chamber slid open.

Nethata walked in and the doors closed behind him. He came across to the pillar and stood facing Rauth. He was in full dress uniform, as he always was when responding to a summons.

Perhaps he thinks I'll be impressed, thought Rauth. *Or perhaps it is to bolster his courage.*

Rauth took in the rows of medals on the man's chest, the iron skulls marking valour in battle, the expensive sword and the marksman's pistol.

He can have no idea how little I care. He could come here naked and we would discuss exactly the same things.

‘Clan commander,’ said Nethata, bowing.

Rauth could sense the man’s unease. His shoulders were tense, his jawline tight, his knuckles a fraction less dark than the rest of his skin.

‘Lord General,’ said Rauth. ‘Thank you for coming.’

‘We don’t have long before the main assault.’

‘No, we do not.’

As ever between them, the conversation was awkward. Rauth didn’t deliberately make their meetings difficult, but it had become hard to remember how humans lubricated their dialogue with courtesies and irrelevances.

‘I wished to see you for this reason: a change to the plan will be made,’ said Rauth. ‘My brothers are to be deployed on the Gorgas. Your troops will form the spearhead against the hives.’

Nethata blinked at him, taken back.

‘Without support?’ he asked.

‘Without support,’ confirmed Rauth.

Rauth studied Nethata’s reactions carefully, in the same way a magos might study the flow of electrons across a transmission wafer. The man was struggling to remain cordial.

‘Our assault plans have been made with the expectation of your involvement,’ Nethata said, speaking carefully and guarding his language. ‘There is little time to change them.’

‘I know,’ said Rauth. ‘That is why I asked you to come as soon as things changed.’

‘What has changed?’

‘The threat level from the remaining Gorgas bunkers is higher than calculated. They must be purged before we advance.’

Nethata couldn’t hide the disbelief from his face.

‘Bunkers? How many can there... Lord, I do not—’

‘Once that work is done, the Iron Hands will join you in the hive.’

‘Then the assault must wait,’ said Nethata. ‘Until your strength can be deployed, it *must* wait.’

‘It will not wait,’ said Rauth.

For a moment, the two figures stood facing one another, silent, staring into each other’s eyes. Rauth was implacable, immovable, massive. In contrast Nethata looked as frail as a skeleton, but he held his ground.

‘The Titans, then,’ he said. ‘We must have heavy support.’

‘The Titans are not ready,’ said Rauth. ‘You have two battalions of drop-troops – the Harakoni – plus ample artillery cover.’

‘*Ample?*’ Nethata shook his head as he snorted out the word. ‘My lord, I do not—’

‘You can debate this all you wish, Lord General; the decision will not alter. As we speak, my brothers are moving across the Gorgas, rooting out residual resistance and saving your men from that dangerous task. When their work is done they will return to the main assault, and we shall recalibrate.’

Nethata drew in a deep breath, looking like he was considering objecting further, just as he had done over the choice of landing sites, over the timetable of the advance, over the tactics of frontal assault rather than siege. Eventually, though, his square shoulders slumped a little.

‘I see that your mind’s made up,’ he said. Rauth noticed that Nethata’s fists were still clenched, and that the veins on his neck were as tense as machine cords. ‘You will forgive me, lord, if I leave immediately. If this assault is not to be a bloodbath – a farcical, *terrible* bloodbath – then I must make changes.’

‘By all means,’ said Rauth calmly. ‘But do not delay the assault. Its timing must remain as previously determined.’

‘You ask too much,’ said Nethata, bitterly. ‘I will record a formal protest in the campaign logs.’

‘And what will you protest about?’ asked Rauth. ‘That warfare was conducted? That men died?’

Nethata let slip a grim smile.

‘That men died needlessly,’ he said. ‘That they could have gone into battle supported by the might of your warriors, but were instead thrown at the enemy alone.’

‘Nothing I do is needless,’ said Rauth, ‘but your language is becoming intemperate. You have your orders. Go now, and ensure the assault is a success.’

Nethata glared back, holding his position for a moment longer.

‘It will be,’ he said, his eyes glittering darkly. ‘You will see the mettle of my men, and perhaps, once you have seen what they are capable of, you will be less free with your demands and remember that they are human. Like you used to be.’

Rauth felt his eyebrow, the organic one he still retained, raise. He didn’t have a ready answer to that.

Nethata didn’t wait for one, but turned on his heel and stalked out of the chamber. The doors opened and closed for him.

Rauth stood silently once he was gone, pondering the mortal’s words. Then he stirred himself and activated a private channel to Khatir.

‘Iron Father,’ he voxed. ‘Are the transports prepared?’

‘They are, lord,’ came the reply.

Rauth extended his left gauntlet, feeling the artificial sinews within slide smoothly across one another. Even mechanical limbs needed to be flexed.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Then come with me – we shall hunt together.’



CHAPTER FIVE

Lopi looked across the wastes of the Helat through eyes that were, and yet were not, his own.

He smiled, but only his organic lips moved. The gigantic frame of *Terribilis Vindicta* could not smile, though it registered and fed back the emotions of its princeps in other subtle ways – a flicker across motive sensoria, a brief tremor in the drive feeds.

<So,> he canted. <How's it looking?>

Yemos, the moderati plugged into the station in front of him, ran pudgy fingers over the manual controls. A thicket of iron rods protruded from the back of his shaven head, each one connected to input nodes dotted around the frame he sat in.

‘Drive system integrity normal,’ Yemos said, speaking out loud in Lucius-dialect Low Gothic. ‘Powering nicely.’

Lopi gripped the sides of his command throne, feeling streams of information flow into him through the jacks. Cables extended from his hands, his feet, his chest, the back of his neck. He noticed a residual soreness from the connection under his left ear, and rolled his head around trying to shake it off.

<Sensori?>

Killan, plugged into his station just like Yemos, swung his pedestal seat across the semicircle of his array station, scanning the multitude of signals coming into the Titan's battery of auspices.

<Interference to engine-left,> he canted, frowning at a row of orange indicators. <Just not shaking it.>

<I'm sure you will,> said Lopi, tolerantly. Killan was a perfectionist even by the standards of the Mechanicus, and would spend whole days hunting down minor sensor-ghosts if he ever had the leisure. <Anything else?>

Killan shook his head, and the bundle of wires attached to his skull wobbled.

<Remarkably clean, considering.>

Lopi felt a glow of warm satisfaction. As soon as he did so, the immense, sunken presence of *Vindicta's* machine-spirit made itself known. It rolled up into Lopi's consciousness like some beast of the oceans gently rising through layers of frigid water.

Awake again, Lopi thought, not bothering to shield it from the consciousness pressing up against his own. *Alive again. Together again.*

He shifted focus, slotting more explicitly into the pseudo-visual world of the Manifold. The Titan's own perceptions merged with his, folding into an amalgam of real-world visual stimuli and overlaid battle-data.

I feel you.

Vindicta's engines, buried somewhere far below in the war machine's vast torso, drummed in response, making the bronze-inlaid walls of the cockpit tremble.

Lopi held his left hand up before his face, watching as the real flesh, as insubstantial as an x-ray, passed through the miasma of targeting information, engine-health feedback and other sundry aspects of his host's mechanical life.

<Princeps Firax Lopi,> canted Remona's voice then, sounding amused.
<Are you not walking yet? Is something wrong?>

Lopi chuckled. He liked Remona. She was young for a Warlord-class princeps but was as gifted as he liked to think he had been at the same age. Even as he recalled her chestnut hair and coral-pink eyes in his imagination, he saw her engine, the *Meritus Castigatio*, striding into his visual field.

<Ahead of me, once again,> he canted, watching the progress of her Titan with admiration.

Castigatio was a handsome machine, barely three hundred years old and as trim as a starship's prow. Everything about it was pristine, glistening, rigid. The flames of Legio Astorum's livery adorned the thick plates of its armour, vivid against the dreariness of the ash around it.

It stood seven hundred metres away from him, surrounded by swarms of skitarii and servitors. A towering cage of scaffolding rose up around it, dotted with cranes and weapon-hoists. Gradually, moving slowly, the battle-engine was leaving it behind. Signal lights winked from its cockpit and gun-mounts, piercing through Shardenus's dirty skies.

<For now,> replied Remona, weaving an impish algorithm around the binaric core of her reply. <You'll catch up.>

Lopi felt *Vindicta*'s frame vibrate then, as if the spirit of the Titan had heard the jibe and responded to it.

<Steersman,> he canted, excluding Remona from the exchange, <we are being embarrassed. How close to traction are we?>

Jerolf tutted irritably, shaking his head.

'I could use another hour,' he said in his thick Martian accent. Jerolf was a strange one, and hard to deal with, but his origins on the Red Planet gave him a certain cachet among the crews. 'I was not aware this business was some kind of race.'

As he spoke, as if to emphasise the point, war-horns from the formation's three Warhound battle-engines – *Ferus Arma*, *Quis Odio*, *Gaius Thyrsus* – blared out across the Helat. They were moving in formation, less than two kilometres away, rolling in their distinctive lupine fashion across the plains. Lopi noticed, with some satisfaction, that they were already travelling at something close to battle-pitch. Once armed, blessed and provisioned, they would be ready for deployment.

<Take your time,> said Lopi, in too good a mood to worry about Jerolf's general misanthropy.

The vigour of the war machine infected him. He could sense the staggering levels of power coiled up in the engine's limbs. Even before the weapons had been charged and loaded he felt the potential for extraordinary violence vibrate from every rivet and bulkhead. Having served with the Legio for nearly two hundred years, ninety of those as princeps of a Warlord, he knew just what a god-machine like *Vindicta* was capable of.

'No, it's fine,' said Jerolf, shunting a series of brusque commands into the Warlord's core instruction buffer. 'Take it out. Show them how it's done.'

Lopi shunted a confirmation query to Yemos.

<We are clear, my princeps,> replied the moderati. <We are clear whenever you wish it.>

Lopi sank deeper into the Manifold, blurring the distinction between himself and the machine.

You heard them. Stretch your legs.

A shudder ran through the structure of the cockpit, triggered by immense energies suddenly being released. Somewhere a long way down from Lopi's position, the last of the gantries retracted. He had the fleeting impression of a gaggle of tech-priests scurrying away from the Titan's heavy treads before his pseudo-visual field resolved into a three-

dimensional cacophony of target-runes, approach vectors and proximity indicators.

<Walk,> Lopi canted, prepending the command with a softening binary requestor.

Down on the plain, a single tread lifted, trailing ash behind it as it rose into the air. The movement was stiff, arthritic, as hundreds of tonnes of adamantium and steel were propelled upwards in the stately simulacrum of a human foot moving.

Lopi felt the movement as if his own body were shifting, and a thrill of pleasure shuddered through his system.

Vindicta's right tread crashed back down to earth. The Titan's entire structure rocked forwards into the stride.

One step; the first step taken by the Titan since landing on Shardenus. The earth under its huge foot cracked open, and the ash settled over its enormous splayed metal toes.

Cheers rose up, from the crew in the cockpit, from the skitarii stationed in the engine's echoing chambers, from the tech-priests clustered around the cyclopean scaffolds. Lopi could hear Remona's clear laughter and the blares of acclamation from the distant Warhounds.

They were excited, rapt by the sight of the divine engine grinding into animation. He was excited too, as excited as he ever was when the long dormant periods were over and he could take his place back on the field of battle, clamped and plugged into the helm of a towering, semi-sentient god-machine.

Such excitement was dangerous. Getting lost in the bellicose soul of a war engine was always possible, and the wise princeps knew when to maintain his distance.

But Lopi was also wise enough to know when he could allow himself a little slack. Such moments were the compensation for every sacrifice he'd

ever made, and a reminder of what joy, what transcendent bliss, was possible in the service of the Omnissiah.

<Take us out, full stride,> he transmitted to the moderati happily. <I feel playful today. Now let us see what the beast will do.>

Heriat strode across the apron, and the ash-heavy air swirled around his long synthleather coat. He would have been more comfortable wearing a rebreather but had eschewed such visible signs of weakness: the men needed to know that their commissars were suffering alongside them.

He forced down a cough as he breathed in more of the foul air. His throat had been inflamed and sore ever since planetfall, which was something he welcomed. Skietica – the condition that would eventually kill him – had symptoms of anaesthesia in its final stages, so the fact that he was capable of feeling pain meant that he was also capable of living.

That was a good motto. Perhaps he should find a way to weave that into one of his addresses to the troops.

Since the first landings, the Guard's Helat base of operations had grown into a sprawling city in its own right. Barracks and hangars had sprung up in every direction. Defence towers dotted the landscape, each crowned with a knot of multi-barrelled AA weapons. A perimeter fence had gone up, crested with razor-wire and interrupted at thirty-metre intervals with infantry-shredding auto-cannon stations.

Seven separate airfields operated throughout Shardenus's twenty-one-hour diurnal cycle. Four of them were devoted purely to cumbersome supply lifters moving between the fleet in orbit and the forces on the ground. The remaining three had been reserved for military aircraft, and were crowded with Valkyrie and Vulture gunships, arranged wing-tip to wing-tip along kilometres of rockcrete apron.

Heriat strode past rows of Valkyries, observing their state and weapon patterns carefully. Each flyer had a crew of servitors attending to it,

working tirelessly and silently on the laborious tasks of refuelling, systems checking and missile loading. The noise of their main-drive engines idling already made the ground vibrate; when they geared up for lift-off, the din would be deafening.

The lines of Valkyries extended as far as he could see, and the far end was eventually lost in the haze of ash. Placed together, such massed firepower looked close to invincible, and Heriat felt a brief flush of martial pride in what had been assembled.

The feeling didn't last long. He also knew how formidable the hive defences were. Shardenus Prime had stood for several thousand years and seen off several significant threats in that time, so the architects of its defences had had plenty of time to learn their business.

He approached the waiting ranks of Harakoni Warhawks, making the sign of the aquila as he did so.

They stood in ranks four deep, wearing the armour that would take them into combat. The pilots wore standard black fatigues with open-faced helmets and minimal blast-protection. The drop-troops had been kitted out in full carapace armour. Their helmets were ungainly from rebreathers and armoured lens-arrays, and they carried heavy grav-chutes on their backs.

As Heriat drew up before them they shouldered their weapons and stamped to attention. Their commander, Aikino, stood in front, similarly kitted out for the attack run. Somehow he'd managed to cram his dreadlocks into his helmet.

'At ease,' he ordered, saluting Aikino with a clenched fist to the shoulder. His voice rang out across the apron, transmitted by tiny augments relays in his suit collar, and the troops complied instantly.

'Soldiers of the Emperor,' said Heriat calmly, not needing to shout to be heard. 'I envy you. You are honoured with the first strike of this glorious campaign. Of all the many regiments of the Imperium present on this world, it is the Warhawks who will carry the fight to the enemy.'

As he spoke, he watched for subtle signs of fear from the men. None were apparent; they stood tall, unmoving, listening intently.

‘You know your task,’ said Heriat, picking out men at random and fixing them with a level stare. ‘Break the walls, create a breach for the others to come through. Such work is dangerous: some of you will not return. You are seasoned veterans, an elite among Guard regiments, and so we trust you. Your comrades in the Ferik Tactical and Galamoth Armoured and the skitarii of Astorum trust you. Without this spearhead, their assault cannot succeed.’

Heriat didn’t mention the Iron Hands; it would have been pointless to do so. He began to pace in front of them, casting his discriminating eye over the ranks, looking for waverers.

None yet.

‘You all have your battle-plans. As we speak, our cells within the hives have been activated and the defence towers are under attack from within. Galamoth artillery trains have been brought forward and will advance in your wake. The storm will strike you hardest, and you must rise to meet its challenge, but you will not be alone.’

Heriat allowed his voice to rise; to strengthen, to encourage. He was capable of fearsome levels of intimidation when the occasion demanded it, but this was not one of those times.

‘The Emperor will be with you,’ he said, channelling his own devotion and trusting that the men before him shared his faith. ‘Those who die will be martyrs, and those who live will be heroes. Accomplish this, and this world will return to the ranks of the faithful, to the greater glory of the eternal Imperium of Mankind.’

He stood back and raised his fist to the sky.

‘Ave Imperator!’ he shouted.

Ave Imperator! came the massed response, a roar of hundreds of men muffled behind masks and visors.

‘Death to the heretic!’

Death to the heretic!

‘Harakonari an tellika refala!’

The last sentence was in Konndar, the dominant dialect on Harakon. Heriat wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, but had been assured by his ethnographic staff in the Commissariat that it was suitably rousing. Something to do with loyal spouses at home.

Tellika refala! they roared with real enthusiasm.

Then Heriat turned to Aikino and gave him a curt nod.

‘That is all, colonel,’ he said. ‘Take your stations.’

Aikino returned the nod.

‘They’ll fight well, commissar,’ he said.

Heriat paused.

‘What I just said.’

‘Sir?’

‘It didn’t mean what I thought it did, did it?’

Aikino smiled.

‘I doubt it. Do you want to know what you told them?’

Heriat considered it.

‘No.’

From somewhere under Aikino’s helmet came a rebreather-filtered laugh. It was a gritty laugh, full of the sardonic resignation of a career soldier.

‘For the Emperor, Commissar-General,’ said Aikino, claspings his fist against his breastplate.

Behind him, the Valkyries’ engines began to whine up to full power. The Warhawks broke ranks, team by team, and jogged over to their aircraft. For them at least, the waiting was over.

‘For the Emperor,’ said Heriat, returning the salute and wishing he had Thunderhawks to send into combat alongside them. ‘In His name, bring

them pain.'

'For the Emperor,' said Marivo, plunging the handle down and watching the service doors slide open. 'Move fast, follow my lead.'

Then he set off, keeping his head low. His breathing echoed noisily in his enclosed helmet, made worse by the filtration apparatus lodged below the visor. The armour Valien had sourced was cumbersome, made clumsier by its extra blast-cladding and stringent environment filters.

He ran out from the open service entrance and down a long ramp. A labyrinth of long-disused buildings extended out ahead of him, all of them intersected with hissing iron pipework and cabling. The open sky yawned away above his head, and for a moment the sudden absence of covering made him feel ill. Marivo swallowed, going through the routines that warded sky sickness.

Behind him came the rest of his squad: twenty of them, most of them Guard troopers from his own regiment, some gangers, a couple of junior arbitrators. Khadi was among them somewhere, though he had no idea where; the soldiers of the squad all looked same in their sealed armour.

They had broken out of Melamar Secundus hive at ground level. Marivo had never gone so far down before, and he had to admit that Khadi's expertise in the claustrophobic, sewage-clogged underhive tunnels had been invaluable. Behind them, the spire's huge bulk reared away skywards.

The air of the wasteland hit him like he'd run into a wall. It was thick with a foul miasma of industrial pollutants, powerful even through his helmet's filters – a mix of sulphur, spent promethium and metallic corrosion. Visibility was no more than twenty metres or so, and everything he could see was wreathed in a haze of dirty browns and greens.

'Keep close!' he hissed again over the vox.

A quick look over his shoulder confirmed what he'd suspected: some of his men were managing their heavy las-packs well and running well; others, the civilians no doubt, were already struggling to keep up.

Holy Terra, he swore to himself. *We'll be lucky to make it there at all.*

He swung back round, feeling the cables looping under his firearm slowing his movements. His boots struck the broken tarmac awkwardly as he ran and his breathing sounded hoarse and ragged in his earpiece. His head began to ache, and a bitter, chemical taste lodged at the back of his throat.

The defence tower wasn't far – less than a kilometre if they went efficiently – but the disused ground between it and the Melamar spire was like a maze and strewn with half-hidden obstacles. The roads that had once existed were choked with refuse and slimy with pools of glowing liquid. Marivo skirted around a huge pipe housing and jogged down a long alleyway, flanked on either side by long-abandoned power generators.

As he went he recalled the route he'd worked out with Valien, running through the turns and switchbacks in his mind. The elevated transit tube – the route any sane person would have taken, if it hadn't been so heavily guarded – would be coming up shortly, and he looked up, hoping to catch sight of the reinforced corridor above them. His eyes watered as he did so, and a blur of nausea washed over him.

A huge flash of red lit up the sky, running from the perimeter walls up into the cloud cover. A rolling, grinding boom followed on, making the clouds of pollution shake and disperse. The ground trembled.

Some of Marivo's men lost their footing and fell into the slime below, cursing and coughing.

'What was that?' came Khadi's voice over the vox. She sounded both terrified and nauseous.

Another boom echoed out, followed by several smaller explosions.

'The wall guns,' said Marivo grimly. 'It's started.'

He grabbed the shoulder guard of a man who'd fallen.

'Keep going,' he said, dragging him to his feet and kicking him back into a run. 'They're not aiming at us. We have to keep moving.'

He hoisted his gun back into firing position and resumed his own run. The sound of the hive cluster's defence grid opening up above them was disorientating. More explosions followed, seemingly from every direction, and the sky stayed red.

Then, at last, he saw the transit tube above him. It flew across the tangled mess of the wasteland, twenty metres up into the murk of the smoggy sky. The tube itself was at least seven metres in diameter and ringed with re-inforcing bands of adamantium. It was far out of reach, and too strong to be damaged by small-arms fire.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘We follow that line.’

He ran along the route of the transit tube above him, using its bulk to shield the squad from prying eyes above. More industrial units passed by in the fog of contamination around them, all of them derelict and gradually sinking into the acid-drenched earth around them. He heard his breathing get even worse, and the pain behind his eyes turned from a throb into a sharp stab.

He heard Khadi's words echo in his mind.

Rebreathers? They'll clog before we get halfway.

He kept running, trying to ignore the burn, keeping his head down and drawing breaths as sparsely as he could manage. His squad came with him, stringing out as they struggled with the atmosphere.

It took longer than he'd imagined it would, but eventually the defence tower loomed up out of the murk. It soared hundreds of metres up into the sky, blunt and angular, clad in plates of thick armour and crowned with a brace of lascannons. The tower had been built into the huge perimeter wall, which curved upwards away from them into the night.

Marivo skidded to a halt, sweeping his lasgun around in search of targets. His squad did the same, drawing deep, wheezing breaths. A few of them fell to their knees, struggling to inhale.

‘Get up!’ Marivo ordered, strapping his weapon to his armoured thigh and taking a melta charge from his belt. ‘Stay on your feet or you’ll never get up again.’

His men organised themselves into a semicircle at the base of the tower, facing outwards and aiming their weapons nervously. Nothing moved in the wasteland around them, but the barrage over the walls above intensified, filling the air with the crackle and spit of cannon discharge.

Like many of the structures within the hive cluster, the base of the tower was too polluted to be used regularly; the inhabited levels were all higher up. The armour plating near the ground was corroded and cracked, just as Valien had informed them. The agent had also assured them that he’d weakened an old service hatch during his last infiltration, and that meltas would be more than sufficient to blow a way in.

You’d better have been right about that.

Marivo ran his auspex over the tower’s foundations, searching for the trace signal left at the required position. His head was hammering by then, and his throat felt like he’d swallowed a handful of iron shavings.

‘I have it,’ he growled over the vox, sounding more like an animal than a man. ‘Ten seconds, on my mark.’

His squad withdrew away from the tower’s base. Marivo set the timer on the charge, and clamped it against the outer lip of the service hatch. Once done, Marivo and the others retreated clumsily, tripping over their own feet as the effects of the toxins increased.

Marivo saw the timer count down in his wrist chrono in a series of blurry outlines. Once it reached the limit, he crouched down on his haunches, covering his head.

A thick *crump* bloomed out through the air, barely audible over the rumble of ordnance erupting further up the walls.

‘Let’s go!’ Marivo cried then, leaping back up to his feet and breaking into a run. This was it. ‘Go!’

Aikino hooked himself to the rail running along the ceiling of the Valkyrie's crew-bay. The metal around him hammered from the cycling-up engines, filling the air with a dense wall of white noise.

'Get in!' he roared over the comm, watching as the rest of his squad ran up the rear ramp and shackled themselves into position. They pushed past him and shuffled further down the bay, leaving him in the position of first-jump, just the way he liked it. All of them were kitted for the drop, with their lasguns strapped across their chests and grav-chutes clamped to their backs. 'Go, go, go!'

The pilot of Valkyrie assault carrier TV-782, known to its crew by the daubed scrawl of *Kelemak Queen* below the cockpit, triggered an acknowledgement rune on the crew-bay ceiling and gunned the VTOL engines into life. The gunship lurched into the air, cushioned on a raging layer of engine-wash. The noise level in the crew-bay reached new heights, shaking the rivets in the panels.

Aikino looked out of the open ramp as the gunship slowly gained altitude. He saw the apron shrink below him. Other Valkyries were already airborne, turning around on columns of smoky downdraft before dipping their noses and thrusting off into attack runs. He counted more than twelve of them in the air before the rear ramp began to close and obscured his view.

Aikino leaned back against the pressed-metal wall and activated a comm-link to the pilot.

'Get us in front,' he said over the crackling feed. He could hardly hear himself speak. His heart was thudding strongly, and he could almost feel the adrenaline pumping around his system. 'I want to be *first*.'

'Yes, sir,' came the reply from the cockpit, and a huge *thrum* blew up from under the Valkyrie. Aikino felt the switch from thrusters to aerial drives, and the aircraft tilted into its attack position.

'This is it!' he roared, addressing the other soldiers crammed up against him in the shaking crew-bay. His voice sounded tinny from inside his blast

helmet. ‘Fifteen minutes to target! Check your weapon! Check your chute! On my word, follow me down!’

The men ran their checks, just as they had done on the ground, and just as they had done a dozen times beforehand in the hangar. They swayed with the rolling movement of the gunship as it accelerated, barely needing the support of their shackles. Their movements were tense but unpanicked – they were Warhawks, as at home in the air as they were on the ground.

Aikino looked down at his own weapon, a short-stocked lasgun with the words *retalla mire allek* scratched along the charge casing.

‘Kill or be killed,’ he mouthed, speaking the words in Gothic. ‘Can’t come quickly enough.’



CHAPTER SIX

Marivo lurched forwards, aiming for the magma-edged hole in the wall in front of him. The stench of the airborne poisons raged around him, leaving sticky residue on the inside of his helmet. He grabbed the shaft of his lasgun while he ran and hefted it clumsily, struggling not to trip over the trailing cables to the power-pack on his back.

Then, almost without realising it, he was in. The interior of the tower enveloped him. He was plunged into darkness, and it took a few moments for his helmet to compensate.

The toxic fog around him thinned a little. He saw other members of his squad break into the space alongside, coughing and staggering. Smoke rose from the breach in the tower's walls, and it glowed angrily where the metal skin had been melted by the charge.

The lowest chamber was utterly dark, half-submerged and home only to disused crates of supplies and mechanical parts. The power generators – their target – were on the next level up.

‘Quickly!’ hissed Marivo, trying to find a way up amid a flurry of whirling helmet-lumens.

He started to move again, nearly slipping on the wet floor. The toxic air began to mingle with the cleaner atmosphere of the tower, making his headache worse.

‘I see it,’ said Khadi from over to his right.

She was already climbing, scampering up a metal-mesh ladder like a rat out of a sewer. The rest of the squad followed her, all eager to get higher up as the chemical fogs rolled past them.

They clambered up on to the next floor, shuffling along a narrow gantry before reaching a sealed blast door at the end.

‘Stay back,’ ordered Marivo, reaching for another melta charge. ‘Rennu, Bredfar – cover it. Noffe and Klieter – make ready to go in.’

Marivo crouched down, clamping the charge against the blast door and setting the timer. Then he withdrew as far back as he could, pressing himself against the near wall.

The charge blew, cracking the door and knocking it from its hinges. As the clouds of smoke cleared, Rennu and Bredfar inched forwards, aiming their guns at the chamber beyond. The sound of generators could be made out – a low, grinding hum. The chamber was lit with a dull red glow, and the cloudy outlines of gigantic power units could be glimpsed through the open door.

‘Let’s go,’ said Marivo, staying low as he advanced towards the chamber. Noffe and Klieter followed tightly behind him, keeping their guns held close to their chests.

Marivo slipped inside, staying as close to the floor as he could. Ahead of him were the generators – five massive machines over ten metres tall and cased in pitted bronze cages. The red glow came from the coils within them, throbbing angrily with the energies needed to power the heavy weapons above.

The rest of his squad fanned out between the generator cages, reaching for their charges and preparing to clamp them in place.

‘Quicker,’ urged Marivo, taking his own charge – the last of the three he’d carried – and priming it.

He locked it to the case of the generator in front of him, just as the rest of his squad did. Their work done, they began to filter back towards the gantry outside, jostling past one another in their eagerness to get out. Marivo hurried them up, counting them out impatiently, hearing the whirring of the melta charges winding down all across the narrow chamber.

A door hissed open somewhere up above. Marivo looked up and saw another metal gantry running around the walls of the generator chamber, up near the ceiling. It quickly filled with soldiers. A klaxon started to blare.

‘Get out!’ he cried, firing one-handed up at the gantry.

He managed to get a single shot away before a whole torrent of las-beams burst towards him. He felt one impact sharply on his shoulder guard, and he flew backwards through the air, landing with a crack on the ferrocrete of the floor. His head bounced from the impact, sending black spikes into his vision.

He heard the faint snap of other las-beams – those of his men still inside the generator room, returning fire. Marivo dragged himself into cover, crouching in the shadow of a generator as the hot white bursts of light rained down from above. He heard muffled grunts of pain as some found their targets. Ahead of him, Noffe went down while trying to get to the open door.

He had no time left. The charges had been set, and only seconds remained on the counters. Marivo hurled himself out of cover, scuttling for the open door on all fours. Las-beams snapped and flickered around him, pinging from the reinforced metal floor.

He reached the threshold, only for a shot to pierce his shoulder, lancing through the gap between his torso plate and shoulder guard and tearing clean through muscle. He cried out, crashing into the doorframe as his body spasmed in pain.

Marivo's head snapped up. Above him, dozens of soldiers took aim. Others were already racing down ladders from the gantry level, swarming into the generator room.

'Holy *Throne*...' he breathed.

Trecic Makda pushed down on the control column and felt the *Kelemak Queen* thrust cleanly through the air. He took the gunship up into the exit corridor, watching the scopes carefully as other Valkyries fell into formation above and around him.

The gunships looked ungainly in the air, like a pack of hooded carrion birds flapping awkwardly away from a disturbed meal. Once in formation, the aircraft thundered out over the Helat, keeping low to the ground and trailing huge strands of smoggy backdraft. Mindful of the colonel's instruction, Makda pushed further ahead, outpacing the lead gunship and taking point.

'*Kelemak Queen*,' came a distorted voice over the comm from the ground tower. 'Hold position. Repeat: hold position.'

Makda laughed, and poured more power into the drives. The Valkyrie swooped into full acceleration, drawing ahead of the closest stragglers by more than a ship's length. The rest of the squadron fell in behind him, resolving into a loose wedge shape and sweeping fast across the Helat landing sites.

'Do we have escorts yet?' asked Makda, looking around him.

'On their way,' replied Fionash, his navigator, from the secondary cockpit. 'Take a look.'

Makda glanced down again at his short-range sensoria. He saw waves of Valkyries departing the Helat in straggling lines, each one carrying a lethal cargo of drop-troops. More of them lifted off every second, filling the sensor display with clusters of glowing pinpricks.

Just as he was about to look back up he saw the signals of the Vulture escorts come into range and pull alongside the troop-carrying Valkyries.

‘About time,’ he muttered, watching the heavy-weapons vessels slide into flanking positions.

Makda keyed in the approach trajectory, and the landscape swept under them with increasing speed. The *Kelemak Queen* surged past the perimeter walls of the Helat encampment. As they crossed the limits, the Ferik’s defensive batteries opened up with a pyrotechnic send-off.

‘Nice of them,’ said Makda, flicking a series of switches on the control panel to stabilise the gunship’s course and bearing. Then he looked up, out through the grimy front window of the cockpit and ahead into the murk of the sky.

The Helat was rapidly falling behind. The Gorgas Maleon rose up on the horizon, studded with still-burning wreckage. Beyond that, dark and immense against a blurred horizon, were the artificial mountains of Shardenus Prime.

Makda felt a sudden lurch of nervousness twinge in his stomach.

‘That’s... big,’ he breathed, checking the sensor readings to make sure he was on the right course.

Fionash chuckled over the comm.

‘Watch yourself,’ she said. ‘Incoming.’

By then the Valkyries had reached their full attack velocity. Moving in concert, the waves of gunships thundered over the pitted landscape of the Gorgas, sweeping in long, broken lines. None of them had fuselage lights on, and in the gloom of Shardenus’s perpetual twilight they looked like hordes of dark-winged spectres racing in for the kill.

The terrain up ahead of them broke into sudden, silent fire. Hard neon lights flared out from the perimeter walls of the hive, joined a fraction afterwards by the crack and bang of their discharge. Las-beams flickered past, lancing between the racing Valkyries like spears of starlight.

‘Hold your positions...’ murmured Makda, driving the gunship lower. Soon the Valkyrie was barely skimming the tops of the Gorgas ruins,

weaving around the taller debris as it roared into range. The other pilots did the same, and their craft hurtled along at near ground-level.

Shardenus Prime reared up massively ahead, growing quickly. Makda saw the lights studded across the hive spires twinkling in the night like jewels. He saw plumes of red-tinged smoke rising lazily from the foundries, curling around the vast knees of the hive clusters.

‘The defence towers are up,’ said Fionash, her voice flat. ‘They’re all up.’

Makda pulled the gunship around the broken shell of a ruined tower. The barrage of fire from the hive ahead was intensifying.

‘Marvellous,’ he muttered, just as the first gunship was hit.

A stream of tracer rounds found its target, striking a Vulture on the right turbine intake. The flyer’s engines exploded instantly, cracking open the armour from within and sending the fuselage tumbling over and over. The pieces crashed into the ground and ploughed a trail through the ruined buildings below.

‘Flak increasing,’ said Fionash coolly.

‘You noticed?’ growled Makda, struggling with the control column as explosive bursts detonated around him. A missile shot past on his left side so close that its flaming trail bathed his wing in smoke. Another Valkyrie went down, its cockpit blasted open by a direct hit. It spun wildly out of control, crashing into another gunship and engulfing both of them in a huge fireball.

Makda felt sweat break out across his forehead. The perimeter wall drew closer, lit up in every direction by anti-aircraft fire. Las-beams and plasma bolts danced out at him in flickering, eye-wateringly bright stabs of light, punctuated by juddering lines of fire. Something exploded very close on his left flank and the gunship bucked and rolled drunkenly, nearly crashing straight into the side of an old industrial complex as it swept onwards through the rubble of the Gorgas.

‘Throne,’ he swore, fighting to bring the Valkyrie back into line. Out of the corner of his eye he saw three more gunships take direct hits and blow apart in mid-air. The volume of fire from the walls kept getting thicker – far too much to evade for long.

‘Holy Throne of shitting Earth,’ he spat, driving the *Kelemak Queen* as fast as he could. ‘How long till we hit the target?’

The ground raced under them, passing in a blur of tangled metal. For all that, the towering hives looked hardly closer than they had been a minute ago.

‘Forget about it,’ snapped Fionash, stress evident in her voice. ‘Maintain attack speed.’

Makda kept swearing. The whole structure of the Valkyrie shuddered as explosions went off around it and the hurtling wind tore at it.

He gripped the control column so tightly he felt like his finger-bones would crack. His rocket-launchers finally acquired a target, and he loosed them both, watching as they streaked off towards the walls. Then he opened fire with the multilaser mounted on the hull. Even as he swept the gunship low over a debris-strewn ridge, firing all the while, he felt the shockwave of another Valkyrie being blown into pieces.

We are going to die, he thought bitterly, feeling shards of shattered armour-casing clatter against his own hull. *We are – all of us – going to die.*

Nethata leaned over the circular tabletop, staring intently at the hololithic projections shimmering in front of him. He was tense, and the figures he was seeing made him tenser.

‘The armoured divisions,’ he said. ‘Moving too slowly.’

All around him in the command bunker, senior officers, aides and servitors moved from console to console, inputting commands or staring at tactical reports from the front. Close to fifty men and women jostled for space in the low-ceilinged, poorly lit space.

‘Orders to increase pace relayed to Galamoth commanders,’ reported a steel-faced servitor on the other side of the hololith table. ‘Dispatch received: They are hampered by terrain.’

Nethata shook his head, stifling the urge to swear pointlessly at the automaton.

‘Those corridors should have been *cleared*,’ he snapped, watching as the signals from another half-dozen Valkyries blinked out of existence. The waves of gunships streaking towards the hive cluster were being thinned out rapidly. Close to a quarter of them had already been destroyed before they even reached the walls, and it was clear that the volume of fire from the defence towers was only increasing. ‘Sweet Emperor, get the Ferik up *faster*.’

The main regiments of Guard troops were making heavy weather of the advance. Their targets were arranged along the south-eastern walls of the hive complex, between the Vannon and Rovax Gates and south of the gigantic Melamar hives, but everything was happening too slowly, and the gunships were dangerously exposed. In the absence of the Titans and the Iron Hands, the whole shape of the assault looked enormously fragile.

‘Reserve wings sent into the assault, as ordered,’ said Refede Gropis, overall commander of the air assault units. ‘All Vultures are now in the air.’

‘Any towers down?’

‘No.’

Nethata suppressed the urge to gland a shot of tranquilox. He felt sweat burst out across his forehead. If all the defence towers remained intact, then those Vultures would be shot out of the sky soon enough.

‘Divert all forces to the attack zone,’ he ordered, never lifting his eyes from the dancing array of lights on the hololith. ‘Maintain speed. We need *one* breach. Just one.’

Gropis bowed, and hurried away to transmit the order.

Nethata didn't watch him go. He gripped the side of the table tightly, feeling his blood press against his temples.

Damn you, Rauth, he thought, trying not to imagine how much help the Iron Hands would have been, nor what obscure tasks they were engaged in. *Damn you to the Eye, all of you.*

Marivo felt hands grab him by his shoulder and neck, hauling him through the doorway and out into the darkness of the gantry beyond. Even as he was wrenched out of harm's way, he felt the heat of bolts as they crackled into the space he'd just occupied.

'Come *on!*' came Khadi's voice. It was urgent and nervy.

Marivo struggled awkwardly to his feet, gritting his teeth as the wound in his shoulder flared up with agonising pain. It was all he could do to stay conscious.

Khadi sprinted off ahead of him, careering along the gantry towards the ladder. Marivo limped after her, feeling his arm go numb. He had an overwhelming urge to slump to his knees, to collapse in a heap, to give in to the pain. Then he heard footfalls behind him, echoing out from the generator room as the guards hurried after them. He stumbled along the gantry, sliding down the ladder to the level below, feeling his useless arm slap painfully against his side as he stumbled onwards.

His fractured and smeared visor made it hard to see much. His shoulder felt like a wet hunk of semi-cooked meat and his throat was raw and bleeding. He staggered out across the basement floor, his vision beginning to blur, expecting at any moment to feel the hot stab of a las-bolt in his back.

He reached the breach in the outer wall again. The sick feeling in his stomach grew even worse, and he recognised the bitter stink of chemicals in the air. It had been bad enough the first time, but now his visor was cracked and his armour compromised.

Then, from behind and above, he heard the muffled crack of the charges going off. Taking a deep breath, he plunged out into the toxic filth once more.

The sickness hit again. It was almost like plunging into a sea of poison. He gagged, tripped, almost falling to his knees. More muted explosions bloomed out, far above him.

He started to run. Somehow, even though he reeled around and crashed into the shells of the buildings around him, he stumbled his way out of the danger zone. His rebreather wheezed like a old dog at the end of its life, barely thinning out the soup of spores in the air before they were sucked into his mouth.

He saw the flash of light before he heard the noise of the biggest explosion. The light swept out in front of him, a vivid surge of neon-orange that dragged his shadow out across the ground. Then came the deafening crash of the blast wave as it smashed through the defence tower from the inside.

Marivo half-turned as he ran, looking up over his shoulder. The tower still reared up massively, dark against the dark of the sky, but it was burning. Gouts of flame shot out of rents in the walls, bulging from where ammunition deposits had ignited. A colossal pall of smoke rolled up the broken flanks, flecked with red-hot fragments of burning metal.

Even as he watched, more explosions took root higher up, barely muffled by the distance. He remembered Valien's briefing then, just as if the agent had been standing by his shoulder and whispering the words to him all over again.

The generators are on level one. Hit them hard enough and the explosions will reach the ammo dumps. After that, the whole tower's as good as gone. It's simple; just move in fast and get out before they know what's happened.

Marivo turned away from the burning tower, feeling his awareness slide into sluggish torpor. His tongue had swollen in his mouth and was sticky with viscous saliva. Breathing was difficult – like pulling porridge through a sieve. His wounded shoulder throbbed agonisingly, and he felt blood slip down the inside of his armour.

He started to run again, barely knowing which direction to head in, alone in the wasteland. He'd lost sight of the rest of his squad, all of whom were no doubt running as hard as they could for the sanctuary of the hive. He stumbled and staggered as fast as he could, his jaw clenched and his eyes half-closed. As he went, a single thought ran through his mind, over and over.

I did the job; now to survive. I did the job; now to survive.

The explosion lit up the night sky hard to port. Makda saw it immediately, and banked hard.

‘You’re off course,’ warned Fionash.

‘Oh yes,’ said Makda, feeding the Valkyrie’s engines every last scrap of power he could find.

The *Kelemak Queen* screamed over the last remaining tracts of the Gorgas, careering past a long strand of smouldering machinery. The perimeter wall of the hive raced towards them. It curved high up into the air – two hundred metres tall and dwarfed only by the colossal spires beyond it. The parapets were alive with las-fire and bolter crashes – the night was lit up with them – and every passing second saw another Valkyrie go down in flames, flailing and rolling into the devastation of the Gorgas wastes.

‘Jekkil squadron, following squadrons, lock to me,’ shouted Makda over the open comm.

Ahead of him, directly where the Valkyrie was heading, a defence tower was collapsing in a riot of breaking masonry. Ferrocete bulged outwards, broken open by huge orange explosions within.

Its destruction opened up a narrow corridor between the curtains of incoming fire. Small-bore projectile weapons still shot through the night, but the space overlooked by the toppling tower was free of the worst of the devastating barrages.

‘Here it comes!’ cried Fionash, sounding almost hysterical. ‘Here it comes!’

Makda yanked the controls hard, pulling the Valkyrie up from its ground-hugging attack run. The gunship swung up sharply, just above the parapet level, roaring along on a booming cloud of engine exhaust. Heavy incoming fire whistled past it, only barely missing the wings. Other surviving gunships followed Makda’s lead, sweeping up in his wake at full tilt, their turbines whining and shedding long curls of smoke.

‘Fionash!’ shouted Makda. ‘Coordinates!’

The *Kelemak Queen* shot up above the walls, just beyond where the defence tower was crumbling into a heap of broken masonry. The bulk of the hostile fire abruptly gave out as the gunship broke the perimeter. Makda slammed on the air-brakes and prepared to activate the VTOL lifters.

‘Down now!’ cried Fionash, sending a marked schematic to Makda’s sensor array. ‘You’ll overshoot!’

Once over the wall-top, a vast panorama of the hive cluster opened up in front of them. A gigantic hive spire towered over them to their left, part of a binary cluster. Other spires stood further off, wreathed in underlit clouds of smog and ash. The biggest of them, only part-visible past the outer ring of hab-blocks, had virulent streaks of purple light leaking from the highest pinnacle. Shardenus Prime was more than a city – it was miniature world, self-contained and immense.

Directly below them was the parapet level of the walls – a long, flat strip running along the top of the immense barrier, over thirty metres wide and studded with gun-points and elevator access hatches. Flak from smaller

batteries flared up at them, strafing the gunship and knocking chunks out of its armour plate.

‘Taking her down,’ said Makda, cutting out forward momentum and switching to the VTOL drives. The gunship rocked on its axis as the wing-mounted thrusters blasted into life.

By then more Valkyries had broken through and were dropping low over the parapet. A single Vulture flew with them, strafing the anti-aircraft positions dotted along the top of the walls. The noise of its heavy bolter was audible even over the massed roar and boom of the defensive batteries maintaining their volleys out into the expanse of the Gorgas.

‘Prepped to deploy,’ reported Fionash, her voice still shaky. ‘Five... four...’

The gunship lowered itself over the flat parapet like a ghoul descending over its prey. With thirty metres to go Makda pulled a lever to open the rear ramp.

‘You’re in,’ he announced over the crew-bay comm. ‘Now give them hell.’

He held the Valkyrie in a shaky hover at twenty-five metres, ignoring the flak bursts going off all around him. Some of the heavy fixed artillery further along the walls was beginning to be brought round, ready to pick off the gunships that had broken through the perimeter. The air was still full of tracer fire, broken by the heavy shadows of more Valkyries thundering overhead.

One by one, the men in the crew-bay jumped from the open hatch. Makda saw Aikino go first, kicking away from the Valkyrie and plummeting rapidly. His grav-chute kicked in only a couple of metres from the wall-top, cushioning him before he hit it. The others followed, plunging down onto the parapet like stones. Once the last one had exited, Makda fed more power to the thrusters and pushed the Valkyrie back up

higher. As he did so, he swung the ship's nose back round, ready for the perilous journey back out over the Gorgas.

‘Mission accomplished,’ said Fionash, sounding breathy but slightly less panicked than she had done earlier.

All across the breach in the defences, gunships were breaking in and unloading their troops along the parapet, hovering on labouring engines and waiting for the signal to turn around and head back.

‘Don’t relax yet,’ warned Makda, preparing to ignite the forward thrusters again. ‘We’re still in a whole heap of—’

The rocket hit them from below, punching up out of the shadows and cutting clean through his left wing. Immediately the Valkyrie banked sharply, and the engines broke into a screaming whine.

‘No!’ screamed Fionash. ‘No! No! *No!*’

The *Kelemak Queen* swung round madly, spinning on its axis like a gyrocopter. The tail-fin hit the inside edge of the wall and sent the carrier spinning over itself and falling fast on to the wasteland beyond. Makda hauled the controls back, wrestling with the column and trying to generate more lift. He saw the smog-streaked horizon race up towards him horrifyingly fast.

‘Bail!’ he roared, watching powerlessly as the chemical-fogged wasteland on the other side of the walls swam up closer. ‘Get o—’

At the last moment, Makda found a burst of extra power, and the ship lurched forwards, hitting a transit tube and ricocheting clear. It corkscrewed twice on its ventral axis, picking up momentum as it went. When it finally collided with the leading edge of the Melamar Primus spire it drove a deep rent through layers of rockcrete, carving open protective armour plates and exposing two levels of a hab-complex to the corrosive elements.

The shell of its fuselage burst into flame – a brief flash of sun-white brilliance – before the remnants collapsed into a shower of flailing debris.

Its wreckage shot through the flaming air, just a tiny part of the colossal pyrotechnic display unleashed by the incoming airborne assault, before falling gently to the earth like ash-rain.

Aikino's grav-chute gave out just before he hit the parapet, and he slammed down hard. He recovered his poise quickly and let the anti-grav motors idle, using the mild push to help right himself.

The rest of his squad came down around him, cutting out their chutes and brandishing lasguns.

'We're out of position,' said Aikino over the comm, glancing down at his locator. 'Give me a moment.'

He looked up, trying to get his bearings. His platoon had come down onto the parapet as planned, but a long way south of their planned location. On the far side of the wall – a long, long way down – was a wide expanse of semi-derelict buildings boiling with a yellow-green fog of pollutants. Beyond that lay the hive spires themselves, rising high into the firelit clouds of smog.

The sky was a riot of colour, picked out by las-discharge and solid munitions explosions. Valkyries hung in the sky all along the walls, dozens of them, dropping their contingents of troops even as they were rocked by incoming fire. The few Vultures that had managed to penetrate the perimeter circled the dropsites, hammering back at the defensive gun-points with salvos from their nose-mounted heavy bolters.

The walls stretched off into the distance, running north-south. Most sections were still studded with active defences, with the only major breach being the one they'd just flown through. A destroyed gunnery tower listed badly just a few hundred metres away, leaking flame and smoke, but all the others were still active.

'That's our target,' he said, pointing out the next operative defence tower, north of the one that had been destroyed to allow their entry. 'We need to widen that flight corridor.'

He started to run across the roof. His men fell in behind him. Aikino switched his vox to a brigade-wide channel.

‘All Harakoni on wall sections,’ he ordered. ‘Assault tower to north of breach. Let’s take it down.’

He got nearly halfway towards it before the first resistance emerged. The big guns were still aimed outwards, hurling massive amounts of las-fire, rockets and heavy bolter rounds at the incoming Valkyries, but the thick walls were well-garrisoned and stocked with extensive anti-infantry gun-points. As the Harakoni troops closed in on the tower, grey-uniformed soldiers swarmed out to meet them, emerging from hatches in the parapet floor and hunkering down behind bulkheads and strongpoints. The entire width of the parapet was soon engulfed in a firestorm of las-beams from all directions, punctuated by the bounce and crack of hurled frag grenades.

Aikino skidded to a halt behind the cover of a low ferrocrete wall – a minor surface feature on the otherwise flat roof of the walls. He primed a grenade, took a breath, then threw it over the top. He waited for the sound of the detonation then broke from cover again. As he ran, other Warhawks joined him, charging straight at the enemy and firing in disciplined volleys.

‘For Harakon!’ roared Aikino, feeling adrenaline pumping through his body and relishing the rush of combat at last.

For Harakon! came the massed cry of the Warhawks, tearing into battle alongside him in a wave of fury.



CHAPTER SEVEN

‘We have a breach,’ announced Gropis, sounding more nervous than pleased.

Nethata gripped the edge of the tactical display table, watching the myriad shifting points of light suspended over its surface. Everything was in motion, overlapping with plotted attack vectors and support lines. Watching the carnage, he felt no satisfaction at all; the attack was barely hours old but was already unravelling.

‘So I see,’ he said, watching the location marker blink on the walls just below the Melamar Secundus spire.

The first wave of Valkyrie attack carriers had gone in. Nearly all the troop carriers had been destroyed, either on their long attack runs or during their attempt to return to base after dropping their contingent of men. The reserve wings were already committed, hurtling straight into the line of fire and taking just as heavy casualties. Tactical feeds estimated up to a thousand Harakoni Warhawks had been deposited along the parapets – enough to attract the attention of the hive cluster’s garrisons, but not enough to sustain a position for any length of time.

‘How long before the Galamoth are in range?’ he asked.

‘They are, lord. Barrages have begun.

‘And the ground troops?’

‘Almost.’

Nethata balled his fists, as if to strike the table in front of him. Space Marines would have been able to punch holes in the perimeter far more effectively than mortal drop troops. They were tougher, faster, cannier, and they didn’t panic.

‘Tell the ground commanders to abandon caution,’ said Nethata. ‘I don’t care what their casualties are – they must close on the breach and commence the assault.’

Orm Vilese, the commander of the Ferik main battle divisions, raised his bald, milk-white head from the tactical pict screens.

‘The Warhawks are pinned back,’ he said. ‘Until the walls are secured, a ground assault would be a massacre.’

Nethata whirled around, almost losing control. Before he could reply, another voice interjected.

‘We are committed now, my lord Vilese,’ said Heriat, entering the room silently, dipping his head under the metal door frame. ‘It would be an act of cowardice to withdraw.’

The presence of the Commissar-General had its usual effect on the regular officers – to a man, they stiffened a fraction, instantly looking warier. All of them, Nethata included, knew the powers of the Commissariat during combat operations.

‘Quite right, Commissar-General,’ said Nethata. ‘We cannot withdraw. Tell the Ferik units to pick up the pace, or I am sure Heriat here will be pleased to deliver the orders in person.’

Vilese nodded brusquely, stifling his objections, and turned to carry out the instruction. Silently, with a few furtive glances at Heriat, the rest of the command staff moved to enact the Lord General’s will.

Nethata looked at Heriat. He didn’t bother to hide the enormous frustration he felt.

‘One tower,’ he said bitterly. ‘*One*. We placed a lot of trust in your agent.’

Heriat looked calmly over at the tactical display, and the green light from the table reflected from his pupils.

‘Trust in the Emperor’s will,’ he said.

Nethata looked at his friend’s face for a moment, irritated by the man’s certainty. It was ever thus – he would drive himself into a state of inner rage, working without pause to orchestrate every aspect of the campaign, while Heriat, the man charged with maintaining discipline in the face of the onslaught, remained serene.

There were times that Nethata envied that capacity, and times when he hated it.

‘Any communication from the Iron Hands?’ he asked, knowing the answer already but making a point by asking the question.

Heriat smiled thinly.

‘Do you want me to chase them?’

Nethata snorted, and turned back to the table. Even as he did so, locator markers from the Harakoni forces installed on the walls blinked out. The beachhead, imposed at such cost, was already being whittled down.

‘Get that support up *faster*,’ he growled, speaking to the entire chamber. ‘Throne of Earth, if we don’t get the Ferik into position within the half-hour, I’ll send you out to do the job for them.’

Aikino limped towards the gun-point, feeling blood run down the outside of his thigh.

‘Forward!’ he shouted, doing his best to rally his remaining men.

The battles across the parapet had become furious and bloody. Clusters of Warhawks fought on, though many were pinned back behind scanty cover. The grey-armoured defenders of Shardenus had poured from the access hatches like insects driven from some underground nest. They

fought fanatically hard, as if something had been done to them to drive fear from their psyches.

Aikino saw over a dozen of them scamper between two low barricades just ahead of his position. Although superficially smooth, the surface of the parapet was pitted with trenches, bulkheads, pipework and other pieces of cover. It made assaulting across it a nightmare.

He reached a metre-high wall section and crouched down low against it, ignoring the burst of pain in his leg.

‘Air support,’ he rasped into the vox. ‘What have you got?’

Nothing but static came back over the link. The few Vultures still flying over the walls were fighting a desperate battle to maintain their positions. The air was criss-crossed with anti-aircraft munitions, and it made the whole sky flare up with a dull, angry light.

‘Anything?’ asked Gerran, his lieutenant. The man squatted beside him, his helmet dented from where a glancing las-beam had nearly taken his head clean off. Behind Gerran waited the rest of his platoon, plus a few stragglers from other units Aikino had picked up.

‘We have to get to that tower,’ said Aikino, squinting into the distance and gauging the distance between their position and the objective. ‘We get two of them down, and those gunships will have a clearer run.’

Gerran looked doubtfully out across the parapet. The tower was still two hundred metres away across a stretch of wall swarming with enemy troops.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘How?’

Aikino smiled grimly.

‘The usual,’ he replied, before switching his vox-channel to open. ‘All troops, coordinate assault on my mark. Homda and Lopert, flank around to the left. Anyone still fighting on the right flank, do what you can. Stand by.’

Aikino grabbed a frag grenade from his belt – his last one – and primed it for detonation.

Gerran did the same.

‘Sir?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘Good luck.’

Aikino looked at him for a second, taken aback.

‘You too, lieutenant,’ he said, awkwardly.

Then he tensed, readying for the burst out from cover.

‘Mark!’ he shouted, hurling his grenade and sending it arcing high into the air.

All across the contested section of the parapet, grenades from other units soared out from clusters of cover. Set to short delays, some burst into clouds of fragment-ation before they’d even landed. The others skittered across the ground before exploding in chaotic whirls of shrapnel.

Aikino pushed himself to his feet and broke into a run. He felt his heart pumping. Out of the corner of his eye he saw other Warhawks doing the same, tearing over the broken terrain with abandon.

Las-beams flickered out, eerily silent amid the crash and thunder of the warfare around them. Defenders staggered out from their positions, their armour cracked or ripped away by the frag blasts. The Warhawks picked them off expertly, gaining ground rapidly.

Aikino reached the barricades he’d seen earlier. He ran at the gap between them before launching himself into a dive along the ground. He skidded, carried along by his momentum. He felt the heat of las-beams lancing just above his back.

Coming to a stop, he rolled to one side and opened fire. Cries and grunts of agony rose up from the troops in front of him, and half a dozen went down under the las-fire.

Then the rest of his unit arrived, pouring through the gap and opening fire with abandon. The defenders, outnumbered and reeling from the wave of grenades, fell back.

‘Keep going!’ roared Aikino, getting to his feet and starting up the charge again. ‘Cut them down!’

The Warhawks ran rampant, sweeping across the parapet and drawing closer to the massive defence tower ahead of them. Aikino kept it fixed in his sights. The push had gained them about twenty metres.

‘Sir!’ came Gerran’s voice over the vox, out of breath. ‘Left flank, heavy incoming!’

As soon as the lieutenant finished speaking, a swathe of bolter fire sprayed across the width of the parapet. Aikino flung himself to the ground, falling heavily on his wounded leg. Gerran did the same, but a series of shrieks from further back told him some others had not reacted quickly enough.

‘Where in hell did they come from?’ he blurted, crawling forwards on his belly and craning his neck. ‘How many of the damned...’

Aikino trailed off as he got a clear look ahead, out over the remaining ground between his men and the defence tower.

More defenders were massing. He saw gun crews struggling with tripod-mounted heavy bolters and lascannons. He saw fresh squads of troops in pristine armour emerge from access hatches and take up position behind bulkheads. Further back, he saw troop carriers bearing Shardenus insignia land on the parapet, unloading more men and materiel.

He looked over his shoulder, back towards the ground won by the Warhawks. The remaining Vultures still hovered, giving sporadic air support to the troops on the parapet. Every patch of ground won was coming under heavy fire from replenished ranks of defenders. The beachhead established on the walls, always fragile, was being ground back, pace by pace.

‘Here come more of them,’ said Gerran, gesturing out over the toxic wastes between the spires.

A squadron of Shardenus garrison heavy lifters, escorted by wings of stub-winged flyers, was heading towards their position. Aikino took a look at the lead craft. It was big enough for at least two hundred troops, and there were more behind it.

‘We’ve drawn them out, at least,’ he said, smiling wryly.

Then, as soon as he’d spoken, he realised what that meant.

‘That’s what we’re here for,’ he said out loud, shaking his head as he realised the truth.

Gerran shuffled forwards. The firefight was still raging all around them, and the Warhawks’ advance was in danger of stalling.

‘Sir?’ he asked, a note of urgency in his voice. ‘What are your orders?’

Aikino laughed bitterly.

‘It doesn’t really matter what my orders are, lieutenant,’ he said. ‘We’ve already done what we were meant to.’

Aikino checked the charge on his lasgun. Enough for a dozen or so more shots before a recharge – as if that mattered.

‘I don’t under—’

‘They knew we couldn’t take down these towers,’ said Aikino, speaking with the dry finality of a man whose death is very close. ‘But they knew we’d do enough damage to pull defenders from the other sectors.’

The sky across the western horizon suddenly lit up, far more brightly and more intensely than the sky above the parapets. Something very, very big had just gone off on the far side of the hive cluster, many kilometres away, beyond the spires that loomed over them.

‘What was that?’ asked Gerran, sounding startled.

Aikino looked carefully, letting his helmet visor do the work of filtering and magnification. Even with such aids, he couldn’t make much out. He

could guess, though. Right at the end, he reckoned he knew just what was going on.

‘That’ll be our allies,’ he said, dragging himself up to his feet and preparing to charge towards the enemy lines. ‘That’ll be the bastards who were meant to be fighting with us.’

He broke into a run. Ahead of him lay ranks of enemy soldiers, well dug-in and waiting for him. Seeing his charge, others of the Warhawks broke cover and joined in the assault. Gerran came with them – he was a good soldier, one that Aikino would be sorry to lose.

They were all going to die. Every loyal trooper on that parapet sector, sooner or later, was going to die.

Aikino lowered his lasgun, ignoring the incoming beams as they whipped past him. He picked his target, and took aim.

He didn’t feel bitter. The adrenaline of combat still surged through his system, just as it should have done. He was a warrior of the Emperor, and there was no better way for a warrior to go. At least he *understood*.

‘For Harakon!’ he roared, firing all the while, running into the oncoming storm as if nothing could hurt him.

And behind him, valiant and doomed, the charging squads of Warhawks took up the battle-cry for the last time.

For Harakon!

‘What just happened?’ asked Nethata, looking at the tactical feed with disbelief. ‘Do we have troops over there? Why are we getting signals from that sector?’

His commanders said nothing. All of them stared, just as he was doing, at the hololith hovering over the main table. Each of them was perfectly capable of reading the situation. On the south-east sector of the hive cluster walls, the battle raged just as it had been doing for over an hour. The beleaguered Harakoni drop-troops defended the areas of the walls they’d taken, though their territory was being inexorably whittled away.

Beyond the walls, out in the Gorgas, the Ferik tactical brigades were struggling to make much headway. Heavy munitions were dragged up into position only to be destroyed by the defence towers on the walls. The main assault on Shardenus Prime, for all its speed and daring, was foundering in a bloody mire of destruction.

None of the commanders were looking at those signals. All of them were looking at a whole array of light-points that had just appeared on the opposite side of the hive cluster, moving fast. They'd come out of nowhere, as if summoned from the ash of the plains. Without warning, those signals had rushed up from the western hinterland zone, overlapping with the walls on the far side of the hive complex.

'No information, lord,' said Vilese eventually, inclining his head to listen to an incoming datafeed from the long-range augur crews. 'I don't have anything.'

Nethata whirled around, barely suppressing an urge to hurl blunt objects at his command staff.

'No information!' he shouted, feeling the veins on his neck stick out. '*No inform—*'

His tirade was interrupted by a burst of static over the comm-feed.

'Lord General,' came the unmistakable metallic rasp of Clan Commander Rauth. 'Maintain your assault. Disregard losses. We have engaged the enemy across sectors 9-6 on the south-west Melamar quadrant. We do not need assistance. The sacrifice of your men is acknowledged.'

The feed went dead, preventing any sort of reply.

The chamber fell silent. Only the servitors kept working at their stations, oblivious to the aura of shock hanging in the room.

'They used us,' said Nethata eventually. 'We were a... diversion.'

Heriat nodded.

'So it seems. What are we going to do?'

Nethata didn't reply immediately. He carried on staring at the tactical hololiths, watching as men under his command died. He knew he'd have to make a decision quickly – the battle for the walls was agonisingly poised, and hesitation would doom more of his troops to a pointless death.

Even so, he found himself frozen, locked between rage and disbelief.

One thought ran through his head, again and again, blotting out all other considerations. It nagged at him, stopping him from making up his mind, stopping him from giving his commanders the words they needed to hear.

They used us.

Naim Morvox swayed against his restraint harness as the Thunderhawk carrier *Tjeslak* thundered into range. All around him his brothers stood silently, each lost in contemplation before the bloodshed to come.

The interior bulkheads rattled as the gunship streaked through walls of flak, but none of the warriors in the crew-bay so much as moved. Each one wore his helm, just as the Iron Hands always did, masking their emotions entirely. For all Morvox knew his squad were reciting litanies of hatred to themselves, or running through the attack plans a final time, or simply freeing their minds of unnecessary clutter. They were like ancient statues to him, cold and featureless.

'Deploy in twenty seconds,' came the voice of the pilot over the comm.

Morvox prepared himself, blink-clicking his retinal display into life and watching the bow-ramp for the first sign of movement. He knew they'd be coming in fast, far faster than any mortal drop-troops could have managed, and getting the timing right would be imperative.

The Thunderhawk passed through a patch of heavy turbulence – the corona of an explosion, perhaps – and the floor bucked like a living thing. The Iron Hands adjusted stance automatically, maintaining both their positions and their strange, expectant silence.

Morvox knew that other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes went into battle differently. He'd served alongside many of them: White Consuls,

Flesh Tearers, Death Spectres. Each of those Chapters had launched into combat with cries of rage ringing from their vox-casters, invoking the names of the Emperor and their primarch to stoke their battle-fury.

The Iron Hands were different. All Medusans were different, raised on a world so choked with scouring winds that opening one's mouth to shout anything in battle resulted in nothing more than a mouthful of grit.

So they prepared in silence. They trained in silence. When the moment came, they would disembark in silence, keeping the comm free for essential battle signals. When the Iron Hands went to war, the only sound was the low machine hum of power armour.

The Thunderhawk reeled again, hit by something along the right-hand stretch of fuselage. Morvox adjusted his stance fractionally.

‘Location achieved,’ announced the pilot calmly. ‘Manus guide you.’

The Thunderhawk swerved in mid-air, rapidly slowing as its mighty air-brakes kicked in. The front ramp shot down with a hiss of hydraulics, ushering in a storm of hot, dry wind from outside. The carrier was still travelling fast. The outside world, glimpsed through the lowered bow-ramp, was a speeding whirl of fire, smog and shrapnel.

Morvox severed his flight harness and crashed down the ramp.

The surface of the hive wall parapet lay ten metres below him, approaching fast. Las-beams and heavy bolters scythed out in all directions, aiming for the squadrons of Thunderhawks hovering over the parapets. Those shots that made contact fizzled out on the gunships' heavy plate armour or reflected wildly out into the sky.

Morvox kicked free of the ramp and leapt out into the air. As he plummeted, dragged down quickly by his heavy armour, he had a brief vista across the whole plane of the hive cluster. Several spires rose up in the east, wreathed in burning ash clouds. Beyond them, out on the far perimeter, he could see the effects of heavy bombardment. A major

engagement was taking place on the eastern wall sectors, and the sky above it was deep crimson like an angry wound.

Then he was down, crashing into the rockcrete surface of the parapet and cracking the slabs with his boots. The rest of Clave Arx crunched down around him, falling from the heavens like vengeful avatars of the gods.

The Thunderhawk shot overhead, banking sharply and bringing its cannon to bear on the fixed anti-aircraft points. Morvox started to advance, striding in silence towards the first of many low ridges he could see carved out of the flat expanse of the parapet. Las-fire and solid rounds flickered out at him, and he ignored them. His clave fell in alongside him, laying down bolter volleys in careful, disciplined bursts. The squad progressed steadily, soundlessly, moving methodically through the ash-wind like red-eyed golems of Terran legend.

Morvox reached the first line of cover and crashed straight through it, smashing aside loose blocks of ferro-crete. On the far side, a dozen mortal troops scattered, firing behind them as they fled. Morvox picked them off with single bolter shots, one by one, advancing all the while.

Across the parapet, Thunderhawks were dropping other claves into the battlezone. They all did the same thing – advanced steadily across the walls, heading for the defence towers and the access tubes that led further into the hive cluster.

The defenders attempted to rally in the face of the assault, dragging up a tripod-mounted heavy bolter and swinging it round into position. Morvox gestured to Gergiz, and he let rip with a withering torrent from his own heavy bolter, shredding the emplacement and cutting its crew into blood-flecked pieces.

The Iron Hands kept advancing, never speeding up, never slowing down. They stormed across each defensive perimeter they came to, cutting down any who stood in their way. The enemy troops were too sparse and too

disorganised to put up any resistance – with the multiple assaults taking place in the eastern wall zones, all reserves had been deployed elsewhere.

A part of Morvox regretted that. He found himself wishing the defence was a little stronger, a little more worthy of his strength at arms.

Such thoughts were human thoughts, though, residues of his old Medusan self. Before long, he knew, his only thoughts in battle would be those of efficiency, of completeness, of slaughter in the pursuit of perfection. Until then, he allowed himself his fleeting regrets.

The main defence tower loomed before them, already burning from the strafing runs of Raukaan's Thunderhawks.

'Brother Sulzar,' said Morvox, indicating the heavily barred gateway to the tower.

Sulzar stepped up and took aim with his shoulder-mounted missile launcher. A krak projectile screamed off towards the gateway, exploding with an echoing howl as it broke through the outer shell.

Morvox stalked towards the smoking ruins, scanning for targets. His helm lenses picked out three semi-conscious bodies in the rubble, which he ignored; others in his squad would dispatch them.

He broke into the tower, clanking down a long corridor lit with stuttering lumens. The interior space was already filled with the noises of battle – echoing bolter bursts, the thud of falling bodies, the screams of the dying. Other Iron Hands squads had penetrated the building at different levels and were already cleansing it, floor by floor.

Morvox reached the end of the corridor where it intersected with a larger chamber. A dozen defenders, each clad in close-fitting grey armour and with blank metal facemasks, attempted an ambush. One of them hurled a short-fuse grenade right at Morvox's chest while others opened fire from the shadows.

Moving with sudden, whip-sharp speed, Morvox shot the grenade almost before it had left its owner's hand, igniting a massive explosion that ripped

the man apart. Then Morvox was amongst the remainder of the group, finishing them off with his armoured hands. He smashed one half-dazed trooper full in the face, shattering his helmet-mask and driving deep into the flesh and bone beneath. He broke the neck of another with a savage backhand, and crushed the chest of a third under his boots.

It went on. His armour slick with blood, Morvox ploughed through the rest of them, lashing out with precisely weighted movements. A few snapshots glanced off his armour; they left little more than scorch-marks on the ceramite.

They passed into a mezzanine level beyond. He and his battle-brothers fired their bolters rarely, preferring to take the mortal fighters apart at close range to save ammo. As the press of combat grew fiercer, Morvox mag-locked his boltgun and drew his blade. The serrated edge shimmered softly in the gloom – a thin red light like the last dregs of sunset.

‘Locator reading,’ he ordered over the comm, slicing open the back of a retreating defender and shaking the flaps of flesh loose from his blade.

‘Two levels down,’ replied Fierez as he threw a soldier headlong into the wall, breaking his spine with a wet snap. He consulted his auspex. ‘Clave Prime is on schedule.’

Morvox grunted with satisfaction and kept going. The mezzanine platform hung over a deep shaft running up and down the centre of the tower. A wide metal stairway snaked around the interior of it, hugging the walls on all four sides. The few defenders who had escaped the initial assault were already fleeing down the stairwell, any pretence at resistance given up.

Morvox followed them. More noises of combat rose up from the base of the shaft, echoing from wall to wall. Furious volleys of bolter fire interlaced with fresh shrieks of fear and agony, and lightning-white muzzle flashes shot up from the depths.

‘Prepare bolters,’ he ordered, sheathing his sword as he descended through the levels. ‘Ranged fire, controlled bursts.’

Two levels down, another corridor branched off from the stairwell, brightly-lit and paved with polished tiles. It led swiftly into a much larger chamber, one with a broad domed roof with a whole cluster of hovering glow-lumens under the eaves. The space beneath it was huge – large enough to accommodate hundreds of men. The walls had been decorated with panels celebrating ancient victories of the Imperium picked out in bronze, and an austere iron statue of Rogal Dorn – Shardenus’s patron primarch – stood proudly under the roof’s apex.

There, it seemed, the tower’s defenders had chosen to make their stand. Barricades had been hastily assembled all across the wide floorspace, each one manned by dozens of grey-armoured troops. Two squads of Iron Hands had arrived before Clave Arx, coming up from the levels below, and battle had already been joined. Las-beams and solid rounds swept across the open space, crashing into the walls and knocking huge chunks out of the bronze reliefs. The noise was ferocious, echoing in the enclosed chamber and resounding from the dome above.

‘Right flank,’ ordered Morvox, assessing where best to deploy his forces. ‘Close combat, standard pattern.’

The Iron Hands broke instantly into a new style of fighting, as if a switch had been thrown somewhere deep within their black-armoured shells. They charged straight at the nearest defenders. Despite the massive size of their power armour, the rate of acceleration was tremendous. Clave Arx tore across the short distance to the barricades, swerving with uncanny accuracy around the lines of incoming fire.

Once they reached the barricades, bedlam was unleashed. Still in complete vox-silence, they ripped up the ferrocrete barriers with thundering blasts of bolter fire. They cracked open the mortals’ armour with vicious, sweeping blade movements. They lashed out with fists,

crunched down with armoured boots, unleashed hurricanes of heavy weapons fire. They ripped through the resistance like a swollen storm-wave crashing into an unprepared coast.

For all that, resistance still remained. The three squads of Raukaan were outnumbered many times over by the massed ranks of mortal defenders. Rows of armour-piercing lascannons had been installed at the rear of the chamber. In sufficient volume, even the humble lasguns carried by the individual troopers could cause damage. The preternatural agility and prowess of each Space Marine was needed just to prevent them being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of incoming fire.

Morvox whirled out of one attack and into another, before seeing a lascannon beam crash into the plate armour of Brother Malloch. The warrior was hurled from the ground in a fountain of cracked ceramite and blood, smashed backwards and dragged along the floor. An instant later, Gergiz silenced the lascannon crew with a savage burst from his heavy bolter, but more existed to deal out the same level of punishment.

At last, thought Morvox, crunching his way through a whole platoon of flailing mortals. *We have our fight.*

His objective lay ahead of him, on the far side of the domed chamber. Huge circular blast doors protected the entrance to the access tunnels leading into the heart of the hive cluster. Once the gateway had been taken, the rest of Shardenus Prime would open up before them, ripe for conquest. The defenders knew that just as well, and fought like daemons to hold the Iron Hands back.

It will not help you, thought Morvox, dropping to one knee and loosing a bolter round at a charging defender before twisting round to crush the torso armour of another. *Nothing can help you now.*

Then, from behind, came an almighty crash. A corona of blue-white energy flared out across the chamber, lashing like storm lightning. Writhing strands clamped on to the mortal troops – dozens of them – and

lifted them bodily into the air. Their bodies spasmed in sudden excruciation, and they screamed like animals led to slaughter.

Morvox didn't need to turn to see who had just joined the fight. He did anyway, just for a second – another human weakness.

Clave Prime had entered the chamber. Chief Librarian Telach was with them, his entire battle-plate lit up with crackling energies. Warp lightning slewed across the midnight-blue of his power armour, shimmering like the raw stuff of stars. The Librarian's whole facemask was lit up with it, and his helm lenses burned with a furious, majestic incandescence.

Beside him came the greatest warriors of Raukaan, unleashed in their full, terrible glory. Imanol, Veteran Sergeant of Clave Prime, resplendent in massive Terminator armour, barrelled into combat like some great Mechanicus war engine. His entourage, enhanced with elaborate bionics across their night-black battle-plate, were scarcely less fearsome.

Dominating them all was Arven Rauth, cracking the ground beneath his imposing Terminator-clad bulk, wreathed in a lambent aura of electrical discharge. In one hand he carried a power axe, in the other a storm bolter, and his helm lenses flashed the colour of raw heartblood.

Alongside him came Iron Father Khatir, as intimidating a presence as any of them, his gauntlets bleeding waves of blue-edged flame. Alone of all the Iron Hands in that place, Khatir broke combat-silence, roaring a deafening, vox-amplified challenge as he crashed into combat.

'Traitors of Shardenus!' Khatir roared, and the echo of his battle-cry resounded from the dome above, shattering its lumens. 'Judgement has come to this world! Surrender and your deaths will redeem you! Resist and your souls will be damned!'

Morvox felt his heart-rates spike, stirred by the familiar exhortations of the Iron Father. Ever since his induction into the Chapter the machine-filtered voices of the Iron Fathers had guided him into war, stirring the

residual human passion for killing and channelling the enormous destructive capacity of his genhanced frame.

He turned back to the slaughter, knowing that its climax was near. Against such assembled forces the mortal defenders of the hive would soon be swept away, leaving the access tubes clear of resistance. After that, the assault would carry on remorselessly, hab-block by hab-block, spire by spire, manufactorium by manufactorium, until the entire world was scoured of the taint that infected it.

For the honour of Manus, he mouthed, feeling the splash of fresh blood against his helm-mask. Now we make our presence known. From here, from this place, until the end and the victory, let the killing be unbounded.

II: UNDERWORLD



CHAPTER EIGHT

Nethata tried not to look too hard at the woman in front of him. No matter how often he met adepts of the Machine-God in person he felt an almost irresistible urge to scrutinise their panoply of implants, to guess which parts of their bodies were real and which were augmetic.

It was a foolish, discourteous instinct, and he knew it. For all that, it was hard not to stare.

‘Thank you for coming to see me, magos,’ he said, settling into his stiff-backed chair.

Magos Ys inclined her head slightly, and the crimson cowl obscuring her face slipped a little lower. The chamber around them, located high up in the Guard’s Helat base of operations, was roughly circular and offered a wide view of the plains below through a set of curved windows. Troop movements were visible in almost every direction – columns of armoured vehicles, Sentinel formations, squadrons of flyers taking off for the front. Over in the far north-west horizon, the burning outlines of Shardenus Prime could just be made out.

‘A pleasure, Lord General,’ she replied. ‘I could hardly expect you to meet me in orbit with matters balanced so delicately.’

Nethata gestured to the table beside her. Bolofe, his Master of Protocol, had covered it in things he thought a servant of the Mechanicus would

expect to find – fruit, mostly, beside a decanter of Martian emreva.

‘We’re all right conducting this in Gothic? I can ask for servitor mediation if you wish.’

It was impossible to read Ys’s mood with her face covered, but Nethata thought he caught a flicker of a metal smile somewhere in the shadows.

‘That is kind, but I am perfectly happy to speak in Gothic.’

Nethata bowed to acknowledge the courtesy.

‘I received word from Princeps Lopi that his Titans are available for deployment,’ he said. ‘I repeat our thanks. With the perimeter breached, we will have need of their heavy weapons soon.’

‘I am glad,’ said Ys. ‘And you are to be congratulated – my adepts inform me the assault on the hives goes well.’

Nethata suppressed a sour expression.

‘The walls have been compromised west of the Rovax Gate,’ he said. ‘The main assault along the eastern walls, the one led by my regiments, was withdrawn after taking heavy losses. No Warhawks were recovered. Two days later, we’re still patching things up. I’m not sure that counts as “going well”.’

‘But the breakthrough was made. Surely that is the important thing.’

Nethata found the magos’s smooth, subtle voice disconcerting. No hint of machine filtering discoloured it. It was human; almost *too* human, if such a thing were possible. He knew that Ys was almost entirely machine, just like the senior Iron Hands, though at least in their case one couldn’t miss the ostentatious display of mechanical alteration.

‘Let me be candid, magos,’ he said. ‘I trust this meeting is in full confidence?’

‘Always, Lord General.’

‘So,’ said Nethata, drawing a breath. ‘There have been differences of emphasis between me and Clan Commander Rauth over the assault. I’m

sure you're aware of that, but now that your assets are coming under his purview, I thought we should discuss it.'

As he spoke, he tried to gauge something of Ys's reception, but it was futile; like talking to a mute servitor.

'I am concerned about the way this war is being fought,' he said. 'We lost thousands of men establishing a temporary breach in the walls, in my view with no justifiable cause. Guard losses are one thing – I'm capable of arguing the case for my own men – but your battle-formation... well, that is something else. I can't speak for you.'

'We would not expect you to,' said Ys.

She folded her legs. The movement was as supple and fluid as a normal human's, though Nethata noticed the glint of dark metal under the hem of her robes before they settled.

'They didn't tell us anything,' said Nethata. 'We launched our assault knowing nothing of their positions, of their intentions. They used my men to concentrate defenders along the eastern wall sections while they came in from the west. Even now they commandeer units under my direct command, driving them alongside their own advance, wasting them in their haste to press on towards the Capitolis.'

He shot Ys a frustrated look.

'They are – forgive me – impossible.'

The magos reached for her glass and raised it to her cowl, taking a sip before replacing it.

'I appreciate your candour, lord general,' she said. 'And I understand your situation, since we have fought alongside the Iron Hands for millennia. Perhaps you know of our close association, perhaps not. In either case, given those ties, I am surprised that you have sought to take me into your confidence over this.'

Nethata pressed his fingers together, fully aware of the need to go carefully. He knew how close the Mechanicus was to the Iron Hands. That

didn't make his approach to Ys pointless, just dangerous; in any case, he had precious few other allies to turn to.

'This is not a question of insubordination,' he said. 'I serve the Imperial cause, as I know Princeps Lopi will, but I have tried to reason with Clan Commander Rauth on many occasions and have got precisely nowhere. He is blind to considerations of caution, of bloodshed, of waste. All he cares about is speed – the need to break the spires as soon as possible. If he has a sound tactical reason for that, then he hasn't chosen to share it with me.'

Nethata unclasped his hands and placed them in his lap, resisting the temptation to look down at them. Ys's empty cowl was hard to stare into for long.

'I am not a weak man, magos,' he said. 'I have led men into battle for over a hundred years, and have taken many hard decisions. But this is...'

He trailed off, remembering the sacrifice of the Harakoni Warhawks, all to expedite the Iron Hands' own hidden advance.

'...inhuman.'

Ys said nothing for a moment. She sat easily in her chair, not touching the fruit and liquor at her side, watching him.

'Let me tell you something about the Iron Hands,' she said eventually. 'You may think that you know what to expect of them, but I assure you that you do not.'

She leaned forwards a little.

'Since we are speaking in confidence, I can make you privy to things many in the Imperium have long forgotten – it will help you to understand. The Iron Hands are human, lord general. Perhaps they do not like to think of themselves in quite that way any more, but they are, and they share in the full range of blessings and curses of that exalted state. One condition in particular is theirs: an ancient condition which even now, with all the techno-chirurgical advances available in our glorious Imperium, resists any attempts at a cure.'

Nethata listened carefully, lulled a little by Ys's smooth, cultivated voice. He had not expected a discourse.

‘Psychological states exist in which a healthy subject comes to harm himself,’ she said. ‘He lets himself waste away through neglect, or cuts his own flesh, or desires to have limbs amputated where no wound has been inflicted. The image he has of his body is distorted, and it is difficult for others to understand such an impulse, since they can have no insight into what he sees when he stands before a mirror.’

Ys spoke in a measured, confident manner, as if her speech had been long prepared.

‘The body of a Space Marine is the most perfect human form ever created,’ she said. ‘Even our skitarii, given every augmetic aid known to us, do not compare to it in power and facility. You can imagine what degree of mental trauma would be required for a human to give up such a gift, to mutilate himself and replace his priceless gene-forged heritage with mechanical parts.’

‘Forgive me, magos,’ said Nethata, ‘but your own kind are not exactly immune to that.’

Ys nodded, and Nethata had the same impression again – the impression that under her cowl she had just smiled.

‘We take ordinary bodies and make them better,’ she admitted. ‘We do so because we desire to improve on what we were born with. The Iron Hands cannot make their bodies better, since they are already perfect. Nevertheless, still they amputate their limbs in favour of metal parts and aspire to the state of machine-hood. Why? Because they *fear* their flesh, lord general. They look at it in the mirror of their minds and they see something loathsome. It is difficult to understand such an impulse, since, as I said, we can have no insight into what they see when they stand before the mirror.’

Nethata pursed his lips, considering what he was being told.

‘So the augmetics,’ he said. ‘It’s because... they can’t help themselves?’

‘Something like that.’

‘All of them? They all feel that way?’

‘The condition gets worse the longer they serve. Some of them recognise it, others do not. Eventually, yes, it claims them all.’

Ys turned away from him. She looked out through the windows, over to the horizon where the spires burned.

‘There is a myth, a rumour, still repeated on Mars, that their Lord Primarch knew of this weakness and wished to purge it. I have seen scrolls, purported to be written in the hand of Manus, that state the matter clearly. Who knows if such things are genuine? Even if he intended it, he died long before he could accomplish it. And so we have the present situation: the Iron Hands no longer place trust in their gene-wrought perfection.’

Once again, the irony of being told such things by a mostly-metal adept of the Mechanicus impressed itself on Nethata.

‘Why are you telling me this, magos?’ he asked.

‘To help you understand them. They do not see the universe in the way that you do. When you advocate courses of action that seem prudent – to slow the pace of the attack, to conserve strength, to protect your exposed flanks – they see only weakness. It reminds of them of their own weakness, and so they recoil from it.’

‘When they risk the lives of my men, I must speak.’

‘Quite so. But choose your words and your tactics carefully.’

Ys turned away from the view of the battle and looked at him from under the shadow of her cowl.

‘They only respect strength,’ she said. ‘Do not argue from the need to preserve life; argue from the need to destroy it. Appeal to mercy, and they will disregard you. Appeal to reason, and they will disregard you. Appeal

to the weakness of your men, and they will disregard you. They understand sacrifice, duty and resolve. Nothing else.'

Nethata stared at his own hands. For the first time, he thought they looked old, despite all the rejuve he'd invested in over the years. He flexed his fingers, watching the way the muscles moved.

'Your words give me little comfort,' he said. 'I had hoped that, with your support, those instincts might be controlled.'

Ys shook her head. It was a perfect idiomatic human gesture, though Nethata suspected that she only adopted such mannerisms because he was there.

'You cannot control the Iron Hands,' she said. 'It is dangerous to try. The best you can hope for is manage them; even we of Mars have had to learn how to do that. They need us for the augmetic devices we make for them, but we are not foolish enough to believe that our relationship is one of master and servant.'

Ys rose from her seat in a single, lissom movement. Nethata got to his feet more clumsily. The audience, so it seemed, was at an end.

'You were right to speak to me, lord general,' she said. 'I will reflect on your situation and see whether anything can be done. Princeps Lopi is an experienced commander; I shall instruct him to remain in close contact with you.'

'I'm grateful, magos,' said Nethata. 'And I hope you don't think—'

Ys raised a hand, and for the first time Nethata had a clear view of her metal-encased claw slipping clear of her sleeve.

'It does not matter what I think,' she said. 'Your devotion to your men commends you.'

Ys leaned closer, and a faint aroma of ceremonial incense rose from her robes.

'If you remember only one thing I have told you, lord general, remember this,' she said. 'They only respect strength. Forget that, and it

will kill you.'

Valien crept forwards slowly, hugging the wall, taking extreme care not to lose his footing. The shaft below yawned away from him, hundreds of metres down. He saw a light blinking on and off in the depths, and wondered what kind of machinery existed so far down, and how anyone ever managed to get close enough to it to service it.

He cleared his mind. Losing concentration would kill him.

Valien edged around the side of the shaft, clinging on the narrow ledge and shuffling slowly. He'd removed the last disguise he'd been wearing in favour of a black bodyglove woven with lightweight armour panels. His bulbous head was enclosed in a sheer layer of sensor-repelling synthskin, and his eyes were protected by an environment-reactive visor. Various weapons, mostly small and esoteric in design, clustered around his belt.

If he encountered spire guards now they wouldn't hesitate before shooting him. That was fine; the time when adopting disguises was likely to help him had gone.

He reached the far side of the shaft and stepped lightly into the tunnel on the far side. For a moment, a brief, thrilling moment, he felt his centre of gravity hang over the void, teetering on the lip of oblivion.

Then he was over, crouching down on the floor, his heart beating harder than usual.

Vertigo. With all the neurosurgery I've had, you'd have thought they could have fixed that one thing.

Ahead of him was a long, twisting corridor, barely high enough for him to walk down without stooping. The walls were black and caked with accumulated filth. Old mechanical workings, mostly broken and filmed with rust, covered sheets of metal panelling. The place smelled fungal and claustrophobic.

He didn't know how far in he'd come. Even with the use of retinal-mounted chronos and locators it was all too easy to lose one's sense of

where one was. Everything was dark, wet and echoing – kilometre upon kilometre of meandering service tunnels and access tubes and maintenance shafts and drive pits and utility gantries, all of it full of stinking air and distant, echoing clangs.

Most of the ways he went were deserted, long forgotten by the inhabitants of Shardenus Prime. He crept through old generatoria, still humming with power, abandoned sewage ducts and mechanised tunnels used only by sightless servitor-piloted drones.

When he saw living men, he killed them. He crept up on them in the dark, keeping even his breathing silent, unleashing his needles into their soft, unwary flesh. When the killing was done he'd drink their blood, feeling hot pleasure wash into his system as he gulped it down.

Then Valien would bless the name of the Emperor, the Master of Mankind, the living god who gave him his powers over life and death. He would speak reverently in the hidden tongues of the Talica death cult, remembering the spare beauty of the temple on Ghanreta Tertius where he'd been trained. He'd remember the way the light had come through the stained glass of the inner chapel, casting a halo on to the stone floor in the shape of a human heart.

At times, the memory of that place would make his eyes prick with tears.

From up ahead, somewhere in the maze of tunnels and access shafts, he heard a noise. It was faint, very faint, like the brush of leaves in foliage.

Valien crept forwards, dropping almost to all fours and letting his fingers drift against the floor in front of him. He picked up speed, sweeping soundlessly along the silent, shadowy routes through the heart of the hive.

The noise grew as he drew closer to it. It was nebulous, diffuse, muffled by the effects of the labyrinth.

He reached the end of the tunnel. The ceiling gradually lowered to meet the floor, causing him to sink onto his belly and snake forwards. He felt the press of metal above and below him, and tried not to think too closely about how many thousands upon thousands of tonnes of spire structure stretched away above his tiny, burrowing body.

The tunnel ended abruptly at a sheer cliff-edge. Ahead of him, a vast cavern lined with soaring pillars carved its way into the heart of the spire foundations. Looking right and left, he couldn't see where it began or where it ended – each extremity was lost in a haze of smog and shadow. Looking straight ahead, he could just make out the other side: a sheer face of soot-black iron, banded with gothic ornamentation and studded with mechanical workings. Faint lights blinked in the gloom like lost sentinels adrift on a huge, black ocean.

The noise came from far below, over a hundred metres down. Valien perched on the lip of his precarious vantage, and absorbed the information.

Men were marching. They were organised into platoons, and the platoons into companies, and the companies into battalions. They went slowly, almost mechanically, arranged in close, grey-clad ranks. The noise of their massed boots striking the ground swirled and echoed up in the cathedral-like space, drumming and booming in the cavern above them.

Valien extended his face a little further out, carefully checking his balance. He narrowed his right eye, and felt the auto-enhancement filters in his cornea do their work. His view zoomed in, overlaying cartographic data sequestered alongside his mission orders.

The men were heading south-west, out of the central hives and towards Melamar Primus where the fighting was. They were well-equipped, with thick plated armour and what looked like non-standard-issue lasguns. He saw grenades hanging from their belts, and savage blades. They wore full-face masks with rebreathers attached, obscuring their faces entirely. Only

the officers, marching ahead of their troops in command squads, had any exposed flesh on them.

Valien swept his gaze over to them, recording the pict-sequence in his earlobe-mounted buffer for transmission into the grid. He concentrated on one man, a bulky figure at the front of a large contingent with a swaggering, rolling gait. His skin was entirely grey, like dregs of ration-gruel. Even by the standards of a sun-starved hive like Shardenus, that colour was unnatural.

Valien zoomed in closer. The man's eyes were white-less, like the black orbs of an animal. Faint pink lesions throbbed at his collar, pulsing with a life of their own. A tattoo had been gouged into his forehead, though Valien couldn't make out much of its shape.

Valien withdrew his optical enhancements and sat back inside the tunnel lip. As he did so, he heard the rumble of tracked vehicles. He waited, utterly motionless, until the tanks came into view, rolling along slowly in the wake of the marching men. He saw a variety of a standard Imperial heavy armour – Leman Russ tanks, Malcador mobile fortresses, Chimera troop carriers, Medusa fire support platforms. Each vehicle had been defaced with grey and purple icons that made his eyes itch. Imperial aquilas had been gouged off the armour plate. The tanks ground their way along the cavern floor, shrouded in choking clouds of smoke.

As he watched, he fed observed details into a comm-pulse unit for transmission.

Estimate: >12,000 infantry; 8 armoured brigades; 2 engineering brigades. Observed heavy weapons squads, infiltrators, sniper units. Advancing down major arterial route [F56] from Capitolis to silos under Melamar Primus. Arrival at front within five standard hours. Endemic physiognomic corruption. Transmit to all field commanders within zone of operations. Originator: Valien TDC, Ferik special attachment. Timestamp: N07:44:56.

It was a substantial force, just one of many detachments of defenders he knew were moving from the inner zones of control up to the front line. As the invaders cut deeper into the heart of Shardenus Prime, more reinforcements would be called up and shipped down the huge transit arteries within the depths of the hive cluster. Such gigantic caverns had been delved to permit the movement of bulk goods carriers between spires; they were just as useful for allowing the movement of armed divisions.

Valien watched until the last of the heavy armour had trundled off into the dark. He felt a qualm of disquiet as he considered the numbers that Nethata had at his disposal. From what he'd seen, Shardenus Prime was well-defended, well-resourced and very hard to make quick progress through. For all the bravado of the Imperial commanders, he couldn't see a quick way to force a result.

Additional: I reiterate supposition that air supply is a weak link. The spires and transit routes are sealed; breaking seals will make atmosphere unbreathable. Transmitting coordinates of filtration stations uncovered during survey: the Capitolis perimeter may be vulnerable.

He shuffled back down the tunnel, drawing away from the cavern and back the way he'd come. After an uncomfortable few minutes of cramped struggle, the roof of the tunnel lifted sufficiently for him to twist around and creep along on all fours. He went quicker then, flitting in the dark until he met an intersection and changed course.

After that he resumed his silent, watchful progress. With every step, that watchfulness increased. He recited Talica litanies of concentration, keeping his mind alert and his senses pitched.

He knew that the danger he was in increased the further he went. With every passing metre he was headed further away from any possible help and deeper into the heart of the corruption. Soon, he knew, the tunnels

would start to open out into inhabited areas of the cluster again, areas where he'd have to use all his conditioning and guile to remain hidden.

And after that, the Capitolis: the cluster's central spire, immense and unknown. No sensor array had succeeded in penetrating its depths, and no agents had managed to get through the perimeter. Its flanks were lit with a strange, lurid light – a violent purple that bled out into the night sky like blood in water. Whatever had corrupted Shardenus lay within that spire, slowly exerting its control across the whole cluster.

Holy will of the Immortal Emperor, grant me nothing more than life and strength enough to bring justice to Your enemies.

For a moment, Valien paused, pondering the words he recited to himself so freely. Though the formula was set, he'd never given much thought to the concept that he might die in the pursuit of his objectives. It was always a background consideration, something that was often statistically likely, but which until then had never impinged greatly on his thinking.

It occurred to him with unusual force that the odds of coming out of the Capitolis alive were slim. No other agents had managed to do so, and they had been operating in the days before full-scale hostilities had commenced. With the spires on full alert and crawling with increasingly mutated defenders, the odds of doing so were even less favourable.

Perhaps his reversion to blood-drinking was clouding his judgement. It was weak, to give into such primal urges, and unworthy of the trust his masters had placed in him. He'd never given pause to consider the odds before, not when an assignment was under way, and he knew that it was a bad time to start.

Still, for whatever reason, he couldn't shake the sensation.

Nothing more than life and strength to bring justice to Your enemies.

He sloped off down the corridor, slipping into the pools of darkness, forcing his mind to return to the task at hand. His fingers curled up into fists, cradling around his drawn needle gun.

Then he was gone, lost in the dark, a single figure heading deeper, ever deeper, into the heart of the hives.

Marivo coughed up blood, and the world swam into something like focus before him.

For a moment, he felt very little. Then he felt a lot, and none of it was good. His shoulder throbbed with repeated waves of pain. His throat felt as if he'd been lost in the ash-wastes for weeks without water and his tongue was swollen in his mouth. Every joint ached, and the skin across his face felt taut and dry. He tasted bile at the back of his mouth but couldn't swallow it away. His eyes watered. He blinked, and it felt like grit had been rubbed under the lids.

'Where...' he croaked, trying to lift his head. 'What...'

Someone came over to him, cradling the back of his neck and lifting a cup to his lips. Brackish water spilled into his mouth.

Marivo couldn't do much more than passively let the liquid absorb. As it seeped down, he managed to swallow. The movement made his throat flare, and fresh tears started in his eyes.

'Who...' he rasped as soon as the cup was removed, breaking off in pain.

Wherever he was, it was dark and cold. As feeling returned to his battered limbs he gained the impression of lying on a long, hard table. He wasn't wearing his armour, though he was still in the olive-green uniform Valien had provided for him. Its cloth was dirty and stiff with blood; presumably his.

'Awake, then,' came a familiar voice.

For an instant he couldn't put a name to the voice. He tried to lift his head again. Despite the fresh blur of pain behind his eyes, he managed it.

'Khadi,' he croaked. 'Where are—'

'Do not speak,' ordered Khadi, pushing him back down to the table.

She was still in her armour, minus the helmet, and looked fairly brutal in the dim light. Marivo could see other figures moving around in the dark beyond her, but couldn't make much out beyond that.

‘We are in Melamar Secundus,’ she said, keeping her voice low. ‘Right at the bottom. Keep your voice down.’

Marivo tried to piece together his memories. He had the distinct feeling he'd been drifting in and out of consciousness for a while. Fleeting, dreamlike images remained in his mind, like outlines burned onto a retina: dragging himself out of the toxic soup, coughing his guts out; crashing into the walls of a tunnel, deafened by explosions in the air outside; feeling hands grasp at his collar and pull him away; whispered voices in the dark.

‘How long?’ he asked.

‘Two days. We had to keep moving. You’ve been given some sedatives, and some anti-inflammatories, but we’ve run out now. That’s why you’re awake. Sorry.’

Khadi didn't sound sorry. She sounded distracted and irritated, as if he'd done something, somehow, to offend her.

Marivo tried to move, and found that he could. His limbs responded to his commands better with every passing second, though his mind was still sluggish and numb.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘What do you remember?’

Marivo took a deep breath, and it made his throat sting.

‘The tower,’ he said. ‘We brought it down. I took a hit. We were getting out, and I was running – I thought you’d gone on ahead.’

‘I had,’ said Khadi. The sound of her voice was flat, as if she were regretting a decision she'd made. ‘Maybe something about your damn Guard training got to me. Leave no man behind – isn't that what you say?’

Marivo had to concentrate to follow what she was saying. Only some of it made sense to him – the events after he'd been hit were jumbled in his mind.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘What’s—’

‘What’s our status?’ she finished for him. Even in his weakened state, Marivo found her constant speaking over him annoying. What was *wrong* with her? ‘I’ll tell you. We got back into shelter just as almighty hell broke out on the walls. For a while I thought we had more guards after us, but they weren’t stupid enough to try to cross the wasteland, and anyway they were needed on the walls pretty soon. Your spy was right – as soon as the tower went down, there were soldiers everywhere, coming over in drop-ships and landing on the walls.’

Marivo felt relief flood through him.

The Guard. At last.

‘So what happened?’ he asked.

‘They got the shit kicked out of them,’ said Khadi. ‘The whole thing was a bloody mess – guess they didn’t have the numbers, or the backup, or whatever. We didn’t hang around long enough to watch.’

Marivo’s relief drained away as soon as it had arrived, replaced by a sensation that felt as if his insides had hollowed out. For weeks, for as long as he’d been persuaded that something rotten dwelt in the Capitolis and needed to be resisted, he’d believed that everything would turn once the Guard arrived. He’d seen the landers come down from orbit, waves of them – back then, the invasion force had looked unstoppable.

He let his head fall back. He felt sick, and it wasn’t from the toxins still fizzing in his airways.

‘Then it’s over,’ he said.

‘No it isn’t,’ said Khadi, activating a microlumen and examining the wound in his shoulder. ‘Something else has happened. There’s fighting

everywhere, over in Melamar Primus, along the wall sectors out west, spreading fast.'

Marivo narrowed his eyes, trying to concentrate. Khadi's face was drifting in and out of focus.

'Any signals? Valien gave me secure comm-lines, with passwords.'

Khadi laughed. It was an empty, caustic sound.

'If you can get close enough, you can try it,' she said. 'Why do you think we're down here? It's bad further up. They're burning everything. Everything.'

She flicked the microlumen closed. The light briefly illuminated her face. She looked gaunt.

'We have to regroup,' said Marivo, struggling to drag himself up on his elbows. 'I have idents for the other cells. They'll want our positions – we'll coordinate, form a front.'

Khadi stared down at him. Her expression was a mixture of disbelief and contempt.

'You haven't seen what we have,' she said.

'I know.'

'It's impossible.'

With a huge surge of willpower, Marivo hauled himself into a sitting position, swinging his legs over the side of the table he was lying on. He saw the other figures in the darkness crowding round, some listening to the exchange, others pretending not to. To the extent he could see them, they looked exhausted and ragged, clad in broken plates of armour and cradling poorly bandaged wounds.

'So what is it?' he asked, genuinely curious despite his annoyance.

'What is the actual, specific problem?'

'We can't contact anyone!' she blurted out, letting her exasperation show. 'We can't do anything – they're the Angels of Death, just like that freak told us, and they're killing anything they see. And the Capitolis has

sent more troops to fight them, and they're not human anymore. They've got grey skin and black eyes and... other things. It's hell up there, and they're ripping the whole spire apart.'

Her voice began to shake. She jabbed a finger at him, and Marivo saw how it trembled.

'You started this! You let that monster manipulate us! What do you think they'll do, when they get here? *Thank* us?'

She laughed bitterly.

'They won't even know it was us that took down the tower. They'll do to us what they're doing to everything they come across. They'll *kill* us, Marivo. It doesn't matter which side does it; we are *all going to die*.'

Marivo looked her in the eye. He could see how close she was to breaking. He'd seen it in men under his command many times, and knew how delicate the tipping point was.

He didn't reply immediately. He let his eyes flicker to one side, seeing the crowd of faces in the dark, all waiting for him to speak.

With a spasm of hot pain, he pushed himself from the edge of the table and stood shakily on his own feet. A wash of nausea and dizziness passed over him, but he ignored it.

'If you stay here, then you're right – you'll die,' he said. 'They'll get down here eventually, and no excuses will be enough to save you when they do.'

He turned to the other figures in the room.

'You all know what's happened here,' he said. 'The spires have been taken by traitors, and the Emperor's Angels won't stop until this whole place is cleansed. We have a choice: we can hide from them, hoping that – somehow – they'll overlook us, or we can join them and fight.'

He looked back at Khadi. She looked vulnerable suddenly, standing with her grimy cheeks and dilated pupils. He no longer found her irritating. A

strange feeling of protectiveness, of needing to take charge again, came over him.

‘I have codes,’ he said. ‘If we still have working comms, I can use them. We can link up with the other cells, find a way to get together. And then, back to the front.’

Khadi snorted.

‘You’re in no condition to fight,’ she said.

‘I will be,’ he replied, hoping that was true. ‘How about you?’

Khadi looked back at him, defiant but brittle, and said nothing.



CHAPTER NINE

<Glory to the Omnissiah! Unremembered death to the foes of the Machine-God!>

Princeps Lopi was still in a good mood. He strode forwards, locked within the throne at the heart of *Terribilis Vindicta*, crushing piles of charred metal beneath his enormous tread housings.

Ahead of him ran the Warhounds, their snouts held low, their weapon-arms cocked to fire. They loped across the ruined cityscape of the Gorgas, striding through all but the most persistent ruins. *Vindicta* came along behind at a more stately pace, walking in tandem with *Castigatio*.

The immense, ruined pillars of the south-facing Rovax Gate loomed before them, crowned with wrecked turbo-laser housings and a vast ranked battery of disabled heavy bolters. The gate housing reared up over three hundred metres into the sky, a riot of gothic statuary and Imperial iconography. The words *Imperium Gloriam Orbis Terrae* could be made out over the lintel, set in iron amid panels of red-veined marble. Below that banner were the words *Shardenus Primus Ostium Rovax*.

The gate was open. Colossal doors, each fifteen metres thick and nearly two hundred high, had been drawn back fully to allow the triumphal entry of the god-machines to the battle-front. The devastation beyond was

visible through the portal. Some flames still clung stubbornly to the edges of the gateway, rippling like hot banners in the wind.

‘My princeps, should we call the hounds back?’ asked Yemos, sounding a little embarrassed to ask the question. ‘It is general precedence—’

<Quite!> agreed Lopi, shunting a general stop order to the Warhounds.
<Well said. Can’t have the whelps getting in there before us.>

The Warhounds came to a halt, pausing before the sweeping walls of the hive cluster and lowering their snouts further in deference.

Vindicta strode on, eating up the ground. Lopi could feel the perfection of its systems, the enormous energies humming from its central reactor towards the motive and weapon arrays. He flexed his fingers, and the Warlord’s cannons swivelled on their mountings.

<Be alert,> Lopi canted, knowing that every member of the crew was already straining at the leash to get into action. The days spent fitting, servicing and blessing the mighty engine had been a trial to endure; now, at last, the work would find its reward. <Once we’re in, I want full sweeps – something may be lurking in the wreckage.>

Vindicta drew closer to the gates, walking with its ponderous, lurching gait. A Warlord Titan in motion was a curious mix of grace and awkwardness. Gravitic stabilisers locked in the lower leg segments struggled heroically to limit the damage done by the machine’s unimaginably heavy tread, but still the earth beneath its feet was annihilated with each movement. Every heavy step made the upper torso sections sway in recoil, so much so that the Warlord’s progress looked more like the infirm tottering of an old man than the confident progress of a warrior in his prime.

<And here it comes,> Lopi said. <Yemos, if you please.>

Vindicta strode through the gates, chewing up the remnants of traitor armour under its heels. At the moment the threshold was crossed, Yemos

let off the war-horns in celebration. The braying noise exploded out from the amplifiers, ringing out across the interior of the hive complex.

<And now let us see what we can see.>

A vista of desolation opened up before the crew. Immediately ahead of them was a wide open area known as the Maw, a kilometres-wide expanse of empty parade grounds, low-profile manufactoria and disused generatoria. A wide avenue ran directly between the gates and the closest of the hive spires, cutting through the urban tangle, clad in ferrocrete slabs and lined with iron pillars. Statues of Imperial saints and heroes had been interposed between the pillars, some of them reduced to little more than rubble by the fighting, some of them more or less intact.

Imperial standards bearing the marks of the Ferik Tactical Guard units dotted the landscape, marking points where objectives had been taken. Lopi knew that the entire Maw had been cleansed following pinpoint raids by Iron Hands squads, and that the real fighting lay ahead – in the two gigantic Melamar hives and beyond.

He raised his head, and the entire cockpit of the Warlord inched a little higher on its pistons.

Melamar Primus dominated the northern horizon, a steep pyramidal structure of towers, walls and interconnective buttresses. The whole spire was burning, locked in the agony of a thousand firefights across its many hundreds of levels.

<A closer look at the hive, please.>

Killan complied, zooming in on the reeling structure ahead and picking out the key battlegrounds. The noise of weapons fire, repetitious and echoing, rang out across the Maw. The cracks and booms were dulled by distance, but the effects of the detonations were plain to see. Beyond Melamar Primus nothing was clearly visible – a huge pall of oily smoke curtained the buildings beyond.

<Full stride,> canted Lopi, assessing the terrain ahead. He felt the machine-spirit of *Vindicta* growling at the back of his mind, stung into life by the smell of promethium and cordite on the air. <Give me targets as soon as you are able.>

The Titan lurched onwards, demolishing whole rows of shattered buildings as it came. Behind it, the similarly domineering profile of *Castigatio* lumbered through the gates, followed shortly afterwards by the three roving Warhounds. The smaller war engines pulled ahead again, driven to seek out the nearest action by their restless MIUs.

‘Incoming transmission,’ reported Killan. ‘Medusan origin. Do you want to take this now?’

<Of course.>

A hololith pillar rose from the floor in front of Lopi’s casket, atop which a ghostly image rippled into solidity. It was a Space Marine helm, as black as night and covered in metallic implants. It didn’t move.

<Princeps Firax Lopi,> canted Arven Rauth in perfectly inflected binaric. <Your arrival is acknowledged.>

Lopi smiled again. For some reason, he couldn’t seem to stop smiling. His spirits sang with the thrilling, overwhelming power at his fingertips, and the blunt greeting of the Iron Hands’ commander only amused him further.

<Acknowledged in turn, clan commander,> he transmitted back. <We are eager to take the fight to the enemy. Any requests?>

He didn’t say *orders*. The Mechanicus didn’t take orders from Imperial factions, not even if they came from the Adeptus Astartes. The bonds between them were at once stronger and weaker than those between commander and commanded, and as subtle and ancient as the Imperium itself.

<Progress is steady,> replied Rauth. <We are troubled by armoured units in sector 7-6 [data appended]. Consider that objective a priority.>

Lopi looked down at the hololith pillar, struck by the pointlessness of transmitting the perfectly static image of a helmet over a lithfeed.

<Understood,> he responded. <We'll take a look. Omnissiah be with you, clan commander – fight well.>

The helm-image remained in place for a moment, but no reply emerged. Then it blinked away and the feed cut out.

Yemos turned to Lopi, his eyebrow raised.

‘To the point,’ he said.

Lopi laughed.

<Indeed,> he canted. <Take us in.>

The Warlord's pace immediately picked up. A low, grinding roll echoed up from the enginarium chambers as the motive trains ramped up power.

The Melamar Primus spire rocked closer with each stride, gradually unfurling itself in its full, austere glory. Like all the spires of Shardenus Prime, it was huge almost beyond comprehension.

<Targeting?> canted Lopi.

<Enabled,> Jerolf canted back, furiously busy at his terminal. <You have control, princeps.>

The lesser spire of Melamar Secundus loomed along the right flank, burning just as furiously as its sister. Large sections of its protective outer armour had been stripped away, as if whole gunships had been flown directly into it.

The Warhounds raced ahead, all three of them sweeping towards the wasteland between the spires. *Vindicta*'s sensors picked up massive levels of toxicity at ground level, and Lopi saw mist-banks of green-tinged chemical smog clinging to the forest of abandoned buildings in the gaps between hive towers.

‘Range closing,’ reported Killan, looking into an augur-pict intently. His fingers ran absently over his terminal controls all the while, constantly

panning, rotating, augmenting and decluttering. ‘Multiple targets on the threshold. Ah – I can see their problem.’

In the narrow gap between the two Melamar spires, several groups of traitor armour had taken up position and were hurling shells into a sector of Melamar Primus that flagged up on the grid as occupied by loyalist forces. Lopi picked out a whole line of Basilisks recoiling as their payloads were unleashed. Each of them bore strange symbols in purple and grey on their armour plate, ones he didn’t like to look at for too long.

<Let us give them something to ponder,> said Lopi, watching through the Manifold as the ground targets came within range. <Do we have a solution?>

The tanks ahead must have detected the incoming Titan group, but they hadn’t made any detectable move to withdraw. Perhaps they underestimated the range of the Warlord’s cannons. If so, it was a costly mistake to make.

Lopi felt the shells slot into the barrel of his arm-mounted quake cannon like blood running through his veins. He stretched out his right hand, and the gigantic weapon swung up into firing position.

Praise to the Omnissiah, he recited. Praise to Him who built the machine, who dwells within the machine, who sustains the machine.

‘Targets fixed,’ announced Yemos. A note of eagerness – raw and vital – infused his normally placid voice.

And so perish all who blaspheme against the holy standard templates of humanity.

Lopi opened his eyes, letting real vision fill out the shifting splendour of the Manifold.

Guide the dread hand of Your servant.

<Fire,> he canted, envenoming the order with a binaric ruination glyph.

The Warlord’s massive quake cannon erupted. A huge explosion rocked out, echoing from the walls of the still-distant spires. *Vindicta*’s chassis

swayed back, reeling from the enormous force unleashed. A stream of dirty black smoke twisted away from the firing arm, streaking across the wasteland towards the armoured positions.

The round crashed into the enemy position, burying the lines of tanks in a storm of fire and earth. A huge pall rose into the air, lit from within by crimson explosions as fuel tanks detonated. The noise of the impact – a massive, echoing roll and boom – followed, resounding from the walls of the flanking spires. A ragged blast-wave radiated out from the epicentre, tearing through what remained of the forces on the ground and flattening everything in its path.

Lopi watched the devastation with satisfaction, still smiling. Nothing, but nothing, was more exhilarating than piloting a machine of *Vindicta*'s destructive potential into combat.

<First kills,> he canted, smoothly navigating through the Manifold for secondary targets. <Close in, half-stride.>

Around him, the remaining Titans opened fire, hurling a barrage of spitting, roaring, crackling energy into the enemy ranks. The sky filled with the growl and thunder of terrifying weaponry being unleashed. The earth cracked and the ash clouds boiled. The Warhounds, given their head at last, charged ahead, letting loose with their ferocious arm-mounted weapons. *Castigatio* emerged from *Vindicta*'s shadow, powering up its own massive frontal array for firing.

Across the devastation of the Maw, already scoured into patches of molten metal by the predations of the Iron Hands, the god-machines of Legio Astorum strode into the inferno, and on their shoulders came the storm of the Omnissiah's wrath.

Telach closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall. The power generator on his back hampered his movements. He felt confined, feverish and claustrophobic. Nearly two days of fighting against a seemingly endless tide of corrupted mortals had taken its toll on his spirit, and his

head throbbed within its psychic hood. Unlike his battle-brothers who fought only with physical attributes, Telach drew on the powers of the warp, and the effort required to tap into that capricious well was significant.

From somewhere far up ahead he heard the heavy, repeated noises of combat. Nowhere in the hive was free of it – most levels of the Melamar Primus spire were contested, and the crash of explosions and drum of bolter fire echoed down the long corridors and up air-ducts.

Every Iron Hands squad was active, spread out across the labyrinthine interior. When he chose to, Telach could see them all in his mind, arranged like dots of starlight amid the huge backdrop of the hive spire. The younger the warriors were, the brighter their light burned. The veterans of the Chapter, those like Khatir and Rauth, only shone dimly in the dark, like the afterglow of a lumen after the power has been cut.

He knew why that was. Perhaps only the Chapter's Librarius really understood the price the Iron Hands paid for their physical enhancement.

What would happen, Telach wondered, if an Iron Hand ever achieved the perfection he craved? What would happen if, by some miracle of bioengineering, the very last fragments of organic matter were stripped from his metal skeleton? Would he register at all on Telach's map of souls, or would he slip into nothingness, lost in the background coldness of the material universe?

Perhaps, if so, then that would not be something to mourn. No one could deny the power given to the Chapter by its continual quest for augmetic self-improvement. The Iron Hands believed, perhaps even correctly, that no force within the Imperium was as resolute as they were. More deadly warriors existed, they acknowledged, more violent, more flamboyant, faster and more devout, but none that possessed the capacity to endure as they did, to weather any storm with infinite stoicism, to *keep going* even when the enemies ranged against them had no limit.

They took pride in that belief. All of them, from the rawest Medusan neophyte to the revered ancients in their Dreadnought sarcophagi, carried that pride in their beating hearts, using it to drive them onwards to new feats of endurance, of devastation, of resistance.

Pride, thought Telach. Perhaps that is the last emotion to go when the final soul-flicker has been extinguished. We have, after all, purged everything else.

‘Librarian.’

Telach opened his eyes and saw Rauth coming towards him. Despite the enormous weight of armour he carried, the commander approached with stealth. His battle-plate was smeared with lines of blood and charred with las-burns. A hot stench of ammonia hung in the air around him; an after-effect of his power sword’s disruptor field being shut down.

‘Commander,’ Telach acknowledged, bowing his head.

He felt guilty even though he knew he had nothing to feel guilty about. Telach knew his limits, and knew how much more his powers would be needed in the days to come. He needed rest at regular intervals, just for moments, out of the constant grind of ceaseless sector-by-sector, room-by-room combat.

For all that, he still felt guilty. Rauth made everyone feel guilty, as if he carried some kind of secret knowledge within his metal cranium concerning every time the warriors under his command had ever been weak or mistaken or foolish or remiss.

‘Are you wounded?’ Rauth asked.

‘Preparing for the next assault,’ Telach replied, truthfully enough.

He felt like adding justification for that, knowing it would not make him feel any better.

My eyes are already bleeding. The skin over my scalp is blistered and my lips are cracked. You have no conception of what you ask of me, nor what you ask of anyone else.

‘I need your services,’ said Rauth. ‘The Titans have engaged the enemy in the Maw. We need to accelerate the advance.’

Telach knew what was required immediately, and pushed himself away from the wall. His muscles protested, and he ignored the pain.

‘Location?’ he asked.

Rauth stowed the power sword against his armour.

‘After cleansing the two Melamar spires, we must advance straight to the Capitolis. I have no intelligence on the transit routes. Give me your insight.’

Telach let his mind go blank and closed his eyes. He planted his staff on the ground and leaned against it, feeling psychic energy run up and down the shaft.

‘By your command,’ he said, beginning the mental ritual that would cast his mind beyond its physical shackles and into the miasma of the aether.

Telach took a long, shallow breath, forcing his primary heart to slow its combat-ready beat.

Then, slowly, he opened his mind’s eye. The world around him – the sounds and scents of the hive spire – slipped away, to be replaced by a phantasmal world of translucence and ephemera.

+I am transcended,+ he pulsed, speaking directly into Rauth’s mind. He no longer had full control of his physical lips, and the visions he saw did not come from his mortal eyes.

As if from far away, he heard Rauth’s voice answer him.

‘The transit tunnels. They are all I need to see.’

Telach let his consciousness drift out of his body. He felt it pass through the layers upon layers of ferrocrete and adamantium above, drifting northwards. Everything was abstract, fleeting, picked out in watery lines over a gulf of darkness. Flickering images of living souls glowed within that darkness – fighting, fleeing, charging, dying. Even as his own soul soared above them, Telach could hear the icy hiss as men were cut down,

releasing their quintessence into the metaphysical melange of the waiting warp.

He broke free of the hive's confines and looked down, from above, over the entire hive cluster. In every direction he could see the ghostly outlines of troop movements. He saw mortal men marching in endless ranks, filing out of the clot of darkness at the centre – the Capitolis – hundreds of them, driven onwards by faceless creatures with corruption clogged in their veins.

Those men were no longer like the ones they'd fought out on the Helat, or across the Gorgas, or even during the first days of the assault on the Melamar spires. Telach could feel their debasement keenly; they were mockeries, cruelly altered by whatever power had taken root in Shardenus.

+Reinforcements continue to move from the Capitolis,+ he sent. +Many of them. They will not die as easily as those we have faced.+

He let his psychic self sweep onwards, out beyond the northern reaches of the Melamar Primus spire and out over the wasteland beyond. He heard the dull *crump* of heavy ordnance, and saw the massive outlines of Titans striding into battle. He saw armoured columns from both sides rumbling towards the front. He saw gunships sweep into contact, stuffed with troops or loaded with cluster bombs. Ever since the Iron Hands had broken through the outer walls, the fighting had spread like a virus within a body, flooding the arteries and heading for the major organs.

Telach felt himself falling. He drifted down slowly, caught by the eddies in the warp and guided by them.

North-east of the Melamar spires stretched another wide region of abandoned industrial wastes. Clouds of toxic fog rolled between the old manufactoria walls, green-tinged like the glands of a corpse. The Shardenus complex, like many he'd seen, was a series of towering islands amid a sea of noxious filth.

+Zones north of Melamar are empty. As you suspect, enemy forces being conveyed underground.+

Telach fell further. The ground rushed up to meet him, and his insubstantial echo-form sank clean through it. He felt a chilling sensation as he bored down through layers of earth, metal and aggregate.

He emerged into a huge underground tunnel, as dark as the void save for regular bands of gently blinking guidance lights. The tunnel yawned away north-east, cutting straight through the earth under Shardenus Prime and heading towards the central spires of the Capitolis.

+Numerous fixed artillery points,+ sent Telach, sweeping up the length of the tunnels and observing carefully. +Defence lines established every five hundred metres. I see trench construction, deployment of heavy weapons groups.+

Wide-gauge rail tracks had been dug into the tunnel floors. Massive land trains ground their way back and forth, adding to the cocktail of greasy smoke that hung permanently in the roof space. Telach saw the souls of mortal defenders burning like stars in the gloom. Unlike the souls of the loyalists, those souls glimmered with a purplish light, shot through with the refracting power of the aether.

+Supplies still arriving,+ he sent, watching the unloading of a whole series of tracked artillery pieces from the cavernous interior of a land train. +Their defences are formidable.+

He looked ahead, peering through the shrouds of filth in the air. Even the psychic projections in his mind were fouled by it.

+I approach the junction with the Capitolis spire. I will attempt to penetrate the outer level.+

A massive gateway swept up out of the shadows, circular in shape and studded with defence lasers. The land trains passed through blast doors five metres thick.

As he attempted to follow them, Telach sensed a pressure exerted against him. He felt suddenly hot, as if he'd strayed into a furnace.

He came to a halt, hanging like a ghost above the gateway, watching the land trains trundle back and forth below him.

+Resistance encountered. I shall persevere, masking my presence.+

Telach pushed on, drifting through the gates. A huge chamber extended out on the far side – some kind of enormous dispatch depot, stuffed full of armaments and supplies. Automated cranes swung to and fro, pulling materiel from towering stacks and loading it on to the waiting land trains.

The pressure in his mind grew.

Telach pushed deeper in, feeling the character of the air change with each passing metre. The atmosphere became sweltering and moist, like the depths of some tropical world on the eve of monsoon. The noises of battle preparation echoed strangely in his psyche, distorted and stretched out. He felt nausea blossom at the back of his throat – the throat that still lay kilometres away in the depths of the Melamar hive.

+I am in the Capitolis, just beyond the subterranean gates,+ he sent, pushing the message through with difficulty. +The presence of the arch-enemy is evident. It is waiting, gathering its strength. We have not seen the extent of it yet.+

Telach swam up towards the terminus of the giant chamber, seeing more tunnels leading away and up into the centre of the colossal hive spire above. As he drew closer to them he saw how the stone walls on either side had been tortured and warped. The faint impression of faces stared out from the structure of the walls, each one fixed in an expression of agonised pain. Fluid dripped from the ceilings above him, glimmering with a pale pink lustre. He heard screams, or something like screams, resounding out from far away.

Then something else made itself known. Telach recoiled, falling back down the length of the chamber.

+An intelligence stirs. I will withdraw before—+

He felt another mind brush against his. The touch was gentle – the merest scrape of consciousnesses – but it sent him crashing back into the tunnels beyond the gateway. For an instant, he was aware of something vast and ancient rushing up to meet him, like some bloated creature of the deep ocean sweeping out of the abyss to feed. He caught an impression of two eyes, burning like coals, and a wide, broken mouth, all of it hanging in the dark.

Telach's control began to slip. Nausea exploded within him, choking him and making him gag. He fled, the tunnels passing by in a blur of confused movement. Even as he rushed back to his mortal body, back to where his physical form would afford him some level of protection against whatever dwelt in the Capitolis, he heard the creature's voice.

It rang out in his mind, as seductive as honey, but sadistic and immeasurably, infinitely cruel.

'I remember you being stronger,' it said.

Telach gasped, and his eyes opened. The psychic link broke, and his projected self snapped back into its mortal bounds.

He cried out, and staggered to his knees. Blood burst from the veins on the backs of his hands, running hotly down the inside of his gauntlets. His head exploded into pain, so intense that he nearly lost consciousness.

Rauth grabbed him by the gauntlets, forcing him to remain upright.

Telach gagged, and his staff fell to the ground.

'What did you see?' asked Rauth.

For a moment, Telach thought he'd lost the power of speech. It took a while to recall how to make his lips move properly.

He saw the red eyes still, hovering over the deep shadow like sentinel flares. Their scrutiny, even for the briefest of periods, had been ravaging.

'You were right,' he rasped, spitting the words out.

Rauth looked down at him. His helm-mask glinted in the dark. His lenses were red too, like pale imitations of the monster he'd seen.

‘Can we force passage through the tunnels?’

Telach didn't know. He couldn't concentrate on the question. His mind spun out of control, whirling around the image of those eyes.

Rauth pulled him to his feet roughly.

‘Librarian,’ he said. ‘Can we force passage through the tunnels?’

Telach stared back at him, groggily, and said nothing. He felt a line of drool run across his chin.

‘It will speed the assault,’ said Rauth. ‘Can it be done? Answer me.’

Rauth's command had a clarifying effect. Telach felt some of his self-control return, and with it an awareness of the pain spiking all across his body.

‘How much faster?’ he asked.

‘The Capitolis has heavy wall defences,’ said Rauth. ‘The tunnels will be quicker to take, if we can force them, but only you have seen them.’

‘Then do it,’ said Telach, swallowing a slug of bile and blood. His heart-rate was returning to normal, though the echo of his visions remained.

‘Order it now. Bring everything forward.’

Telach looked away from Rauth, wondering exactly what the words he'd heard meant.

‘Be aware, though,’ he said ‘The presence in the Capitolis: we have fought it before.’



CHAPTER TEN

Nethata sat back against the juddering walls of *Malevolentia*'s command chamber and tried to ignore the vibrations radiating up his back and legs. The noise and movement inside the Baneblade was constant. Everything stank of engine oil, human sweat and munitions.

The command chamber was small and cramped, despite the enormous size of the vehicle around it. Most of *Malevolentia*'s bulk was taken up with its drive motors, armour plating and weapon systems, and even the Lord General's personal unit, fitted out on Mars three hundred years ago to his predecessor's specifications and given every conceivable enhancement, wasn't much different.

The tank crashed through something resistant outside – a barricade line, perhaps – and the floor tipped up by ten degrees before righting.

Nethata gripped the sides of his chair grimly.

'How soon before we reach the front?' he asked.

Heriat looked up from the data-slate he'd been consulting. The Commissar-General sat opposite Nethata, less than two metres away, also strapped into a seat. He'd donned a rebreather and eye-mask, just as Nethata had, and it made him look even more skeletal than usual.

'Soon,' he replied. 'These things aren't built for speed.'

Nethata nodded curtly, trying to curb his impatience.

His bad temper, which had persisted throughout the Shardenus campaign, would not shake. Every response from a subordinate riled him, and he had to work hard to maintain a facade of calm in front of them. He was sleep-deprived. The constant demands of ensuring that supply lines were kept open, units properly deployed and reserves put in place all took their toll. He'd spent the early days of the assault resisting the urge to gland tranquilox, but lately he'd used more and more. Whenever he gave in, it made him irritable – it was a sign of failure, the erosion of a commitment he'd made a long time ago.

Arven Rauth filled his waking life – the implacable, inscrutable, *infuriating* Rauth. Getting tactical information from the clan commander was next to impossible. One moment, Rauth would demand the redeployment of whole regiments of Ferik regulars for some obscure purpose, the next he'd issue a formal protest at Nethata's request for a single Iron Hands squad in return. Every time a detachment of Guard troops was assigned to Rauth's command it took horrendous casualties, to the extent that Nethata had started to wonder whether his men were being gunned down by his own side.

'Any reports from your agent?' Nethata asked, trying to find something else to occupy his mind.

Heriat shook his head.

'Not for a while.'

'He didn't achieve what we hoped for,' said Nethata.

'Some damage was done,' Heriat said. 'We always knew it would come down to brute force in the end.'

'So it always seems to,' said Nethata.

'If you have a problem with that, sir, perhaps you should consider a change of career.'

Nethata smiled painfully.

'I certainly need to change something,' he said.

The restraint harness dug into Nethata's chest as *Malevolentia* rocked and juddered its way across the broken terrain. Not for the first time since planetfall, he felt shackled, locked inside a massive system he had no hope of controlling.

And that, of course, was the core of the problem, the source of his mounting frustration. Nethata was an Imperial commander, used to having the final say over the lives of millions of men and thousands of companies. He'd always carried out that duty soberly, mindful of the many and varied factors involved in the proper conduct of war. Every order he'd issued as lord general had been made in the full knowledge that he bore the ultimate responsibility for the consequences of his actions.

They were *his* actions, *his* orders. His men.

'I need to change something,' he said again, this time a little more forcefully.

They only respect strength.

He snapped his restraint harness buckle open and stood up, holding on to the chassis around him for balance. Heriat looked up at him in surprise.

'Something I can help you with?' he asked.

'No,' said Nethata, making his way shakily over to the access hatch leading to the crew chambers. 'Not this time.'

He slammed his fist into the door control, and the hatch grated open. On the far side, crammed into the narrow cockpit, four crew members worked at their stations. The tank's commander, wearing a rebreather mask just like all the troops deployed across the toxic hell of Shardenus's wastelands, made a hasty aquila as Nethata clambered inside.

Nethata looked past him, out through the narrow viewfinder ahead. A brace of dirty pict screens hung down from the low ceiling, each giving more grainy detail of the world outside.

He saw a wide open space – the Maw, he believed it was called – dotted with ruined buildings and smouldering piles of rubble. In the distance he

saw the ash-shrouded outline of the closest hive spire, mottled with a throbbing network of flame. Beyond that he could just make out the angular shapes of two Warlord Titans striding through the smoke. Lines of tracer fire criss-crossed the scene, followed by the dull thud and crack of projectile rounds. The entire northern horizon was on fire.

‘Status,’ he said, watching the pict’s intently.

‘On course for rendezvous with Galamoth 4th and 9th, lord,’ replied the tank commander briskly. ‘All vehicles in formation.’

Nethata nodded. He saw the signals on the auspex indicating the presence of a huge number of heavy tanks in convoy behind *Malevolentia*, all fully armed, fully fuelled and fully crewed. In their wake came support vehicles, troop carriers, mobile artillery.

‘Your coordinates came from Clan Commander Rauth, did they not?’ asked Nethata.

‘They did, lord.’

Nethata looked out of the front viewfinder again. To the east of the principal hive spire stood a smaller structure – a lesser spire, relatively intact along its southern face. Enemy positions lodged high up in the walls had not been the target of Rauth’s assault, and still mustered a volume of fire on his right flank. If Nethata had been in overall command, he’d have moved to neutralise that threat before pressing on towards the centre of the cluster. That would have been the prudent thing to have done.

‘You have new coordinates, commander,’ he said, leaning over to consult the principal logic engine before inputting them. ‘We shall join with the Galamoth as planned, but that flanking position cannot be allowed to persist.’

The tank commander looked back at him. His movements betrayed his nervousness.

‘Uh, lord, are you—’

Nethata shot him a cold smile.

‘Perfectly. Make sure that the entire column receives the new coordinates. Do not disappoint me: the smaller outposts must be silenced.’

Without waiting for a reply, Nethata made his way over to a set of looped rungs in the walls. He climbed quickly. With every step he took he felt his spirits lift. He remembered how life had been in the early days of his service – commanding tank battalions, crawling around in the machine’s innards, sacred unguents caking his hands and face, working from engagement to engagement with only the raw thoughts of aggression and survival to occupy him.

I have forgotten where I came from.

Nethata hauled the release lever down and the top hatch sprang open. A hot blast of smoggy air rushed down onto him. He pulled himself up, emerging from the armoured cocoon of *Malevolentia* and out into the open wind.

The ash started to coat him in seconds. He smelled the acid tang of toxins as the tank tracks tore them up from the earth beneath. Devastation lay all around him, curving in a wide, broken swathe across the northern horizon.

Nethata felt his heartbeat more strongly, fuelled by the thudding vibration of the immense vehicle beneath his feet. He felt the enormous power placed within his hands, the destructive potential he had been solemnly charged with directing, and it thrilled him.

‘I will show you strength,’ he breathed, gazing out at the secondary spire and already relishing its destruction. ‘I will show you *mortal* strength.’

A crackle broke out in his earpiece, followed by Heriat’s concerned voice from the chamber below.

‘We seem to be changing course, sir,’ he said. ‘Is everything in order?’
Nethata smiled.

‘It is, Commissar-General,’ he replied. ‘Perfectly so.’

Rauth strode through the fields of death, feeling blood and viscera sluice down his armour as he went. His tread cracked the ground and bones beneath him, leaving a trail of shallow footprints in the raw ferrocrete. Above him, broken lumens flickered intermittently, making the narrow chamber look like an erratic stop-frame vid-feed. The walls, just like his armour, were streaked with blood.

On either side of him came four Terminator-clad warriors of his retinue, the elite of the clan. Their power weapons shimmered like stars in the void.

They crunched their way through a thick layer of burned, twisted and ruined bodies. Corpses stretched away fore and aft, interlocking and overlapping into a carpet of cadavers. Some wore the olive-green of the Ferik Tactical; others the pearl-grey of the old Shardenus regiments. Some of the flesh was pink and human; some mutated almost beyond recognition.

The chamber, narrow and enclosed, was a killing ground. Rauth had known it would be when he'd ordered the mortal soldiers to take it. If time had not been pressing, he could have circumvented the choke-point and assaulted it from above, below or behind. Time, though, was the one thing he didn't have, and so the humans had been hurled into the gaping jaws of the hive's defences, cracking them open, chamber by chamber.

The tactics were effective. Led by individual squads of Iron Hands, the regiments of the Ferik Imperial Guard had hacked, bludgeoned and shot their way deep into the heart of Melamar Primus, tearing a path directly through the centre of the hive and driving the traitors back.

As Rauth swept his gaze across the floor of the chamber, he saw just how many of the mortals had paid for their zeal with death. Hundreds of bodies lay immobile in the chamber. The rough surface of the floor was viscous with a thick layer of mingled blood, sticky and glistening in the on-off light.

The fighting had been savage. Appropriately savage.

Ahead of him, one of the bodies moved slightly. Rauth's helm visor zoomed in on it automatically, drawn by the gesture.

He paused. All around him, his retinue stopped walking. All four behemoths stood silently, towering over the twisted field of corpses in silence.

One of the mortal soldiers was still alive. Rauth's armour sensors picked up his life-signal pulsing weakly. Moving clumsily in his heavy plate, he stooped over the stricken Guardsman, letting his helm's augmenters pick out the man's outline in the flickering gloom.

A pair of eyes looked up at him from the floor. They were wide and red-rimmed. The man's helmet visor had been shattered, exposing a blotchy, bloody face within. He breathed in shallow gasps, and pink foam collected at the edges of his swollen lips.

For a moment, the two warriors looked at one another. Rauth saw the enormous chasm in the mortal soldier's chest where a las-beam had punched through. He saw snapped ribs sticking up from a pulpy mass of charred muscle. He saw organs trembling within, glossy where the intermittent light flashed across them.

Rauth looked at the flesh at the edge of the wound, noting how it tried to repair itself. Blood was already clotting, pooling like oil and coating the ragged fringes of the opening. The man's heart laboured, pumping more blood around what remained of his body. It would not be enough – the injury was mortal.

Still, though. The man was fighting.

Rauth looked deep into the man's eyes. For some reason he found himself unwilling to do what was necessary. He drew his gauntlet up and pressed a finger lightly against the man's temple.

He waited a second longer. The man knew what was coming, and seemed to accept it. He stared straight back up at the Iron Hand, somehow

maintaining eye contact, unable to speak, his fragile breathing growing just a little more urgent.

Then Rauth pressed his finger home. The movement was gentle, like cracking an egg-shell. The mortal shuddered, then fell still. Blood pumped from his wounds, but sparse breaths no longer issued from his gaping mouth.

Rauth withdrew his gauntlet and slowly stood up. His retinue made no movement.

Nethata's words came back to him then, like a ghost-echo on a faulty audio recording.

You will remember that they are human. Like you used to be.

It was hard to recall a time when Rauth's existence had been anything like the fragile, bloody one led by the mortal Guardsmen he led into war. They were ephemeral, those men; like short-lived insects destined to breed, fight and die. By contrast, Rauth knew that he was functionally immortal for as long as his warrior skills proved equal to those he faced in battle. He would never feel his muscles atrophy, nor the grip on his weapon weaken. If a las-beam somehow penetrated a Space Marine's primary heart then his posthuman physiology would compensate immediately. In Rauth's case, the centuries-worth of bionic implants that riddled what remained of his mortal frame would keep him going, keep him fighting, keep him existing.

Such had been the case for hundreds of years. Over the slow passage of time he'd only felt himself grow harder, colder, more unyielding.

Did it matter, that he'd virtually forgotten what it was like to possess mortal frailties? Would it have made a difference to his strategy, had he been able to fully recall his old capacity for terror, for fear, for weakness?

He remembered the words of Raukaan's old Iron Father, the one who'd plucked him from the howling wastes of Medusa and started him off on the process that would slowly bleed away his humanity.

In times ahead, he had said, your mortal mind will return to you like a ghost. It will whisper to you, telling you that you have become a monster. A thousand voices will tell you this. You will be tempted to believe those voices.

Rauth lifted his gauntlet up and looked at it. The mortal's blood glistened from his fingertip.

They speak the truth, though you must not heed them. Some truths are ruinous, and some deceptions necessary.

Rauth remembered how he'd felt when hearing the words for the first time. He'd not listened. He'd never listened, back in the days when his passions ran hot and his spirit raged against the symbols of authority.

And what if they strike near the mark? What then? Some men, we believe, must become monsters so that all of humanity does not become so.

Rauth found himself wishing then that Telach was close, and not closeted away with his three Codiciers in preparation for the main assault through the tunnels. He couldn't confide in Khatir – the Iron Father was little more than a weapon.

He cast his mechanical gaze across the bodies of those slain under his orders, and felt the ghost of the past whisper to him, just as he had been promised that it would. Its voice was comforting even as it mocked him.

You have become a monster.

His comm-feed crackled into life. Rauth's thoughts abruptly broke off, and he let his gauntlet fall.

'Lord,' said Khatir.

'Tell me,' he said.

'Melamar Primus is secured,' said Khatir. Rauth could hear the crash of bolter fire in the background, tinny and obscure. 'Tunnel approaches are now under assault. I assume you wish to lead the attack beyond.'

'I do,' Rauth replied. 'I will be at your position shortly.'

'Very well. Interim orders?'

Rauth hesitated. His thoughts, normally so acute, felt sluggish. Telach's words about the presence in the spires being something they had fought before preyed on his mind. The Chief Librarian had been unable to give him any further insight on what that meant, but it was clear that the normally stoic Telach had been unnerved by what he'd sensed.

Under Rauth's immense, unmoving shadow, the dead Guardsman stared up at him with empty eyes.

'Ensure the heavy support is in place,' he said finally. 'And contact Princeps Lopi.'

Rauth began to walk again, striding through the layers of mingled gore and bone. As his limbs moved once more, he felt some of that sluggishness recede. His boot crushed the skull of the man he'd given the Emperor's Mercy to, and he barely noticed it.

'Telach has warned us of what lies in those tunnels, and I will not enter them unprepared,' said Rauth, pulling up tactical overlays on his helm display as he walked. Activity helped him, and he felt his blood stirring. 'I want all claws assembled, and I want the Librarians deployed, and most of all – and this is what you must impress on Lopi – I want the Titans.'

Rauth contemplated the destruction that would bring, and something within him almost smiled.

'We will send the Warhounds in,' he said. 'Right under their feet. If that doesn't break their spirit, nothing will.'

<Incoming fire, hard-right,> canted Yemos. <Losing cohesion on shoulder-leading voids.>

<You're getting emotional, Yemos,> replied Lopi, registering a trace of irritation at his moderati's frequent regular status-feeds. <Just bring us about as ordered.>

Lopi sank deeper into the pseudo-world of the Manifold, soaking up the streams of symbolic data as they flooded towards and over him. He was

satisfied, and still buoyed by the sheer thrill of sharing consciousness with *Vindicta*.

The Warlord Titan had made its way across the open space of the Maw and through the narrow gap between the Melamar Primus and Secundus hives. Striding through the valley between sheer walls on either side, it had waded through whole detachments of heavy armour, crunching the wreckage beneath its feet and grinding the smoking remnants into the ash-soil.

The enemy had nothing with which to fight back. Their tanks were too slow and too bogged down in the morass of semi-derelict buildings to respond adequately. Only its ferocious wall-mounted artillery packed a big enough punch to trouble the war machines of Astorum.

<Fix on *Castigatio*,> he ordered, partly to keep Killan occupied, and partly because he worried about Remona.

He shouldn't have worried about Remona. *Castigatio*'s princeps was as capable as he was, and seemingly impervious to fear. She had a kill-tally far in excess of what would be expected of one her age, and she knew her machine well.

Still, he worried. He worried about all the men and women in his formation, just as he fretted over the spirits of the god-machines they inhabited. They were like family to him; like his children, or his siblings. When they suffered harm, he felt the pain of it.

'Engine *Castigatio* is seven points to rear-left,' replied Killan, his fingers busy at his console. 'Bogged down with fire-lines still lodged in the flanks of Melamar Primus, but making progress towards our position. The blessed machine is intact and moving well.'

Lopi shook his head, trying to loosen his tight organic muscles.

<Full stride,> he canted, feeling the massive pistons sunk into the Warlord's angular thighs pick up the pace. He swivelled his right-mounted gatling blaster into position and made the appropriate range calculations.

<Let's silence that incoming fire, moderati, then press on. Commander Rauth is not the patient sort.>

Vindicta slewed round, rocking on its central axis. Its left leg planted firmly, crushing an abandoned industrial building as if it were made of rotten synthwood. The soaring edges of Melamar Secundus filled the forward viewers, laced with promethium fires. As ever on Shardenus, the air was thick with smog and ash, cloaking everything in a dirty haze. The Warlord's sensoria picked out the sources of the heavy las-fire – seven separate positions high up on the hive's exterior battlements – and presented Lopi with a range of firing responses.

<Standard suppression,> he canted to Yemos. <We don't need to—>

The rocket hit *Vindicta* just below the neck-joint. It screamed out from a position high up on Melamar's north-west facing terraces, trailed by a thick line of ink-black smoke. It came in fast, curving slightly as guidance cogitators locked on, and exploded in a riot of colour and noise across the forward voids. For a second, all views were replaced with a fuzzy hail of static. *Vindicta* staggered backwards, reeling from the detonation.

Lopi was hurled against the side of his throne, and the distinction between the real world and the Manifold blurred uncomfortably. Klaxons went off from somewhere deep in the Titan's innards, and he sensed the sharp tang of engine oils suddenly loosed into the cockpit's atmosphere.

<What in the name of—> he started.

<Major impact, major impact,> canted Killan, shaking his head. <Mars, that was big. Do they have hunter-killers?>

Some of the sensor screens flickered back online. Lopi righted himself, pushing back against the throne's iron arms. The Manifold hurled information at him, and he could feel *Vindicta*'s machine heart growling away in outrage.

'Frontal voids down,' reported Yemos. 'I need a few moments, my princeps.'

‘Came in too close,’ muttered Jerolf, struggling to retain traction as the Warlord’s massive drive systems absorbed the blast-wave of the rocket. ‘Should pull back.’

<No time,> replied Lopi, gesturing with his right hand and bringing the gatling blaster round. <No time for anything but *this*.>

He unleashed the multi-barrelled gatling, pouring the Warlord’s latent anger into the assault. As he did so, he felt *Vindicta*’s spirit surge up within him, roaring and raging.

The engine rocked back on its stabilisers, juddering from the torrent of fury pouring from the rotating barrels of the immense gun-mount. Heavy projectiles hammered into the sides of the hive spire ahead, scything through the outer armour and ripping it into a hail of torn-up ferrocrete.

Lopi suddenly became aware of the full presence of the Titan within him. The ancient, vengeful soul of the machine swam up from the murky depths, taking control of its weapon systems and powering them up.

<My princeps...> Lopi heard dimly. The voice might have been Yemos’s.

<Vindicta!> Lopi roared, knowing his cry would be screamed from the war-voxes and sent echoing across the battlefield. <Vindicta!>

He was losing control. The sensation was wonderful.

The gatling blaster cut a swathe across the hive walls, tearing through whole hoppers of ammunition in seconds. Lopi felt fresh loops being shunted up through the auto-loader systems and slamming into place. Every crashing impact sent new shivers of sensation rippling through him.

<More,> canted Lopi with relish.

The rest of the Warlord’s weapons broke into action. Beams lanced out from the shoulder-mounted turbolasers, streaking through the roiling clouds of smoke and smog like starship contrails. The enormous quake cannon powered up, whining with accumulated energy before sending its payload thundering out into the atmosphere. When it struck the hive edges,

the whole structure seemed to shudder. Gantries collapsed, walls were demolished, buttresses blew apart in cataclysmic eddies of destruction.

<More.>

Vindicta disappeared behind a maelstrom of colossal energies. Everything opened up, flinging terrifying levels of power out at enemy fire-positions high up on the walls. The noise was deafening even within the confines of the cockpit, and several sensoria panels overloaded with sharp, fizzing pops.

<Princes!>

Yemos sounded alarmed. Lopi could have laughed. Rooted deep within his consciousness, he heard the echo of *Vindicta*'s soul chuckling away. The sound was semi-human, as if the imprint of some long-dead mortal princeps had been stamped onto it in ages past.

It is alive. It thirsts for destruction. It is alive, and I am its avatar.

<My princeps, the target is destroyed,> canted Yemos, his voice urgent. <We are wasting resource on this. You must stop.>

The sound of his deputy's voice amused Lopi as much as it irritated him. He continued to unleash hell on the spire-flank, watching as the outer layers dissolved into a cascade of dust.

<My princeps!>

Then he stopped.

Lopi slumped a little, panting. The aftershocks of the barrage died away slowly, resounding out across the industrial wasteland between the spires. Smoke rolled down the artificial cliffs of the hive spire, lined with the angry red of incendiaries going off. A huge pall of dust and debris sank to earth with eerie slowness, gradually revealing what *Vindicta* had done.

Lopi became aware of the silence within the command chamber. With some difficulty, he extracted his awareness from the Manifold. *Vindicta*'s spirit clutched at him, trying to drag him back into the embrace of rage.

He felt an almost overwhelming urge to power the weapons up again, to keep firing, to destroy everything in his path.

Yemos was looking at him, aghast. Jerolf was still muttering away at his station, and Killan was busy trying to bring a whole bank of sensoria online.

<They have to learn,> Lopi canted to his crew, feeling suddenly like he needed to explain himself. The ghostly presence of *Vindicta*'s machine-spirit began to retreat, sullen like a beaten dog. <They have to learn what happens when they dare to raise their hand against us.>

Yemos looked unconvinced. He bowed his head slowly, never letting his eyes drop from Lopi's.

'We are now low on solid ammunition, princeps,' he said. 'I shall make arrangements for early resupply. We cannot do that again any time soon.'

Lopi didn't feel sorry. His only regret was that the glorious devastation had to end. With the withdrawal of the god-machine's bellicose presence, though, it was easy enough to see that the moderati was right.

<We shall see,> he canted, sliding back into the shallows of the Manifold and assessing the results of his outburst. <As I say, they have to learn.>

The pict screens gradually cleared of dust and smoke, driven east by the hot wind. Lopi gazed out on what he'd done, and allowed himself another a brief frisson of pleasure.

Melamar Secundus was a pyramid of fire. Huge rents had been gouged out of the hive's protective plating, exposing layers of hab-units within. Flames the size of Thunderhawks rippled up the precipitous edges, fed by the wind and spilled promethium. Secondary explosions rocked the spire from within, spewing out gobbets of smoke and sparks. The fire positions, including the location from which the missile had been fired, were black holes gouged deep into Melamar's heart.

The spire had been ravaged. No las-beams now flickered from its turrets. Across whole swathes of its outer surface, it was as charred and dead as a lump of carbon.

Witness the hand of the Omnissiah, traitor, mouthed Lopi, casting his gaze across the horrific damage. Deep down now, almost beyond his ability to detect, the soul of the machine was still chuckling.

He enjoyed hearing that sound. *Vindicta* was precious to him. All the engines of the battlegroup were precious to him – if they suffered harm, then his retribution would be terrible.

<My princeps,> canted Killan. <We have a priority request from Rauth. He requests tasking for the Warhounds: two points north of Primus, below ground level in the transit tunnels, dataset shunted into your feed now. Fire support only. Do you have a response?>

Lopi couldn't wipe the smile from his face. *Vindicta*'s metallic laughter thrummed at the back of his head.

<Let them go,> he replied, barely considering the new data scrolling down through the cascading miasma of the Manifold. <Let Rauth use them to cover him if he wants – *Castigatio* and I have bigger prey to stalk.>



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Morvox heard the las-discharge first, and blink-clicked an audio copy into his helm's scratch buffer.

Out of all the warriors in the clave, Morvox always heard things first, despite the fact his aural implants had never been properly upgraded. One day, he supposed, he'd report to the apothecarion and request the removal of his Lyman's ear for an iron-banded replacement from the forges. Until then he used the organs he'd been gifted upon Ascension. For the time being, he was proud of his aptitude, though he knew that at some point in the future he wouldn't be.

'One of ours?' Morvox voxed to Fierez.

Fierez's helm was distorted by a bulbous mass under the left cheek: an inbuilt long-range auspex, lodged like a tumour amid the cabling of his battle-plate.

'Negative,' Fierez replied. 'We are the only clave still in Secundus. All others are heading for the muster zone in Primus.'

Morvox ran a basic check on the audio recording, filtering the faint sounds through his suit's cogitators and digesting the results.

Las-fire, concentrated bursts, several hundred signals, closing fast.

For a moment, he hesitated. He had orders to return to the access points north of Melamar Primus and join the muster for the coming tunnel

assault. He was itching to follow those orders, since he knew the real fighting would soon take place there – chasing down bands of heretics in the fringe hives had become of peripheral importance.

The hesitation was only slight – four seconds, as recorded by his armour chronos.

‘We purge this, then go,’ Morvox said, gunning his chainsword into life.

The clave started moving. They strode out, going quietly and shifting into standard formation: Morvox at the apex, flanked on either side by three boltgun-wielding battle-brothers, with Sulzar and Gergiz bringing up the rear.

The chamber around them was much the same as every chamber they had fought through over the past few days – dark, cramped, stinking, decrepit. The few working lumens were covered in a layer of grime and threw out barely enough light for a mortal to see by. Ruined equipment was strewn across the narrow floors, smashed and trampled in some earlier engagement. Blast marks ran across the metal-mesh walls, the signs of las-fire or solid-round impacts.

Morvox paid his surroundings little attention. For him, the interior of Melamar Secundus had ceased to be anything other than a backdrop to a series of forgettable, dismal battles. He didn’t mind the endless gloom, or the hot air that wheezed arthritically through clogged filtration units, or the perpetual stink of human sweat and faeces, or the pools of blood on the floor, oozing gently into the overloading san-trenches. Such things were little different than his upbringing on one of Medusa’s titanic land engines – if anything, the claustrophobic, sepulchral surroundings made him feel at home.

He minded the tedium of the combat, which he knew was nothing more than a place-filler for the fighting to come. Nethata’s Guardsmen were more than capable of mopping up the resistance remaining in the twin

Melamar hives; the blades of the Iron Hands, by contrast, should have been reserved for sterner tests.

‘More signals closing,’ reported Fierez, shunting a schematic of the chamber layout ahead into the clave’s internal grid. ‘Six hundred, all concentrated in the upcoming node.’

Morvox glanced at the summary display, quickly taking in all he needed to know. He strode all the while, passing from the narrow chamber into a long, semi-ruined corridor with a shattered ceiling and sewage frothing across the floor. His shoulder guards scraped against the walls on either side as he stomped through the slurry.

‘What are they firing at?’ he voxed, already assessing how best to bring the coming slaughter to a quick conclusion.

‘Each other,’ said Fierez.

The corridor terminated in a locked doorway. Long bloodstains ran down from the top of the frame to the floor. Noises of battle were clearly audible from the far side. Morvox heard a single human voice, louder than the others, roaring with anger.

He pointed his bolter at the lock mechanism.

‘Let’s get this over,’ he said, and fired.

Even before the shell had hit, he was moving.

The door exploded away, hurled through the air and into a close press of bodies beyond. Morvox followed it in, bolter in one hand, chainsword in the other. A mortal soldier stumbled into his path, blinded by flying shrapnel from the door’s implosion, and was cut down by his spinning chainsword blades. Another tried to get to his feet in front of Morvox, hurriedly bringing a lasgun to bear. Morvox backhanded him, hurling him five metres away before the man landed with the crack of breaking bones. Several more troops staggered away, covering their eyes and scrambling to get clear. Morvox loosed three rounds into their retreating backs, felling them instantly, before stalking after more.

By then the other Iron Hands were through the door. They fanned out into the chamber, laying about them with calm, methodical precision. Muzzle flare from their bolters lit up the scene ahead of them in angry flashes.

Morvox never stopped moving. He soaked up the detail of his surroundings in precise stages, killing all the while, using his bolter sparingly and cutting broad swathes with his chainsword.

The chamber was mid-sized – a refectory, by the looks of the broken steel tables and long benches scattered across the bare floor. The lumens had been smashed, plunging the place into near total darkness.

The soldiers were Shardenus regulars. They had dug in behind rows of upturned tables with their backs to the door and had been resisting incoming las-fire from the far end of the hall when they'd been disturbed. Bolts still shot out from that direction, spitting across the refectory in intermittent blazes of colour.

Morvox felt a glancing impact on his breastplate and rocked back on to his heels. He lashed out savagely with his gun-hand, crunching in the skull of a reeling mortal. Then he mag-locked his bolter and strode forwards through the lines of overturned tables and startled soldiers.

‘Hold position,’ he voxed on the tactical channel to the rest of the clave. ‘Something strange is going on here.’

More las-beams arced out through the darkness, though few were aimed at him – the whole melee had descended into confusion. Behind Morvox, the Iron Hands moved with dreadful, inexorable power, hacking and blasting their way through the hapless Shardenus soldiers with contemptuous ease. The whip-crack of las-fire was soon mingled with the wet crunch of breaking bodies and the intermittent thud of bolter fire.

Morvox strode down the length of the refectory, casually smashing aside any mortals who blundered into his path. The remaining Shardenus troops had started fleeing by then, dropping their weapons into the mire and

searching frantically for some kind of refuge. A few of them wept like children, terrified by the night-black giants in their midst despite all the marks and sigils of protection carved into their suppurating flesh.

Las-beams continued to flicker out from the far end of the refectory, many of them poorly aimed. Morvox walked straight into the heart of the incoming torrent, grunting as his plate was hit by several more beams.

A lumbering figure blundered into his visual field: a mutant, dressed in the remnants of a Shardenus Guard uniform, running blindly away from him. He was far bigger than most of the others and was decked out in plates of loose-fitting carapace armour. In place of his right arm he had a forest of writhing, stubby growths, each ending with a curved hook.

The mutant screamed as he ran, and the sound of it somehow cut through the cacophony around him. He took several las-beams to the chest as he blundered onwards, but they seemed to fizzle out before they did any serious damage. A trail of glowing spores streamed out in his wake, shimmering with phosphorescence.

Morvox went after him, catching up quickly and hauling his chainsword back for the swing. As the blade was about to plummet down into the mutant's back, something made him hold back.

'For the Emperor!' came a voice, as clear and unsullied as daylight.

Morvox stayed his hand, just in time to see a mortal dart out in front of the mutant. The man's head was bare, and a line of blood ran down his temple. His unruly blond hair swung around his face as he shoved a lasgun right into the mutant's distorted torso. He fired, and the point-blank blast halted the creature in its tracks, sending it reeling backwards, chest smoking. Before the man could reload, the mutant lurched back into the attack, punching out with its hook-handed arm and aiming at the man's neck.

Had it landed, the blow would have taken the man's head clean off. By then, though, Morvox had seen enough. He swept his chainsword round in

a wide arc, carving straight through the creature's upper body. The whirring blades dragged through the corrupted flesh, churning it up and throwing gobbets in all direction.

The mutant screamed, and Morvox jerked the blade down, tearing through ribs and organs. With a throaty cry of agony, the mutant broke into a death-spasm, flinging its tortured limbs out and shuddering in time with the rhythm of the cycling teeth of the chainsword.

Morvox wrenched the weapon free and let the mutant collapse to the ground. Then he turned to face the other one, the lone soldier with the blond hair. For a second, he let the chainsword blades whirr on – his instincts were to keep killing. In truth, that was all he ever truly wished to do.

The man's expression halted him. It was ecstatic. His eyes, full of defiance and determination, shone in the dark like jewels. Morvox could see evidence of wounds all across his body, especially around his shoulder, where blood had seeped through bandages.

Behind that man, arranged in ranks three deep, were other fighters, all of them decked out in variants of Shardenus military uniforms with the insignia removed. A woman stood just beyond the blond-haired man. Behind her, hundreds more had taken their positions, each with a lasgun in hand. They were all staring at Morvox, everything else forgotten in the face of the giant standing before them.

'Praise His immortal name!' cried the blond-haired man, falling to one knee before Morvox and making the sign of the aquila.

Morvox glanced down at him, uncertain how to react. From behind him, he could hear the final sounds of butchery as the Iron Hands finished off the remaining Shardenus soldiers.

'Who are you?' demanded Morvox, letting his chain-sword run freely, still poised to use it.

‘I am Alend Marivo, lord,’ replied the man, his face transported with excitement, as if some long-planned scheme had just come to fruition. ‘Of the 9th Platoon, 3rd Company, 23rd Shardenus Imperial Guard. Loyal to the Throne of Terra, as are those who serve under me.’

He rose to his feet again, showing no fear of the whining chainsword held just a hand’s breadth from his face.

‘We are ready to serve, lord,’ said Marivo, looking directly at Morvox as he spoke. ‘What are your orders?’

Still Morvox hesitated. The only indigenous mortals he’d seen in the Melamar hives had been traitors or civilians, and both had been slaughtered in droves. The man before him was neither. He showed no trace of fear; only expectation.

Morvox let his chainsword gutter out. As the blades slowed, flecks of torn flesh dropped to the floor.

Morvox considered the question. He knew the scant forces under Marivo’s command would be of little consequence in the battles to come. A few hundred troops, each armed only with las-weapons, would be little more than a hindrance to the main battlegroup – their rations and supplies alone would probably outweigh any military benefit they could bring.

And yet.

‘How long have you been fighting?’ Morvox asked, trying to modify the machine-growl of his voice so it didn’t sound like a threat.

‘Since you made planetfall, lord,’ said Marivo proudly. ‘We brought down a defence tower when the airborne assault began. Since then we’ve been harrying the traitor forces, aiming to join with you, just as Valien instructed.’

‘Valien?’

‘Your agent, lord,’ said Marivo. ‘Surely you know?’

Morvox grunted, and stowed his chainsword. By then his clave had finished their work. They came to join him. At the sight of more armour-

clad monsters striding through ankle-deep pools of still-steaming human gore, even Marivo swallowed.

‘What now, brother-sergeant?’ asked Fierez, barely looking at the mortals.

Morvox ignored him. He ran through the options for an unusually long time – five seconds – before reaching a conclusion.

‘You will come with us,’ said Morvox to Marivo. ‘All of you. The spearhead is in the Primus hive. You will be given your orders, and will deploy accordingly.’

The Guardsman nodded. His eagerness was palpable.

‘By your command,’ he said. ‘We wish to serve again, all of us.’

Morvox regarded Marivo coolly. Once, perhaps, he would have found such dedication to duty admirable. He had served with mortals before, and had witnessed great heroism as well as abject wretchedness. Back then, he had felt that heroism required some kind of reward, some kind of encouragement. In a darkening galaxy, the mass of humanity needed support as well as censure. To abandon them, to use them for some greater purpose; that had seemed careless at the least, callous at the worst.

Morvox found he could no longer summon up such thoughts. As he looked at Marivo, he saw only the pathetic eagerness, the naivety, the lack of power. The man looked too fragile, too weak. Too fleshy.

A sensation like an itch broke out across the back of his neck.

‘You will do your duty,’ Morvox said, and turned away.

Nethata glanced at the auspex readings, and allowed himself a glimmer of satisfaction.

‘Maintain course,’ he voxed to *Malevolentia*’s commander. ‘We have them now.’

Since close-range hostilities had broken out, Nethata had withdrawn from the main turret and hunkered down with the rest of the tank’s crew in the main command unit. *Malevolentia* had been kitted out with high-gain

scanner equipment, giving him an overview of the entire warzone. He and Heriat pored over it, studying flickering motes on rotating hololiths, plotting ingress routes, marking weaknesses in the ever-extending supply lines.

‘We are still some distance from Rauth’s coordinates,’ said Heriat. His voice was even – he was just stating the fact.

‘I know that, Slavo,’ said Nethata, affecting unconcern.

Even as he spoke, he recognised how much of a strain it put on him to disobey a direct order.

No, that was not right. He was disobeying nothing, and the relationship between Rauth and the Guard was not entirely simple. The Adeptus Astartes was a separate branch of the Imperial military machine, a vast, sprawling force of trillions that encompassed a million worlds and battlefields. The Guard did not answer to them, and they did not answer to the Guard. Only convention and expedience made Rauth the overall commander of the Shardenus operation; the vast majority of Territo’s resources owed their direct allegiance to Nethata.

And so it was perfectly within his rights to take his time responding to Rauth’s summons. Nethata had freedom of manoeuvre, the right to exercise his judgement, a duty of care over his men.

The Ferik *were* his men. In the normal run of things he looked out for them – ensured they got their supplies in decent time, were well-equipped and supported, didn’t end up being driven into useless dead ends. He had stood by long enough while Rauth had herded whole companies of prime soldiery into ruinous, bloody gunfights. He’d seen the casualty rates from the Melamar front, and they had stuck in his gullet.

The tank battalions were different. Nethata had maintained full control over them, just as he had with the long-range artillery pieces. They were *his* weapons, ones over which the Iron Hands, now they were fully occupied with spire-fighting, could not easily lay claim.

So he didn't disobey; not quite. He just took his time in responding. A warzone was a complicated place, and the targets before him just kept lining up.

Malevolentia rocked as its enormous cannon fired. Nethata didn't need to look at the tactical display to know how devastating the impact would be. The enemy didn't possess tanks of the same calibre, though they had plenty of units capable of troubling the rest of Territo's convoy. In the broken wasteland between the hives, the fighting had become thick and difficult.

'The Warhounds are leaving,' said Heriat.

Nethata only half-listened, still held rapt by the dancing lights over the hololith pillar. He could see his forces, company by company, forcing their way north alongside the burning flanks of Melamar Primus. In the distance, even more immense, were the walls of the first Axis hive. Beyond that, out of range of all useful sensor readings, was the Capitolis, the ultimate target.

'This is the right approach,' said Nethata, talking to himself. 'Rauth would see it too, were he not so pig-headed.'

Shardenus Prime was, essentially, a ring of subordinate spires arranged around the Capitolis in the centre. Only one element of that protective circle had been broken – both Melamar conurbations were shattered and smouldering. Nethata could see that a direct approach across the wasteland in such conditions would be a mistake of an elementary nature. An invading army, out in the open, would find itself sandwiched between the huge guns mounted on the Capitolis walls and supporting fire from the unharmed Axis, Hierat, Ceres, Temnos and Phelox hives. Even the mighty Iron Hands would suffer in that scenario.

No, the right thing to do was to take out the subordinate hives, one by one, to clear the way forward. At the least, Axis could be destroyed.

Nethata had the means to do it – the tanks, the guns, the troops – he just needed time.

He also knew, of course, that Rauth had a problem with *time*, but that was his issue to deal with.

‘Sir, the Warhounds are heading west.’

Nethata maintained concentration on the tactical display. His forces had spread out, company by company, hammering the enemy back, clearing the way for the assault on Axis. Ahead of them, twenty kilometres distant, the two Warlord Titans were bludgeoning spire-based targets with vicious abandon.

‘Why?’ he asked absently.

‘I don’t know,’ said Heriat. He had reproach in his voice then. ‘Should we not make some attempt to find out?’

Nethata looked up. He didn’t like hearing disapproval from his advisor. They had been through too much together for that.

‘You have something to say, Slavo?’

Heriat looked evenly at him. The man’s skin had got worse during his time on Shardenus. How much longer, Nethata wondered, did he have? Heriat’s continued existence was something he had a direct interest in; something, after all, that he’d paid heavily to extend.

‘This is a dangerous game,’ Heriat said. ‘Rauth is not a man to be toyed with.’

‘He is not a man at all.’

‘He will wish to know why our course has deviated.’

‘When he asks, I will tell him.’

Heriat’s sore-laced mouth pursed.

‘I understand, sir,’ he said. ‘I understand why you’re doing this. Think, though, how far you can take this, and all for pride.’

‘Pride?’

‘Examine yourself,’ said Heriat. ‘Please. You’ve achieved everything a mortal could hope in the service of the Imperium. What test could remain, except, perhaps, defying the Emperor’s elect?’

Nethata felt his cheeks flush with anger.

He held Heriat’s gaze a little longer. Further down in the cramped command chamber, he heard men go about their business, affecting not to hear the strained conversation between their superiors.

‘Is that truly what you think this is?’

Heriat didn’t blink.

‘Not wholly,’ he said. ‘Like I said, examine yourself.’

Nethata felt an uncomfortable pang then, right in his torso, like nerves before the first experience of combat.

They only respect strength.

Perhaps that was it. Perhaps this was just some futile trial of wills, human versus transhuman. He’d always told himself it was about the lives of his men, the integrity of the Ferik Tactical, the triumph of ordered military planning over a headlong dash into disaster.

Heriat knew him about as well as any man alive. He knew his foibles, his weaknesses, the little tics and habits a man picks up over centuries of service.

That didn’t mean he was right.

‘We’ll maintain course,’ said Nethata at last, affecting more certainty than he felt. ‘Once we’ve blunted the long-range guns on Axis, we can head back to Melamar. Rauth can wait a little longer – if he objects, I shall speak to him myself.’

He let his eyes fall away from Heriat’s soft, critical gaze.

‘This is about tactics, Slavo,’ he said. ‘This is about prosecuting this war the way it ought to be prosecuted.’

He turned back to the tactical display. The three Warhound Titans under Princeps Lopi’s command were indeed heading west, away from the larger

Warlords and towards the northernmost point on Melamar Primus. Deployment runes from the Ferik brigades under Rauth's supervision clustered at the same location, deep underground.

Nethata knew he should query that. He should have queried it earlier, back when the first signals began registering. That, though, would require opening a vox-channel to Rauth, something he wanted to postpone as long as possible.

So he shifted his attention back to the columns of tanks and tracked guns, watching as they ground onwards, driving a wedge north-east and slowly coming within range of Axis's long-range weaponry.

'They only respect strength,' he breathed, watching the lights on the hololith dance like ghosts.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Recall the principal lessons.

Naim Morvox mouthed the words to himself slowly, just as he had done many times before. He felt his chapped lips move against one another, brushing against the steel wire that ran down the edge of his jawline and into his helm gorget.

Only the spirit is pure.

The mind may be swayed, the body may fail.

Only the soul cradles vengeance purely.

Become the weapon of the soul.

His clave stood behind him. He could hear the hum of their armour – a tinny, sparse sound in the darkness. The life-signs of his troops registered on his lens display as nine Medusan sigils, badly rendered by the Martian creators of his suit's visual system. For all that the fabricators of the Red Planet professed to understand the psyche of the Iron Hands, they still fell short where it mattered.

Where the mind hesitates, overcome it.

Where the body fails, replace it.

Aspire to the condition of the Primarch.

Emulate his union with steel.

He stood in a gigantic hall at the very base of Melamar Primus. The ceiling was lost in darkness – it could have been over a hundred metres up. Colossal pillars of ferro-crete soared up into obscurity, marching in long ranks along the immense width of the chamber.

Never waver.

Never retreat.

Never doubt.

Morvox turned his head slightly, casting his gaze behind him.

High up the walls, ancient inscriptions had been carved into stone panels. Most were unreadable, scrubbed near-clean by the wearing millennia. Morvox could still make out a broken passage over on the far right – *majoram portam ad Capitolis Shardenus* – though only because his helm lens magnified the resolution.

The flesh is weak.

The weak shall be purged.

What remains is strength.

The hall had once been an embarkation hub for the transit tunnels running under the wasteland between the Melamar hives and the mighty Capitolis spire. Before war had come to Shardenus, it would have been swarming with workers, each destined for the heavy grav-trains that ran into the heart of the megapolis. In recent days the area had echoed with the crash and thunder of weapon discharge as Rauth's forces had driven the last of the defenders from their positions.

The flesh is weak.

What remains is strength.

Now only loyalists remained. They stood in ranks of thousands all across the vast floorspace, company after company of them. Morvox could sense their exhaustion – the fug of stale sweat rising through the hall, a product of days-long combat in the stinking pits of Melamar. Some wore the olive-green of the Ferik, stained with blood and oil; others the black of

the Galamoth Armoured. Irregulars from loyalist Shardenus units stood at the rear, still wearing their old pearl-grey fatigues. For all Morvox knew, the mortals he'd saved in Melamar Secundus were among them, ready to enter action once more on behalf of the Emperor.

Tank columns ran up the centre of the space, their engines idling and filling the air above them with fumes. Rauth had assembled hundreds of vehicles for the main assault, drawn across the entire width of the front line, lowered from the wasteland surface on industrial elevator shafts and sent roaring down the transit passages towards the muster points. Morvox knew that many more had been due to arrive – the second wave of heavy armour, commanded by the mortal Nethata. They hadn't come, though he had no idea why.

Beyond the tank columns, towering high into the gloom at the back of the army, were the three Warhound Titans. More than anything else arrayed in that hall, they radiated an aura of complete dominance. They stood immobile, hunched on two backwards-jointed legs, weapons hanging low from broad, sloping shoulders. Their blunt heads, fashioned into the snarling muzzles of dogs, glowed with orange illumination from cockpit lights. They reared up over the troops below, standing sentinel, frozen into attitudes of poorly contained aggression.

The Mechanicus tech-adepts had barely been able to squeeze the Warhounds into the embarkation chamber's precincts, even after thousands of tonnes of masonry had been demolished to give access from the surface and the full ingenuity of the Martian war machine had been employed to bring the sacred engines into the perpetual twilight of the hive underworld.

But there they stood, hissing steam gently from colossal limb-joints, issuing a low, thudding growl from their huge drive units. Once down into the enormous underground caverns, they somehow seemed *more* massive, *more* intimidating.

Morvox knew their names. *Gaius Thyrsus, Quis Odio, Ferus Arma*. He could respect such power. As a Medusan, as an Iron Hand, as a servant of the Imperium, he relished the sight of it.

The flesh is weak.

What remains is strength.

He turned his head back, away from the massed ranks of waiting soldiers, armour and war engines.

In the vanguard, surrounding him, were the Iron Hands of Clan Raukaan. Nine claws stood ready, each arrayed in night-black power armour and with their weapons held ready. Morvox's own unit, Clave Arx, stood third from the left, as rigid and unmoving as all the others. Their red eyes glowed in the velvet dark.

In the centre was Clave Prime. Rauth was there, as were Khatir and Telach. Three subordinate Librarians stood with the clan commander, their dark blue armour wreathed in subtle flickers of aether-light. None of them moved. None of them spoke.

Huge doors soared up before them all, over thirty metres high and braced with thick bars of adamantium. The doors had been closed by the last of the defenders before they had retreated into the tunnels, then welded shut and braced with supporting buttresses on the far side. The Imperial aquila that had once adorned the door faces had been defaced and daubed with purple stains, but was still perceptibly there.

On the other side of those doors were the tunnels themselves, kilometres-long and crammed with defending troops.

Morvox felt his primary heart beating, long and slow. Despite days of near-constant fighting, he felt alert, aware, prepared. The task ahead would be the sternest test of Rauth's strategy, and everyone assembled in the hall knew it.

+Warriors of Raukaan.+

The voice in his head was Chief Librarian Telach's. Morvox knew that the same voice was being heard by every member of the clan.

+I have seen what lies beyond these doors. At the far end of the tunnels, where the tunnels meet the foundations of the Capitolis, the gates are still open. Through them spill creatures of the arch-enemy. Those gates are our objective. Any other considerations are secondary.+

None of the Iron Hands responded. Each absorbed the information silently, remaining as still as the air around them.

+Whatever Khatir says to them, the mortals will wither before the creatures in those tunnels. Let them wither. Reserve your wrath for the enemy. We must take the gates.+

An image of the Imperial Guard officer's face – the one called Marivo – flashed across Morvox's mind then. He remembered how hard the man had been fighting, how determined he'd been, how the blond hair had framed his eager eyes.

We are ready to serve, lord.

Morvox pushed the image to the back of his mind. Telach's sending echoed in its place.

Let them wither.

'Loyal fighters of Shardenus!' roared Iron Father Khatir, a single voice in the immense space. He, alone of the Iron Hands, had turned fully to face the assembled war host, and his eyes burned red. His tarnished battle-plate glinted in the endless shadows of the Melamar underworld as if edged with faint lines of steel.

'The test comes! Glory in it! Glory in what is to come!'

His voice resounded from the high places, amplified by war-vox relays in his helm. It thrummed up from the ground, echoed from the pillars, rushed out into the void beneath the enormous, unseen roof spaces.

'*Hate* them,' he thundered, raising his lightning claws high. His blades shot out, sheathed in fire. '*Hate* those who have sullied this place. Let your

anger burn, let it make your blows strike true. With every stride you take, their corruption weakens. You shall be the instruments of Shardenus's salvation. You will be the *immortal heroes* of this world!'

Morvox remained still. The words washed over him. He could hear a low murmur of assent from the men standing behind him.

He knew what was happening. Khatir's voice, laced with subtle neuro-markers, would be stirring them. Their tired limbs would be feeling lighter. Their slack jaws would be tightening, as would the grip on their lasguns.

Morvox was hardly immune to the affect. He felt his heart-rates pick up. His blood flooded with adrenaline, primed to send him into full battle-readiness. All across his body, augmetic nodes ran final introspections, priming themselves to contribute properly to the totality of his killing power.

'For those who have turned from the Emperor's holy light, there is nothing but *death!*' Khatir fed his claws with more flame. The rippling, blue-tinged tongues wrapped around the metal of his armour. 'And beyond death, *annihilation*. For the traitor has forgotten the first and holiest truth: that the Emperor protects His own.'

At the utterance of those words – *the Emperor protects* – the ones that every child in every city on every planet across the boundless Imperium knew, the mortals stirred into a low growl of assent.

'And those who die this day will be *martyrs!*' thundered Khatir, curling one enormous claw into a fist. 'Their souls will cleave to the Master of Mankind, joining in union with His holy presence. Those who waver, those who falter, those who retreat, they will be *traitors*, no better than those we have come to slay.'

The growl turned into a wave of angry muttering. The men were roused. Khatir's neuro-oratory was doing its work. Morvox narrowed his eyes, impatient for the signal to advance.

‘Take no backward step!’

Khatir clenched his other fist.

‘Show no pity!’

His eyes blazed.

‘Show no weakness!’

Flames raged across his ceramite, engulfing him and flaring like the corona of a dying star.

‘For the Emperor: death to the traitor!’

Death to the traitor!

The response was deafening. Men thrust their fists into the air, roaring out their defiance and hatred. They stamped their feet, and the echo of it lashed out like a blast-wave.

‘Death to the heretic!’

Death to the heretic!

‘Death to the witch!’

Death to the witch!

Khatir flung his arms out wider and fresh flames arced up high, writhing like the necks of dragons.

‘By He who rules in glory,’ he roared, letting his mighty voice reach a fresh, blistering crescendo, ‘follow me, and bring *oblivion* to them!’

His final words rang around the hall like the report of a nova cannon, vast and booming. Men surged forwards, chanting in unison, driven into a frenzy of bloodlust.

Then the charges blew. Whole lines of thermo-explosives went off at once, cascading down the centre of the colossal doors, showering the Iron Hands standing below them with debris. The crack and echo of the detonation rocked the doors, and one gigantic panel buckled inwards.

Morvox tensed, ignoring the detritus raining down around him, ready for the charge that would carry him over the threshold and into the tunnels beyond. Behind him, the mania reached new heights.

DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!

More explosives crashed out into the dark, blazing along the doors' joints. From the far side, in the cavernous tunnels beyond, something like screaming rushed out.

With a final, rolling boom, the final batch of charges exploded, shattering what remained of the doors in an orgy of flame and magma. The entire structure dissolved into a crumbling, sliding, toppling mass of ferrocrete, adamantium and steel.

Behind Morvox, thousands strong, the war host of Territo surged towards the breach, hurling invective at the enemies they couldn't yet see, desperate to rush through the walls of flame and into the unknown horror beyond.

+Now,+ sent Telach, giving the signal. +Now.+

Morvox broke into a run, bounding towards the smouldering remnants of the gate. All the Iron Hands did the same, responding instantly and accelerating to full speed. They swept onwards like onyx ghosts in the flame-licked dark, as silent as death-masks, power weapons shimmering amid the clouds of smog and ash, bolters primed and ready to bring death to the faithless.

The flesh is weak.

Morvox mouthed the words as he ran, feeling his boots crush the broken slabs underfoot. Beyond the vast maw of the doorway, under the cavernous shadow of the tunnels beyond, he picked out the first of his targets.

He took aim.

What remains is strength.

+Daemonspoor.+

Morvox suppressed the ghost of a smile when he heard Telach's mind-voice. The Chief Librarian didn't control his emotions as completely as the other members of the command clave, and his relish for the upcoming test was poorly hidden.

Morvox swung round on the ball of his foot and fired a bolt at point-blank range into a flabby-cheeked mutant. Before the spinning fragments of bone and flesh had fallen to earth he was already moving, striding through the ranks of the enemy and laying about him with his chainsword. The curve of the tunnels soared away above him, echoing with gunfire. His clone stalked alongside him, fighting in the calm, methodical way that was the hallmark of the warriors of Medusa.

The mortals they were up against had changed since the first days of combat. On the outer walls and in the upper levels of Melamar Primus the defenders of Shardenus had been almost fully human –faint mutation here and there had done little to break the pattern. Down in the tunnels, the full extent of the city's corruption was becoming apparent. Some men had been turned into giants, bursting from their armour in folds of fleshy muscle. Others had been elongated, or given writhing tentacles instead of arms. Morvox had seen mutants with grotesquely enlarged jaws, or bulbous eyes like insects, or hooked claws dripping with luminous venom. In the flickering dark, lit by explosions and las-flares, they looked like the jumbled dreams of some insane vivisectionist.

The mutants felt no fear. They kept advancing forwards their attackers in steady, fearless waves. Some of them still carried lasguns, and fired them coolly and carefully, aiming for armour-joints and tank-tracks. Others wielded a bizarre array of alternative weapons – heavy multi-barrelled projectile guns, cutting blades like meat cleavers, whips studded with spiked balls of iron. Their eyes, nostrils and mouths glowed with witchlight, as if they were illuminated from within by vials of corpse-gas. Their stretched-tight skin was white, like porcelain, and laced with scars and sores. Some went helmetless, exposing bizarre tattoos and piercings across their twisted faces.

Morvox jabbed his chainsword into the gut of an oncoming mutant. He barely had time to watch the whirling blades carve their way through the

plate armour before he'd swung his fist round and unleashed another bolt into the neck of an onrushing cultist. Then he withdrew the blade and lashed it upwards, just in time to meet the leap of a snake-headed warrior in close-fitting carapace armour. Every jab, parry or shot ended the tortured existence of another corrupted soul.

Progress down the tunnels ground to a crawl. The initial burst through the gates had been met by heavy return fire from the barricades beyond. The defenders had been well prepared and supplied with banks of fixed artillery. The Iron Hands had crashed through the first series of barricades, but more lines of defence existed beyond that, banked up every five hundred metres down the long transit route. The tunnels were huge, and the main routes were interconnected by many dozens of service tunnels, allowing bands of the enemy to loop back round and attack the flanks of the invading army.

Rauth's elite forces cared nothing for that. The mortals were capable of soaking up the mutants' counter-assaults, even if it meant them dying in swathes. The Iron Hands' principal target was the far end of the tunnel, still kilometres away – the underground gates to the Capitolis. Enemy troops surged through that open portal, clogging up the tunnels with fresh ranks of horrors and replacing those who died under loyalist blades.

Just as they had done since the beginning of the campaign, the Iron Hands pressed on remorselessly towards that goal, heedless of anything else until the task was complete. Each clave worked independently, strung out across the full width of the tunnel, carving deep paths through the lines of defenders and leaving carnage in their wake.

Morvox strode onwards, kicking out with his armoured boot and shattering the chestplate of a struggling mutant on the ground. A brief space opened up before him, and he took the opportunity to make a long-range shot, taking the head off a lascannon operator working nearly fifty metres distant. An eyeless horror sprang up at him from the shifting

shadows, screaming with inhuman bloodlust and scrabbling up at his helm. He disembowelled it with a casual sweep of his chainsword before jerking the weapon back round to punch through the torso of a raging mutant with lashing flails for arms.

‘Neverborn,’ voxed Fierez in warning, though his voice was barely audible over the whirr of his blades.

Morvox nodded, dispatching a dog-faced mutant with a bolter round and smashing another aside with the butt of his weapon. He’d already felt the same thing – a tang of anticipation at the back of his mouth, as if the saliva were souring. The hairs on his remaining flesh had risen, and his secondary heart had broken into a steady beat.

‘Stand fast,’ he voxed on the command channel. ‘We take them together.’

He’d barely finished speaking when the first of them appeared. It came down the tunnels like a howling wind, screeching as it came. Then more emerged, wheeling and diving like raptors. They didn’t register as targets on Morvox’s helm display – just patches of distortion that his instruments couldn’t track.

His real eyes could see them, though. He saw their pale limbs thrash through the darkness, and he saw their long hair stream out behind their slender faces. He saw their eyes, glistening like jewels, and their long fangs flashing with silver light.

They looked fragile. For all the latent horror they carried in their wake, they looked as if they’d snap clean apart in the face of a well-aimed blade stroke.

Morvox knew how dangerous that impression was. The ephemeral presences were only half corporeal – their true nature resided in the miasma of the warp. They were daemons: immortal intelligences born from the liquid tumult of mortal emotions. Their temporary physical form could be harmed but their essence could never be destroyed, no more than

the thoughts and desires that gave birth to them could be destroyed. They were immortal, eternal, spawned in the darkest recesses of the human imagination and imbued with the malice of infinite invention.

They hurled themselves out of the tunnels, wailing and laughing with fractured voices. Dozens of them had come, some holding hands like mortal children, others spiralling through the air with the grace of acrobats.

The daemons drove the mortals mad. Whether traitor or loyalist, the effects were much the same – delirium, screaming, dislocated laughter, paralysis, uncontrollable spasms. Their spoor was intoxicating, maddening, wholly irresistible and utterly hateful. Men ripped their visors from their faces as the daemons swooped towards them, and the expressions on their faces were both rapt and horrified.

Morvox watched the neverborn swoop and whirl, and felt none of that. The human capacities that would once have made him weak before such monsters had long since bled away. He could no longer suffer from the lusts and desires that they preyed on, nor could he feel the true impact of their baleful presence on his psyche. To the extent he felt anything towards them, it was disgust. They were the embodiment of everything his Chapter loathed – *flesh*, seductive and soft, coursing with rich, warp-spun blood and flushed with the promise of forbidden pleasures.

‘Bring them down,’ he ordered, tracking the nearest of them with his bolter and opening fire.

Khadi felt like screaming. She’d been screaming for real just a few minutes ago, yelling out her devotion to the Emperor like she’d never doubted anything about Him, His angels or His Imperium in her short life. Her fists had been up in the air like all the rest of them, clenched tight and ready for use in what was to come.

Then the doors had opened, and hell had come through them.

She'd run to start with, jostling with the others in Marivo's unit, anxious to get to the front quickly and bring her weapon to bear. Everyone around her had been the same – bullish, eager, pumped with aggression and bravado and fragile confidence.

She'd seen Marivo go first. He'd always been the keenest and the fastest. The encounter with the Iron Hands had reinforced his world view, restoring the confidence that had been briefly knocked by his injuries and the slaughter of the Warhawks. He'd bellowed with defiance, holding his lasgun in one hand while sprinting forwards with the rest.

She'd stayed close behind him all the way in. The rousing words of the black-armoured giant had still been echoing in her mind back then. If she'd been a bit more wary, a bit more experienced, she might have guessed that she'd been manipulated, and that her battle-mania was at least partly induced, but the whole embarkation hall had been roused into a frenzy – thousands of soldiers, all of them desperate for nothing but killing, and that had a powerful effect.

So she'd pushed herself as hard as anyone, maintaining her position in the company near the front, watching for the first sign of action with anticipation.

It was the noise that had got to her first. In the confines of the tunnels, the din had been thunderous. The Iron Hands had crossed the threshold first, and the crash of their massive weapons unloading had sent a wave of ear-ripping energy slamming around the hall. Then the first ranks of mortal troops had charged through the breach, adding blinding volleys of las-fire. By the time the tanks had ground their way to the threshold, things had got truly deafening. Huge barrels had opened up in concert, blazing and thundering and filling the air with a choking smog of bitter smoke.

Still she'd run, coughing and stumbling and trying to keep her weapon primed for use. The gates had drawn nearer, vast and intimidating, looking

even more fearful as flames from earlier explosions licked up the huge columns on either side of them. She'd seen men go down around her, tripping and losing their precarious footing in the headlong rush. Those men had been trampled into the ferrocrete by the ranks coming behind them who could not have stopped running even if they'd wanted to. The entire army, company by company, had swept its way into the tunnels, and its dreadful momentum was by then utterly unstoppable.

She nearly screamed first when the Warhounds unleashed their weapons. The report of the first Titan's colossal arm-mounted guns lashed around the echoing chamber, and it felt like the entire hive spire was rocking on its foundations. Then the next one fired, and then the third – huge, blistering columns of preternatural energy, lighting up the eternal gloom of Shardenus's underworld like the blaze of starship engines.

She risked a quick look over her shoulder to see the Warhounds striding into battle. Seeing them in motion astonished her – awkward, tilting, stalking along like the daemons of legend and rumour, only they were daemons of iron and adamantium and as tall as hab-blocks.

Khadi told herself then that they were on her side, that their anger was directed at the enemy, that their machine souls were blessed and sanctified by the Immortal Emperor and were therefore no threat to her. Still, they made her blood chill.

She turned back, frantically trying to keep her place amid the rush and roar of the charging army. When her company gained the line of the broken gates she almost didn't notice – her ears were ringing from the noise and her vision was blurred and streaked from the array of flashes, flares and explosions.

'For the Emperor!' someone cried, possibly Marivo. Then they broke across the barrier.

Khadi nearly fell while clambering across the twisted and jutting mess of ironwork. She nearly lost her grip on her lasgun as she pushed her way

past the burning remains of a troop carrier, its tracks still grinding even after the chassis had been turned into an empty shell of molten slag. She nearly broke her right leg falling down the steep drop on the far side, down into the pits where the grav-trains had once plied their ceaseless rotary journeys, and nearly blinded herself staring straight into the site of an incendiary detonation just metres away.

She felt her heart hammering and her throat constrict. She felt her panic return, stiffening up her limbs and making her gorge rise and her pulse race.

Ahead of her, the tunnels yawned away into the far distance, huge and criss-crossed with bright lines of tracer fire. Soldiers swarmed across the base of them like insects. The mass of men stretched from side to side of the enormous space, carpeting it in a sheet of glinting helmets. Rockets, mortars and lascannon blasts arced overhead, hurled down into the depths of the tunnels by the slowly advancing tank columns. Every so often the Warhounds would fire, and eye-watering bursts of energy would lance overhead, briefly outshining all else.

Khadi forced herself to concentrate, to keep her feet, to maintain position. From far ahead she could hear the volume of screaming and shouting getting louder. Bolter rounds thudded in constant streams, drowning out the whisper-quiet discharge of the thousands of lasguns.

Her mistake was to look up, out beyond the crash and press of battle and into the high vaults of the transit tunnel.

Up there, high above the clash of mortal arms, *things* were in the air. They swooped down from the roof, laughing with voices like the massed shrieks of animals. Khadi caught glimpses of purple – like long cloaks rippling in the wind. She saw pale limbs flashing in the dark, far too long for mortal limbs. She saw curved scimitars, and long claws snapping.

One of them looked at her. One of them, high up, sweeping over the battlefield like a twisted goddess of nightmarish legend, locked eyes with

her for the briefest microsecond.

In that moment, barely more than a thought-space long, Khadi saw what manner of creatures dwelt in the underworld of Shardenus.

Then she screamed for real. She screamed until her throat was hoarse, dropping her weapon and burying her face into the slime and stink of the ground beneath her. She forgot everything around her. Her hands shot out, and she clawed at the ground, as if somehow she could burrow deeper and escape the terror.

Around her, men did the same. She could hear them – weeping, raging, crying out like children.

Dimly, like a memory of a dream, she heard Marivo's voice shouting something out. He was still on his feet, then.

It didn't matter. She'd seen the nature of the enemy. She'd seen what was waiting for them. She'd seen the first fragments of the nightmare in the Capitolis coming for them.

After that, nothing mattered at all.

Clave Arx opened up with its bolters, blazing out across the darkness of the tunnels. All across the battlefield, the other claws did the same, letting rip with tight volleys of bolter rounds. For a few scant seconds, the daemons danced their way through the hurricane of projectiles, weaving around the lines of fire with staggering agility and poise. Some sped off into the heights, shooting skywards like loosed rockets.

Others hurtled earthwards, spinning and tumbling into range with smooth, careless smiles on their deadly faces. They crashed to earth, rolling and skidding amongst the grappling armies and scattering men in all directions as they landed. Then the screaming began in earnest.

'That one,' said Morvox, breaking into a run towards the nearest fallen daemon and stowing his bolter. From long experience, he knew that blades would cut deeper than bolts.

As one, the clave charged towards it. The daemon rose from the ground to meet them, hurling the broken bodies of mortal troops away from it with casual, whiplash movements. Blood sprayed after the tumbling corpses, fizzing hot and trailing with purple smoke.

The daemon laughed. It was taller than the mortal men around it, shaped in the likeness of a human woman but with an unearthly purple sheen running across its skin. Warp essence flickered across its lilac flesh like quick-silver, catching the light and refracting it dazzlingly.

It shouldn't have been beautiful. Its legs were bent backwards like an animal's and its arms terminated in huge, crab-like claws. Its long, straggling hair moved of its own accord, as if ruffled by the winds of unseen worlds. Its face was stretched into a thin, grotesque parody of a mortal woman's beauty. Blood ran down its chin, spilling over the ornate armour that clung to its otherwise naked body.

And yet it was beautiful. Even Morvox, elevated into an existence of pure violence, could sense that. The neverborn had been created from desire, and desire still lingered over it like the stench of death on a corpse.

As he ran towards it, the daemon ripped the entrails free of the last of the mortal soldiers it had burst in amongst. The man, still alive and impaled on its extended claw, arched his back and cried out in agony before dropping heavily back to the ground. The daemon licked a length of stringy gore from its claw, turned to the approaching Space Marines, and grinned.

Fierez got into range first. He fired a series of rounds from his bolter while still charging, each of them perfectly aimed at the creature's head and body.

The daemon evaded the bolts, flickering between them like a broken vid-pict image. It waited for Fierez to come to it, grinning all the while and opening its claws. The Iron Hand mag-locked his bolter, still running,

and drew his power sword. The blade ignited immediately as the disruptor roared into life.

Then he stopped, dead, arms poised for a blow that never came. Purple flames rippled across his armour, pooling in the joints and bursting out through his helm lenses. The daemon leapt atop him, squatting obscenely on the Space Marine's static shoulders. With a theatrical flourish, it plunged its claw down, cracking open Fierez's helm and burrowing deep within.

A flash of aether-born light shot out, sweeping from the epicentre like the blast-wave from a void explosion. Fierez's armour shattered, exposing both metal and muscle beneath.

By then Morvox was in range, and he leapt towards the creature as bolter fire from his battle-brothers slammed out, pursuing the daemon as it bounded away from Fierez's tottering form. The daemon skipped through the lines of fire, shifting in and out of focus as it danced around the lethal torrent.

'Blades!' roared Morvox.

He would be next. He was closest, and fastest. The daemon knew it too, and looked back at him to gauge his mettle.

For a split second, they locked eyes. The daemon's were dark, like pools into the void. Morvox's were semi-bionic and ringed with metal. Neither were remotely human.

Then the daemon blew him a kiss, somersaulted high into the air, and swept down towards him with the light of killing in its ethereal face.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Valien heard the mortal's whimper before he saw him. He crouched down, stilling his own breathing, letting his aural augmetics do the hard work for him.

Twenty metres away, stationary, alone. Easy prey.

Going slowly, silently, Valien crept forwards. He stayed low, almost on all fours, hugging the shadows. Semi-consciously, he withdrew his needle gun and switched the poisonous nerve agents in the syringes for paralysis inducers.

His shoulder grazed against the low ceiling. The corridors around him were little more than service tunnels, tight and twisting. Valien knew he was inside the foundations of the Capitolis spire, though he didn't know much more than that. He'd left the long transit tunnels behind, hugging their walls, diverting into the ancillary maintenance capillaries to slip past the huge armies that had been installed in the central caverns. After that he'd squeezed through a whole network of tiny feeder conduits, wrestling his stringy body through gaps that should have been big enough only for rats.

The dark was almost total. His false-vision retina compensated, fleshing out the detail of his surroundings in lurid brightness. The nature of the structures around him had changed. Previously bare metal was covered

with a thin layer of growths, many of which shone in the dark with a pale phosphorescence; others were painful to the touch, as if they harboured stingers under their pulpy surfaces. The air had become hotter and more humid; when Valien turned his environment filters off he could taste a trace of sweetness in it, like rotten fruit.

Valien moved off, picking his way over pools of fluid on the floor. A few metres more, and he caught sight of the source of the sounds.

The man had slumped against the tunnel walls, his head low and his hands hanging listlessly. The sobs that came from his open mouth were barely audible; just miserable accompaniments to his breathing. The mortal's head was bare and he wore no night-vision visor. That made him practically blind, which was all to the good.

Valien checked his proximity scanner for other signals, of which there were none. Then he sprang, leaping forwards and bounding down the tunnel like an animal.

Amazingly, the man saw him coming. He pushed himself free from the wall and tried to stumble away. Valien caught him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back. The needle gun fired once, twice in the dark, then withdrew.

The man convulsed, shivering. His back arched and his hands clenched, then he went limp. He fell back into the position he'd been in before, his eyes staring and his open mouth slack.

Valien squatted before him, and gave his prey a good look.

The man wore Administratum robes, though they were so dirty and ripped it was hard to tell what his function had been. From the look of him, he had once been relatively handsome, with the smooth and hairless skin that only came with expensive rejuve treatments. He had thin lips, a high forehead and a hooked nose; perhaps aristocratic blood, or he'd just fancied looking like someone born to a high station.

No longer. Even with the colour-distortion inherent in his augmetic vision, Valien could see that the man's skin was almost pearl-white. Lesions ran from the corners of his mouth down to his throat. Pustules clustered at the edges of his eyes, and they glowed in the dark just like the spores that clung to the tunnel walls.

The man's eyes glared at him, held open by the paralysing agents coursing through his bloodstream. Valien was good at reading men's expressions, a skill he'd honed carefully in his years in Talica, and he had no trouble working out what his victim was thinking.

The man was deranged by fear. He was not just scared of Valien – he was terrified of everything. He had the look of someone who had been hunted for a good while, someone for whom the entire world had long been transformed into something utterly unrecognisable.

Valien rolled his shoulders, relaxing muscles that had been held tense for a very long time.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

The man didn't reply. He stared back, and a line of sweat trickled down from his temple.

Valien adjusted his needle gun, and a fresh syringe slid out from the firing mechanism.

‘You have nothing to gain by not talking,’ he said. ‘Though you still have a few things to lose.’

Valien reached forwards and pressed the needle into the man's throat. The man winced, and tears of pain started from his eyeballs. His pupils were heavily dilated – unnaturally so, which perhaps explained why he'd been able to see Valien coming.

Valien withdrew the syringe and rocked back on to his haunches.

‘You now have loquazine in your system,’ he said. ‘You will feel a compulsion to talk; do not fight it. I ask again, what is your name?’

The man resisted for a moment longer. Then something seemed to crumble inside him. His eyes went dead.

‘Venmo Kilag,’ he said, speaking with some difficulty through stiff lips. ‘Master of Ledgers, class tertius, Capitolis.’

‘What are you doing here, Adept Kilag?’

The man called Kilag shot out a despairing look. If his hands weren’t paralysed, he might have buried his face in them.

‘Escaping,’ he said.

‘You haven’t got very far,’ said Valien.

‘No.’

Valien smiled.

‘Where were you trying to get to?’ he asked.

‘Anywhere,’ the man said. ‘Anywhere.’

‘Anywhere but the Capitolis?’

‘Of course the Capitolis.’

‘Why would you do that?’

Kilag’s face creased up, despite the powerful dampening effect of the drugs.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, still looking terrified.

Valien lost his smile.

‘Just answer the questions,’ he said.

Kilag’s eyes lost focus, as if he were drifting off into some kind of reverie. What little light remained in his fatigued eyes dimmed further.

‘We didn’t know,’ he said, hardly audibly. ‘We didn’t know. They looked like they always had done, right up until the end. Holy Throne, I—’

Kilag shuddered miserably.

‘I have seen terrible, *terrible* things,’ he said.

‘We all have.’

‘Months ago,’ Kilag said. ‘For a while, none of us noticed. We knew the governor’s staff had changed. Someone new had arrived – what was his

name? But it was all so, so... *routine*.'

Valien flexed his fingers idly. He toyed with the idea of jabbing his fingers into the man's eyes, just for the sensation.

'You were lazy,' Valien said. 'Corruption was among you for months, spreading from world to world, and you chose not to see it. You turned your faces away.'

'Yes,' said Kilag, and another tear ran down his smooth cheek. 'We did, we did. Oh, Holy Emperor, we were all to blame!'

'Tell me of the Capitolis.'

Kilag's hands began to shake.

'The walls,' he said, his voice weak. 'They have put... *things* in the walls. We were all changing, subtly changing.'

He looked down at his hands. Sores were visible across his palms.

'Something is happening in the Apex, right at the top,' he said. 'Men who go up there do not come back. We hear screaming, all the time, even when the nox chimes have gone off and everything is locked down.'

'And the Guard regiments?' asked Valien. 'All corrupted?'

Kilag tried to laugh, but couldn't generate enough movement in his throat to summon up more than a croak.

'*Everything* is. There's nothing left.'

'Who is in charge?'

'I don't know! I don't know. But there are angels up there, and they laugh at us.'

'Angels?'

Kilag's face took on a strange, almost demented, look of rapture.

'Ah, yes,' he said, and the foam trembled on his lips. 'Angels. Those ones, they have hell in their eyes – layers of hell, all piled on top of each other. We scream, we scream, and they laugh at us.'

Valien drew a fresh needle from its sheath, tiring of the man's babble. Kilag seemed to see what was coming, and a broken grin cracked across

his face. A film of blood collected under his nostrils.

‘Are you going up there?’ Kilag asked, looking eager to know. ‘Up into the Capitolis?’

Valien nodded.

‘I’m going ahead,’ he said. ‘The Emperor’s armies are hard on my heels. Soon this whole place will be purged.’

Kilag’s nostrils flared, and the shaking in his hands grew worse.

‘You have not seen what I have seen,’ he said.

‘Not yet,’ agreed Valien, filtering the toxins into the needle.

Kilag moved fast. He should have been incapable of it, but still he moved. He sprang up, pushing himself free of the walls and straight at Valien.

Valien nearly let himself be caught. He scrambled out of the way at the last moment, ducking under Kilag’s flailing hands. He felt the adept’s fingers snap shut just above him, clutching at air.

‘I will save you!’ screamed Kilag, coming after him.

Valien crunched back into the wall of the tunnel behind him, cricking his neck against the curve of it. The narrow space hampered him, and his weapon arm caught under a jutting length of metal.

Kilag’s face swooped after him. The man’s jaws were open, and his rotten teeth glittered in the dark.

Valien shrank back, too slow to prevent Kilag’s hands gripping him around the neck. The adept’s thumbs pressed into his throat, squeezing hard. Valien gagged, still unable to free his arm. The adept’s strength was astonishing – he should hardly have been able to move, let alone wrestle with a trained killer of Valien’s calibre.

‘I will save you!’ Kilag shrieked again, clambering on top of Valien and pushing him down into the filth. His eyes blazed with fervour, and he squeezed harder. Valien recoiled as the man’s foul breath wafted across his face. ‘You will not go!’

Valien relaxed the muscles in his arm, and his wrist came free. He snapped it round, punching the tip of the needle gun into Kilag's back.

For a few seconds, nothing changed. Valien felt himself begin to lose consciousness, and stabbed again. A terrible fear surged up within him.

So strong! How is it possible?

Then the grip on his throat relaxed. Kilag looked suddenly uncertain, then nauseous. Yellow fluid ran from his nostrils.

'Do not go!' Kilag cried, and his hands released Valien.

Kilag rolled over, withdrawing into a foetal position like a crushed beetle. He started shaking violently.

Valien shoved his way free, breathing heavily, keeping his gun in position. A sharp pain broke out behind his eyes.

Throne, that was too close. What has been done to him? How is he so fast?

Kilag stared up at him. The man's expression was imploring.

'Do not go there,' he said.

Valien stared back. Kilag's voice had become lucid again, despite all the junk coursing around his bloodstream. The adept's face was drained of colour, and a dreadful expression of warning hung over his harrowed features.

'You have not seen what I have seen,' he said, and his voice trembled with fear. 'Your soul is intact. For the love of the saints, of the Holy Primarchs, of all the blessed souls of sacred Terra, do not go in there.'

Valien remained silent. Something in the man's pleading chilled him.

Then Kilag's face changed again. The horrified expression of warning melted away. Blood replaced the fluid weeping down his mouth and chin, and his hands unclenched into open claws.

His mouth, puffy and bleeding, split into a wide smile. His eyes glowed pink, as if lit from behind.

‘Your soul is mine, assassin,’ came a voice from Kilag’s lips that wasn’t his – a throaty rasp, mottled with loathing.

Valien moved. He drew a knife from a sheath on his thigh and struck out, flicking the blade back and forth across Kilag’s neck.

The man’s face was smiling even as his decapitated head hit the ground. Kilag’s eyes stayed glowing for a few moments, dwindling like embers in the shadows. Then they died out, and the tunnel sank into darkness.

Valien stayed poised for much longer, waiting for his breathing to come under control. His blood coursed around his body, pumped by his thudding heart. He could feel a film of sweat on the palms of his hands.

For the love of the saints, do not go in there.

Still he didn’t move. It felt as if his limbs had been given a transfusion of adamantium. His pulse remained high, his fingers trembling.

You have not seen what I have seen.

Slowly, the fear ebbed. Valien looked up ahead, along the narrow tunnels where his objective lay.

The Capitolis waited for him. He had to find a way up to the top, a path through all the many hundreds of levels, avoiding the mutants and the filth and the living metal. He would have to remain hidden. He would have to be more careful, less arrogant.

Valien looked down at the pool of blood collecting under the headless body of Kilag. Another time he might have stooped to drink, but he knew what the poisons in Kilag’s system would do to him if he did.

He stowed the needle gun, brushed his suit down and recalibrated his visor. He was thirsty, hot and tired. Then he left Kilag’s body behind and began to lope soundlessly along the tunnel, stooping as before. His black-suited outline melted quickly into the endless dark of the underworld, disappearing like memory.

Soon, nothing remained but the cooling blood of the adept on the floor, the faint bubbling of his body expiring, and a pair of red-rimmed eyes,

open in death and still locked in terror.

<I have lost contact with the Warhounds, my princeps.>

Lopi's head jerked up, snagging on the cables in his neck. The inflections in Killan's binaric shunt were minor-negative.

<Last location?> he replied, only half focused on the conversation. *Vindicta*, still engrossed in the fighting around it, maintained its barrage of long-range fire throughout, acting semi-autonomously.

<Two points north of Melamar Primus,> replied Killan. <Stationed at the subterranean embarkation hub. But they've moved – they've got into the assault.>

Lopi felt suddenly uneasy. He'd granted Rauth operational control of the Warhounds on the understanding the three Titans would work as fire support platforms for the main body of troops. He hadn't expected them to be taken into the front line.

<I thought-->

<As did I, princeps.>

The dull rumble and crack of unleashed weaponry from below barely registered. His mind began to race.

<Get me a link to Rauth,> he canted.

<Negative,> replied Killan. <All forward units out of sensor range. They're a long way underground.>

<Any Iron Hands in range, then.>

<None remain in range. He has committed his entire force.>

Lopi looked out across the wasteland ahead, his view mediated by the Warlord's visual relays. By then the immense bulk of Melamar Primus was a long way behind him. *Vindicta* and *Castigatio* had made steady progress out into the industrial filth between the outer ring of spires and the central summit of the Capitolis. The northern face of the three Axis spires loomed closest, flecked with slow-burning fires and dotted with artillery placements. The last of Axis's protective tank divisions was near

destruction, after which Lopi had planned to advance into the spire complex itself.

<Can you boost the signal to the engines?> he asked. A nagging sense that he should have been more careful wouldn't go away. Magos Ys had warned him, after all.

Killan worked hard at his console for a moment, and Lopi felt the subtle shifts of power coursing through *Vindicta's* transmission systems.

<No success,> he canted after a while. <What are your orders?>

Lopi began to feel angry – with himself, mostly. It was a dangerous emotion to entertain while at the helm of a god-machine in the full throes of war-fury.

He said nothing. Yemos and Jerolf remained active, keeping an eye on *Vindicta's* weapon status as it created more carnage at ground level. Lopi remained dimly aware of the fruits of their actions through the feedback mechanisms in the Manifold – crushed vehicle carcasses, demolished wall sections, torched bunkers full of cremated, half-mutated defenders.

It took a lot to make a princeps feel vulnerable.

<This is unacceptable,> he canted at last, realising that his fists had clenched. <I must speak with Rauth. I must protest.>

As he canted, he felt the dull rumble of *Vindicta's* machine-spirit. It didn't want to stop killing. It never wanted to stop killing.

Jerolf looked up from his station quizzically.

'We can't,' he said. 'Not now.'

Lopi unclenched his fists slowly.

<We are *Terribilis Vindicta*,> he canted. <We can do anything we want.>

He summoned up schematics of the battle theatre, and they whirled up at him through the overlapping skeins of the Manifold. He saw himself at the epicentre of a huge map of interconnected trajectories. The lines indicating Rauth's progress were faint, and trailed off at the edge of auspex range. For all that, it was clear enough where he had to be – he'd

gone into the tunnels, and he would be somewhere under the wasteland between the Melamar spires and the looming edifice of the Capitolis.

<Bring us about, steersman,> he canted, still part-immersed in the swathe of sigils and rune-clusters. *Vindicta* continued to mutter away at the back of his consciousness, and he ignored it. <I'm shunting you new coordinates – send the same set to *Castigatio*.>

Jerolf looked for a moment like he would protest, but bit his tongue. Killan and Yemos kept their heads down, already busy with the calculations needed to extract them from the active firefight.

Lopi felt the enormous treads of the Titan start to shift on to the new trajectory, and his growing sense of unease abated a little. Deep down, though, he remained angry – angry, and worried.

<I'll prepare a summary for Magos Ys – see she gets it promptly. After that, make all haste.>

Vindicta's mood was getting to him. His face creased darkly.

<And keep the weapons online.>

Heriat swung round in his seat to face Nethata.

'We have another comm,' he said. He let some reproach bleed into his voice. 'It's been relayed, stored in a buffer for delayed transmission.'

Nethata nodded absently. *Malevolentia* rocked as it crushed something big beneath its tracks, and both men rocked with it.

'I know what it says,' said Nethata.

'You can't keep ignoring them,' said Heriat, irritated.

Nethata lifted his head from the short-range auspex display.

'Any change?' he asked.

'Rauth has ordered his forces into assault,' said Heriat. 'He's advancing along the tunnels towards the Capitolis.'

Nethata looked briefly surprised.

'Underground? I thought he took the Warhounds?'

'They're underground too.'

Nethata let slip a low whistle.

‘Throne,’ he said. ‘I can’t believe Lopi let him do that.’

‘I’m not sure the princeps knows.’

Nethata turned back to the auspex display.

‘So he’s taking the direct route,’ said the commander. ‘I should have guessed. He’ll lose thousands, just as before.’

‘It’ll be fast.’

Nethata shook his head wearily.

‘Do you understand this obsession with speed, Slavo?’ he asked. ‘Tell me if I’m missing something.’

Heriat looked at Nethata carefully. He’d always admired the man’s flexibility, his willingness to change course when the circumstances demanded it. That was something that he himself found difficult – a commi-ssar’s training cultivated a rigid mindset, one more suited to following a restricted set of commands to the letter.

Heriat had long been aware of the limitations of that way of thinking, even as he’d worked hard to purge the emotions from his psyche that endangered it. It was one reason why he’d never sought a command position in the regular military – he knew that he’d have run an army in the way he ran the Commissariat, something that would never have brought the results that Nethata’s imaginative, instinctive command had done.

Heriat, by contrast, would have followed Rauth’s orders completely. He’d have sent the armoured columns into Melamar Primus for the muster on schedule, and by now they’d have been filing into the tunnels in support of the vanguard units.

If Nethata had been any other man, Heriat would have overruled him long ago. Still, though, he resisted the urge. Nethata was not any other man, and that was all that kept things together.

‘I do not,’ he said, feeling the sores around his mouth jostle like a reminder of that. ‘I do not need to understand. Rauth is in supreme command; when he issues the order, you are bound to obey.’

Nethata met his gaze steadily.

‘We are making progress,’ he said. ‘The Apex hive is on fire. Our tanks have already destroyed the outer defences, and I can deploy troop carriers within the hour. All standard procedure tells me I am doing the right thing. Tunnels or not, Rauth will regret pushing on to the centre before taking out the periphery.’

His voice shook a little as he spoke, but his eyes remained dark and unmoving.

‘This is Imperial Guard doctrine, Slavo,’ Nethata said. ‘That is what we are bound to obey. It is what you are bound to enforce.’

‘You have a creative interpretation of my job.’

Nethata smiled.

‘Creative?’ His smile faded quickly. ‘Are you having doubts?’

Heriat didn’t reply immediately. He knew his expression would give nothing away – he’d worked hard at perfecting the stony, unflinching expression he knew the men expected of him. He looked the same when he was pinning medals on officers’ breasts, and he looked the same when he executed those who’d deserted their posts.

For all that, he felt torn inside, pulled apart by two old, immovable loyalties – one personal and contingent, one impersonal and eternal.

‘If I ordered you to turn back, sir, invoking Commi-ssariat’s privilege,’ he said, speaking slowly, ‘would you do it?’

Nethata pursed his lips.

‘Is this a hypothetical question?’

‘I don’t know. Is it?’

The two men sat facing one another for some time, neither one speaking, neither one yielding.

As he waited, Heriat felt the slow grind of *Malevolentia*'s enormous motive units as it thrust deeper into the warzone. He heard the distant *crump* of artillery discharge, and the endless percussive thuds of the tank groups unleashing their payloads against the reeling flanks of the Axis hive spires. He knew that, far underground and to the north-west of their position, similar firefights were taking place under Rauth's direct control.

We should be there. We should be at the speartip.

'Let me ask you a question in turn,' said Nethata, and his expression was strange – hurt, perhaps, or merely playful. 'If you invoked such privilege, and I resisted, what would you do?'

Heriat felt the weight of the bolt pistol at his belt. He knew from experience that he could draw it far quicker than Nethata could respond. That was what it was for – the enforcement of discipline. That was what *he* was for.

'You didn't answer me, sir,' said Heriat.

'Nor you, me.'

Another awkward silence descended. That time, Heriat looked away first. Another comm-signal scrolled across his console, flickering red in the gloom of *Malevolentia*'s command module.

'Lopi's withdrawing his Warlords,' he said, half-relieved at the distraction, half-annoyed by it. 'He's heading for the Melamar muster-point.'

Nethata smiled.

'Perhaps he is learning, in his own time, what Rauth is capable of.'

Heriat didn't return the smile.

'We should join him.'

Nethata glanced down at the tactical displays, showing the progress his tank divisions were making against the Axis hives. Heriat studied the same data, and saw how carefully executed the advance had been. Nethata had

used his resources skilfully, opening up a separate flank and damaging the enemy's power to encircle.

He remembered his words about pride, and regretted them. Nethata had acted within the spirit of the Guard's doctrine, if not the letter, and the battlefield leading to the Capitolis looked far healthier than it had done only hours previously.

'We'll pull back when the last of the artillery points has been taken down,' said Nethata at last. He looked up. 'You're right, Slavo. You've always been right. We'll join up with Rauth for the assault on the Capitolis – he'll need our guns for that.'

Heriat nodded. He realised how close his hand had strayed to his sidearm, and slowly moved it away.

'That puts my mind at rest, sir,' he said.

Nethata looked equivocal.

'Good,' he said.

Nethata turned to the cogitator array before him. His fingers moved expertly across the brass-lined input columns, each one of which controlled the movements of whole tank formations.

'Perhaps, though, while I attend to this,' he said, making it sound like an afterthought, 'you could arrange a hololith-feed to Princeps Lopi?'

Nethata's expression was busy, already absorbed in the preparations needed to conclude the barrage and consolidate his forces with Rauth's. For all that, Heriat had known him too long to miss the signs of lateral thinking, of external planning, of triangulation.

'I think,' said Nethata, keeping his eyes down, 'that he and I will have much to discuss.'



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The daemon was fast, far faster than Morvox. It was strong, too, and commanded subtle magicks of deception and disruption. The creature moved in a haze of misdirection – one moment darting in for the attack, the next spinning away back into the dark.

Morvox remained methodical, watchful, wielding his blade two-handed and maintaining his guard as he fought. He could feel the aura of intimidation emanating from the daemon, but it made little impact on him.

The positions of his battle-brothers flickered across his retinal display as he fought. They were all busy with their own battles; close by, but not close enough to intervene. More daemons had come since Fierez had died, dropping out of the vaults like carrion birds and dancing into combat. The mutants seemed to draw strength from them, and they clustered around the lithe, spectral figures like supplicants.

Morvox saw the claw come in – a blur of movement – and parried with his own blade. The two substances, one physical, the other quasi-physical, hit each other with a shower of witchlight. He felt the shock of the impact, and compensated instantly.

He started moving again before the pressure had released. He switched back with the blade, whipping it though the air in a fencer's motion, forcing the creature up and away.

It smiled at him as it pirouetted out of danger. Its lilac skin shimmered in the dark, leaving trails hanging in the air like drifting pollen.

+Medusan,+ it sent, and its voice was lilting like a child's.

Morvox ignored the taunts, the whispered half-truths as the daemon fought him. They were juvenile goads, trivial insults, the kind of thing a human would have grown out of upon reaching adulthood. The daemon was immortal, as ancient as the stars, and yet when it spoke, it spoke like a child.

It pounced back at him, flinging out a cloud of spiralling purple motes as if casting a net across him.

Morvox spun around, using his momentum to bring the blade across. The daemon veered out of its path – only just – and danced away again, laughing.

+Do you know the name *Fulgrim*, Medusan?+ it asked, never once moving its lips, letting its lethal claws snicker back and forth, toying with him.

Morvox wasn't drawn in. He didn't follow the pattern, and stuck to his own methods. He stayed close, trusting to his armour, trusting in his systems, keeping his movements efficient. He lunged suddenly, point-first, nearly taking the monster's leg off, then restored the wall of defence.

+Fulgrim lives still,+ it sent. +I have seen him. I have loved him. He has whispered truths to me, ancient stories, tales of old wonder.+

The daemon came at him, claws criss-crossed but swinging open. It checked at the last minute, aiming to get past his guard. Morvox corrected, pulling back half a step, giving him the space he needed to block.

+Fulgrim killed a man, once. More than a man – a demigod, a paragon.+

Morvox allowed himself a flicker of dry amusement. He knew what the daemon was trying to do, but he was neither a Space Wolf nor a World Eater, forever a hair's breadth away from some berserk rage. He had been

given over to the machine-spirit; he was a process, a procedure, a single link in a greater whole.

So he didn't rage. He didn't launch into a frenzy of killing energy, nor roar out the name of his slain primarch as if it could somehow gift him the power to kill more swiftly.

He fought on, smoothly, precisely, rocking around his centre of gravity and letting his thousands of augmetic implants do their work.

Aspire to the state of the primarch.

+His name was the Gorgon then, though maybe you have forgotten that. What else have you forgotten, I wonder? What secrets have been lost to you?+

The daemon smiled, and swooped in close again. Morvox let it come.

+My lord Fulgrim beheaded the Gorgon. Did you know that?+

Morvox adjusted the grip on his blade, feeling the iron sinews of his left hand close tight. Servos in his upper thigh primed, storing energy for the burst to come. A series of adrenal adjusters below his rib-cage activated, matched by spike-nodes implanted under the skin of his neck.

+I have seen his head.+

The daemon saw the opening, preparing for the plunge in.

+It is still screaming.+

Morvox moved. His genhanced frame burst forwards, suddenly shifting into blinding, explosive speed. A nanosecond later his bionics did their work, powering up and boosting his response further. His blade blurred as it shot out.

The daemon stopped smiling just as the killing edge swept up, tilting out and slicing through its neck-flesh.

The chainsword flashed with the sudden release of warp energy, sending out a shockwave that nearly sent him reeling. Aetheric-residue lashed out, curling over his armour plate and scorching it. The daemon screamed, and

its voice took on its true form – age-withered, fractured, composed of thousands of strands.

Morvox felt the brief burst of power ebb, and jerked the blade down, putting his full weight behind the movement. The sword carved its way through the daemon's body, shattering the armour fragments covering its torso and unwinding the unholy wards that kept it together.

For a moment longer, it still lingered on the mortal plane, staring at him in mute astonishment.

+You—+

Morvox pulled his fist back and lashed out. His gauntlet crunched into the daemon's face, hurling it high and breaking its back. Then he went after it, working with both blade and gauntlet, cutting and hammering until the creature's body was ruined.

He stood over it for a moment, feeling his hearts hammering. What remained of the daemon shimmered on the floor, glowing softly as the animating power within it dissipated.

'You talk too much,' he said.

Then he was moving again, striding back towards his battle-brothers who were still fighting. As he went, Morvox blink-summoned a tactical map on to his retinal display, showing the positions of the entire clan.

The Iron Hands had pushed far down the main tunnel, outstripping the nearest mortal regiments and leaving them behind. Despite losses from the daemon attacks, the army's progress was continuing. Its cohesion, though, was fracturing – the regular troops couldn't keep up with Space Marines. Every stride took the Iron Hands further away from the main mass of the army, which had become bogged down further back, locked in a bloody tussle with the nightmarish forces dug in along the tunnel's lengths.

'Lord,' he voxed to the command channel, isolating Khatir's comm-signal. The Iron Father was fighting nearly three hundred metres away. 'We are losing contact with the mortals. They are slowing.'

A long hiss of interference sounded over the comm-link, punctuated by bolter fire and muffled explosions. When Khatir responded, his voice was typically acerbic.

‘Noted,’ he voxed. ‘Continue on present tasking.’

Morvox looked over his shoulder, back down the smoke-choked tunnel to where the mortal ranks struggled. Even his enhanced eyesight could make out little.

‘Request permission to lead Clave Arx back to rally,’ he voxed. ‘We are losing them.’

Something like a choke came down over the link. He could hear the sounds of massive energy bursts, and guessed that was Telach in action.

‘Negative,’ ordered Khatir. ‘Continue on present tasking.’

Morvox hesitated for a moment longer. He could see other members of his clave in combat close by. The shriek and chatter of daemons had not gone away, and more would be coming soon enough.

‘The neverborn, lord,’ he voxed, making one last attempt. ‘We have not contained them – some have got past our line. You know the mortals cannot fight them.’

A long fizz of static sounded on the comm-link. If he’d been a neophyte, Morvox might have thought that Khatir was considering the request. But he wasn’t a neophyte, he was a brother-sergeant of the Iron Hands, and he should have known better.

‘Continue on present tasking,’ came the response, and the link cut dead.

Morvox stood still for a little while longer. The glowing runes of his helm’s tactical display danced in front of his visual field. He could see a line of Iron Hand claws fighting their way along the tunnel, drawing nearer to the open gates at the far end through which the enemy still poured. He could even detect the portals themselves, shrouded in fire and smog, and knew that Rauth would be carving his way towards them,

unencumbered by secondary objectives or considerations of mortal casualties.

Aspire to the condition of the primarch.

Then the scream of the daemonic broke out again, close by and moving fast. Morvox starting moving, striding back to where his brothers fought on. He watched his helm display cycle through proximal targets, and sensed the spoor of the nearest neverborn in his lone organic nostril.

More cultists were already stumbling towards him, purple light bleeding from them like blood from wounds.

He tried to forget the face of the man he'd saved.

Aspire to the condition of the primarch.

His arms felt strangely heavy. He hadn't quite learned to forget faces. They still resonated with him, summoning up remnants of emotion, of hesitation, of humanity.

The mortals cannot fight them.

Unable to shake off his uncertainty, he shifted back into the mechanical patterns of movement that had sustained him in the Emperor's service for all his postmortal life. The action of fighting banished doubt. It purified the soul, and cleansed the body.

As the daemons sang in the vaults above him, Morvox took up his chainsword, assessed the tactical priority, and stalked back into combat.

Princeps Yreg Nomen of the Warhound Titan *Ferus Arma* felt a flicker of unease.

He felt the first stirrings of that unease even as he brought his war engine closer in to the enemy, hammering retreating ranks of debased troops with volley after volley of mega-bolter rounds. The tunnels were big, easily big enough to accommodate a Warhound Titan under their immense curvature, but it was still an uncomfortable, claustrophobic place to wage war.

The Manifold was overrun. He was getting far too many signals to be processed adequately, and most of them flagged up as anomalous. Everything else, including across the realview ports, was miserably unclear and the sensoria were badly fogged. He'd have done better with his old human eyes.

<Can't we clean this up?> he canted, flavouring the binaric push with annoyance.

'Working on it,' replied Bonnem, one of his two moderati. 'Something's just made it worse.'

Nomen grunted, and swung *Arma*'s head around. The cockpit slewed through the airborne grime, and only patches of the terrain ahead showed up clearly.

<Try a Herten-Aymar filter,> he suggested, knowing his layman's opinion would probably be rejected by Bonnem, but trying it anyway. <These are mostly particulates.>

Bonnem shook his head, making the cables jutting from the back of his skull clatter.

'If it was that, I'd have fixed it,' he muttered. 'Want me to drive?'

Nomen smiled, bringing *Arma*'s left arm inferno cannon into play. As he did so, the Warhound's machine-spirit growled its metallic approval. Below him, a whole horde of cultists had abandoned their positions and were fleeing back down the tunnel away from him.

Nomen gauged the distance, calibrated the burn, and fed it power.

The flamer sent a jet of blazing promethium streaking out and washing over the retreating gangs of foot-soldiers. They ignited in a series of roaring, fizzing fireballs, writhing as they fell to earth.

The torrent of flame guttered out, and Nomen shifted his attention back to the mega-bolter. Those few of the enemy who managed to escape the flames were mown down by scything barrages of projectiles.

The exercise of power was always reassuring. It eased the link between his mind and that of the engine's, and made the business of piloting much more pleasant than it otherwise could be.

He brought the gun barrels up for reloading. In the brief lull, he let the Manifold feed him what information it could. Nomen had lost contact with the Iron Hands, who had pushed on up the tunnels with surprising speed. In their absence, the three Warhounds had formed the lynchpin of the Imperial advance, forming mobile firebases around which the mortal troops and tank columns could rally.

As the infantry units had ground their way along the tunnels, however, that pattern had begun to break down. Losing his sensoria readings had been the start of it. Then, one after another, he'd lost signals from the accompanying armour. It had started to feel like he was fighting alone in the dark, for all the information he was getting. The outline of the tunnels still registered – when he lifted the Warhound's head, its forward-facing lumen beams exposed the curved ferrocrete ceiling above – but more or less everything else was a mess of static-fuzz and feedback.

It was demeaning. A war machine of *Arma's* pedigree and refinement had no business being underground.

Nomen felt the reload process complete, and geared himself up for renewed action.

<Full stride,> he canted, idly monitoring his weapon heat-levels as the Warhound lurched back into a walk. <I know it's filthy out there, but give me what you can.>

'Multiples, bearing 5-6, coming up slow,' replied Bonnem, working hard to make some sense of what he was getting. 'Enemy advance steady.'

He turned in his command throne, craning up to look at Nomen with some concern.

'From what I can see, my princeps, we've got a lot of units going backwards,' he said. 'We're almost blind here. Recommend we pull back

until I can clear this up a bit.’

Nomen felt the twinge of unease again. What *was* that?

<Negative, moderati,> he canted, rolling his shoulders against the painful interface nodes in his flesh, putting it down to a faulty input buffer. <We have our orders.>

The clouds of smog cleared a little directly ahead, exposing a ragged line of loyalist troopers pinned down by a steady stream of enemy fire. Just as Bonnem had reported, it looked like they were on the back foot and in a state of disarray. Something registered further out as well – a shimmer on the grid, moving fast, looking for all the world like a sensor artefact.

<Let’s clear this out,> he canted, giving something to Bonnem to work with. <Try to raise *Odio* or *Thyrsus* again – I don’t like not knowing their positions.>

Then he swung the mega-bolter down, opening fire in a long, controlled burst. The advancing traitor line was blown apart in a whirling hail of exploding stone and fire. The noise was tremendous – a hammering, thrumming, thudding roar of pure mechanical rage. Bodies were thrown high into the air, torn into limbs and ragged scraps of armour. The screams of the dying were almost inaudible behind the wall of noise created by the vicious, sustained barrage.

Nomen let the torrent cease, and prodded the Titan into forward motion again. Below him, the loyalist troops he’d saved scrambled to get out of the way. Clouds of ash and smog continued to thin ahead of him, revealing part of the long tunnel wall ahead. He could see a little more light, which was encouraging. Something up ahead, out where the sensor artefacts had formed, was glowing lilac.

‘No response from supporting engines, my princeps,’ reported Bonnem. ‘I begin to suspect vox-jamming. Repeat: we should withdraw.’

Nomen ran his cable-tied fingers across the arm of his throne, grazing the controls casually. The spectral presence of *Ferus Arma* was at the

forefront of his mind, fresh from the kills that stimulated its ancient consciousness. Whenever he felt that mind press against his so acutely it was hard to heed calls to pull back from combat.

<I have given you my answer, moderati,> canted Nomen calmly. <This is just the beg—>

Something shimmered across the sensor array, ghosting like concentrated interference on a pict screen. Nomen terminated the datastream and sank into the Manifold.

Then he saw it.

‘Incoming!’ shouted Bonnem. The skein of the Mani-fold distorted – even the spatial indicators warped out of alignment, making a mockery of its orientation capabilities.

<Get me data!> Nomen canted, swimming through a sludge of inconsistent readings and feeling his unease rush back like a wave of nausea.

The first one hit hard, coming out of the dark like a missile.

Nomen didn’t see much of it – just a pair of eyes, swimming fast out of the gloom, glistening like jewels.

‘Hard about!’ Bonnem roared, and the thing hit the frontal voids.

Shields screamed from the impact, shivering and spraying sparks out like a krak discharge. *Arma* rocked back on its legs, causing the servos behind the plate armour to hiss and buckle.

<I need targets...> said Nomen, trying to bring the mega-bolter up fast enough. He opened fire, feeling like he was aiming at ghosts.

Another one streaked in, diving and wheeling through the lanes of fire. Nomen saw something like a woman’s legs kicking, as if the thing was swimming through the air. He tracked it manually, spraying bolter rounds wildly. Something must have connected – he heard a thin wail, and glowing trails of plasma splattered against the voids.

For a second, the horrendous sense of dread eased. Then two more signals whistled into range. The Manifold buckled, sheared, and started to go dead. It couldn't track them fast enough.

'They're using themselves,' muttered Bonnem, frantically working to divert power to the void generators. '*Themselves.*'

The two apparitions hurled themselves into the shields, spiralling free of the increasingly erratic bolter fire. A fraction before impact, Nomen caught sight of a face – a woman's face – snarling with glee, lit up by muzzle-flashes and some strange kind of inner light. The face looked ecstatic.

Then it disappeared in a riot of colour and flame. The shields shuddered under the dual impacts, and warning klaxons broke out from the chamber beneath the cockpit. Violet lightning arced across the Warhound's shields, crackling and lashing.

<We need fire support,> canted Nomen to his sensori as several of the fixed picts on his console shorted out. <Where are the Iron Hands?>

<Out of range,> replied the sensori, working as manically as Bonnem. <All out of range.>

More blurs of movement materialised ahead of them, crystallising in the swirl of the tunnel's darkness and hurtling into range – five of them, then six.

Nomen felt *Arma*'s machine-spirit raging. He felt the blind, furious lust for the kill rearing up, coursing through cabling and metal sinews.

Part of him shared that battle-drive. The other half was getting terrified.

<Full power, forward voids!> he roared, goading the Titan into a stumbling walk. If he had to meet these devils in combat, he'd meet them going forward.

He levelled both weapon-arms at the apparitions, and fired. A lethal mix of solid rounds and flame surged out.

A chorus of fractured screaming broke out, and three of the creatures caught fire as they plunged through the raging curtain. Their immolated bodies slammed hard against the reeling voids, sending shockwaves running across the energised surface. Nomen saw a mutilated corpse tumble down the translucent barriers, disintegrating as it fell. Its limbs – what remained of them – were lithe, oddly alluring even in destruction.

He kept firing, kept pouring his anger and fear out into the night. More shrieks echoed out, and fragments of flesh spun into the Warhound's path.

<Omniissiah!> Nomen roared, feeding more fury into the barrage.

Then the ammo-counter clicked empty on the mega-bolter. At the same time, the inferno cannon reached critical temperature, and guttered out. For a few precious seconds, the wall of reactive shells and flame gave way.

<Reload!> cried Nomen, augmenting the command with urgency markers. He felt his heart hammering in his chest. <Reload!>

The creatures made the most of the brief window, shrieking and laughing as they came. Nomen saw them properly that time – a dozen of them, maybe more. They came in the wake of their destroyed sisters, corkscrewing and diving through the heaps of smog. He watched their fangs glitter in the night.

More time!

He felt the ammo-belts feed into the mega-bolter's chambers with a thick *clunk*. He brought the barrels round, willing the Warhound's servos to drive them faster.

More time!

The first of them hit him at full tilt. He saw it break across the voids. He saw its limbs break and its claws snap, and the forward view rippled like water.

Another came in close by, laughing like a girl. It dived right into the shield-matter, snapping with lightning-laced talons. It was destroyed, blasted into atoms by the voids. The backdraft washed across the

Warhound, halting its forward momentum and causing it to stumble. The shields trembled, flickered, and shivered out.

The binaric sign for [*weapon ready*] flashed up in the remnants of the Manifold, and across his malfunctioning console, and lights rippled down the flanks of the mega-bolter housing.

Nomen issued the fire commands manually, and braced for the recoil.

It never came. An apparition pounced onto the Warhound's weapon-arm, ripping the mega-bolter's cabling apart from its bracing rods. Another two swarmed across the inferno cannon housing, tearing at its slender barrels with their fangs. Reinforced metal was flayed from the underlying structure like flesh from a bone. More horrors clamped on to the massive guns, ripping, tearing and biting.

Bonnem got up from his seat, clumsily unhooking his neural implants. His flesh was as white as bone. He reached down for a sidearm with trembling fingers.

Nomen felt the machine's pain as if it had been his own. Spikes of pure agony ran up his forearms, paralysing his hands and clamping them to the arms of the command throne.

<Resume your station, moderati,> he commanded, though he couldn't keep the raw fear out of his voice. *Arma's* agony had flooded into him, like molten lead bubbling through his bloodstream. He kept issuing the command to fire, over and over, but nothing responded.

Then the left cockpit window smashed, and broken armourglas flew across the confined space. Shards tore into Bonnem's face, shredding the skin. The sensori, still plugged into his station, issued a panicked shriek.

Nomen tried to rise. He tried to pull free of the cables shackling his hands and his head. He only stopped when he saw what was coming through the broken window, and something primordial within him recognised the futility of doing anything further.

The daemon's outline glistened with light. Its flesh was glassy, as if still half embodied in another place. Blood as black as ink ran down from deep wounds in its flanks. Its eyes were like wells into nothingness, and its sleek face was pulled tight into a mask of delighted cruelty.

As it came to kill him, its smile was almost kind.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Khadi stumbled in the dark, tripping and using her hands to keep her going. A long line of drool hung down from her chin after she'd vomited until her stomach had locked in cramps. Her left hand throbbed from being burned in a plasma bloom, and she didn't dare peel the remains of her glove to see what kind of mess was under the synthleather.

Exhaustion made her movements erratic. She caught her foot on some long, semi-buried shaft of metal and crashed to her knees. She stayed there for a moment, panting, shivering, staring.

She had no idea where she was. The constant hammer of heavy weapons disorientated her. Bright lines of las-fire continued to lance down the tunnel in both directions. Men's voices echoed from the vaults, and explosions flared out starkly in the ash-choked dark.

I saw them come.

She'd moved beyond the initial horror of seeing the daemons and passed into a kind of numb shock. Only luck had kept her alive since that first glimpse of them. She'd fired her lasgun a few more times after that, responding automatically to the flicker of las-fire from out of the dark, but had no idea whether she'd hit anything.

I saw them take it apart.

The Warhound had provided some respite. It had loomed up from the gloom, guns blazing, surrounded in a haze of energy, resplendent with the blue and gold of its livery. She'd seen its weapon-arms fire, demolishing the lines of mortal troops in its sights. She'd seen it stride out: invincible, indomitable, the very image of the Imperium's imperishable might.

I saw them come.

Then the... devils had swooped down on it. She'd covered her face and buried it in the mud and dirt, shouting out loud to drown out the sound of their approach.

They'd screamed as they'd flown in, like demented souls fresh from murder. The sound of them coming had made her want to slit her throat, to gouge her eyes out – anything, *anything* to make them stop laughing.

She'd managed to look up once, given a flicker of hope by the sound of the god-machine's mighty weapons firing again.

Surely, her rational mind had told her, surely even the devils couldn't stand against that.

Her last sight had been blurred by darkness, smog and weapon discharge, but it had been enough: they had been crawling all over it, like hornets around a spider, gorging themselves on it, ripping into it, tearing up the ancient metal in slivers and hurling it aside. She'd seen one of the pilots being taken out, dragged from the cockpit window. He'd been shrieking like a maddened animal, and his primal fear had echoed out into the endless dark.

She hadn't watched after that, but his screaming had continued for a long time. She'd crawled away, dropping to all fours, barely able to think at all. Her mind raced, filled with thoughts of wrongdoing, shame, horror, fear. Every shallow deed, every casual lie, rose to the surface like scum on boiling water, crowding out her waking mind and making the very air she breathed a nightmare.

They hadn't come for her after that– they had other, more worthy prey.

So she'd shivered in the dark alone, cowering, drooling, shaking.

The shadow rose above her silently. She didn't notice it at first – it was just one more clot of blackness in the shifting, flickering war-hell of the tunnels. When she finally felt the presence close by, she didn't even lift her weapon. She looked up with the expectation of finding death at last, and was disappointed to see that she wouldn't be getting that.

'Khadi,' said Marivo. 'Shula Khadi.'

He was unsteady on his feet, but his lasgun was still in his hand. She could see the charge meter flashing for near-empty. His visor was broken, exposing part of his haggard face.

She looked up at him stupidly, too weak to say anything. Her hands shook, and she let them.

He squatted beside her. His movements gave away fatigue – he was no longer striding out with the light of the Emperor in his eyes.

'Badly hurt?' he asked. A long way down the tunnels, fresh explosions blossomed, briefly flooding the scene in bright orange light. Then it faded away, replaced by the flickering dark once more.

Khadi didn't know how to reply. Physically, she'd been worse. Mentally – that was different.

I saw them come. I saw them take it apart.

Marivo looked hard at her, lifting up her chin with his fingertip and staring directly into her eyes.

'Can you move?' he asked. 'We need to pull back. We need to get out. Can you move?'

She saw the daemon's eyes hovering in front of her, like a mirage. They stayed there, even when she closed her eyes and screwed them tight. Those eyes made her want to scream, though she'd already done so much of that that her throat was hoarse and raw.

Marivo grasped her shoulder, shaking her a little. His movements were urgent, and a little too quick. He was scared too.

‘Shula, look at me,’ he said. ‘Look at me. They’ve got the Warhounds. They’re tearing up the tanks. We have to pull back.’

Somehow, then, swimming from somewhere deep inside, Khadi felt a smile flicker across her chapped lips.

‘I’m beginning to like you, Marivo,’ she said, stuttering over the words. Her throat constricted as she spoke, as if the muscles had forgotten how to work properly. ‘You’re learning.’

Marivo didn’t smile.

‘I’m glad,’ he said. ‘Really. But now we *have* to move.’

Khadi coughed up more phlegm, and felt Marivo steady her as she got it out. It tasted bitter, as if she’d swallowed engine lubricant.

‘You could go,’ she said, feeling the worst of the shakes begin to ebb. ‘I’ll slow you down.’

Marivo looked over his shoulder, like a hunted beast. The explosions from down the tunnels were coming nearer. With the Warhounds out of action and the Iron Hands seemingly careless of how much their allies suffered, they were horribly exposed.

‘You will,’ he said, grabbing her breastplate and hauling her up. He grunted with the effort of it. ‘Throne, you really will.’

She didn’t resist. Once she was on her feet she found she could stand, just as long as she leaned on him.

Khadi couldn’t see what Marivo’s expression was. The small patch of exposed flesh around his chin looked bloody, like he’d taken a heavy blow there. His breath came in tight, shallow bursts.

‘So what’s the plan?’ she asked.

‘Plan?’

‘You always have one.’

Marivo laughed – a bitter, choking snort that cut off quickly.

‘Is that right?’ he said, dragging her along with him.

Together, they crept along the shattered grav-train tracks. Tracer fire shot out above them, lighting up the ferrocrete of the tunnel roof. Munition booms, fuel-cell detonations, human screams, daemonic screams, all of them followed, resounding in the vast, enclosed spaces overhead.

Khadi clung on tight to Marivo, gritting her teeth, trying to squeeze the nightmares out of her mind's eye.

'I'll work on something,' said Marivo, panting as he dragged her along. 'For now, just try to keep walking.'

Telach looked up. The real world overlapped with the psychic one in a shifting, sliding blaze of false colour.

The vast subterranean gates to the Capitolis, the terminus of the long transit tunnels, stretched away above him, massive and imposing. Huge pillars of adamantium reared up from the floor, banded with granite and carved into exotic swirls. Stone and metal glimmered in the dark, outlined with shrouds of corpse-light that flickered and swayed rhythmically.

Daemons wheeled and dived in front of the gates, tearing through the air like flocks of raptors. Dozens of them had come through the portal and into the tunnels, shrieking and throwing themselves into combat. As they passed, auras of madness lingered in the smoggy dark. The physical elements themselves seemed to recoil from their presence, leaving eddies of ash hanging in the air like the wash of ships in oil-fouled water.

Some were downed by the hail of bolter fire that rose up to greet them. Others veered their way through the barrage and came crashing to earth, only to meet the massed blades of the claws. Their death-screams echoed up into the shadow-shrouded vaults, bouncing from the pillars and running down the grav-train tracks.

But daemons, even lesser daemons such as these, were more than a match for individual Iron Hands, and their capriciousness in battle was for a purpose. As Telach knew, but few other mortal humans did, daemons

never died. Their fragile physical forms could be shattered, banishing their essence back to the shadow world that spawned them, but respite from their malice was only temporary.

So it was that the daemons opened themselves to risk so casually. For eternal beings such as them, birthed at the dawn of mortal sentience, the price of temporary dissolution was low. Every time one of their bodies absorbed the leading edge of a mortal blade, another one of their dread sisters was given space to dart in and deliver a true killing blow.

And when such inhuman weapons struck home, the Iron Hands died truly. Their bodies were durable, cast from genhanced sinew and buttressed with grafted bionics, but still they died. For every daemon that was sent howling back into the abyss, another human warrior took a mortal wound, or was ripped apart by snapping claws, or was prevented from coming to the aid of a brother.

Throughout it all, the claws fought silently, grimly, mechanically. They stayed in close formation, matching the daemons' chaotic rage with stoic resolve. They used their blades with precise, limited movements, and withdrew again when the work was done. Bolters were fired sparingly once the creatures had dropped to ground level. Every battle-brother knew that daemons were undone better with the weapons of eternity – swords, knives, axes, fists.

Telach watched the brutality unfold – two mingled furies locked together in an close-pressed, desperate orgy of committed bloodletting. Slowly, painfully, the ground was won. Unlike the earlier fighting conducted against the masses of mutated human troops, this time the Iron Hands took heavy casualties. Each step was paid for in blood, but the claws remained resolute. They ignored the dead and fought their way up towards the towering gates.

Khatir kept up his battle-cries during the grinding progress, his vox-amplified exhortations ringing out against the distant walls. His flamers lit

up the dark, glowing magma-red and reflecting dully from the ebony of his shoulder guards. He advanced in tandem with Rauth and Clave Prime's Veteran Sergeant Imanol. Even the daemons, those spirits of infinite contempt and mockery, shied away from them. When they eventually summoned the resolve to attack, Rauth smashed them aside with great sweeps of his glittering power sword. The blade shone like ice against velvet, electric blue and blazing with disruptor energy.

Even that light, though, paled beside the brilliance of Telach and his three acolytes. The four Librarians stood apart from the main host, stretched out across the full expanse of the cavernous space, wreathed at all times in coruscating fire. Bright white flames raged over the nightshade-blue of their battle-plate, at once as hot as pitch and as cold as the void. The psykers were like pillars of fire in the night, and aether-born matter streamed towards them like glowing dust pulled into orbit around forming stars.

The daemons knew well enough just how much the Librarians could hurt them. Alone among the warriors of the claws, Telach and his brothers controlled the very substance that gave them form. They could pull apart the hidden tapestry that underpinned the world of matter and extension. They could hear the secret dissonances in the aether, the dissonances that prefigured coming storms of warp magick. They could create devastating eddies of their own. They could perceive the souls of the living and the dead around them, overlaid onto the skein of physical perception like a targeting grid.

Of all of them, Telach was the greatest. His power was the most complete, the most subtle, the most thorough, the most deadly. His mind strode across the planes of the warp with calm certainty, drawing dark energy from across the veils of reality and directing it, screaming, into the world of mortal existence. Throughout the long march along the tunnels, he had deployed his cold fire judiciously, protecting his brothers from the

worst predations of the daemon horde and throwing the unholy creatures back towards this, their last redoubt. He had been immense, immutable, inviolable, a spark of dazzling clarity amid a battlefield of filth, horror and fear.

And now the gates loomed before him, vast and corrupted. Telach could see the imprint of tormented souls in the metal and stone. He could hear their screams, locked in the very stuff of the hive spire, condemned to a living death amid the foundations of the immense Capitolis spires.

He could see the open doors, each one embossed with bronze and iron. He could see the portal through which the horror still emanated. He could see the ancient engravings over the massive lintel – *Turris Capitolis, Shardenus Primus Exultans* – and the foul sigils that had been scrawled across them.

Beyond the doors, he could see the beginning of the Great Stair – the gigantic passageway up into the hive towers beyond. He could feel the close warmth coming down from that opening, as if generated by the coals of a huge fire that had been burning for days and was only now coming to its full pitch of consuming heat.

Telach could see all those things, far more acutely than even his fellow Codiciers in the clan, and the rank sickness of it all resonated like a virus coursing through his bloodstream. His temples throbbed from the constant effort of maintaining the psychic shield around him. His hands bled freely from the summoning of warp-born fires. His muscles ached, his eyes pricked from tears, his mouth bled under his heavy blue helm.

And yet, the goal was close. The ruinous charge down the transit corridors was at its end, and now only the gates themselves remained to be taken.

Telach bowed his head for a moment, gathering his strength. Screams and the laughter of daemons passed, for a moment, into the background. He let the current of the warp sweep up into him, surging from the depths

of his consciousness and into his waking mind. The power rose quickly, like dark waters pooling in the shaft of a well.

No machine could do this.

The words came to him unbidden, like a memory unearthed at random. He discarded them.

By the Immortal Hand of the Emperor, the Master of Mankind.

Telach recited those words reverently, concentrating on the task of gathering warp energy to himself. He knew the daemons would sense the build-up. Very soon they would streak towards him, heedless of the protective aegis swirling around him.

Let them. Such bravado will only hasten their mortal deaths.

He opened his eyes, and the world of the senses rushed back in. His heart-rates picked up. The myriad systems in his psychically-charged armour activated. His breathing deepened. The aether pumped through him, roaring and frothing at the bonds he had set on it.

Gift me the power of that which is the doom of the weak. Gift me the power of that which our uttermost enemy calls home.

Telach's fingers began to leak warp power. It spilled from his gauntlets like pearls, smashing on the floor below and letting out flickers of glimmering witchlight. The massive potency was hard to contain, even before it reached the full level of devastation.

Gift me the power which is the true and just inheritance of Mankind, his destiny, his calling, his birthright to rule.

Telach lifted his head again. The gates towered over him. The screaming of the souls embedded in its structure reached fever-pitch – a chorus of agony arranged in mockery of the holy chants given every waking hour in the cathedrals of the boundless Imperium. Daemons, having sensed the danger, hurled themselves towards him, pulling free of combat with the Iron Hands in their midst and streaking in his direction. Their faces no longer laughed, but were pinched with fear.

They knew what he was about to do.

Telach knew what he was about to do.

For all the pain he was in, for all the pain he knew it would bring him, he still smiled.

For the honour of the Throne, for the honour of Manus.

The smile broadened.

Now you die.

He flung his arms wide, and raw warp fire exploded out from them. Beams of piercing white light shot towards the gates, rippling and thrumming with uncoiled intensity. Two columns of aetheric-fire, snaking like tornados, lashed out from his hands and smashed into the doors of the gate.

The daemons plunged into it and were torn apart. They detonated like frag-charges, scattering across the tunnel vaults in showers of blazing sparks. Telach's columns of fire roared out – undiminishing, thundering and rushing with the force of eternity.

It was agony. Even as the awesome power coursed through his body, Telach could feel it destroying him. He could feel his remaining flesh cauterising, curling away from the augmetics that riddled it. He could feel his hearts burst messily, flooding his chest with blood and drowning him from within.

The sensations were illusions – visions of what would come should he fail to control the torrent of otherworldly flame – but they hurt him nonetheless. It felt for all the world like a part of him was dying; perhaps on some other plane of existence where the divide between warp and materium was less certain, perhaps nowhere else but in his mind.

More. Give me more.

The columns of crackling energy wrapped themselves around the open doors. Like two enormous flaming tentacles, they began to pull them closed.

The daemons stepped up their frantic attacks. They tore towards him like bullets, crackling and burning as the warp-fire rushed through them.

One nearly got to him. It detonated just metres from his unprotected face, shrieking like an animal as the rush of cold flame roared through it.

Telach remained unmoving. His arms were flung wide, channelling the vast power roaring through him.

I am the conduit. I am the process. I am the vessel.

Slowly, grindingly, the doors began to close. The screams of the trapped souls in the metal reached a fresh crescendo. The Iron Hands stepped up their withering assault, launching fresh salvos of bolter fire into the fervid atmosphere. His Codiciers sent out warp fire of their own, cutting down the daemons even as they rallied for a final, frantic assault.

Telach felt his strength began to ebb. He tasted fresh blood. His heartbeats picked up again, thudding like a drum deep within his rib-fused chest.

Not yet. Just a little more.

The fires lashed out, snaking around the edges of the doors. The gap between them narrowed down to a red-tinged slit. Telach began to cry out. He heard his own voice as if from far away, muffled by the crashing tides of the aether around him.

The spire was resisting him. The stone, the metal, the ferrocrete – it was mustering against the power ignited at its base. Whatever dwelt at the summit had corrupted every part of the gigantic structure, like a cancer spreading down from the diseased head, and now the Capitolis itself was alive.

When he felt the full extent of that power, Telach felt his strength falter. He remembered what he'd seen when his soul had been cut loose.

I remember you being stronger.

+No!+ he roared, blazing his defiance psychically. +No. No.+

Then he let loose one final time, feeling the power of the immaterium tear through him with the raging force of a hurricane. Fresh aether-fire surged out, thrashing and writhing, clamping onto the doors and hauling them together.

They closed with a huge, echoing clang. As soon as the metal crashed together, the baleful presence from above lessened.

Telach cut the raging inferno loose, and fell to one knee. Warp essence tore free of him, curling out into the dark like a whiplash, before exploding in a multi-coloured nova against the hot metal of the closed gates.

The daemons, those that had survived the Iron Hands' onslaught, launched into a final vicious assault, knowing they were cut off now and at the mercy of Emperor's Angels. Still they came on, fearlessly, devastatingly, with the fire of the warp in their eyes.

Telach drew in thick, heaving breaths. His real-world sight became blurred. He fell forwards, dizzy, and had to put out a hand to stop himself pitching to the floor.

Every muscle in his body glowed with pain. Even his bionic implants had been stressed, and he could feel the heat in the mechanical components as they wound down.

It was a dangerous time. Drained of energy, bereft of the warp-drawn aegis that protected him, his body and soul were vulnerable to the daemons.

He looked up, ignoring the bite of pain in his neck muscles, readying to use his force-staff in self-defence.

He needn't have worried. Ten huge silhouettes of power armour surrounded him. He heard the roar of Khatir close by, driving his acolytes on to ever greater feats of arms. The daemons still rushed towards the bringer of their torment, shrieking with frustrated anguish, but had no chance of penetrating the cordon around him.

Telach felt some of his strength return. He swallowed, and tasted the blood in his mouth. Moving slowly, panting with the effort, he regained his feet.

Rauth broke from combat then, turned, and lumbered over to him. The commander's armour was streaked with blood and purple fluid; an unholy mixture of mortal and immortal essences. In his absence, Imanol's warriors maintained the protective shield.

+The gates are closed, lord,+ Telach sent. His mouth was still too raw to move.

'Indeed,' said Rauth. He sounded neither pleased nor disappointed, despite the fact that the tunnels had now been sealed from further enemy reinforcement. As ever, his tone was impassive. 'What is your status?'

+I will live.+

'Good.'

Rauth looked out, over Telach's shoulder and back down the long, gaping maw of the tunnels. Moving more gingerly, Telach turned to look the same way.

'What do you see?' asked Rauth.

Telach grimaced, and gathered his farsight once again. The effort of summoning it felt like ripping sinew from bone.

+We have taken the tunnels, lord,+ he said, letting his senses sweep back down the length of them. +Once the residual enemy is dispatched, they will be secure.+

His vision rushed onwards, racing across scenes of devastation.

'And the mortals?'

Telach's mind-sight passed over the wreckage of three Warhound Titans, each one burning and gutted. They stood in the darkness like braziers, wrapped in unwholesome, purple-tinged flames. He saw whole companies of men lying butchered amid the slime of the tunnel floor. He saw lines of tanks, broken and tilted and with their armour plate defaced. Survivors

still fought with traitors along the entire length of the transit routes. In the wells where the grav-train tracks had been sunk, blood lapped at the gutters like the tide against the shore.

+Heavy fighting,+ he sent.

Rauth nodded.

‘When the last of the neverborn are dissipated, the clones will relieve them,’ he said. ‘Those that survived will be re-formed and will accompany us into the spires.’

Telach let his mind-sight sink back behind his physical eyes.

Thousands have died. Tens of thousands.

He blinked heavily, and fresh blood ran down his cheeks.

+Was this the only way, lord?+ he asked, almost without meaning to. He caught himself too late, and found himself looking up into the blank deathmask of Rauth’s Terminator helm.

Rauth paused for a moment before responding. From behind him, the noises of battle began to diminish as the remaining daemons were destroyed.

‘Every mortal who dies frees up a Space Marine to kill,’ he said. ‘We cannot shepherd them all. Do you object?’

Telach felt sick, and knew exactly why that was. He had overexerted himself already, and knew that the greater challenge was still to come. He was in no condition to think clearly or cogently about the tactical situation. He was in no condition to think clearly about anything.

‘No,’ he said out loud, wincing as the flesh of his lips cracked. ‘Forgive me. I need just a little time, to recover.’

Rauth continued looking at him. As ever, the clan commander gave nothing away, sealed inside his massive sarcophagus of sable armour. Only the low grind of his power generators gave away the fact that he was alive at all.

‘They were acceptable losses, Telach,’ Rauth said. ‘Do not lose your nerve. The final assault will come soon, and I will need you.’

Telach bowed stiffly.

‘By your command,’ he said.

Acceptable losses.

‘Do you require an Apothecary? An Iron Father?’

Tens of thousands.

‘An Apothecary?’ asked Telach. He looked up, high into the vaults where the last of the daemons were pinned down by bolter fire. Their sweet stink lingered in the air, hanging alongside the reek of blood and charred metal.

The nausea in the back of his throat intensified. He couldn’t shake the blurriness of his vision, nor the resonance of screaming in his ears.

It would be good to be rid of such things. It would be good to lose the organs and the glands that made him feel that way. It would be good, perhaps, to see the world as Rauth did – lines of force, resistance, possibility – and nothing else.

‘No, not an Apothecary,’ said Telach, and his words slurred from mortal exhaustion. The battle for the tunnels was over, and they had won it, but he took no pleasure in it.

‘For what I have become,’ he said, ‘for what we have become, what good would that be?’

III: THE MACHINE-SPIRIT



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The ash clouds over the Iron Hands' Helatine command complex buckled and glowed, quickly moving from black to a dull ember-red. Warning lights flickered on across the landing stages, tracing out a hexagonal figure on the wind-blasted rockcrete. Automated defence turrets swung into position, extending their barrels and activating a shimmering level of void shields twenty metres above the ebony walls of the facility.

Nearly as soon as the defensive measures had taken effect, the systems shut down. The gun barrels slumped into dormancy. The void shields rippled away, leaving the landing stages exposed and unprotected.

The clouds continued to boil and churn. The ember-red glow turned a deep crimson, then orange. A whole swathe of ash was blown free, exposing a thundering column of flame dropping down slowly through the atmosphere. Seven circles of fire hove into view, each one a thruster for a descending lander.

Master of Thralls Gerod Siirt watched the vessel's approach from behind several layers of blastproof plexiglass. A steady stream of runes told him that his systems had been breached and that something subtle and difficult was preventing his servitors getting them back up again. Fearful aides hovered close by him, all dressed in sheer black robes and sporting

esoteric bionics across their pale faces, none of them daring to pass on any further bad news.

None of them, to be fair, could have told him anything he didn't already know. Siirt's own internal systems, including a hard-plugged auspex array that was finer than that possessed by most non-military starships, gave him better information than all of them put together.

From this, he knew several things.

First, that the lander had come down from high orbit, above the level where the Medusan strike cruiser *Kalach* and its scorts held anchor. For this to have been possible, it must have been capable of concealing its presence with considerable guile – the instruments on board the Iron Hands capital ship were a match for almost anything else in the Imperium.

Second, that the lander did not belong to the Imperial Navy, which had maintained its presence further out. Nothing possessed by Admiral Malfia would have been capable of making planetfall so stealthily, nor of shutting down the base's automated turrets.

Third, that Siirt's defensive systems would not become operational fast enough to prevent the landing. The craft would touch down unopposed with its weapons at full pitch and its own shields intact. Such actions were not those of a friendly power.

Fourth, that the energy signature of the lander's engines was of a distinctive type. Siirt had seen similar patterns before on previous campaigns, and so recognised the vessel as being of the Mechanicus. A quick check on his internal cogitator's memory banks run against three pict-shot profiles of the vessel confirmed its identity: lander UJ-I8 (Spectre class, heavily modified), listed as complement on special liaison vessel 778, designation *Factor Balance*.

Siirt knew enough then to guess that something serious had taken place, and had time to regret the fact that the entire Adeptus Astartes capability of Clan Raukaan was deployed in theatre. The clan's seven Dreadnoughts

in hibernation aboard the *Kalach* would take days to summon, as they had never been intended for on-world deployment. The command complex was full of Medusan auxiliaria, many of whom had bio-enhancements and augmetics on a parallel with skitarii, though if the Mechanicus vessel were powerful enough to interfere with the defence grid remotely there was no telling whether that force would be nearly enough to hold the complex.

Such were the thoughts running through Siirt's mind as he watched the lander touch down in the centre of the landing stage. He made no move to restore power to the autocannons mounted on the walls surrounding it, nor did he attempt to open a channel for comms.

'Two squads,' he voxed to his resident troop contingent, turning away from the viewport and walking towards the reception chambers below. 'Station all available others overlooking the vessel. Make them obvious.'

As he moved down to the reception levels, the two squads of thralls he'd requested fell in behind him. They were all dressed in matt-black carapace armour with blank visors and angular shoulder guards. Each trooper carried a heavy-gauge lasgun and had steel augmetic traces littered across their battle-plate.

They were all Medusan, all battle-hardened, and all heavily altered by the tech-chirurgeons. In normal circumstances, such soldiers would have been capable of taking on virtually anything. In normal circumstances, Siirt would have trusted them to keep him alive for a very long time.

'Any signal from the front?' he voxed back to the command chamber as he walked.

'Negative, master,' came the reply. 'Clan Commander Rauth remains out of range.'

'Keep trying.'

Siirt strode down the short corridor to the blast doors, watching diagnostic readings from the complex's sensoria scroll down his retinal display. The defence grid was still dormant.

Just days earlier, he'd overseen the preparations for the arrival of Lord Telach on the same landing stage. Then, of course, Siirt, had stayed very much out of sight, and it had been Rauth and his retinue who had walked out onto the apron to meet him. Siirt didn't like being out of the shadows. He was a Medusan mortal; like all his race, he disdained the harsh light of exposure. His home world was too dark, too cold, to relish anything other than concealment.

He paused before the doors, collecting himself. From the far side, he could hear the dull thud of a landing ramp hitting the ground and the slow whine of engines running down.

'So,' he said to himself. 'Let us see what we will see.'

He gestured, and the doors slid open. The foul air of Shardenus gusted in, spreading ash across the low-lit corridor floor.

Twenty-five figures waited for him, clustered under the slowly cooling bulk of the lander. Twenty-four of them were skitarii. As usual with the servants of the Mechanicus, their appearance was heterodox – collections of artificial limbs, implanted weaponry, metal faceplates or tank-tracks in place of legs.

The twenty-fifth was different – a human female, average height, slim build, clad in a long russet cloak with a theatrical cowl draped over her face.

Siirt bowed. As he did so, his men silently fanned out on either side of him. Their positions, weapon-states and armour integrity all registered on his retinal display as tiny red sigil-clusters. He had no doubt that the woman in front of him commanded similar data on her own pet warriors.

'Magos Ys,' said Siirte. 'This is unexpected.'

'It should not be,' replied Ys. Her voice was smooth and unruffled, though an undertow of quiet anger marked it. 'Where is Commander Rauth?'

'He is engaged in operations.'

‘Summon him.’

‘I cannot. Contact cannot be established at this time.’

‘You must have some means.’

‘The clan has undertaken operations deep underground. We have not been able to send or receive comm-traffic for two standard days.’

The magos didn’t respond immediately. Siirt thought he heard a low clicking from under the woman’s cowl, then she walked towards him. He detected the trace sounds of his men priming their weapons, and issued a mental pulse warning them to remain calm.

‘Do you know what has happened to my war engines, Medusan?’ asked Ys. Her voice had lost any pretence of civility.

‘I do not, magos.’

‘Then you are blind as well as stupid,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you do not appreciate how precious such things are to us.’

Siirt remained perfectly still. He could almost taste the tension on the air. The magos gave off subtle signal traces of aggression, some of which he could pick up with his inbuilt instruments.

She was extremely angry.

‘I have not seen this data,’ he said.

‘I have spoken to my princeps,’ said Ys. ‘He has been in touch with Lord General Nethata, who has his own reasons for doubting your commander’s judgement. For a long time I have urged restraint, but all tolerances have their limits.’

‘I know nothing of this,’ he said.

‘Yes, so you say. Are you capable of saying anything else?’

‘The sensor impressions we have confirm that the current action is over,’ Siirt said, keeping his tone neutral. ‘I expect a full report from the front within the next few hours. After that, according to the schedule I have, the assault on the Capitolis spire will commence, and full comms may be re-established.’

‘The next few hours.’

‘Yes.’

‘I am troubled that you think that is, in any sense, satisfactory.’

The magos reached up and pulled her cowl back. It revealed a slender, elegant face entirely composed of interlocking plates of metal. Her eyes glowed red, just like the lenses of an Iron Hand’s battle-plate. The sigil of the Mechanicus was embossed on one cheek and the winged griffon emblem of her forge-guild on the other.

Somehow, the effect was more troubling than the mix of flesh and metal that Siirt was used to seeing. Ys was the complete article.

‘My skitarii will deploy here before setting out,’ she said. ‘I shall resolve this situation myself, since those in the field have proved so woefully incapable of doing so. If he will not come to me, I shall come to him. I do not care where he is, nor how busy his duties make him – we shall talk.’

Siirt swallowed.

‘That is not permitted, magos,’ he said. ‘The combat zone is proscribed to non-military personnel. We can accommodate you here until communications are re-established, after which a hololith transmission can be routed directly to your private chambers.’

Ys looked at him frostily. Her red eyes blazed through the smog of drifting ash, glinting from the metal plates around them.

‘Is that your final word?’ she asked.

Siirt tried to hold her gaze. From somewhere, he could sense a power build-up, and blink-commenced a warning to his men.

‘It is.’

The burst came too suddenly. Siirt felt massive, acute pain in his temples, and clapped his hands to his head. He could hear the terse grunts of his men as their neural implants crackled and they fell to the floor. He

staggered, stumbling forwards, gagging from the pain. The world seemed to reel, and he reached out to break his fall.

Then it was over. Ys reached out, catching him before he collapsed. He looked up groggily and found his face a hand's breadth from hers. He was sweating, his heart racing. Something very powerful had been unleashed, something that, just as before, was capable of reaching right into their systems and rendering them helpless.

If it hadn't made him feel so bad, he might have admired the artifice of it. How much did the Mechanicus know of Medusan machine-protocols?

'I recommend a more helpful attitude,' said Ys, holding his arm firmly in her metal fingers. 'More skitarii will be landing shortly, and I do not expect them to be impeded.'

Siirt looked up at her red eyes, unable to speak. He was close enough to smell ritual incense on her robes. In the background, he could hear the sounds of his men struggling to breathe.

Ys brought her face even closer to his, leaning forwards as if she wanted to whisper some intimate conspiracy between them.

'I shall speak to him,' she said, her voice low. 'Even if all the forces of the Annihilator stand between us, I shall speak to him. And when I do, as the Omnissiah guides my hand, he *will* listen.'

The gates to the Capitolis were shut. Their ornate, gilded surfaces still swam with witchlight, flickering out into the darkness of the tunnels in slowly ebbing swirls.

With the banishment of the daemons and the destruction of the remaining enemy troops, the cavernous space before the portal had slumped into darkness once more. The stench of cordite and blood still lay heavy in the air. The cries of the dying and the wounded echoed eerily in the vast spaces, rebounding from the rockcrete walls like the forlorn wails of spectres.

Rauth looked up at the immense baroque doors, ignoring the clangs and booms of activity around him. Every instinct within him urged him to break them down and surge on up into the spires beyond. That, for the time being, was impossible, even for him. Telach's closing of the gates had given them the breathing space they needed to regroup. The clones, freed from battling the last of the daemons, had already stalked back down the length of the tunnels, slaughtering any residual traitors they came across and corralling the surviving mortals into fresh columns for renewed assault.

The respite would only be brief. They consolidated, just for the moment, gathering their strength again, rounding up those mortals who could still march and giving the Emperor's Mercy to those who could not.

Rauth no longer felt much at all for those who suffered. He certainly didn't despise them. The *itch*, as Telach referred to it, that loathing of human frailty, had ceased to have much purchase on him since the last vestiges of his own mortal frame had been flensed away. In truth, he had little idea how much organic matter remained, locked away in pockets within his giant mechanical skeleton. A brain, perhaps some spinal matter, progenoids; not much else.

For all their weakness, though, the mortal troops were necessary. Nethata had not answered the summons. Rauth didn't know why. Perhaps fighting out on the surface had been heavier than expected; in any case, it was not good enough. The Guard under the Lord General's command would be needed for the final push if the Iron Hands were not to be bogged down by the sheer volume of enemy troops within the Capitolis. Just as before, the human contingents would be needed to tie up the enemy assaults, freeing the real warriors to strike up at the pinnacle.

The summit was where the nightmares lay. Telach had divined that much, at least – whatever he'd sensed was there, growing in power with every passing heartbeat.

As if summoned by Rauth's thoughts, the Chief Librarian lumbered up then. Rauth turned to face him. Telach's shoulders looked slumped even under his heavy battle-plate, and he radiated fatigue. His armour still snaked with curls of opalescent energy, but the dazzling radiance that had blazed earlier had, for the time being, gone out.

'When will you be ready to fight again?' asked Rauth.

Telach straightened.

'Whenever required, lord,' he said.

'That will be soon,' said Rauth. 'You know it must be. Tell me, what waits for us in there?'

'I do not know. The spires are shielded from me.'

'Then guess.'

Telach hesitated. He drew in a deep breath, and Rauth heard his damaged vox-grille rattle.

'The neverborn,' said Telach at last. 'They used a proscribed name: a fallen primarch, now lost to the Eye. Perhaps they do so to mislead us, or perhaps they taunt us with the truth. Sometimes they speak the truth even when they would be wiser not to – they have strange natures.'

Rauth nodded.

'I heard the same name,' he said. 'But it is not him that waits for us. If it were, we would be dead already.'

'Indeed,' said Telach. 'Perhaps a creature in his power, though, one who nurses a special hatred for us. When we enter the spire I will know more. Beyond that, I will only say this: it is not yet manifest. Time is against us, lord. This pause must be a short one.'

'You do not have to tell me that,' growled Rauth, gazing hungrily back up at the sealed doors. 'I long for nothing else but to get in there.'

Telach let slip a grim laugh then. Perhaps, out of all of the senior Iron Hands in Raukaan, he was the only one still capable of such a thing – a residual, infinitesimal, sense of irony.

‘Be careful what you wish for,’ he said.

The walls were alive. Metal, once as inanimate and as cold as ice, had sprung into fluid life. Riveted bracings curled around the base of pillars and crept over the lintels of doorways. As the bracings moved they let out a faint noise – a hiss, punctuated with bubbling pops as the structure flexed and rippled.

Mesh-steel floors undulated like hide stretched across a drum. Growths punched up through the surface, shiny and phosphorescent. The air shimmered with curtains of gauze, drifting aimlessly as idle currents ran down the winding passageways.

A heartbeat rang out, long and slow, underpinning the steady chatter of the vaults above. It welled up out of the depths, sonorous and echoing. As it beat, the curtains in the air trembled, spilling tiny points of glistening dust onto the skin-floor.

Old coolant pipes had burst free of the walls. They gurgled with dark crimson contents. Further along, where the corridor tilted and swivelled round to the right, blood-coloured fluid spilled freely across the floor. It sank into the drum-hide surface in a foam of pink, bubbling as it was devoured.

It was hot, almost unbearably so. Heat radiated from the living walls, making them drip with moisture. Even so high up, there was no escape from it. What remained of the corridors, the service tunnels, the transit shafts, the meeting chambers, the chapels and pleasure gardens – all of it was soaked in soft, cloying, sticky heat.

Voices echoed down the corridors, faint and broken. A child sobbed, over and over again, lost in the maze of pulsing, throbbing matter. Women whispered or hissed; men laughed too hard, as if making up for some unutterable, dreaming horror with hollow mockery.

Valien never saw the owners of those voices. He trod along the soft, fleshy ways, stumbling in half-blindness, trying not to hear them. At every

corner he would pause, believing that someone was waiting for him just on the other side. Whenever he staggered around it, though, another foetid artery would await him, empty and seamy and stuffed with spores. The place was at once deserted and full; both empty of bodies and singing with souls.

The walls closed in on him. Where they had once been dirty, dark and cold they were now glossy, organic and hot to the touch. Breathing remained difficult. Valien's suit's systems were giving out – he could feel his atmospheric filters clogging with spores. Sweat had collected in his boots, and his bodyglove was sticky with it. Dehydration had given him a persistent, sick headache, and his dry tongue was swollen in his mouth.

He knew that he was somewhere very high in the spire of the Capitolis. He had taken the difficult way up, the circuit-ous route. It would have been quicker to have cut across to the vast, roofless chamber that ran up the very centre of the spire, to the colossal spiral stairway carved from marble and lined with steel that curled up and up around the adamantium spine of the Capitolis. That was Shardenus's glory: the Great Stair, an immense series of gilded steps that climbed for hundreds of metres without break from the filth of the earth to the smog of the heavens.

That way had been guarded, thronged with mutants, cultists, dead-eyed warp beasts and shuffling spawn, and so he had been forced to find the dank, twisting, hidden ways up, the ones that had been abandoned, forgotten or closed off. His world became a dark procession of cramped, clammy tunnels, each one dripping with fluids like bodily organs. The walls themselves trembled like flaps of skin, and the air stank with the musk of living matter. The dark, gothic majesty of a world's command centre had been perverted, turned from austere stone and metal into a nightmarish image of flesh, bone and blood.

Only once did Valien see evidence of what the Capitolis had been like before corruption had come. He stumbled at the end of a long, dizzying

climb up a series of tortuous capillary tunnels, falling to his knees from light-headedness as he reached the top and clambered into a tiny, deserted chamber. Ahead of him, only a metre or two away, was a column of carved onyx. The column was surmounted with a statue. A grave, mournful face stared back at him out of the dark, rendered in thick sweeps of a sculptor's chisel.

He'd seen the same figure many times before. The likeness was a standard one, propagated by the Ecclesiarchy and sanctioned in the manuals of all the artisan guilds. A near-identical statue had stood in the Talica shrine on Hespera, the one in which he'd undertaken his final training. It was Rogal Dorn; the Lord Protector, Saviour of Terra, master of the Fists, the golden son standing resplendent in his armour at the dawn of Mankind's eternal reign across the stars.

Alone among the paraphernalia of the upper spires, that statue remained untouched. Pools of glistening liquid fermented gently at its base. Tendrils crept up the polished surface of the pillar, straining to reach the figure at the top and choke it.

Valien looked at it for a long time. In the past, in other places, he'd found the selfsame image preposterous. He'd mocked the angular jawline, the narrow eyes, the rigid, clenched expression of resolve. For a cynical man in a cynical profession, such caricatured defiance had always struck him as faintly ludicrous.

No longer. Valien found himself remembering the stories he'd been forced to memorise in the schola, of Dorn's tortured progress through the webs of madness spun by the Arch-Traitor in the final battle for Terra, alone and surrounded by the raw stuff of Chaos.

As he recalled the texts, the legends, the myths, he managed a faint smile.

So it was for you, so it is for me.

Valien got back to his feet, trying to ignore the soft sucking sounds his boots made on the trembling floor.

But you were a primarch, the exemplar son of a living god.

He started to stumble onwards again. As he did so, his fingers strayed to his chest. He ran his fingers over the indentations just below his heart.

And I am the lowest of your Father's servants; a criminal and a blood-drinker and a sinner given the tasks no right-thinking human would undertake.

The ambient heartbeat echoed in his thick, clammy head. Another tunnel snaked away from him, blurry and lost in heat-haze. He limped down it, following nothing but instinct, remembering almost nothing of the orders Heriat had given him. A drive older than all others, older even than base survival, goaded him on.

Curiosity. Now, after all this, I will find out what evil has been gestating here. He saw no mortals. He had not seen a living soul since Venmo Kilag, far down in the abyss of tunnels in the Capitolis's bowels. If he had been feeling less sick, less faint, he might have speculated on the fate of the millions of men and women who had once inhabited such a huge spire and were now nowhere to be seen. He might have wondered what terrible magicks locked their voices in the air, making them speak as if still alive and moving through the corridors. He might have paid a little more attention to the strange faces half-buried in the shifting skeins of the walls and the floors, or the way the ceilings bulged, or the long trails of blood that led to the transit shafts.

When my curiosity is sated, I will do what I came for.

Valien crept onwards, wheezing in the thick air, pushing spore-veils aside with his shaking hands.

I will carry out the order.

He hardly knew where he was going. He was blind, weak and disorientated, and the last of his mortal strength was ebbing. For all that,

he retained a certain confidence. As surely as if the Emperor Himself were guiding him, he knew he was coming to the heart of it. Even at the end, bereft of senses, his faith remained absolute.

I will accomplish it.

He crawled on.

And then, only then, will I die.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

For a while at least, the guns had fallen silent. The wasteland between the spires had reverted to a bleak, toxin-infested swamp, untroubled by the grinding passage of tank groups or the tread of Titans. Hot winds blew across the tangle of blasted buildings and roadways, pulling ash across the evidence of fighting. Smouldering wreckage started to coat with a thin layer of coal-black filth.

The twin Melamar hives had finished burning. Their precipitous outer walls were broken and black, and a thousand columns of smoke rose lazily into the gloomy sky. To the east, the Axis spires still raged with untamed fires. Immense gashes had been cut into the flanks of the conurbations, glowing with fringes of magma-hot metal.

To the north, the vast structure of the Capitolis stood inviolate, half-lost in the haze of distance. Its mighty walls rose high, pristine and surmounted with ranks of gun batteries. A soaring mass of domes, gothic buttresses and blackened turrets thrust above them, undamaged still, glowing with light from within. Far up, sweeping towards the summit, the lights altered in hue, going from red to purple. The uttermost pinnacle was hidden by drifting shrouds of ash, but the intense and unnatural glow bleeding from it couldn't be hidden.

Nethata looked upon the vista on *Malevolentia*'s bank of pict screens, rotating the angles slowly, marking the destruction his forces had wreaked. Heriat sat opposite him, watching as position runes and scrolling databursts recorded the deployment of the assets under the Guard's control.

Malevolentia had come to rest atop a low rise in the centre of a ruined industrial facility in the heart of the wastes. The space around the tank had once been a storage yard for chem-transporters. A few of the old vehicles remained intact, clustered around the edge of a rutted concrete rectangle. They were dwarfed by the gigantic machine standing in their midst. Its engines still laboured, producing a thick pall of smoke from its rear stacks. The ground behind it was shattered where it had crashed through the yard's perimeter fencing.

'The final groups have reported in,' said Heriat eventually, concentrating on the screens in front of him.

'And?'

'All squadrons intact. Some losses from counter-attacks during the withdrawal from Axis, but within your predicted parameters. The targets around us can no longer muster significant return fire.'

Nethata grunted with satisfaction.

This is the way to wage a war. Careful, judicial, logical.

'We will move again soon,' he said.

'Indeed,' said Heriat. 'Refuelling and supply are already under way.'

Nethata was reassured by his progress. He still had formidable forces at his disposal. Taking account of the mobile artillery pieces, the heavy armour and the rapid-reaction troop contingents, he had sole possession of an army in its own right. He was weak in air support since the debacle of the first attack runs, it was true, but then the enemy was deficient in that area too. Despite Rauth's mismanagement of Territo's substantial

resources, enough remained to give him hope that the campaign could yet be salvaged.

‘Has Princeps Lopi made contact?’ Nethata asked.

‘He has.’ Heriat’s voice sounded almost grudging. ‘Do you wish to acknowledge?’

‘Of course,’ said Nethata. ‘Why didn’t you say? And, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take this alone.’

Heriat looked surprised at that.

‘As you wish,’ he said stiffly, unstrapping himself from his seat and clambering upwards out of the narrow command chamber. The hatch slammed shut behind him, sealing Nethata in.

Nethata swivelled around to face the chamber’s hololith pillar, keying in the authorisation on a copper-plated panel. He didn’t like giving Heriat orders like that. It felt disloyal, almost impertinent, but the man was a commissar, and the things he had to discuss with Lopi were delicate.

I shall make it up to him, he thought. I shall make all this up to him when this madness is over, and everything shall go back to the way it was before.

The hololith column rose up from its base, grinding on old gears. Nethata smoothed his crumpled uniform and adjusted his position. No one looked their best after days cooped up in a Baneblade, but the little things were still important.

A luminous face laced with cables and metal jack-nodes flickered into being above the pillar, shifting and crackling with interference.

Nethata bowed.

‘Princeps Lopi,’ he said, addressing the lithfeed. ‘I am sorry this is the first time we have spoken face-to-face. We should have done so properly before.’

The princeps didn’t respond initially. Though it might have been an artefact of the long-range hololith transport, it looked for all the world like he had recently been crying.

‘I felt them,’ said Lopi.

The words left his mouth awkwardly, as if he’d spent so long using binaric that Gothic had become uncomfortable to him.

Nethata hesitated. He wasn’t sure he’d heard him correctly.

‘As I say, I’m sorry if–’

‘I felt them.’ Lopi’s voice was broken and halting. As he spoke, his eyes wandered. He hardly seemed to register Nethata’s presence. ‘I felt them go, one by one.’

Nethata suddenly started to doubt the usefulness of the conversation.

‘I can see that your grief is still acute, princeps,’ he said, speaking carefully. ‘Perhaps it would be better if–’

Suddenly, Lopi’s gaze snapped into focus. He looked at Nethata, and something like embarrassment rippled across his augmented features.

‘No, I am sorry.’ His right cheek twitched. ‘I would not expect you to understand. You see, we feel one another. We are one another. You are alone. We are many. Their voices, they linger. But it should not affect my judgement; I apologise.’

Nethata studied the flickering feed carefully. The princeps was in a bad way. From all the files Nethata had scanned, Lopi was an experienced commander, a veteran of dozens of engagements; he should have been used to death in battle.

Then again, Shardenus was a strange place. The corrosive, decaying atmosphere had a way of getting to you. The adepts of the Mechanicus were an odd breed, too – perhaps the deaths of their war engines really did affect them.

‘You have my deepest condolences,’ Nethata offered, unsure whether anything he could say would make much difference. ‘I believe I understand your position – I have lost men, too. Both our armies have suffered more than is needful. That is why I hoped you would wish to talk, to find some kind of... accommodation.’

Lopi's fractured face looked steadily at him.

'What do you mean?'

Nethata cleared his throat awkwardly.

'I mean this,' he said, embarking straight into the case he had long prepared. 'The clan commander feels nothing for the souls under his command. I have argued from the start that his pace is too fast, that it risks exhausting our forces before our goal can be achieved. Those arguments have fallen on deaf ears, but now, perhaps, I am not alone in sharing them.'

Even through the shifting, shimmering layers of the lithfeed, Nethata could see that Lopi was interested. Cautious, but interested.

'Explain exactly what you mean, Lord General,' Lopi said. 'I do not have the time for hints.'

Nethata felt his pulse begin to pick up. He was committed now.

'We have had communication from Rauth,' he said. 'He has wasted the forces under his command in an attempt to take the transit corridors quickly. The Warhounds, as you know, have been lost. My Guard regiments fighting with him have been reduced to a fraction of their former numbers. His own Space Marines have taken heavy losses. No satisfactory explanation for this has been forthcoming. Perhaps it is pride, but he will admit no criticism of his tactics.'

Lopi said nothing, but kept listening.

'He needs us, princeps,' said Nethata. 'He needs my armour, and he needs your engines. I have already received orders to bring all my forces into range for immediate assault on the Capitolis. If your sensori has not already received similar requests, he will soon.'

'I have not been taking communications,' said Lopi.

'Well, when you do,' said Nethata, 'that will be the content of them. But here is the thing: we – you and I – we are not subordinates, ripe to be ordered into whatever massacre is lined up next. We are commanders of noble forces. We deserve consultation. We deserve respect.'

Lopi's grainy face looked wary.

'You are under his command, general,' he said. 'I am bound by bonds of allegiance. Are you proposing what I think you are?'

Nethata smiled.

'Mutiny?' he asked. 'No, nothing like that.'

He realised his fists had clenched tightly against the arms of his seat, and gradually relaxed them.

'I propose holding our ground, that is all,' he said. 'We wait here, out in the wasteland. We do not advance. We keep our guns – all of them – here in reserve. If he wants them, he will have to come to us. He will be furious, for sure, but what can he do? Only talk. Listen. Compromise.'

Lopi's expression was hard to read over the fuzzy lithfeed.

'You seem to have everything worked out,' he said.

'I do,' said Nethata. 'I want the Axis hives taken out. I want raids on the remaining peripheral spires, taking out their long-range weaponry. I want time to resupply and regroup the ground forces, and I want an agreed strategy for the taking of the Capitolis. I will commit no further resources under my authority until I have assurances of their usage.'

Lopi started to reply, but Nethata kept speaking.

'One more thing, please, before you respond,' he said. 'Know that I am no craven, nor am I a traitor. I have fought a lifetime for the Emperor and know the price of warfare. If I thought it necessary for victory, I would sacrifice my regiments, and myself, a thousand times over. But I am also no butcher, and do not throw the Imperium's finest weapons – its mortal souls – needlessly into the fire. Rauth will listen to us if you join me. He will have to. He will be forced to see the sense of it.'

Nethata thought then of his meeting with Magos Ys, and remembered what she had told him.

'This is the only way,' he said. 'We cannot hope to persuade, except by the withdrawal of what he needs. They are machines, the Iron Hands; they

are monsters, and their minds are closed. They only respect strength, and together we will be strong enough.'

Nethata stopped talking. He sat motionless, waiting for Lopi's reaction.

The princeps didn't respond. His face hung expressionless over the column, shaking and breaking up in the low, filmy light.

Nethata didn't dare to press him. He waited. Only when he began to wonder if the audio feed had somehow been compromised did he speak again.

'Princeps?' he said. 'Did you hear me correctly?'

Lopi looked back at him. There was no mistaking it this time – trails of tears marked his cheeks, glistening where they had collected on his exposed augmetics.

'I have heard your words, Lord General, and considered them,' he said.

Another agonising pause, and then he spoke again.

'We stand together,' he said.

Nethata felt a wave of relief flood through him.

'I am glad to hear it, princeps,' he said, smiling despite himself. 'This is the right decision; this is where the tide turns.'

He had to fight to stop himself smiling. Now, all things were possible. Now the battle could be conducted on sensible terms.

'This is where we remember our dignity,' he said.

Morvox stalked through the foetid transit tunnels, striding across the scenes of ruin. Smoke rolled lazily across the floor, sinking into wells and blast craters. A faint tang of musk still clung to the blackened and broken landscape, mingling with stronger smells of charring and decay.

Clave Arx had spread out thinly, each warrior heading out into the shadows to hunt down the last of the enemy and retrieve the remaining mortal forces for the renewed assault. In addition to Fierez, two battle-brothers of Arx had been slain before the doors were closed and the combat had ebbed at last. Once their progenoids had been recovered and

their armour taken away, none of the surviving members of the clave made any mention of them. They went about their duties just as they always did – silently, efficiently.

Morvox didn't question that. He felt no grief for the warriors' passing: they had been weapons, instruments of the Emperor's vengeance, and death in battle was something that would come for all of them in the end.

Only mortals grieved. Morvox watched them as they trudged along the tunnels around him, lined up in ragged columns, their eyes dull and their expressions slack. Some of them had the staring looks of men in shock; others were plainly terrified, as if the deep shadows still held creatures that could harm them. Many had to be threatened with execution before they would get back to their feet. The occasional hard bang of bolters from further down the immense transit corridor indicated that those threats were carried through.

Morvox paused for a moment, watching a line of dishevelled Ferik Guardsmen make their way out of the gloom and towards the gates. He found himself strangely absorbed by them, just as he had been by the fighters in the Melamar hive. Their movements were clumsy. They went slowly. Their killing potential was negligible; only in huge numbers could they hope to turn the course of battles.

Something about them captivated him. The sensation made him uncomfortable.

Once, on Medusa, vanishingly far into his past and long before he'd begun the journey from mortal childhood into superhumanity, Naim Morvox had broken his left arm. He had done it while working in the burning hell of his land engine's enginarium. The pain had been sudden, eye-watering in intensity, and he'd struggled not to scream.

Then he'd seen the wound. He'd seen his white bone protruding from between torn muscle. He'd watched his blood well up in the gash, hot and

thick and nearly black. He'd felt faint, and had slumped back against the drive housing.

After that the crew had come for him. They had given him sedatives and stitched his arm up and strapped up the wound. A week later he'd been back at his station, proud of the scar and proud of the residual pain.

Every so often, even much later, he remembered how he'd felt before they had come for him. He remembered the strange fascination of the broken skin, the meat-red muscle, the oozing fluids. He hadn't been able to look at it – it had made him feel sick. He hadn't been able to look away from it either.

That was how he felt then, on Shardenus, looking at the mortal soldiers making their way back to the front. They fascinated him in the same ghoulish, repulsed way that his mangled forearm had fascinated him.

I am going mad, he thought. They are what we live to protect. They are the Imperium. I am going mad.

‘Brother-sergeant.’

Morvox whirled around, startled out of his thoughts.

Iron Father Khatir stood before him. Morvox bowed, ashamed to have been surprised by Khatir's approach – moving power armour was not the quietest thing in the galaxy.

‘Iron Father,’ he acknowledged. ‘I thought you were with the clan commander.’

‘I was,’ said Khatir. ‘Now I am here.’

As soon as Khatir said those words, Morvox knew what was coming next.

‘Earlier, I was dis–’ Morvox began, attempting to get his penance in early.

‘Twice, you have questioned an order,’ said Khatir. His even tone was no different than it ever was, but somehow the words carried an undertow of

menace. That was what the Iron Fathers could do – they could shame, inspire, cow, infuriate, all with words alone.

Morvox saw Khatir's gauntlets glint in the darkness, ready, as ever, for use. For a second, he imagined them flashing up, bursting with flame, ready to strike at him.

'I am shamed by it,' he said, careful to speak only the truth.

'I see that,' said Khatir. 'I have been watching you, brother-sergeant. I have been watching you ever since we fought together in that bunker. Just now, I watched you as you paused in your duty. I saw you stand in these tunnels, and I imagined what thoughts were going through your head.'

Morvox felt a brief stab of resentment, and swallowed it down. It was hard to be talked down to, even by an Iron Father.

'I will work harder,' he said. 'I have been remiss.'

'You have. But I know what ails you.'

'You... I...' Morvox struggled to find the words. 'What *ails* me?'

Khatir made no move towards him. He made no gesture of reassurance, nor of condemnation. He stood in the midst of the tunnels, surrounded by the ravages of war, and spoke as quietly as he always did.

'The beast is most dangerous when closest to death,' he said. 'The beast within you is dying, Morvox. It is lashing out. This is a perilous time for you. You are caught between two worlds.'

As the Iron Father spoke, Morvox felt as if something was stirring within him, writhing in his innards like a snake. It indeed felt like some sinuous animal had coiled around his hearts, squeezing against them like a noose.

'You are changing,' said Khatir. 'You are losing the last remnants of your past. You can fail here. I have seen others fail, and it is not something I wish to see again. There is no place within the Iron Hands for failure.'

Khatir lifted his gauntlet and rested it heavily on Morvox's shoulder guard. The gesture was a bizarre one for a Medusan to make, and Morvox

resisted the urge to recoil. He didn't know whether it was meant to convey reassurance or act as a threat.

'You still remember pity,' said Khatir. 'You look at the cattle who serve alongside us and you mourn their deaths in service. You wish to nurture them, to explain what we are doing, to help them understand. But they will never understand. Even our brothers in other Chapters, those rare ones who are our equal in devotion, even they cannot understand as we do.'

As he listened, Morvox felt the twisting sensation within him grow worse.

'They have no future,' said Khatir. 'The universe holds no place for them. Only the strongest will endure, and nothing is stronger than the machine.'

Morvox had heard such things said many times, but for some reason the words stabbed at him harder then. He didn't want to listen to them – they made him feel sick. He didn't want to stop listening to them either.

'A time will come,' said Khatir. 'It will come for you soon. You will forget pity, and you will see the weakness we carry within us. Then you will understand the need to change, to improve, to excise that weakness.'

Khatir exerted pressure on Morvox's shoulder.

'Until that time comes, remember who you are. Do not fail. Never question an order again.'

Morvox looked directly up at the Iron Father's facemask. He couldn't decide whether the visage was horrific or benign. He felt the weight of the gauntlet on him, heavy like the bonds of death.

'I will not, lord,' he said. 'Never again.'

Columns of men were moving. They didn't march with the assurance they had done, back when the Iron Father had roused their spirits with his exhortations of duty and sacrifice. They were hunched, sullen, exhausted, terrified.

Marivo watched them pass before dropping back out of sight. The interior of the tunnels echoed with the thud of their boots. Loudspeakers blared out orders, one after the other, all of them demanding more duty and more sacrifice. He barely listened to them – they had become little more than background noise.

He slumped back against the grav-train track housing – a trench barely a metre deep – pressing himself against the cracked ferrocrete wall. His boots slipped on the viscous slime underfoot. He didn't look too closely at that; it had a familiar stench.

Khadi squatted beside him, breathing heavily. She had barely made it into the shelter of the wall's shadow. Her physical strength was recovering, but her resolve had crumbled. On the long trudge back from the front line she'd broken into bouts of random sobbing, interspersed with sudden explosions of rage. He'd seen such things before, but that had been on long, arduous campaigns of warfare. The assault on Shardenus had been going on for a matter of days, but already troops were losing their minds from stress and exhaustion.

The trench gave little shelter – just a slightly deeper shadow against the whole mass of spotlights, tracer beams and moving vehicle headlights. Still, it had given him what he needed: a breathing space, a chance to collect his shattered thoughts about what had happened and put them in some kind of order.

Marivo had seen whole companies of loyalist troops swept away. While the daemons had swooped down on them from above, no effective resistance could be mustered. Only luck had saved him. Somehow he'd kept out of the worst of the massacres, dragging Khadi behind him and firing only when he'd had to. His old injuries had started to play up again, and his shoulder had blazed with pain, hampering his aim and making his eyes water.

Then the Iron Hands had returned, marching back down the tunnels and laying waste to all before them. They had been as terrifying as anything else. They had killed, and killed, and killed. Until then he'd have sworn that nothing could stand against a daemon, but they had. They had never taken a backward step. Even as the unholy monsters had ripped into their sacred armour and plunged glowing claws into their exposed flesh, they'd kept on fighting.

All of this Marivo had watched, staying hidden amid the stink and the corpses, holding on to Khadi and keeping his hand clamped over her helmet's mouthpiece in case the sobbing started again.

If you could fight those monsters, he'd thought, why were you not by our side when it might have done us some good?

As the worst of the horror and the fear subsided, that question burned in his mind. It made him angrier the more he pondered it.

So it was that he didn't rush to join the shuffling rows of men making their way along the tunnels and back to war. An instinct deep within him told him that he ought to, that his oaths of office in the Guard bound him to service and that refusal to move when ordered was a betrayal, but he resisted it and stayed hunched in the shadows, his arms around Khadi in an unconscious embrace of protection, his lasgun primed to fire at anyone, from either side, who got too close.

'What are we going to do?'

Khadi's voice was little more than a whisper. Marivo glanced down at her. Her tear-stained face looked fragile. Her armour didn't fit her properly; it never had.

'I don't know,' he said.

There was little point in pretending otherwise. He didn't have a plan, and he hadn't been able to come up with one on the dangerous and wary flight back down the length of the tunnels. All he had left was anger, fear and fatigue.

Khadi pushed herself away from him and craned her neck up above the lip of the trench wall. Her movements were tentative, but at least she was able to move again.

‘They’re still moving,’ she whispered. ‘I can see Iron Hands. They’re rounding up anyone still on their feet.’

‘I know,’ said Marivo, remaining where he was.

Khadi turned back to him, looking scared.

‘You don’t want to go back to them?’

She wasn’t being sarcastic, but she might as well have been. The words stung Marivo, like a mockery from the past.

Half of him did. The old half of him wanted nothing more than to drag himself back over the wall and report for service, just as he had done in the Melamar spire. His lasgun charge was low, but they would probably find a pack for him, and maybe a replacement helmet. Enough men had died, so there were sure to be spares.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

Khadi slipped back down beside him. Her hands were trembling.

‘I can’t go back there,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Throne, I can’t go back. We’ve done our bit. We’ve done *so much*.’

Marivo nodded slowly.

‘We have,’ he said.

Khadi leant towards him.

‘Could we get out?’ she asked him, her voice suddenly urgent. ‘This place is still in a mess. We could do it.’

Marivo had thought much the same thing. He didn’t know exactly how far down the tunnels they’d already come. In the dark, the wreckage and the confusion there was no way of telling.

‘Maybe,’ he said, not wanting to give her too much encouragement. ‘If they see us try, they’ll kill us.’

Khadi smiled weakly.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘But others must have got out. It can’t be that far. We can get back into Melamar, lie low. There’ll be people alive in there, survivors, waiting it out, just like there were before.’

Marivo stayed silent. The struggle within him intensified.

‘And what then?’ he asked, speaking to himself as much as her. ‘What if we made it? How long do you think it’ll be before they catch us up?’

He looked at his hands, feeling weak and tired.

‘They never stop,’ he said.

Khadi grasped his hands then and held them in hers. The movement was sudden, unexpected. Marivo almost snatched them back, but didn’t.

‘Marivo,’ Khadi said. She looked at him, for the first time, like she was looking into the face of someone she could respect. ‘We’ve done pretty well, I reckon, to get this far. Come with me. Forget about your duty – look where that’s got us. We could make it, the two of us. Shardenus is a big place.’

Marivo looked up at her, startled. He had never heard her speak like that before. For the first time, he heard the strength in her voice.

‘We don’t have much time,’ she said. ‘I’m going. I’ve decided.’

She got to her feet, swaying a little as she found her bearings.

‘What will you do?’ she asked, looking at him anxiously. ‘You have to choose now. Come with me – we can make it.’

Marivo couldn’t take his eyes away from her. His mind cycled through the options, over and over, just as it had been doing for the last half-hour. Just as it had been for the last half-hour, the choice remained impossible.

Khadi looked over her shoulder, itching to go. From somewhere deep in the tunnels, the sporadic thud of bolter fire could still be heard.

‘Come on,’ she said, getting ready to make her move. ‘What’s it to be?’

Marivo remained still for a fraction longer. Then, finally, he stirred himself. He felt no confidence in his choice, but at least he’d made it.

‘All right,’ he said, hoisting his lasgun into position. ‘Maybe I do have a plan.’



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Valien crept on all fours along the conduit. The tunnel was barely big enough to squeeze down, and it pressed against him tightly. Yielding flesh slid over him, lubricated by a layer of thick, glistening slime. He had to go slowly, pausing often to catch his breath.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He'd used up the last of his suit's stimm-shots. Whenever he stopped moving for any length of time he'd start shaking from fatigue. He didn't know where he was exactly, except that there was nowhere else to go, nowhere to keep climbing to. He'd reached the end.

A purple light glowed at the end of the tunnel. He pushed himself towards it. With each push of his legs he got a little closer, and the sensations within him intensified. He felt phlegm rise in his throat, and swallowed it down.

The walls around him began to yield a little. The tunnel opened out as his hands pressed against it, exposing a narrow orifice at the end, just a few metres away. Through the trembling lips of the orifice, Valien could see nothing but a swirling cloud of purple.

He hesitated. The weight of dread in the air had become so heavy that he almost couldn't move. Every physical action required a huge effort of will.

It is in there. If I go in there, I die. It is in there.

The prospect of his own demise chilled him a little. He'd expected it to be quick – at the end of an arbitrator's power maul, perhaps, or locked in heroic combat with a similarly skilled agent of the arch-enemy.

You do not deserve any of that. Not for the sins you have committed.

Valien licked his parched lips, and shoved himself forwards. The slick walls of the tunnel slid over him, leaving trails of glistening slime on his armour. His forehead pressed against the trembling lips of the orifice. The gap was barely wider than his shoulders.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Blessed Emperor... he began, before trailing off.

He could no longer remember the words.

He opened his eyes again, took a spore-filled breath, and pushed his head through the gap.

Immediately, he knew where he was. From his know-ledge of the spire's schematics, he recognised the shape of the governor's audience chamber, right at the top of the administrative palace. There was no mistaking the room laid out before him – it must have been over a hundred metres in diameter and perhaps twice as high, and nothing else in the upper spires was remotely as big.

He had emerged high up one of the inner walls. Below him, he could make out a glittering carpet of slime strewn across what had once been marble flagstones. It looked like incarnadine vomit.

The remaining walls of the chamber soared up far above him, terminating in a sheer pointed arch. Chandeliers hung on iron chains from the ceiling, each one emblazoned with crystals and burning with lilac fire.

The chamber was octagonal. Five of the walls, including the one Valien had emerged from, had been constructed from dark stone, fluted and ornamented in the Imperial Gothic style. Most of that decoration was now covered in a thick layer of translucent ooze which glistened warmly in the

light from the chandeliers and dribbled obscenely over the faces of sculpted angels.

The remaining three walls were made of armourglas and formed part of the outer skin of the spire. The huge windows looked south, out across the wasteland between the hives. Though his view was clouded by the filth in the air, Valien could just make out the hunched outlines of the Melamar and Axis hives on the southern horizon.

It was an odd thing to see. He'd been active in Melamar Primus only days previously, creeping through the corridors and goading its inhabitants into action. Back then, he'd been in confident control of all his considerable faculties; now, he was only a finger's width from expiring.

His gaze dropped back into the chamber itself. Before Shardenus's ruling classes had turned to corruption, Valien imagined that the space would have been austere and elegant. The workmanship of the panes was impressive. The statuary, what remained of it, was imposing. It would have been a fine location to receive ambassadors, Imperial officials, trade delegations.

Now the place had been turned into a carnival of grotesquerie. Facets of the glass swam with filmy matter. Mouths opened and closed obscenely between the flexing stonework. Dripping protuberances snaked out from pools of bubbling froth, lashing back and forth as if searching for prey. Twisting lines of burning incense rose up from the floor, each one a different colour – purple, crimson, cobalt, cadmium. Coloured smoke merged and melded, turning the air of the chamber into a vaguely blood-coloured murk.

The chamber was full. A chorus of murmuring emanated from its occupants, thousands of them, all arranged around a tall throne in the centre of the marble floor. As far as Valien could make out, they were all naked, all bare-headed, all covered in tattoos and splattered purple sigils.

They swayed in unison, rippling in time with an ever-present heartbeat that ran through the bones of the structure around him.

Valien didn't look at them for long. Their murmuring made him feel nauseous, and he had to grip the edges of the orifice to keep himself in place.

He knew where he'd have to look next. He'd been putting it off, forcing his gaze to skirt around it, trying to avoid the inevitable. As surely as if it possessed gravity of its own, however, the throne demanded his attention. With his heart still hammering, Valien let his eyes rise until he was looking at it.

The very act was painful. No figure sat in the throne. The seat was made of obsidian. It was strangely angled. Light reflected from it in unpredictable ways, making it look at once bone-dry and blood-wet. Incense-heavy air shimmered above the empty seat, trembling with every beat of the immense heart. The effect was like heat-haze, or hallucination, or dreaming.

Valien squinted, trying to make some sense of it. He couldn't latch on to anything. Every time he tried to focus, the image would slip away. Trying to fix on to the shimmer over the throne was like trying to control ball bearings on a metal sheet.

He clenched his fists and hunkered down, peering through the narrow gap and pushing his head out further. His eyes narrowed. He switched off his augmetic implants, resorting to his natural sight alone.

The distortion over the throne clarified a little. Even attempting to look at it made his head throb. Tears started in his eyes.

He saw something, just for a moment. It was just an impression – a fleeting after-image of a ghost presence, like a hololith spinning into being or a retina-burn after an explosion.

It was man-shaped, but far bigger even than a Space Marine. Valien saw tatters of dried flesh waving as enormous arms thrashed out. He saw the

glint of armour rimmed with bronze, and harlequin patches of intense colour on ancient ceramite. He saw long, curved claws made of metal, and clusters of jewels hanging from clanking iron chains. He saw the remnants of a face, a once beautiful face, now a rag-tag collection of stitched sinew and gristle held together by steel clips and nutrient tubes. He saw two eyes, burning through the curtains of incense like plasma bolts.

He felt his grip slipping, and one hand dropped from the edge of the orifice. A gasp of pure horror burst out of his lungs, overriding all his psycho-conditioning and neural training. The world shifted around him, shaking and blurring. He could feel himself losing his precarious footing.

He pulled his eyes away – it was difficult – and tried to right himself. Waves of sickness washed over him, dragging at his frail, fractured consciousness.

He reached down to his chest again, searching out the indentations below his heart, beginning to make preparations.

As he did so, the daemons came. He didn't see where they came from – they seemed to swim up out of the air itself. They screamed at him, hurtling towards the orifice like loosed bullets homing in on a target.

He saw the first of them just before the end, just before it came to take him.

It was beautiful – so, *so* beautiful.

He tried to reach down again, to do the thing he had travelled so far to do, but it snatched him away too quickly.

He felt its talons lance through his shoulders, punching through the flesh under the bone and hooking him out. Musk, maddening and potent, clogged his nostrils, accentuating his sudden, shocking agony. He felt himself lift, borne aloft by a violent kick and carried far out into the open. Dimly, as in a dream, he heard mortal worshippers bellow their rage at him.

The daemon's claws ripped through him, tearing up his already tortured flesh and flaying layers of armour like falling leaves. Then, its work done, it dropped him.

With his last flickers of awareness, Valien saw where he was headed. The empty throne rushed up to greet him, replete with the fractured, semi-manifest horror that it cradled between its arms.

Before he hit it, he only had time to do two things. The first of those was to scream.

Rauth felt anger course throughout his veins, as rich and virulent as he had ever felt it. His armies were assembled again, ready to storm the gates, and his residual capacity for fury had been rekindled. It was not a good time to hear bad news.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, keeping control of his voice with difficulty. ‘What do you mean, he wants to *discuss terms*?’

‘He has ordered his forces to remain where they are,’ said Khatir. ‘He says he will not commit them until certain conditions have been met.’

They stood at the base of the enormous gates to the Capitolis spire. Only Telach and Dozeph Imanol were with them; the rest of the clones stood in their assault formations across the huge expanse of the gates’ antechamber. Ranks of mortal soldiers stood behind them, thinned out since the last muster but still presenting a formidable force of arms.

Khatir was as angry as Rauth. Imanol, the Veteran Sergeant of Clave Prime, said nothing. He lurked silently on the fringes of the discussion, his Terminator plate crusted with blood and the residue of the daemoniac. Telach too was silent. His exhaustion was palpable.

‘I will *flay* him,’ said Rauth, balling his immense fists.

‘He can be compelled,’ growled Khatir. ‘Give me leave to go.’

Rauth's instincts were the same. He had a brief, satisfying mental image of tearing through Nethata's scant defences and seizing control of the precious armour under the mortal's control. It could be done.

He turned to Telach, suppressing a burning desire for revenge.

‘What of the Capitolis?’ he asked.

‘Still nothing, lord,’ said Telach. ‘It is closed to me.’

‘You said the presence was growing,’ said Rauth. ‘How much time do we have?’

‘Hours,’ he said. ‘Maybe less. Thousands of souls have been fed to it; the veil between the worlds is weak now.’

Rauth took a deep, long breath. The wounds he had sustained were raw still, but their pain was welcome.

‘We need Nethata’s armour,’ insisted Khatir. ‘We need those tanks.’

Imanol nodded slowly.

‘You are right,’ he said. ‘The enemy is numerous; we will not kill them quickly enough.’

Rauth felt fresh frustration boiling within him. The entire campaign had been arranged around the union of forces – the numerous mortals to soak up the bulk of the enemy’s rage, freeing the Iron Hands to strike out at the real danger, the spirits of the arch-enemy that no unmodified human could take on.

‘What does he think, that we made our choices for *no reason*?’ Rauth thundered, struggling with the urge to lash out and crunch his gauntlets into the fabric of the doors. ‘Does he think we do not suffer? Does he think that we do not absorb our share of pain?’

‘He is weak,’ said Khatir. ‘Let me destroy him – I can deliver you the armour we need.’

‘We do not have time,’ said Telach. ‘He is out on the wasteland, and we are down here – we must assault the spire.’

‘We cannot succeed without them,’ said Imanol.

For a moment, Rauth felt paralysed, hung between two equally unacceptable options. Part of him burned to crack open the gates that very moment, to tear into the spire and burn his way up to the summit, damning

the consequences of failure. Another part burned to take vengeance for Nethata's treachery, to drag the mortals to heel and compel them to do their duty.

For a veteran Iron Hand, raised on a world of cold and shadow and gifted the terrible gene-legacy of his austere primarch, that, in the end, was all there was: wrath and duty. If any other human state had once held sway in his psyche, it was now long forgotten – the slow burn of transformation had done its work, and the last of the weaknesses of the past had gone.

The rest is strength.

‘We will withdraw,’ announced Rauth, and the words were bitter on his synthetic tongue. Once the decision had been made, he felt the first stirrings of full combat readiness pricking across his enhanced nervous system. ‘We will move quickly, back out into the wastes, and take the armour by force. Then we will assault, our numbers restored, and break the spires. We can do it, if we leave now. No hesitation, no restraint.’

Rauth turned his helm towards Telach, and the ceramite curves glinted in the dark.

‘And for the traitor Nethata,’ he said, ‘no mercy. No mercy for any of them. Everything about this world is weak and perverse – when our task is accomplished here, I will *scour* it. A thousand years, hence the fate of Shardenus will echo throughout the Imperium. Men will look to our actions here and know the price of weakness. This shall be the example. This shall be the demonstration.’

Those last few words came out like an animal growl. He began to move, to stride back down the tunnel towards Nethata's position. His fury was unabated, and he knew it would burn on throughout the fighting to come. Khatir and Imanol both approved – they understood.

Only Telach remained silent.

‘Wait,’ the Librarian said, holding up a hand.

Rauth almost didn't listen, but something in the tone of Telach's voice gave him pause.

'Listen,' said Telach.

Rauth stopped, and listened.

Above, far above, something enormous had detonated. Rauth's enhanced hearing picked up the muffled crashes of gigantic explosions from the far side of the gates. His helm's auditory filters worked quickly, bringing him detailed information on the location, size and magnitude of the blast.

Auspex data started to flood into his tactical systems – target runes, comm-signal ranges, psychic concentration nodes, power build-ups. The explosions kept on going. They were getting bigger.

He turned to Telach, his fury forgotten for a moment.

'What *is* that?' he asked.

Nethata walked along the ridge towards the first of his armoured columns. His entourage followed closely, holding their lasguns ready and going watchfully. The men had been taken from the remnants of the Ferik's First Company and were as good as any of the troops still under his direct command. They were seasoned by several campaigns and gifted with the best equipment he could find, but still they went nervously, as if expecting attack at any time.

Nethata didn't share their trepidation. Five hundred metres away, the huge outline of the Warlord *Meritus Castigatio* loomed up through the ash, monumental and imposing. Even when stationary and mostly powered down, it was a fearsome prospect. Lopi's other war engine, the *Terribilis Vindicta*, stood immobile at the other extreme of his army's long formation of mechanised units, watching over them protectively.

It was hard to imagine anything taking on such a concentrated collection of firepower. Space Marines were impressive, to be sure, but they weren't invincible, and Nethata knew that if Rauth had any sense he'd use the opportunity presented by such defiance to behave with a little more respect.

Nethata looked away from the Titan and out over the wasteland. The landscape around him was a picture of devastation. Old, rusting industrial compounds mouldered in the corrosive air, gently worn away by the acids at their base and the toxins in the air. A vast expanse of low-level buildings stretched away north, wreathed in a faint smog of ash and dust, only broken by the immense bulk of the Capitolis spires on the northern horizon.

Nethata knew that he was safer in the sealed confines of *Malevolentia*. Even with his elaborate environment suit working at full capacity, the poisonous air of Shardenus made its presence felt; without such protection he'd have long since been dead. He liked to inspect his formations in person, though. He'd always done so in the past when he could. A hololith tactical could only tell you so much – you learned more by looking into the eyes of your company commanders, seeing whether they were prepared, assessing their stomach for the coming fight.

For the most part, he'd been reassured by what he'd seen on his impromptu inspection. The Ferik and Galamoth regiments had taken losses in the fighting across the wastelands, but they also knew what had happened to the Harakoni on the walls, and to those units taken by Rauth into the Melamar hives and the tunnels. They knew which commanders were likely to get them killed quickest, and which ones were likely to give them a semblance of proper support.

Nethata reached his destination – a small, semi-derelict control tower overlooking the heart of his carefully arranged army. He kicked the door open and ascended the stairs quickly, eager to get the overview he wanted before returning to *Malevolentia* for final preparations. It would probably be his one chance to see the entirety of his forces laid out before him.

He reached the top level quickly – an abandoned comms room with broken plexiglass in the panes and a bank of smashed cogitators along one wall – and leaned out over the cracked sill to get his overview.

His tanks were arranged in their battle groups in a long, broken line along the ridge ahead of him. They stretched out in either direction running east-west, their engines idling and sending a film of fresh smog into the already thick air. It was a significant force – over two hundred Leman Russ main battle tanks in varying configurations, backed up with Basilisk artillery pieces and Chimera troop carriers. Sentinel walkers prowled around the fringes, looking fragile under the enormous shadow of the two Warlords. To the south lay the burning Axis hives; to the north was the gigantic Capitolis spire. Everything in between swam with a green-tinged toxic soup, washing over the abandoned buildings like an inland sea.

Nethata let his gaze run down the length of the army, looking out for units out of sequence. For a while, he saw nothing untoward. He was about to go back down the stairs when he saw the first of them start to move.

A squadron of Leman Russ battle tanks powered up their engines and lurched forwards, all twelve of them, grinding over a straggling barbed-wire thicket before setting off down the long, broken highway ahead and out into the swirling chemical mist.

Nethata watched them go, momentarily dumbstruck. He hadn't given an order to advance. He hadn't given an order to do anything.

'Heriat,' he voxed over the comm. 'Do you know anything about—'

Before he'd finished the question, another unit set off. Then another. Before long, whole sections of the defensive line had broken into movement. Nethata felt a chill run through him. He turned and ran down the stairway, back to where his entourage was waiting for him.

His comm-channel began to fill up with queries. Group commanders of stationary units sent urgent requests for clarification. Group commanders of moving units kept their channels offline. Nethata wasn't interested in any of them; there was only one man who he wanted to speak to.

‘Commissar-General Slavo Heriat,’ he voxed again. ‘Respond immediately. We have multiple unauthorised movements. Respond immediately.’

Nethata raced along the ridge, back to where *Malevolentia* had been left. His escort struggled to keep up with him, weighed down by their sealed environment suits and heavy weaponry.

‘*Respond*, Slavo,’ he ordered, getting testier the longer he was kept waiting. ‘This is—’

He stopped when he entered the chemical facility yard. *Malevolentia* was gone. One of the walls on the northern edge of the space had been entirely demolished, and tell-tale tracks in the concrete told him exactly where his command vehicle had gone.

A lone Ferik watch officer, swathed in an orange chem-suit, waited for him in the centre of the yard.

‘What is happening here?’ demanded Nethata.

The officer saluted smartly.

‘Your orders, lord,’ he said. ‘Squads detailed to rendezvous with the Iron Hands have begun deployment. I thought—’

It was as if the world had suddenly given way under Nethata’s feet. He felt briefly dizzy, and glanded a quick burst of adrenaquil. He hadn’t needed to do that for a while.

‘When did this happen?’ asked Nethata, his mind racing.

How many units has he taken? How did he organise it? When did he do it?

The watch officer checked his chrono.

‘Ten minutes ago. I assumed these were your orders – the authorisations checked out. Oh, and the Commissar-General left this for you.’

The officer handed something to Nethata, who absently took it. Only when he looked down did he see what it was: Heriat’s bolt pistol.

For a moment, he had absolutely no idea what to do. He stared at the pistol stupidly, his mind locked in a vice of shock.

Heriat. Of all of them. I should have listened. I should have been more careful.

Nethata was still standing there, still too shocked to make any decision, when the explosions went off. Even from so far away, they crashed out across the wasteland like the immense, crushing reports of nova cannons.

Nethata looked up sharply, stung out of his paralysis by the sudden barrage of detonations. To the north, out on the edge of unaided sight, the summit of the Capitolis spire was being ripped apart. The explosions kept on going, lighting up the northern horizon with huge, rolling balls of fire. It wasn't the tanks – they were still far too far away.

Nethata turned to the watch officer, hardly bothering to hide his surprise.

‘What *is* that?’ he asked.

Heriat felt the rhythmic drum of *Malevolentia*'s engines semi-reassuring. The promise of mechanical reliability made his decision feel slightly less capricious, slightly less shabby. Even though he'd known what had to be done for several days, and even though he'd spoken to his selected company commanders over an even longer period of time, when he'd actually come down to it the action had made him feel wretched.

If it had been anyone other than Nethata, he wouldn't have hesitated. If it had been anyone other than Nethata, he'd have long since had enough of the minor slights, the disregard, the monomania. A lifetime's friendship wasn't easily thrown away, though, and in the event it had taken outright treachery to push it over the edge.

Heriat's life was as full of certainties as other men's were not. Nethata evidently didn't view his actions as treasonous. A casual glance at the Guard conduct manuals or the precepts of the Adeptus Terra would have corrected that impression. Rauth was the senior commander on Shardenus;

short of an order from the Imperial authorities themselves, all loyalist forces on the planet were bound to follow his orders. It didn't matter whether those orders were wise or foolish, enlightened or despotic. That was the nature of commands; you followed them.

The Imperium was nothing without discipline. Everything else – loyalty, fervour, duty, friendship, devotion – it was all nothing without the iron fist of control. Humanity, as the Commissariat knew well, was a wayward species. It had to be protected from itself. When it wavered, it had to be corrected. When it doubted, it had to be conditioned. When it faltered, it had to be punished.

Position runes danced across the command console's forward sensor array. Heriat looked at them carefully. Nearly half of the companies under Nethata's command had broken rank and followed his orders. That was encouraging. All of those he had approached had been persuaded by his arguments – or his threats. Those he had judged too close to Nethata to accept the possibility of betrayal would now have to examine their options – would they remain behind in a diminished rump of a fighting force, or would they advance with him, fulfilling their duty to the Emperor and to the Guard?

Heriat sat back in his seat and issued the command to release his vox-message to Rauth. Soon the clan commander would know that he still had mortal allies willing to do what was necessary for victory. Heriat himself knew perfectly well what was required of him, as he had been the one who had listened in detail to the increasingly angry missives from the Iron Hands command group over the past few days. He knew where his tanks were to be deployed, and what role they were to play. Valien's transmissions had been useful in that respect, as had the schematics he'd sent before all comms had died.

Heriat knew perfectly well that the forces under his command, including *Malevolentia*, would be destroyed within a few hours of coming into range

of the Capitolis's defences. All of this was understood. Nethata and he did not disagree on the practicalities of the situation; it was the principle that was at stake.

And yet, for all his certainty, Heriat did not rest easily in his seat. A perfectly certain man would not have handled things the way he had done. A perfectly certain man would have carried out the ultimate sanction – he would have killed Nethata at the first sign of treachery and taken over command from the very beginning.

The fact that he hadn't done so was evidence of failure. Heriat had left the bolt pistol for Nethata to find, knowing that he would understand the symbolism.

It wasn't as if, in all conscience, he'd had any choice. Heriat couldn't have killed Nethata. Not since the transplant that had saved his life after the action on Goetes IX, staving off the ravages of early-stage skietica and keeping him alive for another fifty years. The price Nethata had paid for that donation, made in a filthy battlefield medicae station under constant fire, had been high – for all the miracles of the surgeons' art, he had been condemned to spend the rest of his life addicted to a cocktail of high-strength glanded narcotics to compensate for what he had given up.

Perhaps all that adrenaquil and tranquilox had begun to affect Nethata's judgement at last – it would not have been the first time. If so, then Heriat's sickness had been the cause of Nethata's sickness, and applying the final sanction would have made his actions even more wretched than they already were.

Heriat felt the sores around his mouth itch painfully, and resisted the urge to scratch. His expression remained stony. The flesh, as Rauth would no doubt have relished telling him, was weak.

'Commissar-General, we have sensor readings from the spires,' came a vox from *Malevolentia*'s command chamber.

Heriat stirred from his thoughts. The forces under his command were still some way from their final positions.

‘Put them through,’ he said, switching the screen on his console to a forward vid-feed.

Just as he did so, he saw the explosions go off. Even from so far away, they burst through the audio transmitters with a static-fuzzed crash.

Heriat started, stung by the sudden barrage of detonations. Picked out in grainy detail on the pict screens, the summit of the Capitolis spire was being ripped apart. Auspex data started to flood into his tactical systems – target runes, comm-signal ranges, power build-ups. The explosions kept on going, lighting up the northern horizon with huge, rolling balls of fire.

Heriat slumped back in his seat, watching the damage unfold.

‘What *is* that?’ he asked.

The daemon’s claws ripped through him, tearing up his already tortured flesh and flaying layers of armour like falling leaves. Then, its work done, it dropped him.

With his last flickers of awareness, Valien saw where he was headed. The empty throne rushed up to greet him, replete with the nascent horror that it cradled between its arms.

Before he hit it, he only had time to do two things. The first of those was to scream. The second was to activate the explosive implanted in his chest.

He didn’t feel the explosion. It was so huge, so powerful, so destructive, that he was reduced to atoms in an instant. He didn’t see the enormous pool of fire surge out from his destroyed body, sweeping across the corrupted audience chamber and shattering the immense panes of glass in a rain of silver. He didn’t see the external walls of the spire blow out into the atmosphere, showering burning stone and metal down the long flanks of the upper hive. He didn’t see the secondary incendiaries in the cluster ignite, sparking the inferno that would reduce the entire governor’s

complex to rubble and crack open the powerful shields that protected the Capitolis from sensor probes and psychic attack.

None of that mattered, for he had fulfilled the order given to him by Heriat at last.

Penetrate the Capitolis, he'd been commanded. Find out what's in there, report back with visual records. We need to see what's waiting for us inside.

He hadn't been able to send visual records. For a long time his instruments had been deaf and mute, and he'd been crawling silently though the dark like an insect. Only the final resort, the devastating explosive core that every Talica operative had implanted in their chest cavity, had the capability to achieve that goal. Only that device had retained the power to blow open the walls of the Capitolis and expose the horror within.

And so, even in his dying scream, a sliver of satisfaction penetrated Valien's consciousness. He knew, as he died, that he had reported back as best he could. He knew that if any loyalist troops still fought their way towards the Capitolis they would now be fully aware, in exact and terrifying detail, just what was waiting for them inside.

It might not have made up for his many sins. Nothing, perhaps, could have done that; but it was a contribution, a small act of penitence.

In a way, it was restitution. In a way, it was enough.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Telach felt his mind flood with visions as soon as the explosions broke out. He didn't need to let his mindsight roam free – the images crowded into his waking consciousness in a mad, overlapping rush.

All of the Librarians felt it. He could see his three Codiciers – Nedim, Malik, Djeze – reeling from the sudden deluge. Even the non-psychic battle-brothers responded.

Daemonspoor. Huge, huge daemonspoor.

Telach lifted his power staff high, and pure warp lightning licked along the shaft. Anticipation surged through his body.

'No time remains,' he said, turning to Rauth. 'Forget the mortals – we must fight this.'

Rauth hesitated, caught between his stated course of action and the sudden change in events.

'What do you see?' he asked. 'Tell me quickly.'

Telach's hearts were already thumping hard, fuelling his body for the imminent fighting ahead. Now that he knew the nature of what awaited them in the spire, all room for debate had ended.

'A rift,' he said. 'A gateway between realms. It is almost open. This world stands on the edge of damnation – we have not been fast enough.'

Still Rauth hesitated. Telach felt impatience rise up in him. He knew why Rauth resisted giving the order – the Imperial forces were in disarray, riven with discord and rebellion. Even if all of Nethata's forces had been committed to assault alongside them, their chances of taking on what waited for them beyond the portals were slim. Even Iron Hands couldn't kill that fast.

Khatir ignited his claw-flamers with a flourish.

'Is there any other way, Librarian?' he demanded.

Telach looked squarely at him.

'There is not,' he said. 'Whatever else happens, I am going up there.'

Just as he was about to stride off towards the gates, a crackling comm-signal broke through on the command channel. Even with the destruction of the shielding surrounding the Capitolis, it was faint and broken. All those in the primaryclave picked it up.

'Priority signal for Clan Commander Rauth from Commissar-General Slavo Heriat of the 126th Ferik Tactical. Lord General Raji Nethata relieved of command due to insubordination. Remaining Galamoth and Ferik armoured divisions heading for deployment coordinates to follow in transmission 5-78, tactical outline appended. Bombardment to commence immediately. The Emperor protects the faithful.'

Rauth turned to Telach. As he did so, he ignited his power blade, and its ice-blue surface blazed in the dark.

'So there is mettle in humanity yet,' he said. 'So be it. Open the gates.'

Telach immediately fed power to his staff. Warp essence burst out strongly, flooding the chamber before them with dazzling electric-white light. Each of the Codiciers did the same, sending snaking lines of energy lancing up towards the sealed portal.

'Warriors of Raukaan!' roared Khatir, striding up to the doorway with his arms aloft. 'Now comes the final test!'

The claws responded instantly. They drew blades and slammed magazines into place. Many still carried horrific injuries, and nearly all had sustained damage to their armour plate. Of more than a hundred Space Marines who had entered the tunnels, less than seventy remained.

Telach felt the massive doors tremble. He had closed them with layers of wards against the daemonic, all of which took time to unravel. As the psychic barriers came down, he could hear the howl of the creatures on the far side. They were already clawing at the metal.

‘We will take them with *speed!*’ cried Khatir, sounding as eager for the fight as he ever did. ‘Advance! Pause for nothing! Destroy all in your path! Show no restraint!’

Telach unbound the last of the wards. A great, echoing crack ran down the length of the gilded doors. The shrieks of the daemons rose in volume, and the bronze surfaces buckled.

Rauth strode up to the portal, taking the position of honour. In one hand he carried his storm bolter; in the other his shimmering power-blade. Clad in his heavy void-black Terminator plate, he looked immense. Clave Prime formed up around him, each warrior massive and silent.

Telach could feel the pent-up energy coiled inside them all. He knew what was about to come.

The Iron Hands had fought in the manner of their Chapter doctrine – cold, methodical, remorseless. Now the urgency of the task had become fully apparent, as had the scale of the abomination before them.

Such straits demanded the casting-off of fetters, the abandonment of control. Only rarely did the sons of Manus abandon their meticulous way of war and adopt the ancient rage that lay deep in the gene-heritage of all the Adeptus Astartes.

When that happened, there were few forces in the galaxy capable of resisting it: ten thousand years of anger, of rage, of bitterness, all concentrated into a single, machine-augmented storm of vengeance.

Now the storm was coming. Now Shardenus would face the wrath of iron.

Telach crashed his staff onto the ground, shattering the rockcrete. Above him, the massive doors burst open with a booming crack. Sheets of aether-light rushed out, spinning into the dark. Lightning snapped across the widening gulf as the heavy doors ground slowly inwards. Shrieks and screams echoed from within.

‘For the Emperor!’ roared Khatir above the gathering tumult, sending gouts of vivid flame streaming high into the poisoned air.

And then, for the first time since the bloody campaign had begun, the Iron Hands responded. The sound of their massed battle-cry, hurled up defiantly into the vaults, was deafening, outmatching the screams of the neverborn, outmatching the low grind of the opening gates, and echoing through the bowels of the Capitolis like the coming of the gods themselves.

For the Emperor! they cried, sweeping up to the portal in a tide of darkness, charging into the maelstrom with murder in their eyes, blood on their armour and death kindling on their blades.

Morvox ran hard. A Space Marine in full battle-plate was a huge object weighing many tonnes; at speed, his momentum was formidable.

He leapt through the portal at the head of his clave. Seven of them remained from the fighting in the tunnels, and two of those – Gergiz and Kozen – carried serious injuries. They all ran at the same pace, hitting the ground hard with heavy armoured treads.

Beyond the gates, the Great Stair snaked away into the preternatural darkness, winding around a core of solid granite. It spiralled upwards, immense and majestic, curling like a massive python about the structural core of the hive spire. That core was gigantic – over sixty metres in diameter and lined with basalt pillars and mammoth iron bracings. Eyeless angels perched along its width, gazing sightlessly out over the enormous

vaults. The Stair swept upwards around the core, vanishing into a dark haze as the marble-lined steps wound ever higher. It was surrounded on all sides by a vast gulf of emptiness, breached only by a web of flying buttresses and high arches that spanned it, branching out and forming a sprawling lattice linking the stairway to the rest of the hive. On the far side of the abyss, the vast inner walls of the hive spire stood, shrouded in shadow and smoke.

The Great Stair had once been an empty place, clothed in darkness and disturbed only by the whispers of adepts shuffling from intersection to intersection along its immeasurable length. Now the warp itself burst out from the walls at all levels. Enormous growths snaked down from overhanging gargoyles, luminous and clutching. Screams echoed down from the high places, bouncing and refracting from twisting structures of living, weeping metal. Blood swilled down the stairs, frothing and boiling as the Iron Hands crashed up through it. Angry, violent lights wheeled and flickered in the vaults above, turning the echoing spaces into psychedelic, hallucinatory nightmares.

‘For the Emperor!’ roared Morvox, giving in to the urge to cry out, to vent his fury and his violence. Once unleashed, the dam-break of emotion could not be pulled back. The long repression of his animal spirits had done nothing to degrade the primal fury he was capable of – it had only isolated it, smothering it with layers of cold, calculating restraint. Now that it had gone, his wrath rose up, choking in his gorge. He could feel his body respond strongly, spiked with a rush of adrenaline and combat-stimms. The urge to slay was so strong that he felt that his hearts would burst from it.

Horrors came down at him, careering down the stairwell with fangs drawn and eyes glistening. A grotesque mutant, its stomachs spilling open with writhing lengths of sinew-flails, barrelled into his path bearing a

force-hammer. Morvox beheaded it with a vicious sweep of his chainblade and kicked its body away, barely breaking stride.

Snake-faced figures leapt from the distant walls, sailing through the hazy atmosphere on gauzy membranes, spitting venom as they came. Morvox charged into them as they landed, firing from his bolter with tight precision. Three went down before he came in blade-range, each one taken out with head-shots. Before the skull-fragments had hit the ground he was among the others, punching the chainsword out and dragging it round in huge, unstoppable arcs. Blood and viscera surrounded him like a holy aura, flying high into the clammy air as his limbs moved.

His claws were equally lethal. The Iron Hands powered upwards, sprinting forwards, crashing through resistance with blunt, brutal force, pivoting on heels and bringing weapons into contact with crushing, shuddering violence. They slammed into knots of squealing mutants, cracking them open, hurling them apart and dealing death with savage purity.

But mutants were not the worst of the dangers under the arches of the soaring Capitolis. The spire had been steeped in the baleful powers of the warp, and everything within it sang with hatred, malice and madness. Huge flagstones cracked and disintegrated with no warning, opening up chasms and hurling warriors down into hidden depths. Sorcerous flames blazed out of gargoyle-faces, catching even on ceramite armour and raging across it. Translucent creatures, studded with blood-rimmed eyes and curtains of flesh, sprang down from hidden caches between the soaring pillars, careering through the gore-streaked air and clamping on to the facemasks of warriors with hooked fingers. The winding core of the Capitolis had been turned into a maelstrom of spines, hooks, barbs, flails and toxins.

Morvox ran on, leaping over a rearing creature with glowing eyes, crushing its face with his boot. He spun around, unleashing a burst of

rounds into the stomach of a lurching monster with six lashing arms before plunging his chainsword deep into its stinking folds of blubber.

‘Maintain speed!’ roared Khatir from far up ahead, his voice resounding strangely from the warped architecture. ‘Purge the unclean! Slay them all!’

Morvox didn’t need to be told. Every Iron Hand sprinted onwards, thundering through the obstacles ahead. Whenever one was felled, another took his place. As inexorable as the workings of some giant, many-sectioned machine, the sons of Manus lashed, crunched, crushed and cut their way higher, ever higher, into the screaming heart of darkness ahead.

And as they climbed, the broken soul of Shardenus responded. Hurtling down from the living domes of glass and adamantium, wailing with joy and fury and wheeling high above the shambling press of mutants, the daemons came, and in their wake came terror as pure, hard and eternal as diamonds.

‘Fire!’ cried Heriat, shouting through the vox as if that could somehow make the shells strike home stronger. ‘Fire at will! Bring them down!’

All along the line, a hundred Leman Russ tanks opened up, and the wasteland disappeared in a huge plume of dirty smoke. A fraction of a second later, a vast, rolling boom cracked out, echoing between the distant burning spires. Long trails lanced out through the air, straight as gunshafts, before slamming into the soaring walls of the Capitolis.

The tanks had ground to a halt south of the precipitous spire walls and had deployed in a long semicircle out in the chemical-shrouded wasteland. Toxic mist swirled thickly all around the immense foundations of the mighty hive, and shells left long ripped lines in it as they roared off to their targets.

The colossal hive towered above them, dwarfing all else and filling their viewfinders, but it was already burning. Explosions at the summit had spread, dropping like flaming tears from the distant pinnacles. A massive

gouge ran down from the top of the pyramidal structure, still burning at its edges, revealing the innards of the structure within. Like an insect nest broken open by searching fingers, the exposed levels swarmed with madness. Mutated figures, tiny in Heriat's scopes, dropped from the open wounds in the structure, screaming as they plunged to their deaths.

More explosions registered on his sensoria, this time coming from within the hive. Only one explanation existed for those readings – the Iron Hands had launched their assault from within. They were tearing their way up the heart of the spire, moving at astonishing speed. Heriat found himself wishing he could have seen them fight in there – the sight of Space Marines unleashed on prey was something that remained in a man's mind forever.

'Maintain fire-rates,' he ordered, watching on his range of screens as the barrage repeated itself.

The cramped chamber rocked around him as *Malevolentia* opened up with its main cannon. Heriat watched the shell thunder out and crash into the walled flanks of the Capitolis. An entire section of metal and stonework crumbled into a dust-cloud of ruin where it impacted. More shells followed, blasted high by the Basilisks as they opened fire.

Even with aural protectors and inside the reinforced shell of the enormous vehicle, the noise was monstrous and unending. Shell after shell, round after round, mortar after mortar sailed through the air, punching lines through the curtains of ash and exploding against huge bulwarks of ferrocrete and adamantium.

The spire's defenders – such as they were – initially seemed to have been caught off-guard. Many of their massive wall-mounted cannons had been destroyed in the opening flurry of fire, as if their commanders had been distracted by the cascade of destruction descending from above.

Now, though, the response had picked up. Lines of cannons on the parapets swung round and down, picking out the exposed formations of

loyalist armour. White beams of las-fire and hammering torrents of heavy bolter fire scythed down from the burning ramparts, cracking into static Leman Russ plate and breaking it open. The Capitolis's cannons were huge – as large as those that had been mounted on the outer perimeter – and each direct hit utterly destroyed its target. Heriat saw one group of three Basilisks taken out by a single shot, blasted to fragments of metal by the enormous fireball created on impact.

In standard military terms, the situation was hopeless. Heriat's forces were exposed, out in the open, hidden only by clouds of toxic matter. A prudent commander would have withdrawn before the carnage overwhelmed him. A prudent commander would have demanded to know why the two Warlord Titans, the only things big enough to take on the spire's enormous guns as equals, were standing immobile out in the wasteland and taking no part in the action. A prudent commander would have done something, anything, to ensure his survival in the face of such withering, deadening fire.

But Heriat's task was not to survive. Neither was it to destroy the spire from the outside – he had nowhere near enough firepower for that. His task was simple and specific. All his guns were aimed at a small fraction of the Capitolis's vast expanse. His commanders zeroed in on their coordinates with ruthless efficiency, ignoring the havoc wreaked among their ranks and doing nothing to lessen the dreadful impact of returning enemy fire.

Heriat recalled the text of Valien's last full dispatch to him. He'd replied to it, congratulating the agent on the work he'd done in recovering detailed plans of the Capitolis perimeter. He had no idea whether his reply had found its mark; he hoped it had.

Whether he'd known it or not, the data Valien had sent had been invaluable. The atmospheric filtration units studded high up on the walls were heavily guarded with massive walls of armour-cladding and surrounded by heavy weapon turrets. Their gigantic rotating blades were

hidden behind adamantium mesh screens and set far back into the cyclopean flanks of the hive. They were well-guarded, well-hidden and there were dozens of them. Without Valien's coordinates, destroying them would have been hopeless; even with them it was painfully hard.

But they could be taken down. Many units were already on fire, collapsing into ruin as the armour plate around them cracked and flexed. As they did so, the raw toxins of Shardenus Prime's hellish hinterland were sucked up, churned around, mixed with poisonous fuel-fumes, then flushed directly into the deep innards of the hive via the capillaries and tunnels of the spire's enormous circulatory system.

The Capitolis was a body, a single immense organism. Heriat was poisoning it.

A massive explosion rocked *Malevolentia*'s chassis as something detonated close by. Lines of dust ran down from the ceiling of the command chamber, spilling across a cracked pict screen and fouling the image. Scores of runes scrolled across the remainder, feeding him screeds of data on positions, fire-rates, damage taken and units lost.

The tank-lines were exposed and unsupported. They would do well to last another hour. Two, at most. That was all the time they had.

'*Fire!*' Heriat shouted down the comm, spitting his defiance into the mouthpiece. 'Throne of Earth, bring them down! I want to see them *choke!*'

Rauth crashed upwards, lashing out through a whole swathe of clutching tendrils. Everything in the core of the Capitolis had been turned into a clinging, writhing forest of stone and flesh – columns flexed like lungs, taking in air and expelling it with soft breaths. Overhead lumen-banks burst open, revealing nests of worms that fell to the stairs with wet slaps. Wall-sections burst at the seams, vomiting clusters of writhing growths that spilled across the swimming floors; spiked creatures exploded out of suspended cogitator housings, thrusting out through broken valve-shafts and exploded bronze cages.

Rauth swung his fist round, bludgeoning a swaying spawn as it shuddered away from him. He went after it, driving it to the edge of the sweeping Stair. It clung on, trembling even as its spiked tentacles flailed at him. He slammed out a final time with his blade, severing the horror's flesh and sending it crashing through the stone railings and out into the void beyond. It tumbled away into oblivion, wailing as it went.

Rauth powered on upwards, hearing the crunch and thud of his fellow warriors as they hacked their way along the endless Stair. As they went, screams followed them from the very structure of the spire's core. Living humans had been buried inside the pillars of the hive, or melded with the marble flagstones underfoot, or hung from huge iron chains over the bottomless abyss.

Rauth had seen such blasphemies before on other worlds and knew their purpose. Mortal agony echoed in the parallel realm of the aether, quickening spirits of ruin and weakening the bonds that held them distinct from the world of the senses. The Capitolis had been turned into a shrine of pain, an altar on which human suffering would be turned into debased glory.

If he'd been capable of nausea, Rauth would have been sickened by it; as it was, his emotional range had been drilled down to a narrower spectrum. In the absence of shock, pity or terror he simply fought on, channelling his rage into physical destruction. Clad in the huge baroque edifice of Tactical Dreadnought armour, he became a demigod of devastation. When living barriers reared up at him he tore them down. Abominations flung themselves at him, tearing at the ever-moving plates of ceramite and scrabbling for purchase, and they died, cut apart by the crackling edge of his blade or ripped open by tight bursts of bolter rounds.

Khatir remained close to him, striding with cold determination through the melee. Imanol was near too. Telach had forged ahead, accompanied by his Codiciers. The Librarian had been wreathed in a corona of ice-white

fire, lighting up the paths of darkness in stark illumination and propelling him upwards with terrible, ferocious speed. Anything that got close to him, mutant or daemonic, exploded in tatters of charred flesh. He had passed on far ahead, out of reach of help, a lone bright star amid the filth and misery.

Rauth forced himself to run harder, his boots cracking the floor beneath him. Terminator armour was enormous, prohibiting the lightning-quick movements of his battle-brothers, but it was still capable of driving him onwards at a furious pace.

He knew the need for haste. Even though he had none of Telach's gifts he could still sense the burgeoning horror waiting in the levels above. An ambient heartbeat was everywhere – shuddering down sinuous coolant tubes, reverberating up circulation shafts, thrumming across the steps they ascended. Its owner was coming quickly, fighting its way into consciousness like a foetus grappling through the fluids of the womb.

He hadn't been quick enough. Despite everything, despite the sacrifices, the relentless assaults, the focused attack on the centre of the contagion, he hadn't been quick enough.

Rauth had enough humanity left to feel guilt for that. He had enough humanity to feel shame, and frustration, and anger. He had none left for fear, for despair or for resignation: he would fight until the last moment, straining every muscle and overloading every bionic in his system to counteract the evil that had been birthed at the pinnacle.

Aspire to the condition of the primarch. Aspire to the union with steel.

He crashed onwards, decapitating a howling mutant that swung down from a thicket of cables with one hand while disembowelling another with a casual punch of his storm bolter barrels.

A daemon hurtled towards him, bounding down the twisting stairs like a feline.

Rauth winged it with the storm bolter, blowing a section of its trailing leg clean away. It shifted, slipping sideways with impossible speed. Rauth's armour matched it, compensating for the sudden motion with a thousand tiny servo movements. He swung his blade round in a sparkling arc of ice-blue lightning.

It tried to evade again, but misjudged. Rauth's weapon bit deep, and its disruptor field exploded into a snaking, lashing orb of expelled energy. The daemon screamed, throwing its head back and baring lines of fangs. Rauth pushed deeper, working the blade hard, carving through the unholy flesh. He ignored its raking claws, even when they sliced through his own plate and bit down to the metal workings below. The two of them – beast and man – grappled together for a while longer, each gouging chunks out of the other, rocking back and forth and breaking open the wide marble steps beneath them.

Then the light in the daemon's eyes faded. Its broken body collapsed onto the floor. A rushing like storm winds built up, followed by a sharp snap. Rauth drew his sword back and kicked his left boot forwards. The heavy serrated sole crashed down on the creature's head, cracking the bone.

Rauth let himself look down at the vanquished daemon for a moment. Its lithe body was twisted into contortions, the lilac skin broken in a dozen places.

He applied force, and his boot shattered the daemon's skull, grinding the warp-woven bone into dust.

Then he was moving again, lumbering up the winding path towards the uttermost summit. As he went, he saw more creatures of the dark heading towards him, each with an equal desire and capacity to slay. They clogged the way ahead, clawing and racing to be the first into contact with him, swarming down the corridors like insects. They threw themselves into his path, uncaring of their own debased lives, only concerned with slowing the

progress of the Angels of Death for long enough. Simply pushing through the close-packed crowd of them took too long – there were too many, too many.

We are running out of time.

‘Onwards!’ Rauth roared, his voice thick with frustration. ‘*Break* them!’

Nethata watched the Capitolis burn. Out in the wasteland, he could see Heriat’s forces taking heavy punishment. Every time a Leman Russ was reduced to smouldering metal scrap by a las-beam, a pang of terrible shame stabbed at him.

They are my men. They are my machines.

He knew what the Commissar-General was doing. He had seen Valien’s dispatches, and saw where Heriat was aiming. Nethata admired his precision under fire. For all that he had been betrayed, for all that Heriat’s actions had destroyed his own position, he couldn’t muster much more than wry admiration in response.

Heriat had been right. Nethata had always known, in his soul, that his actions had been folly. The Imperium never tolerated dissent. Its very being lay in the absence of dissent, the lack of mercy, the dispassionate application of discipline. It had been foolish, *imbecilic*, to think that he could have proved the exception.

Nethata sat in the chassis of one of the few tanks left to him, commandeered from its Galamoth commander less than a hour ago. The tiny command space in comparison to *Malevolentia* made drawing up acceptable tactics difficult – he had poor control of the comm-network, and a number of commanders were still unable to speak directly to him on secure lines.

The delay had given him time to think, at least. His initial response had been to go after Heriat, to aim his remaining guns at *Malevolentia* and try to disable it. In his initial fury, had been able to, he would have done it.

Then the attack on the spires had begun, and the carnage had escalated quickly. Even as Nethata had rushed to assert his control over the resources he still had left, wall defences had opened up and started destroying Heriat's Basilisks.

Nethata's dreams of an orderly, measured attack lay in ruins. All loyalist forces save those under his immediate command – just over a hundred battle tanks with supporting troop carriers – were fully committed, locked into a death-grapple with an enemy that could no longer be withdrawn from.

That presented him with two options: he could pull his own forces back, retreating ignominiously from the front in the hope that he'd be able to salvage something to use at some later point, or throw his lot in with the man who'd only just betrayed him.

It didn't take long to reach a decision.

'We advance,' he ordered, addressing the squadron commanders over the division-wide channel. 'Take up positions alongside the Commissar-General. Follow his fire-pattern and take his orders. Emperor be with you. Emperor be with us all.'

The tanks started moving immediately. Despite the obvious danger, none of the commanders liked standing idly while their comrades were in action ahead of them. Columns of Leman Russes began to grind their way north, crashing through the maze of shattered buildings and breaking out onto potholed, cracked highways between them.

Nethata watched them go through tiny viewports on the tank's hull. As the tanks made their way towards the battle-front he felt his failure weigh heavily on his shoulders. Physical pain, deep-seated and acute, throbbed in his lower torso, but he resisted the urge to gland.

I should feel pain for this. I should feel guilt, and I should feel shame.

The tank's commander, a man named Hiert Lerdian, turned to face him.

'Are we going in, lord?' he asked.

The tone of his voice was reproachful. Just like the rest, he didn't enjoy seeing other men charge into action ahead of him.

Nethata checked the readings on his auspex again. The screen was filthy with ash.

'Have you raised Princeps Lopi yet?' he asked.

'Negative. The comms protocols are complex. We are trying.'

Neither of the Warlords had moved. They remained static, like ancient statues of a long-dead civilisation watching over the gradual destruction of the world around them. For all Nethata knew, the god-machines might have been in contact with Heriat, or Rauth even, but he no longer had the means to raise them himself.

Nethata put the auspex down.

'Keep trying,' he said.

'And us?'

Nethata looked out of the viewport again, out to where the spires burned.

He knew his life was forfeit. He was tempted to give the order to retreat south. He might have been able to get to the gates, then out across the Helat to the command bunkers. Shuttles would still be berthed there, ready to take him up into orbit and the safety of the fleet. Once aboard a Naval warship, even Rauth would not be able to get at him easily.

'Lord, are we going in?'

It would be difficult, but it could be done. Perhaps, despite all he had done to earn the clan commander's wrath, something – his life at least – could still be salvaged. Maybe negotiations could be made.

You cannot control the Iron Hands. It is dangerous to try.

He smiled again; a hooked, wry gesture across his blunt face.

'Yes, we are going in, commander,' said Nethata, gripping the edges of his seat, ready for the lurch and roll of the tank's movement. Everything on the northern horizon was aflame. For as long as he looked at the Capitolis, he felt like he was looking at the end of the world. 'Seal us up,

and bring us close. We'll add our fire to theirs. Perhaps we can do some good out there.'

He felt the engines start up. The hull of the tank shook violently, and smoke belched into the crew compartments.

'Perhaps we can yet make amends,' Nethata said quietly, speaking to himself as the crew busied themselves with their duties. 'Perhaps there is still time.'



CHAPTER TWENTY

Marivo had made his choice, and Khadi had made hers.

When she'd left, scampering down the tunnels like a sewer rat, he'd felt a sharp and unexpected pang of regret. He'd wanted something a little more pronounced to mark their separation; an acknowledgement, however slight, that they had shared something of a strange bond over the terrible days of the insurrection on Shardenus.

He had saved her life. She had saved his. They had both killed men in the name of the Emperor and lived to witness the Angels of Death in furious, terrifying action. He felt that was worth more than a weary nod, a quick look up, and a brief hand on his shoulder before she'd gone.

That was what he'd got, though. Perhaps there had been no time for anything else. Or perhaps, as was more likely, Khadi had never felt more than a fleeting affinity for him. Any illusion that the two of them had begun to feel some shared sense of purpose, a bond of comradeship even, had been just that – an illusion.

For all that, Marivo couldn't quite shake the image of her tired, scared, dirty face. He held it in his mind as he ran, gripping his lasgun with white-knuckled fingers. Focusing on a picture of humanity in all its ordinariness helped stave off the imminent madness for a little longer.

After she'd gone, he'd gone back to the front, just as he'd always known he would. He'd reported for duty and picked up recycled weapons and armour components. The visor he'd been given had been much better than the one he'd used before, save for the smell of sweat and blood inside.

He'd followed the Iron Hands in with the rest of the mortal troops. He'd watched the gates open, and had felt the cold waves of horror sweep across him again. He'd seen the Space Marines charge through the gap, and he'd heard them shout their battle-cry.

The sound of that had jolted him out of his fear-struck stupor. Before then, even when the daemons had been among them, the Iron Hands had fought in silence. Hearing them roar their defiance in metal-edged unison had daunted him rather than inspired him. It had reminded him just how much he was an insignificant part of all that was unfolding – a mere speck of humanity thrown between the contests of gods and daemons.

Then the orders from the sergeants had broken out, and the remnants of the mortal forces sent into the spires alongside the Iron Hands had begun to shuffle forwards. A mix of uniforms – pearl-grey, olive, black – had jostled alongside one another, a product of hastily reconstituted units and regiments. Marivo had broken into a tumbling run along with the others, trying to keep his feet as he'd passed under the enormous lintel of the gates, trying to keep his senses as the thunderous crash and echo of warfare broke out around him once again.

Now past the gates and still climbing, he couldn't remember what had made him give up the chance to escape. It hadn't been fear of being discovered. It hadn't been faith in the inevitable success of the Imperial Guard – events in the tunnels had shattered any beliefs he'd once had in that respect.

Perhaps it had been nothing more than stubbornness; an inability to change his essential nature even in the face of such extremity.

Marivo charged up the enormous stairwell alongside the others. He only had fleeting glimpses of the vast chasm around him – huge, arching roofs covered with hanging growths and throbbing tumours, pillars soaring away in the muzzle-flash-lit dark, gothic arches framing furnaces beyond. Snatched fragments of screams rang out, some of them human, some of them unearthly and bestial. Violent bursts of gunfire hammered out from further up the Great Stair, matched by the roar and growl of flame weapons igniting.

Marivo felt his lungs burn. The air was hot and bitter, like ashes drifting above a bonfire. Las-fire flickered in the dark, angling in all directions. His boots crunched through what felt like body parts lying on the ground – broken ribcages, crunched torsos, fractured skulls. He nearly pitched onto his face, but was held up and driven onwards by the press of bodies around him.

Just as before, the Iron Hands advanced faster than the mortals could. They had their own objectives, ones that had not been communicated to him or anyone else. That was fine by him; he knew his role. Every man around him knew his role – to do as much damage to the enemy as he could before the end came. If that end drew just one blade away from the Angels of Death then it had achieved its purpose.

Mutants began to crash in amongst them then, howling and shrieking as they careered down the many spans that bridged the gulf between the spiral stairway and the inner walls of the hive. Some still carried ranged weapons; most used improvised blades or the distorted growths bursting from their ruined frames.

Marivo saw one come at him – a burly horror with round black plates in place of skin – and fired. His first shot went wide, but the second connected. The mutant stumbled, and another las-blast finished him.

He kept running. Men alongside him fell and were left behind, choking in the bloody murk that ran ankle-deep and rolling down into oblivion. He

kept firing. Two more mutants went down to his shots.

He'd always been a good marksman. He'd been proud of that, back when his life had consisted of training drills and off-world exercises. He could shoot.

Another one came charging across to the stairway, sprinting along a slender connecting bridge and leaping over the stone railing.

The creature's face was stretched obscenely. Its teeth punched through its own cheeks, extending out and up like the tusks of an ork. It pounced at Marivo from the shadows, thrashing a dirty-looking goad at his stomach.

Marivo swung his lasgun round, squeezing off a single shot. It glanced against the creature's oncoming arm but didn't stop the goad. The blunt blade slipped under his armoured breastplate and burrowed deep into his stomach.

Marivo gasped, but kept moving. He ripped the blade free and smashed the stock of his weapon into the mutant's face. It staggered backwards, lurching towards the edge of the stairway. Marivo limped after it, swinging his gun like a club and bludgeoning it closer to the drop.

It saw the danger, and tried to lunge at him again with the goad. By then, though, Marivo had been able to spin his lasgun back the right way round. He fired, and the shot blasted the creature clean over the railing. It tumbled out into the void, shrieking wildly before its plummet carried it out of earshot.

Marivo slumped against the railing of the stair, his hand clamped to his bloody stomach. He leaned against the stone. All around him, men and mutants grappled with one another.

Feeling dizzy, he let his head swing around. He looked out over the edge of the stairwell. The void fell away into blackness below him, vertiginous and yawning, and he realised how high he'd come already.

When he saw the green bloom race towards him from out of the depths, he had no idea what it was. He watched it puff out like algae in water,

swimming out of the darkness and swirling up in broad, milky swathes.

Only when it hit him did he recognise what it was. He remembered the toxic fog of the wasteland, how it had nearly killed him before. He crashed to the floor, trying not to breathe in and knowing he would have to. The air around him flushed green as clouds of chemical fog raced up the core of the spire, billowing and boiling like thunderheads before a gale.

Marivo tried to rise, staggering forwards, then crashed to earth. He could feel blood run down from his eyes, and his skin begin to burn. He began to lose consciousness, but somehow managed to roll himself onto his back. He heard other bodies crash to the floor with wet thuds. He heard both men and mutants dissolve into fits of coughing.

His vision went cloudy. The sounds of gunfire receded, becoming muffled and echoing.

Marivo had no idea how the spire's seals had been breached. He had no idea whether it had been intentional or not. Before he died, though, he did realise something that he guessed might be important: those of mortal flesh and blood, whether pure or mutant, could not fight for long in such conditions. They would die as the chemical filth filled their lungs. Only those encased in armour and with the physique of demigods could tolerate it.

The Emperor's Angels.

Marivo let his head fall back. He gazed directly above him. As he did so, clouds of green-tinged fog rushed over him, sweeping up the Great Stair and curling around the core.

Bolted to an overhanging bulkhead, only five metres above him, was a standard-issue Imperial aquila. Marivo had seen thousands of such emblems during his service, and that one was no different. It was streaked with purple fluid and cracked from solid-round impacts, but it was still intact. Somehow it had survived the desecration, a tiny portion of Shardenus's dignity still unbroken.

That gave him comfort. The image had been with him since childhood, defining him, giving him purpose. It was the emblem of his life. It was the emblem of all their lives. Now, at the end, it watched over him with blind, impassive eyes, unfurling its angular wingspan across the scenes of devastation.

‘Holy Throne of Terra...’ he breathed, beginning the catechism that would guide him to the Emperor’s side.

He knew he had achieved very little. He had killed a few traitors, and gathered a few more loyalists to his side. He had followed the orders he’d been given, even at the end when he’d had the chance to get out. Whenever he could, he’d stayed on his feet, fighting on, standing up to horrors that were far in excess of his limited powers.

He didn’t know whether that made him a hero or a fool. He knew what Khadi thought.

‘Holy Master of Mankind...’ he rasped, coughing.

He never finished. His jaw fell open, his lasgun fell from his hands, his chest stopped moving. All around him, traitors and loyalists slammed to the stairs, retching and scratching at their throats.

And so it was that, flat on his back, his unseeing eyes staring towards the heavens, Alend Marivo died the way he’d always known he would: his uniform on, his blast-visor down, and with image of the eternal Imperium gazing down upon him.

Telach sprinted up the stair, flanked by his three Codiciers. His breath came in deep, ragged gasps. Warp fire trailed from his armour in long glowing streamers, and the head of his staff flared like an imprisoned sun. The gap between the Stair’s edge and the bulk of the hive around him narrowed dramatically, closing down to nothing more than a few metres. He saw the curve of arches soaring towards their keystones, and knew the end was close.

Light streamed from the joints in his battle-plate, leaking out from the incandescence within him. He was burning himself up, bleeding with

summoned psychic fire that consumed him even as he used it to kill the creatures that blocked his progress. The agony of it had long since ceased to plague him. It drove him onwards, keeping his purpose pure, goading him into ever greater feats of endurance.

Only he knew the full measure of the monsters being birthed in the spire above. If the rift opened, many more abominations would spill through, condemning Shardenus to a living hell of madness. The lesser daemons they had fought since entering the tunnels required only trivial sorcery to spin into being. The ones that were coming demanded sacrifices of worlds: they were devourers, the shivers of souls, the bringers of torment.

One of Fulgrim's sons. And he has fought us before.

Telach kept running, leaping up several steps at a time. Warp creatures crashed against his psychic shielding, burning away at the touch of the dreadful aegis around him. With every impact, a little of his strength was chipped away, a fragment of his power dissipated.

He'd gone faster than the others, using his psychic gifts to propel him. Only Nedim, Malik and Djeze, similarly wreathed in layers of fire and capable of using their powers to sustain them, had been able to keep up. Telach had blazed a trail up through the high places, using his warp-summoned powers to speed him onwards. Even he had not been able to outrun the clouds of toxins that had rushed up the central core, sweeping through the ranks of mutants before them and laying them low. Now, with the swarms of traitor creatures thinned out, every step, every boost, took him a little closer to the conflict that waited.

He had to be quicker. He ignored the stress-warnings from his armour, and he ignored the blood swelling in his boots, and he ignored the growing tears in his muscles. He kept going, ever upwards, ever higher, carving a path through the vaults of darkness like a spear of starlight surging up through layers of shadow.

When he finally broke through, it came as shock. He thundered onwards, tearing along the broken marble stairwell. He reached a ruined segment – a jumbled heap of fallen masonry and metal struts, as if a whole section of wall had been blasted inwards, clogging the way ahead. There was no way around – it seemed as if the entire spire had collapsed in on itself, closing up the abyss between the core and the rest of the structure and forming a massive clot of semi-molten, tangled ferrocrete.

Telach picked up the pace, accelerating towards the wall of ruin. By the time he hit it, he was moving at massive speed. He burst up into the wreckage, burrowing through it and throwing the lumps of detritus aside like a leviathan emerging from the deep. He felt his Codiciers follow him, burning and destroying as they came. His momentum carried him straight through, barging away plasteel beams and hurling cracked blocks of masonry aside. He heard huge crashes as rebars and rockcrete arches crashed down into the stairwell below, bouncing and disintegrating as they whirled into the abyss.

Then he broke out, bursting into the open on the far side. The layers of broken hive-structure gave out at last. Above them was a sky formed of boiling ash clouds and flickering orange lightning. Telach shrugged off the debris in dusty clouds, emerging into a scene of pure desolation.

He clambered higher, pulling himself free of the well he had bored through the broken metal, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

The pinnacle of the Capitolis was gone. Whole towers, domes and structures had all gone, blasted apart in a storm of incendiary fury. What remained was a blunt, unstable, half-collapsed plateau at the very top of the hive. It was comprised of molten metal and broken pillars, riven with crevasses, still flickering with windswept flame, open to the elements and buffeted by the endless, driving ash.

Telach spun round, searching for the enemy that he had sensed for so long. His Codiciers pulled themselves free of the wreckage and joined

him, their fists crackling with opalescent energies.

The plateau was big – four hundred metres across, at least – but was as uneven and treacherous as any blast site. Over to Telach's left, a huge gouge plunged down the southern face of the spire, still burning furiously and sending rolling plumes of smoke drifting across what remained intact. Everything was black, scorched into carbon by the furious firestorm that had swept through the upper levels.

Far, far below him, down on the wasteland between the spires, Telach could see a long, ravaged formation of tanks bombarding the lower levels of the hive. Further out, almost lost in the smog and ash, were the two enormous Warlord Titans. They didn't move, and no lights glinted from their cockpits. He briefly wondered what they were waiting for.

He began to move, striding out across the wreckage of the Capitolis's pinnacle. It felt as if he'd emerged high atop some mythical pillar of the gods, thrust up from the mantle of a burning world and exposed to the gaze of the angry heavens. He could still sense corruption around him – it stuck in his nostrils, draining his strength and dragging on his muscles.

Then he saw the rift. It must have been enclosed once, hidden inside one of the Capitolis's highest chambers and surrounded by the instruments of ritual. Now those chambers and those instruments were gone, blasted apart in an orgy of fire, and the portal was out in the open, cast upon the uttermost summit of the shattered hive spire.

To mortal eyes, it was almost nothing. An absence more than a substance, it hovered seductively on the edge of sight like a vid-feed artefact or a distortion on an auspex readout. Telach couldn't focus on it; any attempt to do so made his eyes ache. Only the elements at its edge could be seen truly – a vague circle of flickering, wavering witchfire, ten metres across, hovering several metres above the plateau of ruin.

His psychic senses told him more. They told him that the rift was nearly complete, that the skeins of matter holding the structure of the universe

intact were stretched very tight. Enormous forces clustered on the other side, ready to pour through the gap. He could hear the claws of the neverborn as they raged at the remaining resistance, scraping the veils of perception aside one by one. Daemons beyond number were clustered on the far side, ready to turn Shardenus into a nightmarish, eternal play-world for their obscene desires.

Telach strode up to the portal, feeling its unholy essence radiate across him. Out on the plains below, men continued to die, and fires continued to rage. His Codiciers followed him, each of them kindling fresh psychic fire from their force-staffs. They had the power to destroy it. The damnation of Shardenus would be halted.

By your grace, he said to himself, preparing for the challenge of closing it. *We are in time*.

He raised his staff.

Then, behind him, ten metres away, nearly on the edge of the dizzying drop, a pile of masonry stirred.

Telach almost didn't turn. His first thought was that it was a lesser daemon that had followed them up, one that his acolytes were capable of dealing with.

But he did turn. Some note of disquiet made him look away from the rift and over to where the rubble was moving.

Claws extended from the wreckage, long and curved and made of black metal. A fist followed them, encased in horribly damaged armour. A spiked curve of pauldron broke free, scattering detritus as it rose.

Then the head emerged. Telach saw it thrash back and forth, shaking off the debris around it. He saw patches of skin, yellow with age and daubed with streaks of rouge, stitched together over a gaunt frame of jutting bone. He saw milky eyes set deep within ravaged cheeks. He saw curls of aether-light spill over its scalp, coursing across the tortured surface like streams of tears.

With an echoing roar, the creature pulled itself free of the wreckage, and uncurled itself. Lightning snapped and fizzed around it, lancing down from the heavens as if drawn by its unholy presence.

It was a giant; almost three times the height of a Terminator-clad Space Marine. It was a huge, shambling mess of armour plates, bulbous tumours of weeping flesh and gaudy, vivid swirls of decoration. Clusters of jewels hung from its breastplates in iron chains, clanking together as the monster moved. Flayed skin hung from its shoulders in long tatters, swirling about it in the ash-wind like grotesque purity seals. A motley collection of trophies had been bolted on to its immense frame, fighting for space amid glistening, overspilling muscle-bunches. Bodily fluids, pungent with foul aromas, sluiced across the chaotic landscape of ceramite and metal.

The creature stretched out, extending two enormous lightning claws, turning the blades and delighting in them. Witchfire crackled around it, licking and snaking up from the blasted plateau. Telach could sense the terrible hearts beating within that grotesque outer shell. He could feel the furnace of daemonic energy deep within, boiling and raging and only barely contained by the physical bonds set around it.

The monster had once been human. It had once been like he was – an Angel of Death, a Child of the Emperor.

The daemon looked down on Telach and the Codiciers. It recognised what they were. Its gaze was deranged, out-of-focus. When it smiled, patches of stitched flesh broke away from its skull, bursting free of their sutures.

‘Exquisite,’ it said.

Morvox thundered upwards, thrusting aside the living flesh that reached out to ensnare him. Filaments grasped at his armour and pulled tight before snapping. Snarls and blooms of chemical-laced fog rushed by, surging up from the abyss below and streaking up towards the summit of the stairwell.

‘Onward!’ roared Khatir, only just ahead of him.

The Iron Father’s flamers were raging just as strongly as they had been in the early stages. The mutants had ceased to be a threat – the toxic atmosphere had felled them in droves, freeing up paths ahead of the Iron Hands’ spearhead. The marble floor was carpeted with their broken bodies, bloated with fumes and with blood pouring from every orifice.

Morvox struggled to keep up with Khatir’s furious pace. The Iron Hands had spread out during the long pursuit up the Great Stair, many of them waylaid by daemonic attacks or dragged into combat along the many tributary spans. The thick chemical fog made reading locations difficult, even as it allowed them to race up the spiralling stairway far faster than before.

Morvox no longer knew how far behind his clone had fallen: their life-signals on his helm-display had gone, and damage to his right lens clouded the results further. His bolter had long since run out of ammunition, so he carried his chainsword two-handed, swinging it around him like a mace.

Even though the mutants had been eliminated, the daemons were still present. Impervious to the poisons in the air, they leapt from the inner walls of the spire and sailed over to the Stair, shrieking as they came.

Gergiz had been taken down by one of them; it had sprung from nowhere, grappling with him in an obscene parody of an embrace before tipping them both over the edge of the precipitous shaft. Morvox had seen other warriors ripped apart by them, crippled by claw-strikes, reduced to smoking, fizzing hunks of metal and ceramite by the rapid flicker of warp-fast blades.

‘Cleanse the unclean! For the Emperor!’

Khatir’s entreaties remained strong. He’d driven inexorably upwards, blazing a trail through the dark heart of the hive like a firebrand thrust into the night sky. Only now was his voice becoming cracked, the amplifiers in his helm stretched to their limit.

Something snapped out at Morvox's shoulder then, thrusting out from the darkness. He lashed round, and his chainsword ploughed into what looked like a forest of human hands reaching out from the slough of filth that covered every surface of the Stair's core. He hacked at them viciously, quickly turning the mutated muscles into a bloody, twitching soup of severed flesh.

Once free, he burst back into motion, sprinting hard to catch up with Khatir.

'Purge the mutant!' came the Iron Father's roar from ahead, suddenly cut short by the heavy rush of flamers.

Morvox redoubled his pace, thundering around the curving sweep of the Stair, brushing aside the fronds of corrupted matter that still grabbed at him.

He rounded the corner and saw the Iron Father's body twisted on the ground, crushed up against the inner core of the stairwell. Over it squatted a lesser daemon, its face alive with glee and covered in blood. Two of its sisters lay in the mire beside them, their heads severed and their skin blackened.

Morvox kept going, crashing into the daemon and carrying them both clear of Khatir's body. It arched its back and broke free of him, pouncing to one side and swivelling around, ready to launch at him with its claws. Morvox lunged out with his chainsword, driving the blades diagonally across the creature's body. The daemon screamed, thrashing against the whirring edges, before spinning away. Morvox went after it, thrusting out and hacking back, driving it towards the edge. He caught it again, snagging his chainsword against its body and churning through lilac flesh.

It screamed in agony before crashing through the stone railing and tumbling out into the void. Cut apart by Morvox's blades, it dropped like a stone, wailing away into nothingness.

Morvox spun back round, hurrying over to the Iron Father, stooping over him and searching for signs of life.

They were there – very faint, just on the edge of detection.

‘Lord, an Apothecary,’ he said, stilling his chainsword and running a medicae scan over Khatir’s blood-soaked torso.

Khatir’s fist shot up. His gauntlet seized Morvox’s forearm. The grip was savage.

‘Go,’ Khatir rasped, and fresh blood bubbled up between his helm and breastplate. ‘The summit. Do it.’

Morvox hesitated. Khatir was not yet dead. Given time, given treatment, he might live.

‘I do not–’

The grip on his arm started to weaken.

‘Still, you question,’ growled Khatir, his voice degrading into a throaty mess. He sounded desperate. ‘Continue on present tasking.’

Something about the Iron Father’s voice made Morvox recoil then. For a moment, he couldn’t understand what it was.

Then he felt the old disgust rise up in him. He heard the sound of blood welling up through flesh, slipping over the mechanical components embedded there and fouling their operation. He saw the Iron Father’s raw muscle, exposed under broken armour plate, glistening wetly in the dark.

Khatir’s hand slipped from Morvox’s armour and thudded to the ground.

It will come for you soon. You will forget pity, and you will see the weakness we carry within us.

Morvox didn’t say anything more. He pushed his way from Khatir’s cracked armour and turned away. Already, from up ahead, he could hear the shrieks of the neverborn. From below he heard the thud of his brothers’ boots as they charged onwards. He started to move again, first striding, then running heavily.

Weakness.

Morvox gunned his chainsword back into life, and the sound of the lethal, mechanical parts moving lessened the nausea in his stomach.

I am surrounded by it. It is everywhere.

As he ran, he felt a nagging, itching sensation plaguing him. It made him angry. It made him want nothing more than to fight, to forget, to lose himself.

I will not succumb. I will transform.

Morvox charged along the corridor, following its line as it climbed ever higher. As he went, leaving the crippled body of the Iron Father far behind him, the cries of daemons grew louder and nearer.

I will purge it.

He picked up his pace. He relished destroying them. He wanted nothing more. When the first of them came into view, he felt like grinning.

The rest is strength.

The monster lurched into battle, crushing the brittle landscape of ruin beneath its feet. It moved with none of the sinuous grace of the lesser daemons – it was a patchwork creature of scraps and ancient relics, locked together by sorcery and its own infernal will. As it moved, whips of purple light slapped and slipped around it, bouncing from the shards of old, clattering battle-plate.

It grinned as it advanced, and its sutured face stretched. Iron teeth, each of them filed to points and dripping with viscous saliva, flashed through the drifting smog. Its eyes stared ceaselessly, bleary with malice and madness. Its lightning claws snickered back and forth, grinding against one another as the horror flexed its tattered muscles.

Across its enormous torso hung the remnants of an old breastplate, burst open by the glossy flesh beneath. An Imperial aquila had once adorned it, picked out in gold, but was now almost entirely obscured by baroque adornments and freshly-lacquered panels. Some of its residual armour had been painted a vivid purple; other pieces glowed with lurid pastel shades.

As it crashed towards Telach and the Codiciers, it gurgled with bubbling laughter, and strands of saliva hung in loops from its sagging jaw.

‘Perfect,’ it slurred, lingering on the word as if it had some significance for it.

Telach felt his hearts sink. He knew he had enough power to seal the rift. He might have had enough power, acting in concert with his acolytes, to fight the daemon-creature, though that was uncertain.

He could not do both. Even as he prepared to meet the onslaught he could sense the rift weakening further. Every heartbeat brought it closer to rupture.

+Strike together,+ he sent to the Codiciers, watching carefully as the three of them fanned out across the plateau. Each one of them held their force-staff two-handed, and eddies of psychic essence reflected dully from their dark battle-plate. +Say nothing, heed nothing.+

He could sense their tenseness, their readiness. All of them had passed beyond the possibility of fear, but they could still recognise the magnitude of the horror they faced.

The Emperor protects, he mouthed.

Nedim was the first of his acolytes to lash out, sending a spitting column of silver energy straight at the daemon. It exploded as it impacted, showering the plateau with smoking, spinning trails of sparkling residue.

Malik followed him, dousing the daemon in a welter of shimmering energy. Then Djeze released, joining the streams of coruscating warp-fire in a triangle of snaking, surging force.

The daemon rocked back on its cloven hooves, thrashing its arms through the deluge and hurling goutts of the silvery matter in all directions. A cry of tortured ecstasy escaped from its lips – an amalgam of many voices, many of them human-like, some of them indescribable. It waded onwards amid the storm of coruscating energy, lapping it up and letting it crash across its broken armour.

Then it burst through the oncoming tide, shrugging off the attacks and letting them break across its flesh like rainwater. It plunged towards Nedim, swinging its claws in slow, pendulous motions. As it lumbered into range, fragments of its haphazard body began to break away, flaking free like scales being dragged from the hide of some enormous saurian.

Telach waited until the last moment, until the creature had gained enough momentum to be unable to pull back.

+Unleash,+ he breathed.

An inferno of blazing silver leapt into existence, exploding in a raging storm of blinding light. The warp essence was dragged up from Telach's very soul – the raw stuff of the aether, fashioned into lethal energy by the Librarian's art, turned from a seething morass of formlessness and into a focused, deadly weapon.

Telach felt it thunder out from his staff, making the length of it shiver and his arms tremble. Light spilled from his eyes, from his open mouth, from the palms of his hands. The roaring maelstrom made the joints of his armour burn white-hot. He felt his whole body respond, caught up in the immense, consuming tide of power as it escaped from him.

The snaking barrage hit the daemon full on, sending it staggering back again. Its legs bowed, and it reeled away from Nedim. More unearthly cries of savage pleasure escaped from its mouth, and its long tongue flailed out wildly.

Telach took a stride forwards, maintaining the ferocious assault.

Burn, abomination. Go back to the realm that created you. Be undone. Be banished.

Djeze and Malik advanced with him, summoning up their own flurries of silver-edged bolts and hurling them at the retreating torso of the daemon.

The creature was wounded. Gouts of purple blood ran down its limbs, boiling as the silver flames evaporated it. More slivers of its bizarre

armour were blown away, spinning off into the backwash of psychic power that streamed away behind it.

But it was no lesser creature of darkness – it was a prince of pain, a master of the dark wells of a mortal's mind, and its command of sorcery was a match for all but the greatest champions of Mankind. Moreover, its movements were not those of a creature trying to evade the punishment.

It revelled in it. It wanted more.

It crouched down, hacking up laughter from its ruined gullet, continually bludgeoned by the rain of warp matter. Then it pounced, swinging into the air with a huge thrust of its gigantic legs. Its hooves crushed the metal as it landed, then it kicked off again, lurching and swaying through the torrential fire, racing towards Nedim and shrieking with splintered laughter. Its claws flickered through the air, jumping from one position to the next like out-of-sequence frames on a vid-pict.

Telach adjusted the trajectory of his assault, aiming to knock the monster back again and clear of the Codicier, but the daemon was too fast, too powerful. Nedim braced himself and swung his staff upwards to meet the daemon's talons, planting his feet wide apart for the impact of the claws.

It never came. Somehow, the metal spurs seemed to shift out of position, causing Nedim to miss the parry and stumble forwards.

It was enough. The daemon grabbed him by the throat and lifted him high into the air. Telach and the others came in closer, hurling bolts of crackling warp fire. The bolts hit it hard, and it reeled away again, still clutching its prey. Nedim, held up one-handed, slammed his staff down into the daemon's face, aiming for its eyes.

Again, the blow should have connected, but – impossibly – the creature's grinning face had already moved. It dodged the impact and flexed its arm, throwing Nedim high into the air. For a fraction of a second the Codicier hung powerless above the laughing daemon, his limbs outstretched and his

staff out of position. Then the monster thrust up with both its claws, plunging its blades through Nedim's waist.

The Codicier was torn in two, his torso rent cleanly apart in a bloody flail of gore and broken ceramite. The pieces crashed to the ground, followed by a rain of wet slaps as his eviscerated entrails followed him down.

The daemon swung around, doused in blood and buffeted by the roaring, spitting streams of silver fire from the remaining three Librarians. It threw its tortured head back and uttered a gargling cry of triumph, soaking up the furious volleys of warp matter as they exploded against its flanks.

'Magnificent!' it bellowed, revelling in the carnage it had caused even as it suffered under the torrents of forking energy. Blood ran down its scarred chin, and its long tongue lapped it up. 'Give me *more*, Gorgon-spawn! *Give me more!*'

Malik and Djeze each withdrew steadily, maintaining the lines of blistering force from their staffs, unwilling to be caught within strike-range of the creature's claws.

Telach felt a cold dread pass through him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the rift pulsing. The empty space between the ring of witchfire had distorted further, as if it were bulging outwards. The daemon-creature's presence in the world was drawing the others towards it. For the first time, he saw shapes on the other side – writhing shapes, pressing up against the thinning walls of matter.

+Do *not* withdraw!+ he ordered the Codiciers, feeding more energy to his crackling staff and breaking into a run towards the towering daemon. +It can endure this fire. Move in – get *closer*.+

As he ran, the last bolts of warp energy crashed into their target. Telach withdrew his power to the staff itself, coating it in a sheen of magnesium-white. The length of it blazed with sudden brilliance, transforming into a force-weapon of concentrated luminescence.

‘For Manus!’ he roared, breaking into a rare battle-cry as he lumbered heavily into range.

The daemon lurched towards him in turn, swaying and giggling even as its cloak of flayed flesh crisped away in the deluge.

‘Manus?’ it laughed, frothing at the mouth with insane glee, bringing its talons into position and clanging them together. ‘I was there when he *died*, Iron Hand.’

Then it broke into a shambling, rocking charge, thrashing its arms as it came in a whirl of blades and blood.

‘We killed him,’ it mocked, bursting through the sheets of aether-flame. ‘We will kill you.’



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Mechanicus crawler made its way slowly across the Gorgas, rocking and swaying as it crunched through the remnants of civilisation. Ahead of it, vast and magnificent even in ruin, reared the burning spires of Shardenus Prime. Lightning flickered across the heights, leaping down from swirling bands of cloud. The pinnacles of the spires blazed furiously, shining like blood-red beacons across the landscape of desolation.

Ys looked at it impassively. Her throne was hoisted on suspensors and remained reasonably level during the passage, but even the slightest jolts annoyed her.

She was ashamed, and she was still angry. Progress was too slow, and the chances of achieving what she needed to achieve diminished as every minute passed.

She glanced at the signals from her skitarii escorts. Some of her tracked units had pushed ahead, looking for a faster way through the wreckage.

They wouldn't find one; her cogitators had plotted the most efficient route on the basis of detailed schematics. She would have to be patient. She would have to sit, immobile, locked inside the huge metal shell of her mobile fortress, and wait for the kilometres to pass.

I will kill him for this, she determined, gripping the sides of her throne with metal fingers. *The judgement is just; Mars will understand.*

She sat on the throne, watching through the noosphere projections as the spires drew slowly nearer, marking where the Iron Hands had broken in and gauging where their fighting must have taken them.

Her resolve hardened; it couldn't come quickly enough.

I will kill him.

Telach leapt into the air, using his servo-powered legs to catapult him upwards. As he hurtled towards the daemon he swung his staff round, lashing out at its unholy flesh.

He had to move quickly. For all its shambolic appearance, the creature was the fastest enemy he had ever faced. Its blades whirled around him in a flickering, wavering dance, sometimes seeming to shift in and out of existence entirely. The gaudy array of grotesquerie was a distraction, masking a terrifying level of power within. Its muscles, bursting out from behind cracked armour plate, were a terrible mix of genhanced, warp-wound strength.

Even as he fought for his life, conscious that the rift was growing with every second, desperate thoughts raced through Telach's mind. He had been party to lore forbidden to most; he knew the names of ancient traitors from the old Legions. He knew much of the history of his Chapter, even fragments of those forgotten days, millennia distant, when primarchs had walked among mortal men.

He did not know enough. The lore was incomplete. He did not know the name of the creature he faced.

Telach's power staff crashed against the daemon's claws, hurling fresh gout of warp fire in all directions. Its talons swept back towards him and Telach veered away, smashing its forearms aside with his staff.

The creature's hide ruptured, exposing a flickering skein of kaleidoscopic sinew. Fresh purple blood burst out, popping and cascading over the glowing matter beneath.

By then Djeze and Malik had closed in again, wielding their lightning-crowned staffs and hammering them into the daemon's body. Their skill was prodigious, their bravery absolute, their commitment total. They fought as all the Emperor's Angels did – brutal, fast, deadly. Their bionics made them stronger again, bolstering the momentum of every blow and speeding up their reactions by precious nanoseconds. The power of the aether rushed to their aid, enveloping them in curtains of consuming fire, flaring out with each staff-strike and raging against the unholy aegis surrounding the daemon.

It wasn't enough. For all their speed, the creature of Chaos was faster. For all their strength, it was stronger. For all their warp-mastery, it was far, far more steeped in the sorcery of the immaterium.

It punched out with its taloned fist, rocking Telach back on his heels and denting his breastplate. As he tumbled away, he saw talons whistle round, cracking into Djeze's helm. The acolyte went reeling, stumbling backwards across the tilted, broken landscape.

Then the daemon switched direction again, swivelling effortlessly. For all its demented, carefree laughter, every move it made was judged with deceptive precision. Malik charged in, bringing the tip of his staff down and releasing another torrent of spitting argent fire.

The barrage sprayed across the daemon's leading leg, sending a stream of purple blood splattering across metal and ceramite, but the move had been foreseen. Before Telach could close in again, before Djeze could regain his feet, the daemon opened up its gauntlet.

The movement was perfect. Lilac energy exploded on impact, ripping through the ash and sending a resounding *snap* across the plateau. Malik was hurled through the air, careering wildly away from the explosion, his staff broken and his armour smoking. Even as he was cast aside, the daemon opened up its other fist, hurling a flaming ball of purple warp matter sailing after him. The second explosion was greater than the first –

a monumental *boom* that engulfed the stricken Iron Hand in a welter of raging, consuming destruction.

His armour broke open, exposing the flesh within to the pure power of the warp. Telach heard Malik scream briefly before the Codicier landed heavily, colliding with the charred girders of the plateau. The sound was cut off by a sickening snap, and Malik's limbs fell limp. A length of adamantium rod the width of a man's forearm protruded from his cracked chest, impaling him to the summit of the spire.

By then Telach was moving again, wielding his force-staff two-handed. He rammed it down on the daemon's tattered thigh, plunging the tip through the sorcerous muscle and burning it up with crackling warp fire. It reacted instantly, sweeping its claws around to knock him clear. Telach ducked, feeling the killing edges sweep above him by a finger's width, before thrusting the staff upwards, aiming at the monster's heart.

A little faster, and he would have done it. The daemon parried the blow just in time, bringing its gauntlet across to lock against the staff. It grasped the metal, squeezing it tightly and forcing it away. Telach pushed back, feeling his arms burn under the enormous pressure. He felt blood and sweat run down his temples.

The daemon leered over him, drooling from cracked lips.

'Excellent,' it crooned, piling on more weight. 'I shall relish bleeding you last of all.'

Then Djeze roared back into combat, his gauntlets streaming with psychic energy. The Codicier leapt high, vaulting over a ridge of smouldering masonry and jabbing down with his staff. The blazing tip of it hit hard, driving deep into the daemon's armoured shoulder. Opalescent fire surged out, crashing across all of them in a glittering, torrential deluge.

The daemon released the pressure on Telach's staff and was beaten back, laughing all the while. Strips of skin from its sutured face were ripped

away, revealing bloody muscle tissue underneath. More armour fragments were blasted clear. It roared with pleasure from every bloody wound it received, revelling in every impact and fresh bite of warp flame.

Freed to move again, Telach swung his staff around, building momentum. He unleashed a fresh torrent of crashing, roaring destruction, adding his fire to Djeze's in a brutal, spitting conflagration. Under the twin assaults, the daemon withdrew further, limping awkwardly, thrashing its limbs wildly amid the deluge as if swimming through it.

Telach pursued, sending bolts crashing into its retreating torso. Both Librarians unleashed all they had left, emptying themselves against the daemon. The air itself seemed to carve open, riven apart by the elemental forces loosed through it. Stabs of lightning intensified, drawn by the enormous clash of energies, crackling and snapping around them like solar flares.

Even that was not enough. The daemon slowly regained its balance, and its demented laughter morphed into something more sinister, more purposeful. It pushed back against the veils of silver fire with bleeding hands. It lowered its broken pauldrons and strode forwards, step by step, back towards the two Iron Hands.

It had been badly hurt – a long gash ran down its disintegrating face, making its jaw sag horribly. A smoking hole had been torn in its midriff just below the shattered aquila, exposing blackened, pulsing organs within. Its tongue flickered back and forth, snaking across exposed bone and metal plate.

‘This has been exquisite,’ it gurgled.

Then it lunged, bursting through the crackling arcs of warp lightning, sweeping towards Telach like an avenging angel. Djeze intervened, and was blasted aside, thrown down with a contemptuous swipe of a bleeding gauntlet.

Telach planted himself, holding his staff before him and feeding it all the power he could muster. A glimmering shield formed in front of him, and he felt his armour servos stiffen against the coming impact.

The daemon thundered into him, wrapped in a glowing nimbus of purple flame, its claws sweeping back and forth in a blur of blinding movement.

Telach parried furiously, though the force of the blows nearly shattered his forearms. He was driven back, stumbling as the massive creature hammered at his defences. The shield before him buckled, ripped, and then splintered. He felt a fist thud heavily into his flank, cracking his armour and breaking the bionics beneath. He spun away, only for talons to rake down his helm. His right eye-lens cracked, and a rapier-thin claw gouged into his eye-socket.

Telach tried desperately to summon up psychic power, but his staff was ripped away from him. He punched out, clenching his gauntlet and going for the daemon's chest. The daemon's right claw shot down, taking his left arm off at the elbow. Its blades sliced cleanly through the metal workings of Telach's armour, breaking the pistons and gears in a cloud of electric discharge.

Telach fell heavily, crashing on to his back. He felt his consciousness waver, and blood ran down the inside of his helm like oil. He struck out blindly with his right hand, and missed. He felt huge, warm fingers grip his throat, pressed against the armour of his gorget and pushing inwards.

Telach's left eye blinked blood away, and his vision briefly cleared. The daemon's face hung over him.

Its skin was hanging from its bones, suspended by stray lines of surgical wire. Blood ran freely down across its hide, pooling and bubbling in the folds of flayed flesh and shattered armour pieces. Jewels clanged on their twisted chains, each of them lit from within by twisting flames. Some of them were round and smooth, with the sheen of xenos artifice on their surfaces.

The daemon face swung lower, and fluid dripped from the exposed flesh onto Telach's helm. Its breath stank of incense and musk.

'You have forgotten so much,' it said.

Telach looked into its rheumy eyes, knowing the end had come. He was pinned. His hearts thudded in unison, going into overdrive just to keep him alive.

'You do not know who I am,' said the daemon-creature. Its voice was suddenly petulant. 'You do not even know the names of your brothers I killed. Why have you forgotten so much? Why do you not remember?'

Telach felt fresh blood wash hotly across his torso, and his vision briefly went dark again. He concentrated furiously, trying to stay conscious at the last, determined to meet his death with his eyes open.

'I do not need to know your name,' he rasped. 'You are just another traitor.'

The daemon roared with anger. It curled its claws into fists and slammed them into Telach's body, denting his armour and beating the Librarian further down into the crushed and twisted terrain.

'Santar knew!' the daemon screamed. 'He knew who I was! He knew that it was Julius Kaesoron, First of the Emperor's Children, who had beaten him! You are *shadows* of what he was! You are *sick*! Where is the sport in fighting such diminished creatures?' It drew its talons back higher, poised to attack, and fire ran along the length of the claws.

'Ferrus would *weep*,' it said, 'to see what you have become.'

Telach blearily watched the points plunge down at him. He saw his distorted reflection in the metal as the polished edges rushed towards his neck.

The blade that saved him came out of nowhere, and crackled with a blue disruptor field. It locked with the daemon's claw just above Telach's helm, throwing glittering illumination across his battered armour and holding firm.

‘He never wept,’ came Rauth’s machine-growl.

Then the clan commander threw the daemon’s claws back up from Telach’s neck, strode across his battered body and launched into combat.

Nethata was slammed against the wall of the tank’s cockpit, and his head bounced painfully from a metal bulkhead.

He pushed himself back into his seat, regretting having released the restraints only minutes earlier. He pulled the strapping back across his chest, and the tank’s tilting floor rocked back to something like horizontal.

‘What was that?’ he snapped.

‘Our escort,’ replied the tank’s commander. ‘They’re finding our range; I’m moving up.’

The tank’s chassis swayed again as the engines coughed and growled. Nethata twisted around in his seat, squinting into his auspex and trying to make sense of the readings that flooded across the tiny screen.

If he’d been in *Malevolentia* he’d have had a whole bank of pict readouts to look at. He’d have had dedicated comms units, and tactical overlays, and everything else a field commander needed to coordinate a massed armour advance.

But *Malevolentia* was gone. It had taken a terrific amount of punishment before it had succumbed. Its armour was the best in the formation, and had absorbed a number of direct hits before the end.

Heriat had just kept advancing through all of it, even when the whole roof of his vehicle was on fire and the main cannon had been knocked out. Nethata had watched it all unfold on a tiny, grainy vid-feed all the while, powerless to intervene.

He’d tried to open up a comm-link. He’d not wanted to try to persuade Heriat to withdraw – that would have been pointless. He’d not wanted to berate him, nor query his motives, nor demand control of his army back, all of which would have served no purpose either.

To the extent that he'd had any plan at all, he'd wanted to say that he understood, and to assure him that the two of them needn't die as enemies. He'd wanted to relive, just for a moment, some fragment of the shared memories they had accumulated over many long, difficult years.

Perhaps Heriat wouldn't have listened. In any case, the link hadn't worked – either *Malevolentia*'s systems were damaged, or he was being blocked.

So Nethata had watched, mute, as the final beams of light had shot out, piercing the super-heavy's armour plate and striking at the engines within. The end had not been quick – more shots had been needed to ignite the fuel tanks that finally brought the machine to a flaming, shuddering stop.

The tank's heavy bolters had kept firing the whole time. The engines had stayed running, pushing it ever closer to the semi-ruined walls of the Capitolis. Before he eventually died, Heriat had done more damage to his targets than the next ten units combined. Nethata knew that if any annals of the campaign on Shardenus were ever compiled, Heriat would be recorded as a hero, just as he himself would be painted as a traitor.

He couldn't argue with that, even though it made a mockery of his decades of decorated service. Such was the price of giving in to pride, of forgetting what the place of individuals was within the boundless war machine of the Emperor.

Nethata tried to shake such thoughts from his mind. He turned his attention back to the auspex readings. Even from the limited data he had, he could see that the remainder of the loyalist armour was destined for Heriat's fate. Dozens of filtration towers had been taken down. Large sections of the hive walls had been demolished, setting off chain reactions within the spire that broke the atmospheric seals. Still, though, the defending gun positions were intact, and their rain of fire had barely lessened.

They had done all they could. Nethata considered whether to issue the order for withdrawal, wondering whether his troops would still take his commands. With their final task achieved, he still entertained the possibility of escape, of getting back to the fleet and away from Shardenus before the vengeful clan could catch up with him.

Even as he weighed his options, three new readings appeared on the extreme edge of his auspex range. One of the signals was very strange, like nothing he'd ever seen before. The other two were more familiar – Warlord Titans, heading towards the Capitolis at speed.

‘Lopi,’ he breathed, gauging the distance and trying to work out how long it would take them to reach the Capitolis. ‘At last. What has kept him?’

‘Did you say something, lord?’ asked the tank commander, turning round in his seat.

Nethata put the auspex down and looked at him. The game wasn’t over yet; not quite.

‘We’re going back, commander,’ he said. ‘Full reverse, and then follow the coordinates I give you.’

For a moment, the commander resisted. Just as before, he was unwilling to leave the fight.

‘I must protest,’ he said. ‘We are fully engaged.’

Nethata ran a finger along the edge of the bolt pistol he’d been given by Heriat. It was a commissar’s weapon, a weapon designed to enforce discipline. He didn’t plan on using it, but it was nice to know he had it, just in case.

‘Protest all you want,’ said Nethata calmly. ‘Then follow my orders. I don’t care who drives this thing, but one way or the other I *will* rendezvous with those machines.’

Telach fought for breath. Rauth had driven the daemon back, grappling with it in a brutal melee and pursuing it across the plateau. Telach had

been left behind, broken in the wreckage. His cracked helm fed him a whole series of damage markers, though he could barely see them through the screen of blood in his one working eye. The pain where his arm had been severed was ferocious, even though more bionics had been ripped away than actual flesh.

Amid all of that, though, Telach's overriding emotion was dread – not for himself, but for the portal he had been unable to close. 'More Iron Hands were emerging from the spire below, but Telach knew they would be able to do nothing against such an arcane threat. He dragged himself away from where his brother warriors charged into battle against the daemon-creature, hauling his broken body one-handed across the knife-sharp detritus of the plateau. All around him the elements whined, tearing at his broken armour and clogging the rents with hot ash.

Despite the blood clotting over his eye, he could see it well enough. The witchfire at its rim was now raging like the world's fire, red and angry. In the centre of the circle, the air itself was pulled back and forth, flexing like an amniotic sac. The creatures on the far side were obvious now, at least to one with his perception of the immaterium. Even as Telach watched, a clawed hand shot through the barrier, breaking into the universe of the senses in a cascade of multi-hued light.

No time remained. His staff was broken. Summoning the rituals of banishment was beyond him. All he had was himself – his own soul, pregnant with psychic power even as his body collapsed into oblivion.

He had always been prepared to make such a sacrifice. The likelihood of it coming down to such extremity had always been high.

Telach crawled on, feeling the tangle of metal and rubble beneath him rake at his exposed body. Shattered fragments of his breastplate ripped away, torn from the carapace beneath and dragged from their connector nodes. A mix of organic muscle and bionic components fizzed and ripped, mixing blood and lubricant freely.

The portal flexed further. Another inhuman arm reached through, gripping the rim and pulling it taut. The sound of hissing laughter broke across the barrier, growing in volume.

Telach kept going. He was dimly aware of a rising crescendo of bolter fire. Some of it crashed into the portal itself, aimed by those who had no real conception of what they were shooting at. They couldn't hurt it by mechanical means – if the thing had been susceptible to such damage then it would have been destroyed when the atomic had gone off.

Only one power had the capacity to destroy the rift – the human mind, born out of a mortal cranium, locked in a skull of bone and steeped in psychic power. That, at least, was one organ the Iron Fathers had never tried to replace.

Telach hauled himself to his feet, ignoring the sharp waves of agony that radiated through him. He tottered towards the portal, fighting to keep conscious, to keep one leg moving in front of the other. As he went, he began the process of unbinding.

It was hard to do. Every discipline of a Librarian's training focused on retaining control, of keeping the vast psychic potential within him under severe censure. Failure to do so resulted in the release of pure warp energy into the universe, creating vortices of unpredictability that threatened to destroy everything around their centre.

He limped closer, feeling the last shreds of physical control leave him. His secondary heart gave out with a hot, agonising burst. His consciousness frayed at the edges, making it seem like he was stumbling down a long tunnel of blurring, overlapping images. He felt a storm of psychic power bursting out from his inner core, roaring up from the depths of his mind and crashing through the barriers he'd spent a lifetime erecting.

The daemons on the far side of the rift saw him coming, and knew what he was doing. They clawed ever more frantically, trying to prise the last

elements of the portal open, screaming obscenities and sending images of eternal torment directly into his reeling mind.

By then Telach had reached the edge of the rift, and his mind had almost ceased to function. He was deaf to the physical world and immune to its sensations. He burned from within with a furious white fire, one that bled from his soul in a torrent of destruction even as it sucked at the burning rim of the rift.

He was losing himself, dissolving into a rage of psychic essence, his very being dissipating into a flood of burning, consuming aether.

Telach's last act was to throw himself forwards, plunging into the swirling vortex of energies in an almighty blaze of full-spectrum light. He heard a massive explosion as if from far away, booming like the crash of surf on a distant shore. He felt the portal buckle and rupture around him, spinning apart as the energies of his dissolution reacted with it. He felt his own body ripped apart as the laws of the universe violently reasserted themselves.

Then he heard a vast sound, roaring like thunder, before it died away. A sensation of falling overtook him.

He passed through, rolling into nothingness.

It went dark, and everything stopped.

Then there was something like light, and something like time.

In his last moments, Telach knew he had destroyed it. He knew that because the world of Shardenus had gone. The entire universe had gone. In its place was a shifting, swaying abyss of infinite possibility. He didn't *see* it – he had no eyes left to see anything – but it persisted before him. He had awareness still, a measure of sentience, but nothing else.

For a moment, it was staggeringly beautiful. He drifted amid its primordial majesty like a pearl tumbling across the face of the ocean.

Then they came for him, howling out of the depths. He had frustrated them, and he was adrift in their realm.

In its last seconds of existence, the soul that had been Telach knew what fate awaited it. It was exposed. It would be consumed, and its agonies would be as infinite as the pleasures of those that feasted upon it.

But just then, for a fragment of what passed for time in that place, before the neverborn swam up out of the seething face of eternity to feed, it basked in the fading knowledge of what it had done.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Rauth swung his sword wildly, making no attempt to lend finesse to his blows. He launched his blade around him in huge, vicious arcs, leaving long trails of disruptor energy hanging in the air behind. With each blow, he took another step forwards. Stride by stride, he bludgeoned the daemon back.

The creature staggered away from him, barely meeting each incoming thrust. Rauth hacked and parried with abandon, moving with terrible speed. His armour had taken a ferocious battering during the ascent and plates hung from their mountings like discarded trophies. The ceramite across his left leg had been ripped away, exposing linked steel pistons in place of flesh and bone. His storm bolter had long since been discarded, and now he fought like a warrior of ancient legend, sword in hand and with an aura of righteous fury blazing from his blade.

As he pressed forwards, the familiar thunder of bolter fire broke out from behind him. Those of the clones who had survived the horrors of the interior were breaking out onto the plateau, loosing what ammunition they had at the retreating form of the daemon. They fired in constant torrents, each bolt slamming into the retreating creature and bursting through the lilac skin.

If it had been intact and in the full glow of its unnatural strength such impacts would not have troubled it, but it had been mauled by the attacks of the four Librarians. The power holding its sinews together was unravelling fast, and every swipe of Rauth's blade, every detonation from a reactive shell, dragged it closer to physical oblivion.

It raged back, slashing at Rauth with its claws, lashing out with an equally ragged loss of control. Rauth grimaced as his right shoulder guard was shattered. His movements became even faster, propelled by hundreds of subcutaneous motors working in concert.

Rauth whirled his blade round, building up momentum for a final, heart-bursting lunge. As he swung the blade into position, a massive explosion burst out from behind him. Jets of crimson fire shot across the sky, streaking far out above the wasteland below. The air seemed to shudder, as if the elements themselves had been ripped out of alignment before snapping back into place. The entire pinnacle rocked, and more crevasses opened across its jagged surface.

Rauth was thrown onto his face, hitting the ground hard. He heard crashes and cracks as others of his contingent were similarly floored. A violent gale screamed across his body, tearing at the extremities of his damaged plate. Huge chunks of broken masonry and cracked metal were flung over the edge of the ruined spire-top, catching fire as they tumbled through the engine-hot atmosphere and disintegrating into rains of flaming dust.

He knew then that Telach had destroyed the rift. In its absence, the winds of Shardenus howled and raced.

Rauth rolled over heavily, powered by his damaged armour, knowing the danger. The portal was gone, but the daemon remained. He looked up – and stared right into its face.

The creature hung low over him. It had been wounded badly by the sudden withdrawal of its ethereal support. Its patchwork face ran with dark

blood. Under the skin was a whirl of latticed light, throbbing and pulsing like electrical currents in a cogitator housing. The wind tore at it, lifting up the edges of its broken skin. Its eyes were filmy and its jaw hung slack.

It staggered, almost losing its footing. One of its arms was limp, riddled with bolter wounds and bleeding torrents of virulent blood. Huge chunks of flesh, steaming with heat and plasma, had been gouged from its bloated torso and lay on the ground, slopping in pools of bubbling fluids.

As Rauth lay prone beneath it, the daemon drew its lone claw back, keeping the tips of its blades pointed at the Iron Hand's torso.

It was coming apart. Soon it would be hurled back from the mortal plane and into temporary oblivion, but it clung on, persisting in the world even as its physical shell collapsed around it.

'I would have made this world a paradise,' it said, its voice choked with blood and saliva.

Rauth struggled to move, but the daemon kept him pinned.

'You have ensured it remains a hell. Perhaps you are proud of that.'

The creature's face twisted into disgust. It looked repelled, not just by Rauth, but by everything, by the whole edifice of ruin around it, by what the galaxy, what its place within it, had become.

'We are both sick, son of Ferrus,' it said, 'but only I know it.'

Then it plunged its claw down, fast as a bolt-discharge. It ploughed through Rauth's breastplate, breaking open the ceramite and driving through it. The metal talons travelled straight through Rauth's chest and out the other side, cutting and tearing as they went.

Rauth's back arched. The daemon grinned savagely, and twisted the blades.

'Enjoy this,' it said. 'Feel your hearts burst.'

Then Rauth's own blade shot up, plunging deep into the daemon's flickering, weeping neck. The power field over the sword detonated in a lashing corona of energy. The daemon screamed, and tried to withdraw.

Rauth wouldn't let it. He surged to his feet, keeping his sword extended, pushing it deeper into the creature's unholy flesh. The daemon's claws broke off as it wrenched away, torn free of the gauntlets and remaining lodged in Rauth's chest. The Iron Hand fought on regardless, ignoring the metal protruding from his torso and working his own weapon again with heavy, crushing strokes.

The daemon lost its footing, crashing down hard against the serrated plateau. Rauth pursued it mercilessly, hacking at its flailing limbs, carving into the juddering flesh and smashing apart the remnants of its ancient armour.

Finally, he stood over its heaving chest, gazing down at the obscene scrawls on its crushed battle-plate. The daemon-creature looked up at him, surprise and hatred written across its otherworldly face.

Rauth gripped his power sword in two hands, feeling its power thrum along the metal edge.

'You forget who you're fighting, son of Fulgrim,' he said, drawing the weapon high. Despite himself, despite all that had happened, a crooked grin spread across what remained of his face. 'It's a long time since I had hearts.'

Then he plunged the blade down, severing the daemon's head from its neck in a single, terrible blow. Its animating spirit was banished, expiring with a sharp, acrid snap that spun out from where the blow fell. Its grotesque body, hacked and impacted by a thousand blows, slumped into stillness. Blood still ran from the gashes across its frame, bubbling softly as it sank into the charred metal beneath.

Rauth looked down at the carcass. He could hear the sounds of his warriors making their way over to his side. He ignored them.

The daemon's face was shrinking away, dissolving like flesh in acid. The sutures came loose, freeing up flaps of skin and exposing firmer, older flesh beneath. For a moment, before the last of the gaudy, rouged-streaked

embellishments fluttered away, something like elegance was revealed – a taut, aristocratic visage, cruel and intelligent.

There were some in the Imperium who might have recognised that face. Some lords of the Ordo Malleus might have identified the features of one who had been First Captain of the III Legion, who had fought alongside gods in the age of wonder when the Imperium was forged, who had strode across the bloodied plains of Laeran, of Isstvan, of Terra, and who, after the ruin of a traitor's hopes, had been slowly changed by the wearing horror of the Eye. They might have known what hopes had once been placed in him, how admired and feared he had been, and just how far into madness he had fallen at the end.

Rauth knew none of that. He watched his enemy disintegrate, taking neither pleasure nor pity from the spectacle. The creature's words lingered in his mind, troubling him for some reason that he found hard to pin down.

We are both sick, son of Ferrus, but only I know it.

Then the face was gone, collapsed into blood and muscle as its animating spirit dissipated.

Dozeph Imanol drew alongside him. The sergeant of Clave Prime had taken a massive wound to the head on the charge up through the centre of the spire, shearing his helm casing away and revealing a bloodied skull beneath. On his return to Medusa, no doubt the entire cranium would be replaced by metal.

‘Did you discover its name?’ he asked.

Rauth shook his head.

‘What does it matter?’ he asked.

He limped away from the corpse. As he went, he pulled the creature's claws from his chest, dislodging a host of flickering, crackling bionic parts as he did so. The loss of them was not entirely trivial – his helm display was blank, and he'd lost filtration through his vox-guard – but he could live without them for the time being. His three mechanical heart-

analogues, each one placed in a different location within his armour and protected by multiple layers of adamantium binding, still beat firmly.

He looked around him, waiting for his breathing to return to a more sustainable level. Telach was gone. A lone Codicier had survived but looked to have sustained heavy injuries. Less than thirty warriors of Raukaan had made it to the summit, and all of them had been similarly ravaged by the ascent through the spire. They stood silently, waiting for their next set of orders.

None of them said a word. There were no cries of victory or defiance.

Rauth limped over to the edge of the plateau. Far below him he could see the remnants of Nethata's tank columns slowly withdrawing across the wasteland, still suffering under fire from the Capitolis walls. Clearly traitor forces still remained within the hive, and the fighting was not yet over. Of the daemons, however, there was no sign.

‘What are your orders, lord?’ asked Imanol, his voice crackling with distortion.

Rauth looked back over to where the rift had been. Its guardians were destroyed. Those mutants that remained would be hunted down, chamber by chamber, before the entire Capitolis was purged with flame.

After that would come the punishment. After that, the populace of Shardenus Prime would be held in judgement for their sins, for allowing malice to root itself amongst them and for failing to resist when the time of testing came. Judgement would come to them; when it did, it would be swift, austere and complete.

‘Shardenus has been saved for the Imperium,’ announced Rauth, looking out beyond the steaming outline of the daemon-corpse and across the burning wasteland. The Melamar spires to the south smouldered amid the boiling mists of toxic fug. Above them dark clouds raced still, underlit with sporadic bursts of lightning. ‘When our remaining work is done, its

loyalty will be unmatched. We will remake it. We will refashion it as an exemplar.'

'I relish it, lord,' said Imanol.

Rauth could tell that he did. Imanol had good instincts – a firm grasp of the sacrifices that needed to be made in order to do what was necessary. When the time came, he would make a suitable successor as clan commander.

'Then we have labour ahead of us,' said Rauth, turning away from the vista of devastation. 'Prepare your weapons and follow me down.'

Rauth strode back towards the shaft leading into the spire's interior, preparing once again for the fighting to come.

'Leave no mutant alive,' he ordered, activating the disruptor on his force-blade. 'Preserve any mortal loyalists still living – we still have need of them.'

As he neared the edge of the steep way down, a dark expression kindled on his helm-guarded features.

'Except for Nethata,' he growled, starting the long climb down into darkness. 'Should you find him, bring him to me.'

Nethata adjusted his chem-suit a final time before climbing out of the Leman Russ. He clambered down the ladder from the open hatchway, feeling the toxin-laced air pull at him.

He walked out across the ash, his boots crunching through the thin layers of drifting embers. Behind him, a kilometre to the north, the Capitolis burned. Huge explosions continued to surge through the enormous superstructure, making the earth beneath him tremble.

Ahead of him stood the two Warlord Titans. They had come to a full stop, and towered over everything within fire-range. Seeing them up close was awe-inspiring – he had to crick his neck just to make out anything above their massive knee-joints. Their cockpit lights glowed dimly amid

the shrouds of ash, and their gigantic weapon-arms hung, de-powered, from their mighty shoulder housings.

Between the Warlords stood a tracked vehicle – a steep-sided armoured crawler with the emblem of the Mechanicus emblazoned on its flanks. Columns of dirty smoke poured from vents along its sides, making the dark metal even darker.

As Nethata approached it, a ramp lowered slowly from the crawler's blunt forequarters, touching heavily onto the earth with a low hiss of pistons releasing.

Nethata halted, waiting for Ys to emerge. He knew it had to be her, even though he'd had no confirmation of her arrival. Though unexpected, the development gave him hope – Lopi must have been in touch with her. The princeps, seeing the way things were going, must have passed on the reports of the Warhounds' destruction, triggering her descent from orbit.

As Nethata waited, he marvelled at the twists of fate. He knew Rauth was furious with him, and that the fury of the Iron Hands was only ever satisfied by a single result. The Mechanicus, though, was a different matter. Nethata was fully aware of the links between them, and the knowledge Ys had of Rauth's protocols and machine workings. If anyone could stand against Rauth, if anyone could hope to act as a bulwark against the Iron Hands, then it was her.

A squad of skitarii lumbered down the ramp, spilling out into the wasteland with their bizarre array of inbuilt weapon systems and external bionics. Behind them came Ys, striding out with human-like fluidity. Her cowl had been pushed back to reveal the strangely organic curves of her metal face.

'Magos,' said Nethata, bowing. 'I am glad to see you again.'

Ys stood before him. Her expression, as always, was impossible to read.

'I don't know why that should be so, Lord General,' she said, and her voice was cold.

It was then that Nethata knew that he'd miscalculated.

'Has Princeps Lopi not informed you?' he asked. 'We had an agreement – an arrangement. He promised me that—'

'Princeps Lopi has been relieved of his command,' said Ys.

As she spoke, a team of skitarii dragged a body down the ramp and hurled it onto the ground. The flesh on it was milk-pale and covered in metal-rimmed input nodes. As it hit the ground, its head fell back.

Nethata recognised Lopi's face despite what had been done to it.

'He acted outside the boundaries of his jurisdiction,' said Ys. 'The penalty for that is the same for us as it is for you.'

Nethata looked up at her severe face, and knew then that it was over. The Warlords stood impassively above him, gazing northwards with their vast machine eyes. They looked like vengeful giants. For a few moments, Nethata had dared to believe he could use them to shield himself; that the Mechanicus would honour its compact.

'I do not understand,' said Nethata, knowing that protestation was useless but finding himself unable to avoid the attempt. 'He told me that Rauth had betrayed him, that if we stood together then we could force him to come to terms. You yourself, you told me that. You told me that they only respect strength.'

Ys's expression didn't change. There was no sympathy there, no compassion, nothing but a steady, machine-cold glare.

'Yes, I told you that, Lord General,' she said. 'I told you that to warn you, and you should have heeded it. The strength of the Iron Hands is far beyond your strength; you could never have stood against them, and you were foolish to attempt it. Lopi was also a fool, and he has paid the price. The Warlords will walk on the Capitolis, and I will aid Commander Rauth in his cleansing of it. Perhaps, in that small way, we will recover a portion of honour. For you, for Lopi, there is nothing.'

Nethata watched the magos's lips move, and it felt like watching his own death sentence being read out. The ceaseless wind blew ash across her cloak, dragging on the fine fabric and staining it black.

'Then you are here to kill me,' he said. He wondered briefly whether he could reach his bolt pistol in time, and quickly discarded the notion.

Ys shook her head. The gesture was so impeccable, so graceful.

'I have taken care of my own,' she said, gathering up her robes and preparing to return to the crawler. 'Your fate is not in my hands.'

Then she turned, and walked back to the ramp. Nethata watched her skitarii follow her. When they were inside, the crawler was resealed and began its steady movement again.

Nethata watched it go. Then he watched the Warlords grind into movement. He watched them stride out north, stalking across the shattered terrain with their massive, earth-crushing treads.

Then he was alone again, save for the lone Leman Russ tank he'd withdrawn from the front line. As he pondered what kind of protection that offered him, he almost laughed.

He looked north, following the route of the Titans towards the Capitolis spires. The whole structure raged with flame and smoke. Clouds raced across the distant summit, swirling and breaking open. Lightning still flickered down the smouldering flanks, though it had lost the lilac hue it had had before.

Something had changed. The spire still loomed up massively, a monument of decaying grandeur riddled with blast-gouges and semi-ruined gothic ornamentation, but it no longer carried the spectre of abject horror that it had done. A pall of fear had lifted from it, replaced by the grimy tang of spilled promethium, molten metal and soot.

Nethata knew then that Rauth had been right. Something had been waiting for them in the Capitolis. The Iron Hands had been prepared to

sacrifice everything they had to destroy it, and they had succeeded. They had been prepared to make the calculations he hadn't.

He felt sick.

'Lord?'

The tank commander's querulous voice was another irritation. Even at the end, even with the ruin of all his hopes, still the reminders of his failure intruded.

'What is it?' he replied absently, staring up at the Capitolis.

'What are your orders? Where are we going?'

Nethata didn't reply immediately. He afforded himself the luxury of thinking back over his lifetime's many glorious conquests. Jeriul XI, the Refaloe Stars, the Adjmena agri-belt. None of those would now be remembered – scholiasts would painstakingly amend the records, substituting the names of more suitable commanders. The only world left next to his name would be this one: Shardenus.

He wondered how long it would take Rauth to find him. Despite everything, the thought of dying at the hands of the clan commander rankled.

Nethata began to unhook the catches at his neck, unfastening the seals that kept him isolated from the lethal air of the wasteland. He felt the links unclip with tiny snaps.

There was still one thing he could do; one aspect of his fate that remained within his hands.

'We are going nowhere, commander,' he said absently, disconnecting his rebreather and wondering how long it would take him to die.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

How long, Khadi wondered, did it take to punish a world?

Perhaps they would only stop when every last mortal life was extinguished. Perhaps that had always been their goal. For a long time Khadi had thought that was what they were planning. In the weeks after her escape, as she'd made her way back to Melamar Secundus and headed down into the hidden catacombs in search of safety, it had seemed that they would stop at nothing less than that.

After leaving Marivo in the tunnels, she'd gone as quickly as she could through the ruined chambers of the war-torn hive. It hadn't been easy, even during the chaos of the residual fighting and resupplying. Troops had been moving up to the front all the time, though none of them looked to have enough spirit to report a deserter.

She hadn't been alone, either. The terrible carnage in the tunnels had broken the spirit of many others, and some of them had formed into ramshackle bands as they'd slunk back into the shadows and slipped down hidden tunnels.

Khadi hadn't liked to look at the others, though she'd thought of Marivo often during the long flight home. It sometimes felt like his spirit was

mocking her, or chiding her, or somehow informing on her to what authorities now remained.

Khadi knew he wouldn't have done that, not even if his sense of duty had tempted him to. Right at the end, she'd learned to appreciate his character a little more. Perhaps she would never have truly liked him; they were too different, too far sundered along the long line of Imperial hierarchy.

For all that, though, moments of their association still came back to her. She remembered how it had been to drive the mutants back in disarray, shouting out her allegiance to the Emperor and watching them fall, one by one, under a hail of las-beams. She remembered how she'd felt when the Iron Hand, the one with flame-wreathed fists, had spoken to them before the gates to the tunnels.

Whenever she thought about those things for too long, though, it made her feel sick, and she forced herself to concentrate on the present.

The present was squalid enough. She was hunched in the corner of a tiny, metal-lined room. It was perfectly dark save for a sliver of light at the base of the door. The floor swam with filth that seeped through her worn-out boots as she squatted.

She was cold. She'd long since got used to the perpetual shakes and the blurred vision. Melamar's ruined infrastructure was still mostly offline, which meant that the air was almost unbreathable and drinking water was scarce. She hadn't eaten properly for days, and the chances of finding more food where she was were slim.

It was the same for all the others. She'd been surprised how many there were, lurking in the underworld of the hive; thousands of them, their faces drawn with hunger, their eyes hollow with despair. Somehow they'd managed to escape the worst of the fighting, neither succumbing to the mutants nor the loyalists.

She'd pushed her way through them, not wanting to get too close and hoping she saw no face she recognised. They had been heavy with disease, most of them, and if they hadn't been so weak and terrified then she might have been scared of them. It was only later that she realised how she must have appeared to them – still in armour, holding a well-used lasgun and with blood all over her.

Eventually she'd managed to get away, finding ways down into levels where even they didn't go. She'd found a home in the dark, a place to gather her shattered spirits, to wait for her energy and resolve to return.

They never did. The days passed. She got hungrier and weaker, and her scavenging trips to the old refectoria turned up less and less of use. She saw bodies everywhere, slumped face down in the flickering gloom, wasted away from plague or exhaustion.

If Marivo had still been with her, she would have shown him those bodies, and the masses of refugees who still huddled in the depths of the spires. She would have explained to him that these people were the backbone of the Imperium, the ones who kept it functioning during the long centuries of toil and privation. They understood nothing of the certainties he'd cherished. Even right at the end, most of them would have had no idea why war had come to Shardenus, nor have been able to tell the traitor forces apart from those who had come to liberate them. Each army would have been equally horrifying to them – just two sets of monsters, each one intent on killing as much as possible, destroying as much as possible, punishing as much as possible.

In those circumstances, she would have argued, who could blame them for hiding away, for turning a blind eye to the growing tide of corruption, for keeping their heads down?

Khadi liked to imagine what Marivo would have said in reply. She liked to imagine him tongue-tied, finally aware of the harsh reality of the underworld, unable to respond with some glib piety or other. Most of all,

she liked to picture him admitting to her that she'd been right, and that they had never stood a chance right from the beginning.

They won't even know it was us that took down the tower, she'd told him. They'll do to us what they're doing to everything they come across. They'll kill us, Marivo. It doesn't matter which side does it; we are all going to die.

Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt then. Something heavy boomed out above her. She shrank back, pressing her body up against the metal wall. The boom was followed by a series of heavy crashes, each one echoing down long tunnels before dying away.

She felt her heart beat faster. She hugged her knees, and resisted the urge to rock on her haunches.

She knew what was coming. She'd gleaned enough information from the others to know that the Angels of Death had finally turned their attention to those who had been too slow, too scared or too confused to make the appropriate level of sacrifice for Shardenus. She knew that they'd spent two whole weeks scouring the Capitolis, cleansing it with fire. Then they'd moved on to the outer spires, sweeping through them one at a time, delivering their justice, executing those who hadn't resisted the traitor with enough fervour.

Khadi wondered how they knew who had been a hero and who had been a coward. Surely it was almost impossible to tell, except for the fact that most of those who'd joined them, like Marivo, were dead.

So it was that she'd speculated that they were killing everyone, perhaps in some petulant rage against the perceived weaknesses of mortal men. She'd heard other figures bandied around, too – one old man who'd escaped from the Axis hive across the wasteland and had nearly gone blind from the poisons reckoned they were killing one out of every three survivors they found.

‘One out of three,’ he’d rasped, struggling to breathe from his bleeding mouth. ‘They’re making an example, to stiffen the resolve of other systems.’

He’d laughed then, coughing up blood in the process.

‘We will be famous,’ he’d said, and Khadi had seen the tears in his eyes. ‘They will whisper our name on a thousand worlds.’

More booms rang out from above her, followed by a long, resounding series of dull thuds. For a moment, Khadi thought they were mortars going off. Then she realised they were boot-treads, clanging against the hollow metal. They got closer.

She tried to get to her feet, but her legs were too shaky. She stumbled, and fell to her knees into the slime. When the door slammed open, flooding the chamber with light, that was how she appeared – on all fours, wrist-deep in filth, her greasy hair hanging lankly down over her face.

Khadi looked up, squinting against a strong lumen beam. The Iron Hand towered over her. For a moment, she thought she recognised him. He looked exactly the same as the one that had rescued her and Marivo, the one who had demanded that they follow him to the tunnels.

Then again, they all looked more or less the same.

‘I fought for you,’ she said, getting to her knees. Her eyes began to adjust to the light, and she blinked heavily, sending tears down her cheeks.

The Iron Hand lowered his boltgun. He hesitated for a moment, holding the weapon steady. It looked to Khadi like he might have been running some kind of ident-check through his internal systems.

‘I was with Alend Marivo, of the Guard. We both fought for you.’

The Iron Hand remained unmoving. His helm lenses glowed blood-red in the shadows. He looked more like a daemon than an angel.

Perhaps, thought Khadi, that was what was required. Perhaps the galaxy had become so mired in horror that only such warriors as these could stand up for humanity.

She resolved to say nothing further then. She fixed her gaze on the monster's trigger finger.

And if that is so, she thought, then we have lost already. If that is so, then our survival means nothing.

She didn't notice when the finger tensed, sending the bolt directly into her body. Death was almost instant – a brief punch of bone breaking on impact before the explosive shell detonated within her heart.

Khadi's lifeless corpse fell to the ground with a splash. The monster stood over her for a long time. The white hand device on its shoulder guard shone in sharp relief in the lumen beams of its brother warriors.

'More life-signs, further down,' came Brother Rydek's voice over the comm.

Khadi's killer – Brother-Sergeant Naim Morvox of Clave Arx, Clan Raukaan of the Iron Hands – nodded curtly before turning and moving back into the corridor. From behind him, the sound of crunching boots and synthetic armour-hum echoed in the narrow passages.

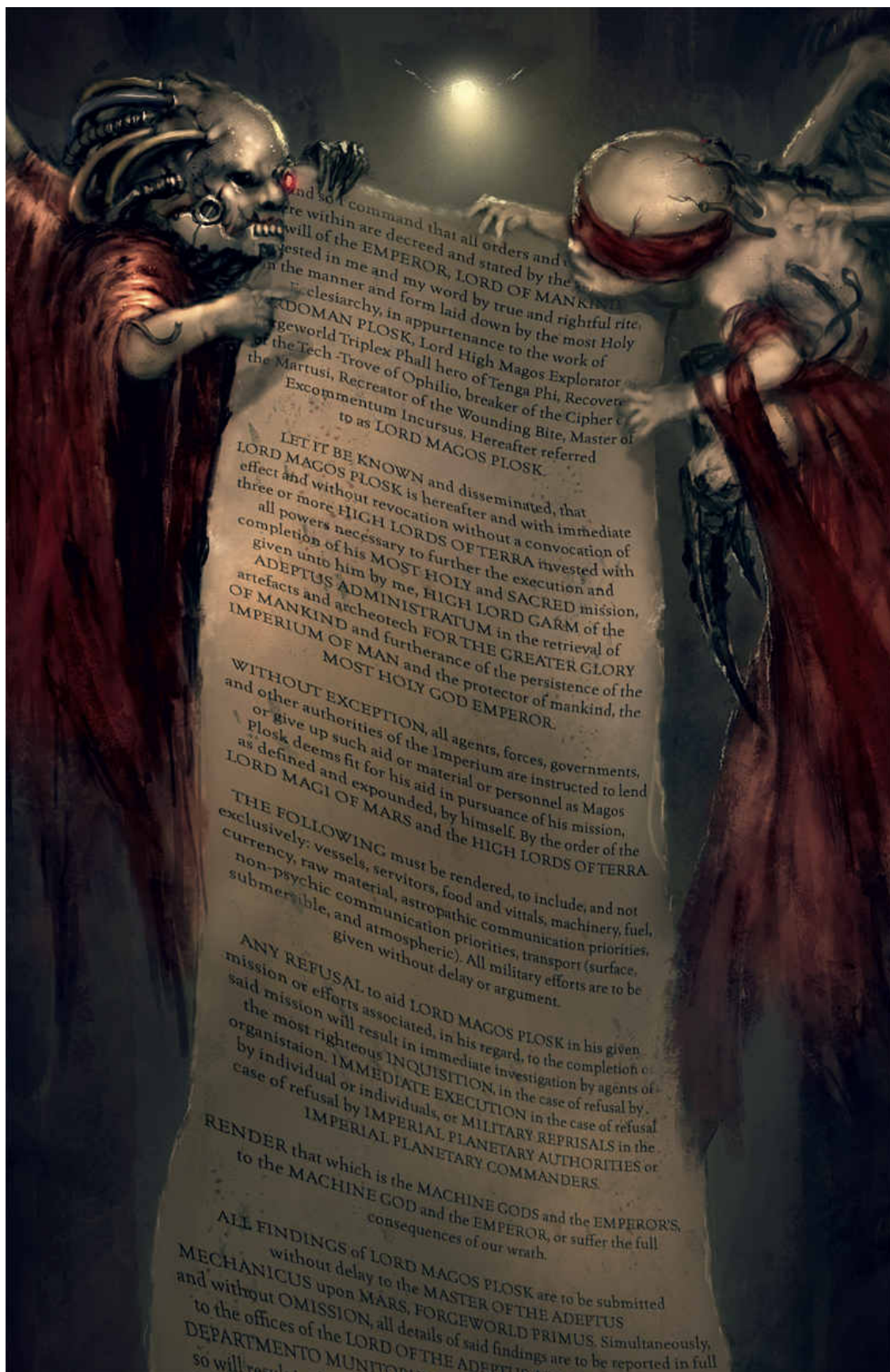
'Advance,' said Morvox, and stalked back out into the darkness.



DEATH OF INTEGRITY

GUY HALEY





and so I command that all orders and
are within are decreed and stated by the
will of the EMPEROR, LORD OF MANKIND
invested in me and my word by true and rightful rite
in the manner and form laid down by the most Holy
Ecclesiarchy, in appurtenance to the work of
FORGEWORLD TRIPLEX PHALL hero of Tenga Phi, Recoverer
of the Tech-Trove of Ophilio, breaker of the Cipher
of the Martusi, Recreator of the Wounding Bite, Master of
Excommmentum Incursus, Hereafter referred
to as LORD MAGOS PLOSK.

LET IT BE KNOWN and disseminated, that
LORD MAGOS PLOSK is hereafter and with immediate
effect and without revocation without a convocation of
three or more HIGH LORDS OF TERRA invested with
all powers necessary to further the execution and
completion of his MOST HOLY and SACRED mission,
given unto him by me, HIGH LORD GARM of the
ADEPTUS ADMINISTRATUM in the retrieval of
artefacts and archeotech FOR THE GREATER GLORY
OF MANKIND and furtherance of the persistence of the
IMPERIUM OF MAN and the protector of mankind, the
MOST HOLY GOD EMPEROR.

WITHOUT EXCEPTION, all agents, forces, governments,
and other authorities of the Imperium are instructed to lend
or give up such aid or material or personnel as Magos
Plosk deems fit for his aid in pursuance of his mission,
as defined and expounded, by himself. By the order of the
LORD MAGI OF MARS and the HIGH LORDS OF TERRA

THE FOLLOWING must be rendered, to include, and not
exclusively: vessels, servitors, food and vitals, machinery, fuel,
currency, raw material, astropathic communication priorities,
non-psyhic communication priorities, transport (surface,
submersible, and atmospheric). All military efforts are to be
given without delay or argument.

ANY REFUSAL to aid LORD MAGOS PLOSK in his given
mission or efforts associated, in his regard, to the completion of
said mission will result in immediate investigation by agents of
the most righteous INQUISITION, in the case of refusal by
organistaion. IMMEDIATE EXECUTION in the case of refusal
by individual or individuals, or MILITARY REPRISALS in the
case of refusal by IMPERIAL PLANETARY AUTHORITIES or
IMPERIAL PLANETARY COMMANDERS.

RENDER that which is the MACHINE GODS and the EMPEROR'S
to the MACHINE GOD and the EMPEROR, or suffer the full
consequences of our wrath.

ALL FINDINGS of LORD MAGOS PLOSK are to be submitted
without delay to the MASTER OF THE ADEPTUS
MECHANICUS upon MARS, FORGEWORLD PRIMUS. Simultaneously,
and without OMISSION, all details of said findings are to be reported in full
to the offices of the LORD OF THE ADEPTUS
DEPARTMENTO MUNITOR
so will result:

First Battle Geller Field Generatorum — Unknown Vessel —

Novamarines

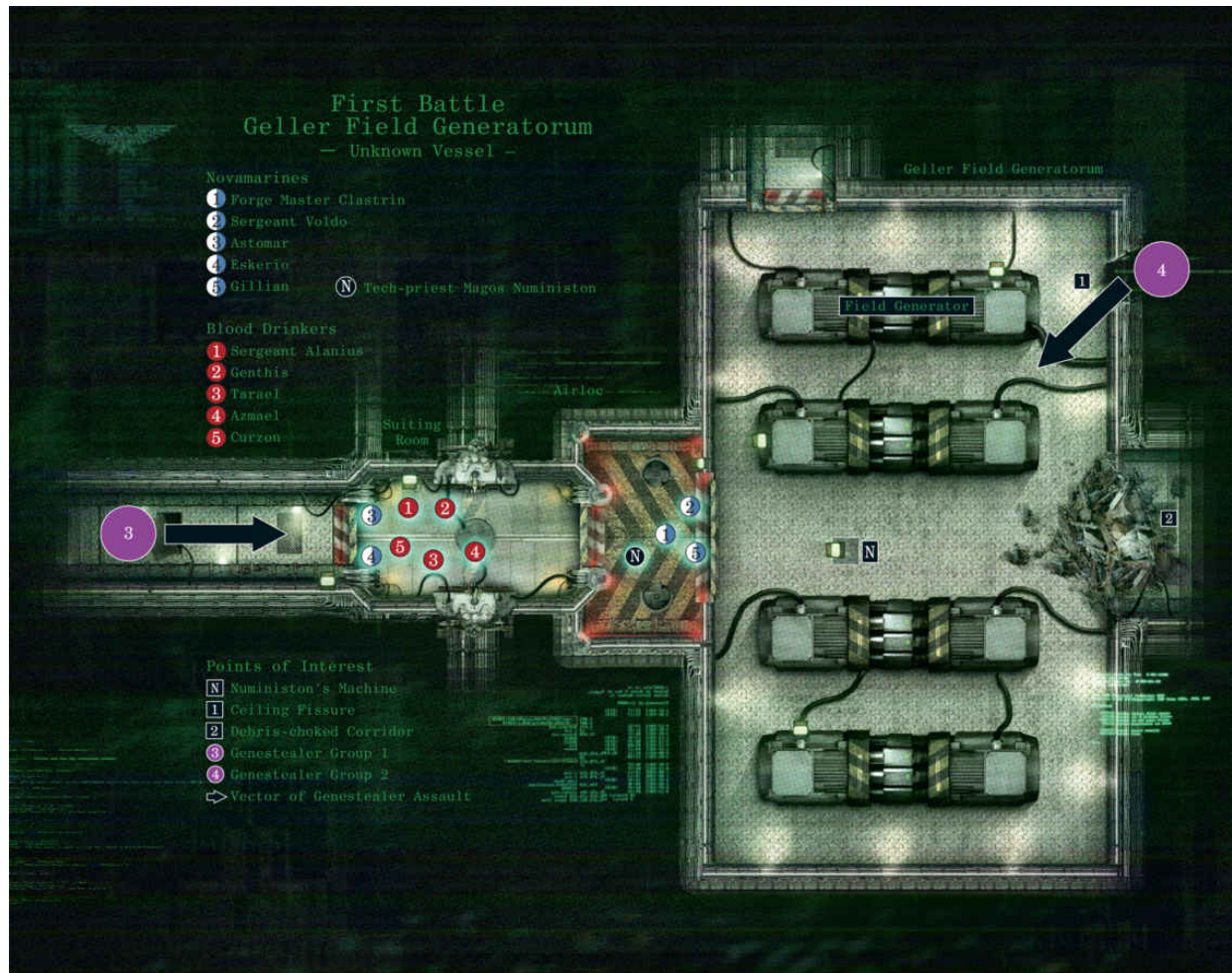
- ① Forge Master Clastrin
- ② Sergeant Voldo
- ③ Astomar
- ④ Eskerio
- ⑤ Gillian
- Ⓝ Tech-priest Magos Nuministon

Blood Drinkers

- ① Sergeant Alanius
- ② Genthis
- ③ Tarael
- ④ Azrael
- ⑤ Curzon

Points of Interest

- Ⓝ Nuministon's Machine
- ① Ceiling Fissure
- ② Debris-choked Corridor
- ③ Genestealer Group 1
- ④ Genestealer Group 2
- ➡ Vector of Genestealer Assault





DEATH OF INTEGRITY



Guy Haley

Note:

The majority of this novel takes place in 887.M39, two thousand years before the present year of 998.M41.



CHAPTER 1

Memories of Honourum

Serenity entered the mind and hearts of Mantillio Galt. The whispered prayers of the chapel serfs receded to be replaced by the sough of soft wind. The buzz of the tattooing needle faded. The rapid prick, prick, prick of it on his skin was kissed away by cold mountain air. His perception of the battle-barge's Grand Chapel became uncertain. His eyes were closed, all he saw was the fleshy dark behind his eyelids, but the sense of it, the weight of years and prayer, grew lesser and replaced by an impression of open spaces. He was hanging between the physical and the metaphysical; a disquieting sensation of being neither here nor there. He reminded himself that he was aboard *Novum in Honourum*, in transit through the warp. He lacked the dubious witch-gifts that would allow him to sense it, but at these times, halfway into his meditative state, he felt he could almost see it.

He quashed his anxiety.

'Glorious is the Emperor, mankind manifest as one, he shall light the way.' He quoted the Codex Astartes, and concentrated on his breathing.

The scents and sounds of home called to him, but he would not go there, not yet. For the Flesh Remembrance to take, for it to be bright with truth

and glorious for the Emperor's eyes when his time came, first he must relive the incident which the tattoo would commemorate.

The material world flickered, and went away entirely.

Fire. Fire blazing in the fluted corridors of the eldar craft. The osseous plastics of the alien vessel burned ferociously. Blue-tinted flame washed against his battleplate; blue from bone licking at the blue-and-bone of his Chapter's heraldry. The temperature indicators of his sensorium were far into the red; without his power armour he would be burned alive. Even now, he sweated from the heat.

The roar of the fire was deafening. Flickering movement had him raise his bolt pistol rapidly, his power sword ready. Nothing, nothing but fire and burning psychoplastics.

Most of the eldar pirates were dead, their slender forms shattered by bolter fire. Gaudy corpses draped the platforms of the chamber, some already aflame. Reports from *Novum in Honourum* had the remaining three eldar vessels fleeing, strike cruiser *Ceaseless Vigilance* and Battlefleet Trident's four escort craft in hot pursuit. They would not catch the fleeter xenos craft, but Galt was confident they would not return to trouble the Orin Gap. Ten fragile alien spaceships were wrecks. It had been a costly victory; *Corvo's Hammer* wallowed in the void, heavily damaged. And it had not been won yet.

'Form up on me,' he ordered his squad of Sternguard veterans. Four remained. They ceased their checking of the dead, and gathered around their captain, ever alert. Firelight danced over their armours' ornate decorations.

Galt nodded towards the large door at the head of the chamber. Delicate galleries framed it, drawing the eye towards its curved symmetries. The personal badge of the eldar corsairs' leader adorned this portal: a blank-eyed face, dripping with tears.

Decadent xenos trash.

‘Through there, the bridge,’ Galt said. ‘Slay their leader, and they will not return. Brother Verderio, blow the door.’

‘Yes, captain.’

The door was as fragile as the rest of the ship. Verderio’s melta bomb reduced it to slag. Beyond lay their target.

They marched in, bolters high. Shuriken fire came at them from several quarters. Pistol shots. Razored discs embedded themselves in the thick ceramite of the Space Marines’ battleplate. Not a single Sternguard fell, their relic armour proof against such feeble alien devices. Bolt fire replied. Three eldar died, joining their brethren already draped across the bridge’s shattered instrument consoles.

Ruination greeted Galt, fallen spars and shattered bonework all around. The corsairs had been heavily punished by Battlefleet Trident’s weapons. Broken machinery and dead aliens surrounded a raised dais, upon which, in an ornate throne, an eldar princeling lolled, his chin upon his fist. He wore no armour, but was instead clad in garish robes. Nor did he carry any weapon, although he looked at the Novamarines with such disdain it seemed he thought his glare alone deadly enough. Two forms flanked him, grasping evolved weapons. They were so still that, for a second, Galt took them to be statues. They were not. He watched them closely for movement. He had seen their kind before, despicable thinking machines: robots, abominable intelligences, forbidden tech made doubly vile by its alien origin.

Galt holstered his pistol and unclasped his helmet. He placed it upon the floor, looking upon the alien lord without the mediation of his power armour’s senses. His purpose was twofold. Galt would allow the eldar to see the tally of his deeds that were marked upon his face, and he would view the alien in turn with his own eyes, to test his spirit’s mettle against its uncleanness unshielded.

‘Surrender!’ he called. ‘And die with what little honour your kind possesses.’

The eldar shook his head as if enormously disappointed. He toyed with a glittering jewel on a chain about his neck and curled his lip in distaste. ‘So predictable, so very, very predictable.’ He stood. ‘For a thousand years I have plied the stars, *mon-keigh*, and you march in here in your...’ He gestured at the Space Marines, at a loss for words. ‘...ugly suits of armour, shouting at me as if I were deaf, expecting me to hold my hands in the air and allow you to end my life with your crude devices.’ He pursed his lips. His sing-song, accented Gothic was loaded with contempt. ‘I am not deaf, Captain Galt. Far from it. How else would I know your name? I hear all.’

Galt’s face was unmoving. He was unimpressed with the eldar’s attempts to unnerve him. He jerked his head. The Sternguard raised their weapons.

‘Then die without honour. It matters not a whit to me. Only that you no longer prey upon the citizens and shipping of the Imperium.’

The eldar laughed. ‘You think I die today? No. I am not done with this path yet, let alone my life.’

Suddenly, the pirate captain dropped from view through a circle of light that burst open in the floor. Bolts cracked into the throne, their target gone.

‘Cease fire!’ Galt ordered. He signalled with his hand to Brother Aster, that he should investigate the pirate captain’s escape route. ‘Brothers, cover him. Beware the statues beside the throne.’ Aster ran forward, bolter raised. He looked downwards, then back at his captain.

‘An energy portal of some kind, brother-captain. I cannot see through it. Do we follow?’

‘No,’ said Galt. ‘The doorway will not go where he went, I’ll warrant. Trust not the pathways of the alien.’

Sure enough, the light winked out. The portal closed, revealing nought but a patch of smooth floor.

‘Well said, brother-captain,’ said Brother Kederion.

‘Captain,’ warned out Brother Gorfillio. He raised his gun. ‘The constructs awaken.’ The statues were moving.

Aster backed away from the dais, bolter up.

‘As I thought, eldar ghost machines,’ spat Galt. ‘Aster, stand clear. Take them down.’

‘Stand firm, brothers,’ said Aster, ‘these things are tougher than they look.’

The machines moved slowly, as if time ran differently for them. Boltgun rounds smacked into them, but failed to penetrate. Together, the ghost machines raised their weapons.

‘Take cover!’ shouted Galt. He and his veterans were familiar with the deadly effects of wraithcannon fire.

The guns were silent. A black orb appeared on Verderio’s chest. He glanced down at it, and died. Verderio collapsed in on himself, pulled towards the ball of unlight. His armour shattered with a deafening crack. Blood sprayed in all directions as his body imploded.

The Sternguard went for cover, keeping up fire as they went. The machines were slow, but their shots many. They tore chunks from the battle-scarred bridge. Dozens of bolt rounds spattered off them without harm, a few exploding when they ricocheted and buried themselves in the fabric of the chamber.

Throughout it all the ghost machines made not a single sound. The Space Marines were fighting the dead.

Galt watched from behind a fallen spar. The roaring of flames from the adjoining room had become louder, punctuated by the crashing of falling chunks of wraithbone. He had to end this now. He waited until the wraithguard were facing away from him, ready to exploit their poor reactions.

‘For Honourum! For Corvo! For the Oath!’ he cried, and ran full tilt at the eldar machines. He slammed into one, jarring his own body. It

staggered back from the force of his impact. The second registered his presence, and brought its deadly rifle to bear. The machines overtopped him by thirty centimetres or more, slender giants. Galt looked into the long, cold face of the thing's helmet. His own was reflected in the gloss of its surface.

Galt swung his power sword with all his might, the crackling edge of it slamming into the bulbous end of the ghost warrior's cannon. The strange alloys of it split. He stepped back and brought the sword down again, severing the end of the gun from the stock. The wraithguard dropped the shattered weapon, and made a clumsy lunge for him. He sidestepped, sweeping his sword around towards the leg of the first wraithguard, now recovered from Galt's charge. The sword dug deep into the back of its knee. The construct rounded on him, gun coming towards his head. Galt wrenched at his power sword, the tug of it coming free sending him backwards. He regained his guard in time to stare right down the muzzle of the wraithguard's gun.

And then Aster was there, followed by Gorfillio, advancing on the dais. Their guns spoke, and now the bolts buried themselves deep. Galt's charge had bought the Sternguard time to change their magazines for those holding vengeance rounds, the unstable fusion cores of these bolts allowing them to penetrate the thick armour of the constructs. Even so, such was the density of the materials used to make the wraithguard that evidence for the explosions of the rounds within was but a splintering upon the surface.

The ghost machines did not react as living beings would. They were neither knocked back by the rounds nor did they convulse. They simply stopped; one remained standing, becoming the statue the Space Marines had originally taken it for, the fingers of one hand splayed to grab at Galt. The other folded in on itself and sank to the floor.

‘Thank you, my brothers,’ said Galt. He deactivated his sword, and went to retrieve his helmet. As he went he called up the embarkation deck flight control of *Novum in Honourum*. ‘This is Captain Galt,’ he said.

‘Immediate retrieval required. We are done here. Imperator vincit omnis. One casualty, Brother Verderio. Inform the infirmary and Chaplain Odon. We commend his soul to the Emperor.’

‘Brother-captain!’ called Aster. In his hand he held a jewel, similar to the one the captain had toyed with. ‘What shall we do with their stones? Should we keep them? They may be useful as bargaining chips in the future.’

Galt’s face hardened. Aster was being pragmatic. They knew enough of the eldar to understand how important their jewels were to them and their vile alien religion. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I do not deal with the alien. Crush them.’

The scene melted away, the essence of the action against the eldar even now being pinned to Galt’s flesh with needle and ink. He returned to the no-place between waking and dreams, and awaited judgement.

The rush and roar of air going into and out of his lungs became the crash of vast oceans. He felt a gentle tugging at his mind. Home called to him.

His actions were deemed worthy by the spirits of his departed brothers. Deep within his skull he felt a subtle shift as his gifts, the Hibernator and the Unsleeper, worked in concert to push him fully into the trance. He smelled bo-heather and cold, wet rock.

He opened his eyes. He was no longer in the tattooing chair within the Grand Chapel of Remembrance. The battle with the corsairs retreated once more into memory. Rough stone was beneath his bare feet, a wide vista before him. He stood upon a small balcony carved directly from the mountain, the cliff it projected from dropping to rocky plains riven with crevasses. To either side of the balcony an endless array of bastions,

turrets, statues and galleried windows stretched away, chipped from the mountains by generations of Novamarines.

Galt was in the Fortress Novum, or rather he was within the Shadow Novum, the dream of the real place, although to invoke dream does not adequately convey what Galt experienced. It was as if he were there upon the ramparts, while his fleet sailed a thousand light years away from Honourum. He had not put into port there for many long years, and so he treasured his rare visits, even to this facsimile.

He marvelled at the veracity of his vision. He closed his eyes and breathed deep of the thin atmosphere, and he smiled at the chill of it on his lungs.

The fortress-monastery of the Novamarines was vast. It had never been completed. It was said it would only be finished when the last Novamarine had laid down his life in the service of mankind. Every victory saw a new hall hewn from the living stone, every dead brother a fresh shrine consecrated. After eight thousand years, the fortress-monastery occupied three-fifths of the Heavenward Mountains. No one, living or dead, was aware of its true extent, and its deepest halls contained mysteries beyond the knowledge of all but the Chapter Master himself.

Like men, so too do Chapters have their secrets.

There was no sound in this shadow of Novum beyond that provided by nature, and no brothers or their servants. Not living, at least. The Shadow Novum was the hall of the dead, home of the shades of Novamarines gone before, a place where guidance could be sought from the heroes of the past. Why else did the living carve ceaselessly at the mountains? The dead needed their barracks and armouries as much as the living, and their numbers grew with every passing year.

Galt leaned his hands upon the balustrade. The sky boiled with black cloud. Lightning lit it from within, making strange sculptures of the heavens. Green aurorae flared where the storm brushed the fortress-monastery's void shields, a foretaste of the shifting patterns the defences

spread across the stars when night fell. The monastery sculpted the world it occupied – tangible and intangible aspects both – as the world sculpted the men who became the brothers who resided within the monastery; a pleasing symmetry.

The sky was dark, but below the storm the land was bright. It was late afternoon, and Honourum's young sun threw its rays under the attention of the tempest building around the mountains. Light painted the sculpted peaks and hard plains golden. Honourum was a harsh but beautiful world, a world of painter's light and its contrasts. Galt stared at the horizon, letting the sun and the wind refresh his soul.

He had not been home for so long.

Galt waited. He must be patient. The storm drew blackness over the sky, the slot of sky the sun shone through narrowed. Thunder rumbled. Fat spots of rain speckled Galt's robes, sleet quickly followed, cutting slanted lines through the air. He watched crystals of ice melt on the warmth of his skin.

A movement behind him, more than the wind.

His guide had arrived, a hero drawn from the halls of the dead to this halfway place to aid him; the boon of the tattooing ritual.

Galt turned. A figure stood in the doorway leading out onto the balcony. Like him he wore a bone-coloured habit, a deep-blue tabard hanging down the front displaying the Chapter badge: a skull surrounded by a stylised starburst. A silver sash embroidered with many campaign markings, the honours of a Deathwatch kill-team veteran, crossed the brother's chest. This gave Galt a start, he knew that sash. He knew it too well. He prayed it was mere coincidence; the Novamarines were an old Chapter, it was not impossible two brothers separated by millennia could have won identical badges.

Not impossible, he thought, but unlikely.

‘Brother, what aid may the dead grant the living?’ said the figure, and Galt’s heart chilled. The voice was as familiar to him as his own. The figure stepped forward, pulling back his hood as he did so.

Galt frowned. It was as he had feared, the spirit wore the scarred face of Veteran-Sergeant Voldo, the man who had overseen Galt’s training as a neophyte and his creation as an initiate, the man who was as good as a father to him.

Voldo was heavily tattooed with scenes depicting important moments from his life. Some were crude and faded with time; those given to him centuries ago by his human family before he was chosen by the gods to live in the halls of the dead and fight for the Sky-Emperor. Some were Chapter icons. Others were full images, glorious in their colour and artistry. There was little room left upon Voldo’s skin for more. Every millimetre of his bald head was covered with marks of honour. They covered his neck, and crept from the sleeves of his robes to wrap delicately around each finger of his hands. As with all of the brothers, the Chapter badge was tattooed upon his forehead. This was the first mark they received upon initiation, but in Voldo’s case each trough between the rays of the nova were filled with long-service studs, forming a secondary starburst of unyielding adamantium.

‘How can this be, brother?’ asked Galt. A complex mix of emotions troubled him, catching at his voice. ‘You live, I saw you not an hour ago.’

Voldo rested a hand on the balustrade and looked out over the plain. ‘The dead are not subject to the laws of time as are the living, lord captain. This place is eternal. Time has no meaning here. I died a long time ago. Or yesterday. Or tomorrow. It matters not. We are all here, all the brothers past and all the brothers yet to be. You are here, as am I. Tell me, are you living, or are you dead? Do you know yourself?’

Galt started to say something, but thought better of it. He fought to regain his poise. It was not wise to query the dead too closely. What was

not openly displayed by the flesh art was not for other men to know. And so he too turned to the stony plains of Honourum, unreal and empty below him. Far away, a lone figure struggled across the broken stone pavements, fleeing the storm. He went up and down the peaks and ridges of the rock, as small and insignificant as an ant.

Galt watched the man's progress a while before speaking. 'I am troubled by this. Honourum is illuminated as if the sun shines strong, and yet black storms wrack the sky. What does it mean?'

Voldo ran a hand over his head and smiled wryly. 'You know our world, boy – storm and chill and golden light.' No other would address Captain Galt with such familiarity. No one else had the right.

'Not in the dream-place, not together, not like this.'

Voldo put his other hand on the balustrade and leaned fully on it. His robe fell away from his straightened arms, revealing more tattoos. Here an ork died, there a city celebrated liberation; moments in time captured in ink on flesh. 'Light and dark struggle together, First Captain. This is what the storm represents.'

'Who prevails?'

Lightning cracked. The void shields flared purple and green; oil on troubled waters.

'Our kin down there will say the gods are fighting,' said Voldo, nodding at the man in the distance. He had made his way to the edge of the plains of crazed stone, and was ascending a spur in the mountain carved into a lunging aquila. One head of the eagle looked down at the figure with an expression of avarice; the other looked away in dismay. Galt did not recognise the statue, but that was nothing strange. The geography of the Shadow Novum was not entirely the same as that of the real.

'They also say the Fortress Novum is the kingdom of the dead,' said Galt. 'They do not think of us as alive at all.'

‘And they are right. Do you not seek counsel of the dead? The physical Novum stands upon Honourum, but you stand here. Which is the phantom? All men inducted to the Chapter die in the service of mankind, only time stands between life and death, and time is nothing at all. You will know yourself, soon enough.’

‘You speak like Reclusiarch Mortiar.’

Voldo gave a gruff laugh, a single sound, quickly gone. ‘I am dead. I am entitled to. Ask him, he too resides in these halls. All reside here.’

‘Do I?’

Voldo did not answer directly, he shifted, scanning the horizon. ‘Listen to what I say, lord captain.’

Galt tried to remain impassive. Seeing the living Voldo as the honoured dead could betoken nothing good, but to show concern in the presence of his shade would be inexcusable. ‘You have not answered my question, Brother Voldo, as is your duty as the honoured dead. Favour your living brother, who will prevail in this age-old contest. Light or dark?’

Voldo gave a small smile, almost imperceptible. The same smile Galt remembered so well from the moment of his choosing at the end of the Contest of Fire, and later from his time as a novitiate, serving in Voldo’s Scout squad in the Tenth, the same smile he had seen on Voldo’s living flesh that very morning.

‘Who said they were fighting with each other, First Captain? Difficult times are ahead. Be wary.’

‘And the figure, the tribesman who flees the storm? Why does he climb? What does he signify?’

‘Who told you he was of the tribes, or that he runs from the storm?’

Lightning blasted at the void shields directly, its discharge rushed across energy shields in splintering branches. Thunder boomed, the void shields crackled as loud as gunfire reply.

With a jolt, Galt left the Shadow Novum. His vision-quest was done; abruptly, without warning, as was always the way.

The quiet songs of the Reclusiam serfs standing in a circle about the couch welcomed him back. Galt's eyes opened. The air was dry and still. The couch vibrated slightly with the ship's reactor.

'The ritual is complete, my lord. My work is done.' The auto-artisan withdrew its needles from Galt's shoulder. The auto-artisan had once been a man. What remained of it was barely human. One arm had been replaced by a jointed metal prosthetic which, in place of a hand, carried a drum mounted with dozens of fine needles and jars of pigment. It had no legs, its torso being affixed to a gimballed arm that allowed it to move around the tattooing couch in the Sanctuary of Marking. Where the serf's other arm had been, the robe was sleeveless.

'A fine piece to commemorate a grand deed,' the auto-artisan croaked. Its voice was weak, unaccustomed to use.

Galt flexed his arm and craned his neck to look upon the artwork. Dots of blood oozed from the microscopic holes the needles left. They clotted rapidly, the effect of the Larraman cells, another of his Space Marine gifts. The skin was red, irritated by the tattooing, but Galt could see how it would look once he had healed. The new art depicted him with his bolter upraised, the corpses of eldar reavers and their strange battle-machines about his feet.

'A good addition,' he said. 'I thank you.'

'I am glad it pleases you. Thanks are not necessary. You do your duty, lord, and I do mine.' The auto-artisan bowed its head and crossed its arm over its chest. The gimbal withdrew, pulling the half-man back into the alcove where it resided in hibernation between the times its services were needed. Somewhere upon its body would be the tattoo that told how it had come to be this way, how a young aspirant to the plate of the Novamarines had become nameless, wizened flesh trapped by metal.

Cold gasses engulfed it. The alcove door slid shut.

Chaplain Odon, spiritual leader of Galt's company and lord of the Grand Chapel of Remembrance, stepped into view. He grasped Galt's newly marked shoulder and made a noise of approval. 'A good likeness, brother-captain, it augurs well. Surely this image alone will swell the Emperor's heart with pride when the time comes for him to judge the tally of your deeds.'

'By the marks upon thee, shall he know thee,' said Galt.

'And so judge the iron of a brother's soul,' responded Odon.

Galt sat up and faced the Chaplain. Odon's robes were black and he was hooded, the skull tattooed over the features of his face only just visible in the candlelight of the chapel.

'Your dreams, did they bring you anything, brother-captain? Did the honoured dead speak to you of victory?'

Galt was silent.

'You are troubled, brother. Unburden yourself.'

'Tell me, Chaplain, what does it portend when the living appear within the Shadow Novum?'

Odon's face became thoughtful, causing the skull to move as if it had a life of its own, a face upon a face. 'This man, he is among us?'

'Yes. It was—'

Odon laid a hand on the First Captain's shoulder. 'No brother, do not speak his name, not to me nor to anyone else, and especially not to him. Time is meaningless in the place beyond. The ancestor-grounds of the Shadow Novum are populated by all those who have died, and will yet die. For the living to see one there who still breathes is unusual, but no cause for alarm. Indeed, for the shade of a man who still lives to seek out a supplicant is a sign of great honour. You should be proud, brother-captain.'

Galt nodded hesitantly. 'Yes, Brother-Chaplain. It is an omen of ill-fortune for the man who will become the shade, is it not?'

Odon made a noise of affirmation. ‘Death is soon to come for the brother whose phantom so shows itself. It is best the living brother not know of the closeness of his shade, no matter that his presence in the Shadow Novum tells us his soul is safe.’

‘Chaplain, there was something else.’

‘Yes brother-captain?’

‘A great storm raged in the heavens, although the land below was bright. At first the two – light and dark – seemed to fight, but the shade told me this was not so. A man fled across the Plain of Judgement before the western face of Fortress Novum and ascended Mount Bordon, in my vision carved into the likeness of the aquila. What does it portend?’

‘You saw another figure?’

‘Far in the distance. A tribesman perhaps.’

‘Troubling,’ said Odon. He frowned, although the skull superimposed on his features continued its eternal grin. ‘I will think on it. There are forces at play around us at all times that we cannot understand. Nor should we try to. Such understanding is the gift of the Emperor alone, for he sits in the doorway between the worlds of the living and dead. It is not for we, the children of his children, to contemplate. Still...’ Odon paused. His grey eyes narrowed in the tattooed sockets of his second skull.

A quiet fanfare interrupted them, an all-ship vox announcement followed. ‘Brothers and servants of the Novamarines, hearken! All attend your duty. Prepare for real space translation.’

A countdown commenced, the culmination of three days’ preparation to leave the warp. Galt and Odon waited for it to reach zero.

The battle-barge’s reactor built to a terrific howl. Warp engines pulsed with arcane forces that sent shudders rippling through the ancient vessel’s fabric. The lights flickered as all power was diverted to the bracing fields that helped hold the craft’s enormous mass together. A strange sensation settled over Galt, a feeling of impermanence, as if he were only the

possibility of Mantillio Galt, and not the actuality of him; a ghost of himself. Coming so soon after seeing the shade of the still-living Voldo, this was an unsettling sensation.

The feeling ceased. Galt was who he was, real and flesh, a servant of mankind and the Emperor unto death. The thrum of millions of tons of plasteel under his feet grounded him in reality even as the vessel hung precipitously on the cusp of non-existence. Galt's faith in the ancient ship calmed him.

The ship quaked, and was still.

'Rejoice, brethren! Geller fields deactivated. Safe translation to real space accomplished,' the ship-wide vox said.

'We have arrived then, and in good time. Shall I accompany you to the bridge?' said Odon.

'Yes, Brother-Chaplain.' Galt stood and pulled on his habit, covering his coloured flesh. As their fortress home was never finished, so the flesh art was never done, not until a brother fell in battle and the record of his achievements was buried with him. Galt called out his signifex code, engaging a vox in the ears of a nearby statue of an angel. 'Captain Galt orders Captains Mastrik and Aresti, Epistolary Raniel, and Master of the Forge Clastrin to the bridge.'

Odon smiled, his second skull spreading wider its own awful grin. 'I do not know why you call Forgemaster Clastrin, brother. Where else would he be today, when there is treasure in the stars?'

Galt smiled and gave a quiet grunt of affirmation. 'You are right. Let us go. I don't want Mastrik getting impatient and ordering the ship forward before I get there.'

The chorus of Reclusiam serfs around the couch, gold-masked and dressed in bone-and-blue, dipped their heads as Galt stood. Their circle parted to let the captain and the Chaplain through. As they left the sanctuary and entered the main body of *Novum in Honourum's* Grand

Chapel, Galt's serf aides Artermin and Holstak stood up from the pews where they had been praying and fell in behind him, their ship's uniforms emblazoned with the Chapter heraldry. They were not weaklings, these lesser men, but vigorous starfarers. Nevertheless, Galt and Odon towered over them. Six black-clad servitor-worshippers detached themselves from alcoves in the walls, and fell in behind.

'We have arrived,' Galt said to the men, 'and I would look upon our foe.'

On the way out of the chapel, the party turned and bowed as one to the statue of Lucretius Corvo, founder of their Chapter, which stood five times life-size by the soaring doors.

Odon led them in a request for guidance. Not as an ecclesiarch would beseech the Emperor, but as a respectful officer asking advice of a much-loved leader. They were all brothers after all, even if long millennia separated their births.

They left the chapel to its serfs. Their songs continued, gentle as the breeze that blew unceasingly over Honourum's stony plains.



CHAPTER 2

Brothers in arms

‘First Captain on the bridge!’

Galt stepped onto the bridge of the battle-barge. Chapter serfs and full brothers alike snapped to attention. Servitors, oblivious to his rank, went about their ponderous business. A fragment of flesh half-hidden in a web of cybernetic command and life-support cables turned to the door – the remains of a brother. The entirety of the machine he occupied rotated with him.

‘Brother-Captain Galt, we have arrived in-system.’

‘Brother-Captain Persimmon, how goes it?’

‘A smooth translation, *Novum in Honourum* serves us faithfully as always.’

Persimmon was a wreck of a man, crippled in battle by a vicious xenos species never encountered before or since. Neurotoxins had destroyed his limbs and much of his musculature. Only chance had brought him to the *Novum in Honourum*’s infirmary and not delivered the bolt of the Emperor’s Grace. The Apothecaries had been ready to send his soul to the Shadow Novum, where he would await the final call to battle from the

Emperor. Yet he had lived, clawing his way back from the dead with his single, bloodied hand. Somehow, his body had healed itself enough to remain viable, and so he had also escaped the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought.

Unfit for combat duty, Persimmon had been invested as the Chapter's Master of the Fleet and installed directly into the bridge of the *Novum in Honourum*. Technically Novum was Galt's command, but Persimmon was the true captain of the ship, body and soul. Already noted for his great acumen in naval engagements, his skill had only grown after his injury and subsequent bonding with the vessel. In many respects he *was Novum in Honourum*.

Persimmon's cradle occupied the space where the command throne of the battle-barge had once been. A Shiplord's Seat had been installed to one side of the cybernetic captain; this was Galt's place, but he walked past it to stand on the walkway over the operations pits and their many-tiered rows of servitor drones, wired in as Persimmon was directly to the ship, before the broad windows of the bridge.

Others of the officer clade of the Chapter were there. Clastrin, Master of the Forge, worked busily, surrounded by human serfs and servitors, and aided by two Techmarines. He, unlike the other Space Marines present, wore his power armour. It was as red as rust, only his right shoulder pad bearing the bone-and-blue colours and badge of the Chapter. Tentacles of metal darted out from the harness upon his back, working controls. Chitters from his augmitter of rapid binaric, the tech-speak of the priesthood of Mars, compelled both his own cyborgs and the bridge servitors to greater efforts. His helmet was off, and his face, marked by strange tattoos that owed more to the Omnissiah than the traditions of Honourum, was tense with anticipation.

Captain Lutil Mastrik and Epistolary Raniel stood side by side on the walkway in front of the windows; Mastrik animated as always, Raniel

distracted. Odon and Galt's retinue dispersed, and the captain and Chaplain joined the Librarian and Mastrik.

Galt looked to the main window, its armourglass covered by external and internal blast shielding.

'You waited for me, brother?' he said.

'I was sorely tempted not to,' said Mastrik.

'Brother-Captain Aresti?' said Galt.

'En route from *Corvo's Hammer*, brother-captain,' said Mastrik. 'He is late as usual.'

'Our brother has problems that require his attention,' said Clastrin. His words were doubled, his organic voice overlaid by a melodious second projected by a vox-emitter. The two spoke with simultaneous disapproval.

'Shall I engage the chartdesk, brother-captain?' asked Persimmon. 'We have good pict captures of the hulk already.' Persimmon indicated the black glass bed of the chartdesk, eight by eight metres, situated in front of his throne. 'Forgemaster Clastrin has excelled himself today.'

Galt shook his head. 'Open the blast shields, I wish to see the hulk with my own eyes first. Let us get a feeling for our battleground, before we lose ourselves in the detail of it.'

A chorus of grinding servitor voices spoke as one. 'Compliance.'

'You paraphrase Guilliman, brother' said Mastrik. 'The wisdom of the Codex is never far from your lips.'

'As it should not be far from your own, brother,' said Galt mildly.

Motors whirred, pulling up the shutters on both sides of the window. Immediately the bridge was flooded with harsh, blue light. Galt shielded his eyes.

'Dim windows, ninety-eight per cent,' shouted Clastrin.

'Compliance.'

At the servitors' unspoken commands, the machine-spirits of the bridge exerted their influence on the glass, darkening it. Galt dropped his hand to

his side.

The shutters clanged into their housings, revealing a window that ran the entire width of the bridge. Ten metres tall, and many times wider than that, the window filled the whole of the forward section's wall. The armourglass was framed by heavy mullions, each tall support cast in the likeness of a Chapter hero. The edges of the window were stained, tiny panes set in a labyrinth of metal incised with the names of the glorious dead, displaying in a long, colourful ribbon of pictures the story of the Chapter's founding nearly eight thousand years ago.

A bright blue sun occupied most of the view. The ship was close enough that the men aboard could see flares ejected from its churning surface, the top and bottom of the star cut off by the window. The light was raw, dangerous despite the windows' protective dimming, bleaching out the subtle colours of the stained glass. There were no planets around Jorso, it was too violent a star for fatherhood. Its searing light had blasted the dusty stuff of its offspring into interstellar space before they had had a chance to coalesce.

Against the sun, the other ships in Galt's fleet were silhouettes both small and insignificant. He recognised them all from their shapes, they were as familiar to him as children are to their fathers. Two strike cruisers and four escorts. One caused Galt concern. *Corvo's Hammer* sparkled with vented plasma, the price of victory in their last engagement.

A curling plume of blue flame burst from the sun. Far more than a ball of gas it seemed, but a great, ravening animal. How could something that writhed so not live?

'The hulk will pass between our orbit and the star soon brother-captain,' said Persimmon.

'In five, four,' began one of the serfs, 'three, two, one...'

'I see it.' Galt breathed the words.

A vast black shape slid across the boiling blue surface of Jorso.

‘Bring detail views up on the main chartdesk. Compensate for stellar luminosity,’ said Persimmon.

‘Yes, lord captain,’ said a serf officer. Commands were issued to the relevant servitors and by them relayed to the machine-spirits which inhabited the ship’s systems. The bridge filled with machine noise as affirmations of compliance ground out from uncaring throats.

The chartdesk shimmered. Bands of light resolved themselves into a holographic image of the space hulk in front of Persimmon’s throne-cradle.

‘Corvo’s oath,’ murmured Galt. His hand went to the Chapter pendant that hung about his neck.

‘First Captain,’ said Persimmon. ‘I present the space hulk *Death of Integrity*, our target.’

Even against the immensity of the growling sun, the hulk designated *Death of Integrity* appeared huge, an agglomeration of vessels and cosmic flotsam tossed together by the shifting tides of the empyrean. *Novum in Honourum* was a battle-barge, one of the greatest vessels the Imperium could command, but she was a toy in comparison. The hulk presented itself as a broken ornament the size of a small moon, its surface a bewildering mosaic of protrusions. Ship prows, engine units, nacelles, crumpled cargo barges, the smooth lines of xenos craft, pocked half-mountains of asteroids and the ice spires of comets projected chaotically from its surface. Many of the elements that made up the hulk were forged by thinking creatures, men or otherwise, but its shipwright was the warp, and that had little respect for the physics of real space.

Servitors growled and chirruped in binaric, half-formed words in standard Gothic slipping drool-slicked from their mouths. Not for the first time, Galt wondered if any awareness remained in their wiped minds.

One of the serf-officers overseeing the augur arrays spoke. ‘Mass, thirty-seven point nine trillion tonnes, albedo point eight-seven, gravitic

displacement...’

He went on, describing the physical qualities of the hulk. Portions of the holograph representing the vessel winked bright green as another officer identified component parts, a gridded funnel came into being around it, depicting its weak gravity field, other icons and graphical demonstrations of mass and potentially active power sources blinked up one after another, cluttering the air of the bridge with informatics.

The serf overseeing the augur array had a face half of metal, a slatted round covering one eye. When he spoke, it was with the emotionless burr of a vox-grille.

‘Estimated composition, three hundred and seventy vessels, of which fifty-three per cent class gamma or lower, twenty-four per cent class beta, eighteen per cent class alpha. Remainder unknown. All best estimates. Certainty impossible.’

‘That,’ Galt pointed at a part of the hologram. ‘That is an Imperial warship, heavy cruiser, Avenger-class?’

‘Indeed, brother-captain. One of several.’ Clastrin said in his twin voices, his ordinary reserve swept aside by excitement at the hulk. ‘All ages, many patterns.’

‘A rich prize then, when we are victorious,’ said Mastrik, a broad grin across his face. ‘We had best send a message to your friends on Mars, Forgemaster, so they may pick the carcass clean.’

‘Archeotech is valuable to all who live under the Emperor’s protection, brother. I urge you to curb your flippancy. Respect is the appropriate response to this gift from the Omnissiah.’

Galt turned slightly, his gaze moving from the windows to the chartdesk holo.

‘The core? What lies at its centre?’

‘Unknown,’ replied the serf.

‘There is a great deal of stellar interference, First Captain,’ said Clastrin. ‘Our augurs do not function well in this close proximity to a star of Jorso’s class. We have detected several large, unstable sources of radioactivity within the hulk also, and these further cloud the eyes of *Novum in Honourum*. Deep augur scans are impossible.’

‘Any indication of the xenos threat? Where do they lair?’

‘None, First Captain, not by machine means, at least. It is impossible to say at this time.’

‘Epistolary Ranial? What does the Librarium say?’

‘It is as the request maintained, First Captain. Psychic activity is indicative of genestealer infestation.’

‘That is a very large hulk, Brother-Epistolary,’ said Galt.

‘And there are a great many genestealers aboard it, brother-captain,’ said Ranial drily.

‘We shall have to see then, what our cousins say,’ said Galt. ‘Any news on their fleet?’

‘None, lord captain,’ spoke the chief augur-serf. ‘We cannot pinpoint them against this background of interference, but I expect contact soon.’

The clanging of power armour boots on deck-plating rang out as Captain Aresti hurried onto the bridge. He wore his armour, the bone-and-blue quartered heraldry of the Novamarines still scarred from their last battle. His tattooed face was bare, his helmet tucked under his arm.

‘My apologies, brothers.’

‘You are experiencing difficulty, I take it?’ said Galt. ‘*Corvo’s Hammer* bleeds. I thought the main drive repaired.’

Aresti shook his head. ‘We are down to only one containment unit, brother-captain. Two destroyed and one damaged. The one the Forgemaster repaired ruptured as we exited the empyrean. We were fortunate that it held so long.’

‘The damage is great, First Captain,’ said Clastrin. ‘My Techmarines labour through all the watches. I myself will attend and personally implore the machine-spirits within to hold fast to life, but I fear *Corvo’s Hammer* will not survive another voyage through the immaterium. The vessel requires full dry dock facilities if it is to recover.’

‘And they are in short supply here,’ said Ranial.

Mastrik gave a gentle laugh. ‘That they are, brother.’

‘The potential loss of a strike cruiser is no matter for levity, brothers!’ protested Clastrin. His artful electronic voice strained with annoyance.

‘My apologies,’ said Mastrik. “‘All is but dust in motion”,’ he added, quoting the script of Corvo. ‘And yet I think you will no doubt find a way to keep the dust of *Corvo’s Hammer* together a little while longer. Perhaps our new friends will aid you?’

‘Where are they?’ asked Aresti. ‘Our deep augurs are beyond use. *Corvo’s Hammer* is as good as blind.’

Galt shook his head, and lifted his pendant to his lips. He kissed the jet icon absent-mindedly, and let it fall.

‘If they were working, you’d still be as blind as the rest of us are, brother,’ said Mastrik.

‘I have them, lord captains,’ a serf spoke. ‘Tightbeam transmission coming in now.’

The chartdesk flickered, bands of colour rippled, and the light-model of the *Death of Integrity* vanished like a broken reflection. In its place appeared the shoulders and head of another adept, a genetically altered Space Marine like the brothers of the Novamarines, but subtly different. His face was impossibly beautiful, his black hair shoulder length and scraped back from his forehead. He wore ornate plate of red and gold, as if ready to march into battle. The image crackled violently, the sound buzzed.

‘Stabilise the image, compensate for stellar wind,’ ordered Clastrin.

The image shook and became a little clearer, although it shivered and popped constantly.

‘I extend the greeting of brotherhood to the Novamarines,’ intoned the figure.

‘It is gladly accepted, and returned twofold.’ Galt stepped closer to the projection. ‘We have heard and accepted your call for aid, as detailed in the Covenants of Trust. Brother hears the call of brother and responds. I am Captain Mantillio Galt of the Novamarines First Company, Master of the Watch and commander of Battlefleet Trident. How may we be of assistance?’

‘I, Chapter Master Caedis, Lord of San Guisiga and of the Blood Drinkers Chapter, thank you for your response. Might I suggest we meet face to face and discuss the matter at hand?’

Galt dipped his head. ‘Naturally. As you have done us the honour of inviting us to battle, I extend the hospitality of *Novum in Honourum* to you and yours in return.’

Caedis bowed his own head. ‘The Blood Drinkers thank you brothers. We shall attend you shortly. In five hours time?’

‘We shall bring our fleets together, cousin Blood Drinker, and thence parlay.’

‘That is agreeable. Wings of Sanguinius shield you.’

The holo winked out.

‘Brother-Captain Persimmon,’ Galt called, ‘rendezvous with the Blood Drinkers fleet. Brother-Captain Artermin, rouse Major-domo Polanczek. I will not have our brethren think us misers. They are honoured brothers, and should be entertained as such.’ He looked to the other captains. ‘And now, brothers, how do we greet these sons of Sanguinius? As brothers of peace, or prepared for war?’

‘In plate, brother-captain. It sends a certain message,’ said Ranial. ‘We wish for them to think us ready. Warriors, not aesthetics, although we are

both, we should show our steel to our allies, as their master has shown us his.'

The others nodded their assent.

In the furious glare of Jorso, two fleets drifted. Their colours were distorted by the harsh cyan light of the star, making one set of vessels black as old blood, the other two clashing shades of blue. Spotlights and landing beacons illuminated portions of the crafts' hulls with cleaner light, and here one could see that one fleet was a bright and threatening red, the other ivory, with portions of the vessels picked out in sombre blue. The two largest craft hung side by side in the vacuum, thrusters occasionally flaring as they fired to maintain the ship's positions; battle-barges, both immense. Towards the stern they rose in stepped decks, as massive as mountains. Long, narrow hulls studded with hangars and drop pod launch bays thrust forward like proud necks, growing wide at their heavily shielded bows. At the prow armour was held out either side on stanchions, emblazoned with the marks of their respective Chapters. A stylised chalice below a suspended blood drop upon one, a skull surrounded by a starburst on the other. Upon the bridge of the bone-and-blue vessel the name *Novum in Honourum* was inscribed. The bow plating of the red vessel bore the legend *Lux Rubrum*.

They were similar yet different, these vessels. *Lux Rubrum*'s upper decks flared more fully than *Novum*'s, its decoration was more elaborate. A statue of an armoured angel stood upon the highest point, sword upraised, adding fifty metres to the ship's height. A chalice hung from the angel's other hand, spilling drips of metal, as if it were blood frozen solid in the chill of the vacuum. *Novum* was a hundred metres longer, its prow plating thinner, its figurehead a modest aquila set to the fore of the command section. Starbursts of gleaming adamantium were set over the eagle's eyes, a skull on a chain about its neck. Sisters, then, not twins, these mighty fortresses of the stars.

A flash of light winked halfway along the port side of *Lux Rubrum*. A half-second afterwards a small shape glimmered in the hard shine of

Jorso: a ship, propelled by a blade of flame, navigation lights blinking. It crossed the space between the battle-barges rapidly, slowing only slightly as it entered a docking bay in the starboard of *Novum in Honourum*.

Lord Caedis of the Blood Drinkers went to enjoy the hospitality of the Novamarines.

The Thunderhawk's turbines roared as it came in from the launch tube to hangar 73. It slowed to a hover, turning side-on to the tube as it did so. Heated air blew in all directions, causing the robes, banners and scrips of the Novamarines welcome guard to snap violently. Motors whined, deploying landing gear, secondary wings went up, and the ship touched down, sinking into the hydraulics of its claws.

The deep red of the Blood Drinkers Thunderhawk was shocking in the muted colour of the Novamarines landing bay. Like a wound, or a cancer, an alien body alike and yet unlike to that which encompassed it. This contrast carried the imputation of inimicality, and Galt was perturbed by that.

The Thunderhawk engines' crescendo dwindled swiftly, humming to a stop. The smaller noises of the hangar took their place; the leaden clump of servitors as they dragged cables and refuelling lines to the craft, the three blaring notes of the all clear klaxon. The metal of the Thunderhawk creaked. Two of the Novamarines' own Thunderhawks sat on mobile pads to the rear of the launch bay, their bone-and-blue sombre in comparison to the Blood Drinkers' vivid livery.

Galt, Odon, Mastrik, Aresti, Raniel, and Clastrin waited by the hangar bay's doors in their full armour, bareheaded. A pair of serfs in Chapter colours attended each, dwarfed by the helmets and weapons they carried for their masters.

The standard bearers of the Third, Fifth and First Companies stood behind them, silver-helmeted veterans carrying elaborate and ancient flags. Two files of Novamarines stood to attention, veterans also, flanking

the standard bearers, four honour guard at their head. The fleet's Master of Astropaths, a fleshy man by the name of Feldiol, stood with them, as did several of the higher ranking Chapter serfs; even Lord Navigator Gulfindan Van Heem had come down from his lofty perch atop the *Novum in Honourum*, looking uncomfortable out of his low-gravity apartments. His witch eye twitched behind its lid in the centre of his forehead.

Long seconds passed.

'Are they disembarking, or not?' grumbled Mastrik.

'Patience, brother,' said Ranial.

There was the muted click of mag-locks disengaging, and the Thunderhawk's assault ramp opened. Gases hissed outward, bringing with them strange scents. The air of the *Novum in Honourum* was dry and flavourless, reminiscent of the thin atmosphere of the Chapter home world; that coming from the Thunderhawk was rich with perfume and the smell of copper and iron.

The ramp lowered to the floor of the landing bay, red light spilled outward.

The Blood Angels disembarked.

Galt had studied all he could on the Blood Drinkers while the fleet was in transit, but the data in their Librarium was old, the Novamarines having had few dealings with the other Chapter. The personnel detailed in the Librarium records were all long dead, and Galt did not recognise the five Space Marines who stepped out from the Thunderhawk alongside Chapter Master Caedis. Their markings made it apparent what ranks they held. There was their Chief Apothecary, the Chapter Reclusiarch, an Epistolary, and a captain who wore the black shoulder rims of the Fifth Company. The sixth Blood Drinker was a veteran who stopped by the door to the Thunderhawk to unsling a tube from his back, from which he produced the Chapter's rolled banner. He fitted his standard poles together quietly, raised the Blood Drinkers flag high, and fell in behind the officers.

All wore markings and badges exactly as laid down in the Codex Astartes, and this Galt approved of. Guilliman's wisdom was not to be ignored. One might argue that the precise form of a campaign badge mattered little, but Galt thought this an ill-thought opinion. The Codex Astartes was a system, all parts of it interlocked to create a perfect doctrine of war and being. Those who strayed from Guilliman's tenets were foolhardy, no matter how small the deviation.

The Blood Drinkers armour was richly decorated, incorporating badges and personal heraldry rendered in relief. All well within the Codex's precepts, but to the more ostentatious end of what was advised. Caedis's armour was chased in gold, a heavy fur cloak was held to the front of his shoulder pads by large, circular brooches, partly obscuring his plate's markings. Like Galt's men, Caedis's followers were bareheaded. They carried their own helms. No serfs attended them.

The Blood Drinkers were exceptional specimens, even for the Adeptus Astartes. It was said that their primarch, Sanguinius, had been of unnatural beauty, and that all his sons bore an echo of his physical perfection, whether of the Blood Angels or their successors. Galt was taken aback by the poise and fineness of these men's features; they were angels made flesh, so close to perfection they made Galt feel graceless. Only close to perfection, however. There was something about them that fell short; some indiscernible flaw. It was not until Caedis and his brethren drew closer that Galt could see that their skin and hair appeared dry, desiccated almost, the flesh of their faces grainy as if carved from moistureless stone.

'I bid you welcome to the battle-barge *Novum in Honourum*, Lord Chapter Master Caedis,' said Galt. 'In the name of brotherhood, I give you its freedom. If you require anything of the Novamarines, lord, you have but to ask.' He dipped his head, and clenched his fist over his heart in salute. He then held out his right hand. Caedis reached his own out, and

they grasped each others' forearms in the warrior's clasp, bone armour to blood.

'The sons of Sanguinius hail you, sons of Roboute Guilliman,' replied Caedis. 'As our primarchs were brothers, let us be brothers also.'

'We shall fight together, side by side.'

'And I welcome it.' Caedis's dry lips curved into a smile. He spoke well, with something of an aristocratic hauteur. Galt sensed a luxury at odds with the simple aestheticism of the Novamarines. Caedis had very white teeth, and somewhat long canines. Galt found these physical and cultural differences unremarkable. All the Chapters differed a little, those that followed the Codex Astartes closely also. He thanked Corvo silently in his mind that his Chapter was lucky enough to be of the purer sort, descended from the Ultramarines themselves, first among all the Chapters of the Imperium.

The greeting done, the two groups relaxed. 'Captain, may I present to you my chief aides?' said Caedis. 'Reclusiarch Mazrael, spiritual leader of our order, Epistolary Guinian, and Sanguinary Master Teale. Captain Sorael there leads the Fifth Company.'

Each of Space Marines bowed their heads in turn. Galt did not recognise the title of Sanguinary Master, given as that of the one he had taken to be Chief Apothecary.

'Finally, Veteran-Brother Metrion,' said Caedis, gesturing to his Chapter standard bearer. 'Our Chapter Ancient.'

Galt responded, introducing his own men. 'You see here Brother-Captain Lutil Mastrik of the Novamarines Third, and master of strike cruiser *Ceaseless Vigilance*. Captain Aresti commands our Fifth Company, and is master also of *Corvo's Hammer*. Epistolary Ranial, Chaplain Odon and Master of the Forge Clastrin make up the others of the senior initiates you see here. Master of Astropaths Feldiol, Fleet Chief Lord Navigator Gulfindan Van Heem of House Meld, and my principal serf aides Artermin

and Holstak. Finally, Major-domo Polanczek. Should you require anything while you are here, please direct your requests to him.'

'Anything at all, my lords,' said Polanczek with a deep bow. He looked behind the blood-red warriors quizzically. 'You have brought no servants, no Chapter serfs in attendance?'

Caedis essayed his slow smile again. 'No, major-domo, we have not.'

'Then I shall assign men to you for your stay, my lord.' He clapped his hands, and serfs dressed in the livery of the Novamarines stepped forward briskly. 'Come, we have refreshments awaiting you.'

'We thank you,' said Caedis. 'I am sure the others are as thirsty as I.'

The banquet took place in Galt's quarters. Diplomacy was a part of the art of war, Guilliman himself had written, and thus the master of the ship's dwelling space incorporated audience rooms and the like. Galt's personal rooms were spartan, in keeping with the temper of his Chapter. In contrast the Hall of Welcome where the Novamarines entertained the Blood Drinkers was lavishly appointed. Friezes of the deeds of Lucretius Corvo, founder of the Novamarines, filled every wall. The ceiling sported twin domes, both filled edge to edge with cunning trompe l'oeil. The one above the feasting Space Marines depicted an allegorical interpretation of the Emperor's ascension. Clad in golden armour, the Lord of Mankind reached up to the sky pointing to where, upon a cloud, a golden throne shot out rays of light, his other hand reached for outstretched hands rising below him, showing his reluctance to leave the mortal world. Winged vat-children of the Adeptus Mechanicus hurried his ascent. His down-turned face was full of authority and regret. The dome nearer the door showed Roboute Guilliman – primarch of the Ultramarines, and through their descent from the Ultramarines, also of the Novamarines. The image depicted him as a thinker, at work in his cell on the Codex Astartes while generals and lords of all kinds waited in animated discussion for his wisdom to be delivered.

Caedis sat in the place of honour to Galt's right. Care had been made by Major-domo Polanczek to assure the visiting Chapter Master's high rank

was recognised, so although his throne was on an exact level with Galt's, it was far more heavily decorated.

‘We were beginning to lose hope,’ Caedis was saying. Despite his protestations of thirst, he ate and drank sparingly of the dishes laid before him. ‘We have been tracking the *Death of Integrity* for nearly three decades, following a trail of infested worlds, always one step behind. Our astrometric data presented us with a pattern that our Master of the Forge was able to untangle somewhat, giving us projected destinations and worlds under threat.’ He sighed, and pushed at the meat on his plate with a silver fork. ‘But we were always too late, arriving after the hulk had departed, and thus our frustrations grew. We were fortunate three months ago, when we were able to confront the creatures in their lair. Epistolary Guinian tore the mind-scent from the thoughts of their young. Only then could we follow the hulk with certainty through the warp, and predict where it would next emerge. I am greatly relieved we have caught it. The worlds we have cleansed thus far are of minor importance, but this is the hulk's third appearance in proximity to Vol Secundus. A genestealer infestation within the hives there would have been disastrous, and sown the seeds of a greater contagion that perhaps only a crusade could have contained.’

‘Why has it manifested here?’ asked Galt. ‘Master Clastrin knows of nothing special about this star. It possesses only a moderate mass despite its luminosity, not enough to bend the fabric of real space sufficiently to aid the warp translation of such a hulk.’

‘Who knows?’ replied Caedis. He spoke softly, but his words cut through the conversation filling the air. ‘It is however the seventh star of such a class the *Death of Integrity* has emerged by.’ He waved his hand. ‘This sector is full of them, the young and the radiant.’ Caedis blinked. Even his eyes looked dry. Galt imagined he could hear the eyelids rasping over them. ‘We are close to the stellar nurseries of Gennak Minoris, the stars

here were born not so long ago,' he smiled. 'At least, not by the reckoning of stars.'

'Gennak Minoris is the outermost boundary of our patrol routes,' said Galt. 'You were lucky that we caught your astropathic plea.'

'You go no further?'

Galt picked up a morsel of food from his plate and examined it before putting it into his mouth. He concentrated on the flavour, ignoring the wash of information the Emperor's gifts fed him. 'We swore eight thousand years ago to the Lord of Macragge to defend the Segmentum Ultima, body and soul, living or dead. Our business takes us far and wide, but does not often take us beyond segmentum bounds.'

'And yet, were it not for your heraldry, I could be sitting with the warrior-kings of Ultramar themselves. So distant is that realm, but you maintain their culture as if it were your own.'

'It is our own,' said Galt with some force.

'You are exiles then?' said Caedis casually. His eyes followed a serf as he poured wine for the adepts. Galt frowned slightly at the look in the Chapter Master's eyes. There was something predatory about it.

'We are not. We are guardians of the Imperium, and loyal sons of Ultramar. We do our duty gladly.'

'So it would seem.' Caedis paused, considering whether or not to say whatever was on his mind. 'Excepting your tattoos,' he said.

Galt's hand strayed to his cheek. 'A custom of Honourum, and one of the few of our home world we retain after induction as novitiate Scouts. This way we honour those who birthed us, as we honour the heritage of Ultramar in all else we do.'

'All are the customs of pure men. Who is to judge one higher than the other?'

'Honourum's tribes are primitive in the extreme,' said Galt. 'Theirs is a harsh existence. Honourum is a bare world.'

‘Primitivism embraces purity of heart and of mind. You hold the sophisticated ways of Ultramar above those of your parents?’

‘They are self-evidently superior,’ said Galt.

‘Is that so? I doubt I would have received so personal a welcome from Lord Macragge.’

‘Our world is hard, the laws and customs of hospitality are inviolable. The tribes must cooperate, or all would perish,’ said Galt.

‘Ah, so some primitive customs are worth preserving? Another difference between you and your brothers. Interesting,’ said Caedis. He looked around the room. There was an easy elegance to all he did. ‘I see you are not all tattooed.’

‘All initiates are, even those few who were not born on Honourum,’ Galt said. ‘Those servants you see who are not marked do not hail from our home world. Honourum has few people, Lord Chapter Master, we draw serfs and criminals for cyborgisation as tithes from systems all over the segmentum. Those of our servants who hail from elsewhere do not always follow the flesh marking.’

Caedis nodded as if he had known all along and he was testing Galt. It was a self-satisfied nod, a master’s gesture to a pupil, and Galt found it irksome. His guest’s questions were intrusive and irrelevant. ‘And what of your strength?’

Galt was relieved at this change in topic. Battle and matters of war were safer ground. ‘In the fleet: the *Novum in Honourum*, two strike cruisers, and four escorts. We have approaching three companies here, near the entirety of the First and Third, much of our Fifth also. But the Fifth suffered in our last battle, and bore the brunt of our foe’s retaliation. Many brothers are in the infirmary. Their vessel is badly harmed.’

‘I saw your strike cruiser,’ said Caedis. ‘The damage is extensive.’

‘Eldar raiders, corsair scum. They fought hard in space and on the ground, but they will trouble the Orin Gap no more. Some elements of the

Fourth, Tenth and Ninth accompany us. It is an unusual gathering of strength for our Chapter,’ said Galt. ‘Were it not for the damage to *Corvo’s Hammer*, the fleet would have broken up already, lord. Our tasks are many, we are spread thin.’

‘You spoke of luck before, but I sense the guidance of the Emperor in this,’ said Caedis thoughtfully. ‘We do not have the numbers to either assault or bombard the hulk alone, I called in our Second and Fifth Companies, but the Second were forced to divert. A greater threat was brought to my attention, greater even than the one posed by the *Death of Integrity’s* stowaways. I am therefore left with little more than one and three-quarter companies aboard *Lux Rubrum* and our four escorts. I have many of my veterans, thankfully, although the skills of my First Company captain are sorely missed.’

‘He is not with you?’

‘As you, manifold are our tasks also. He has his own mission. But what was taken with one hand has been paid for handsomely with the other.’ He gave his food one last desultory taste, and then pushed it away.

‘And now?’

‘It is our nature to assault the foe at close quarters, blade to blade,’ said Caedis.

‘A direct assault, lord?’ said Galt. ‘Surely, bombardment would be the better strategy? We have readings of dangerous radiation levels in many places within the hulk, only Terminator plate would be proof against that. My Epistolary tells me that there are large numbers of xenos aboard. Let us break it apart with torpedo and cannon, and cast its remains into the sun.’

Caedis gave a laugh. ‘And what would your Master of the Forge say? There could be a wealth of archeotech aboard.’

‘Clastrin?’ Galt said. ‘He will doubtless object, but taking the hulk by force is too large a risk for our forces, even combined.’

‘My Forgemaster also will be displeased.’

‘Forgemaster Clastrin bows first to Ultramar and Honourum, and then to Mars,’ said Galt. ‘I will set out to him that he has little choice – the possibility of forgotten treasures comes with the certainty of losing a strike cruiser, and that he will not countenance.’

‘Although I hunger for the fight, I cannot but agree. Bombardment is the wiser option, and as much as the battle-joy calls to me, wisdom must prevail, is that not what Guilliman teaches?’

Galt nodded solemnly.

‘There is, dear captain, another factor at play. The hulk is never in-system for long, five to ten days at most, before departing. A decisive assault could not perhaps be mounted in such a short time. We would be forced to rush, and such tasks should not be rushed.’ Caedis smiled broadly, revealing his long canines fully. ‘Our combined fleets are more than up to the task. Bombardment and the cleansing heat of starfire it is. We are agreed. Together, we may rid the galaxy of this menace, and be on our way. As you say, our tasks are many.’ He raised his goblet. ‘A toast, then, to our rapid success.’

‘Our rapid success, lord,’ repeated Galt.

Their cups clanked together. The toast was taken up around the table, until it was shouted with approval.



CHAPTER 3

Bombardment

The two fleets had become one. The hallways of the battle-barges echoed to the sound of servitors as they prepared for war. Ponderously *Lux Rubrum* and *Novum in Honourum* manoeuvred around one another, until the vessel of the Blood Drinkers, black-red in the sun's light, drew ahead of its Novamarines sister. The *Lux Rubrum*'s engine stack flared as bright and blue as Jorso. The ship pulled ahead, until it became a wink in the dark, the engine little larger than the stars. *Novum in Honourum*'s reactor rumbled and it fell into line five thousand kilometres astern of *Lux Rubrum*. Strike cruiser *Ceaseless Vigilance* angled downward to fly below and to the port of the Novamarines battle-barge. *Corvo's Hammer* limped behind. Escorts moved easily above and to the front of the two flagships, Thunderhawks flew in formation, full weapon load-outs slung beneath their stubby wings. To the fleet's portside the hulk continued its orbit around Jorso, massive and squamous, a canker that would soon be excised from the galaxy it so troubled.

Quiet bustle characterised the bridge of *Novum in Honourum*. A large tactical view of the hulk hung in the air over the chartdesk, reticules in bright red marking points of weakness that should cause the hulk to break apart swiftly. All nine brothers on the bridge wore their full plate. The serfs carried sidearms at their waists, and racks of guns had been extruded

from the walls for masters and servants both. Several weapon-servitors stood station at the doors, and squads of battle-brothers patrolled the corridors of the command and gunnery decks. Counter-boarding was unlikely, but all was done as strictly dictated by the Codex.

Armoury savants had calculated it would take two days of bombardment to utterly destroy the hulk.

On the bridge, Raniel stood at Galt's side. Occasionally he closed his eyes as he eavesdropped on the astropathic chatter among the fleet, catching stray metaphorical images the psykers used to communicate with one another. Odon had retired to his cathedral to lead the serfs there in prayer for their victory, Aresti and Mastrik were aboard their own ships. Clastrin had removed himself to *Corvo's Hammer*, ostensibly to monitor the ship's damage. The Master of the Forge had taken the news of the bombardment with stoic silence, Galt nevertheless knew the tech-priest was sorrowed by the decision and had withdrawn so as not to witness the loss of his prize.

On the long spine of the battle-barge, giant turrets swung to port, pointing squat, broad-muzzled cannons at the hulk between *Novum in Honourum* and the sun. A symphony of mechanical noises – distant clanking, whines, the muffled sounds of munitions trucks many decks below, the muted roar of weapons powering up – added themselves to the grumble of the ship's main power core.

'Brother-Captain Galt,' said Persimmon. 'All gunnery decks report ready. You may give the order when you desire.'

Galt reached for his pendant reflexively. Only when his gauntleted hand touched the eagle emblazoned across his chest did he realise it was beyond reach beneath his breastplate. He clenched his fist. 'We wait for Lord Caedis, he commands here.'

'As you wish, brother-captain.'

A few moments later Caedis's voice crackled over the vox. The systems aboard both ships were more sophisticated than most, but still they struggled with the star's furious heliosphere. 'Brother-captain, you answered our call for aid. The honour of the first salvo belongs to you.'

A cheer went up from the non-servitor personnel on deck, the loudest coming from Persimmon, who banged his remaining hand on his throne-cradle.

'Many thanks, Lord Caedis,' said Galt. 'The honour is gladly received. All guns acquire target. Prepare to open fire on my mark.'

His brothers on the bridge stared out of the curved window towards the *Death of Integrity*. They were composed as warriors of the Emperor should be, but their eyes betrayed their excitement. This was their meaning, to purge the galaxy of alien life, leaving it safe for mankind's Imperium. To further this goal was the greatest satisfaction a Novamarine had. Their work never ceased, but each xenos dead was one less to prey upon the children of Terra.

The brothers waited. Galt let the feeling build a moment, to heighten the release. He permitted himself a small surge of satisfaction.

'Port broadside, fire,' he said.

The floor shook as the port weapons batteries discharged. Plumes of fire erupted all down the ship from the cannons between its launch bays. The bridge vibrated with every report.

'Bombardment cannons, fire at will,' he said. '*Corvo's Hammer, Ceaseless Vigilance*, commence firing when ready. Thunderhawk wings, await my command.'

The turreted bombardment cannons spat no fire, their munitions, magnetically impelled, shot from their gaping muzzles at a velocity so high there was only the briefest spark of sunlight on metal to tell of their passing.

Corvo's Hammer and *Ceaseless Vigilance's* prows flashed as their guns discharged. Away ahead of them, made small by distance, *Lux Rubrum* sparkled with righteous violence.

The hulk was a long way away. It would be nearly half an hour before the first rounds hit home. The bridge fell back to quiet, muttered orders and muted conversation the order of the day as the complicated affair of space combat was undertaken.

Twenty-seven minutes or so later the bombardment cannon rounds, outpacing the explosive-cast shells of the weapons batteries, hit home.

Bright explosions flared on the side of the hulk, round blisters of fire welling up on its rough skin. Those less sophisticated than the adepts called such rounds lava bombs. Each contained a large fusion generator. In the brief moment the fusion generator operated, the bomb generated several gigatons of explosive energy, hotter than the surface of a star. Weapons like that could crack a planet's crust, given time.

They were equally effective against the space hulk.

'Target report.' Galt directed his question at one of the battle-brothers acting as officers on the bridge. Brother Montan, Fifth Company, he noted. He should and did know the names of all the initiates under his command.

'Target integrity holding, brother-captain.'

'Continue bombardment,' said Galt. He cast his eye over the tactical hologram over the chartdesk. It pulsed and flared with bursts of light, denoting hits. 'Concentrate on target point alpha ten, I see a weakness there. Exploit it.'

Energy beams flicked across the void. Shells glimmered in the eternal night of space. The black between the fleets and the hulk sparkled with short-lived stars.

'Lord captain!' Brother Montan said. 'We have our first major collapse!'

All eyes on the bridge went from the display to the distant hulk. A dazzling flash preceded a billow of flame towards the hulk's nominal

stern, and a long, thin shape detached itself from the main body of the hulk. Half a starship, at least, it span slowly about its axis, wheeling gracefully as it fell towards the sun.

Grim smiles on the bridge. The hulk was almost obscured by clouds of fire. A tail of debris now trailed behind it.

‘Lord captain,’ called a serf. ‘We have some unusual readings...’
Puzzlement creased the man’s face. He was heavily tattooed, a man of Honourum.

‘To me!’ said Persimmon. Within his throne-cradle, the crippled captain leaned forward as the serf sent the information to the captain’s data-slates. Persimmon’s remaining eye narrowed. His face lit up as his screens flashed. ‘Strange. I’m reading multiple, concerted energy emissions. If that were a warship I’d say they were powering up to fire or flee.’
Persimmon lay back in his cradle. ‘Not unusual. Probably feedback from dying systems, it is hard to tell in all this static, brother-captain.’

‘It is not a concern at this time,’ said Galt. ‘Have the Forge examine the data after the bombardment. Continue firing.’

The tac-screen fizzed, then went out. The lights on the bridge flickered. All faces turned upward instinctively. All but Galt’s. ‘Have faith brothers, and continue to fire.’

‘Probably a stellar pulse, not unusual so close in,’ said Persimmon. ‘Jorso’s magnetosphere is lively. But we’ve lost most of our auto-targeters, brother-captain.’

‘I trust your hands and eyes to guide the gun crews, brothers,’ said Galt. Not once did he take his eyes from the blazing hulk. The bombardment would now rest with the judgement and skills of the brothers. They were trained to solve the difficult calculations of combat over such a distance. The hulk was two light minutes away, and so what they saw was where the hulk had been two minutes ago. The actual position of the hulk and the differing speeds of the Space Marine projectiles all needed to be taken into

account to ensure effective targeting. Taxing work, but this was better, the minds of adepts and not the spirits of machines bringing death to the unclean.

He was pleased that most of the rounds he watched hit home. More wreckage fell away from the hulk, some of it revealed to be burning as it floated across the hulk's silhouette, before the fires were lost against those of the sun.

Ranial, who had remained silent and still, suddenly came alert.

The ship's vox crackled, more laden with static than ever. 'Lord captain,' Van Heem's voice was serpent-smooth and oddly accented. 'Inbound fleet. Emperor preserve us, lord captain, warp translation imminent!'

'What?' shouted Persimmon.

'We are receiving an astropathic broadcast. Mars-stamped,' Lord Feldiol's voice sounded over the vox. 'We are decoding it now.'

'I feel it, a powerful sending preceding a fleet.' Ranial's eyes shut. 'They are coming in hard by.'

'Where?' said Galt.

'Between the fleet and the hulk.'

'All hands! Prepare for evasive action!' shouted Persimmon. 'Hard to starboard! Hard to starboard!'

Alarms wailed. *Novum in Honourum*'s deck tilted as the ship pitched. Galt had the uneasy feeling of being trapped between warring forces far mightier than he, cosmic forces ignorant of the fragility of man: the inertia of the craft's forward motion, the pull of the artificial gravity plates, the mass of the ship itself and its sudden movement to the side.

Between the hulk and the fleet space flickered, the fabric of reality wavered as if a blanket shaken. The star's light took on an unnatural hue, a colour not native to this universe.

'Translation under way!' shouted Van Heem.

Thunderhawks darted nimbly from the warp point, escorts following swiftly. The *Ceaseless Vigilance* crawled around, thrusters and braking rockets jetting all over it as it sought to avoid the incoming vessels. *Corvo's Hammer* trailed dangerously behind. *Novum in Honourum* heeled to the side, nose sweeping out and away from the star.

‘Throne! We’re going to end up right in the middle of them! All ahead full! Ahead full!’ shouted Persimmon.

Further pressures assailed those on the bridge. In a great, round arc, *Novum in Honourum* lumbered away from the ripple in the sky, the fabric of the ship groaning in distress.

There was a blinding flash. Reality folded into itself, torn asunder by warp engines. A third fleet disgorged itself from the warp, ships tumbling from nonsensical geometries into shapes suited to material space.

A great vessel, longer than either of the battle-barges and at half their mass again, floated serenely between *Novum in Honourum* and the space hulk as if it had always been there, its rust-red exterior betraying none of the violence of its arrival. Void shields flared as weapons fire intended for the *Death of Integrity* slammed into them.

‘They’re opening fire, brother-captain!’ shouted Persimmon.

Galt bared his teeth, ready to return the favour, but stopped. The arcane cannons that lined the vessel from prow to stern remained silent. Only swarms of interceptor missiles issued from it, not ship killers, and they slammed in their hundreds into shells still streaking from *Lux Rubrum*.

Galt saw what he expected to see, a skull, half-human, half-mechanoid, contained within a white-and-black cog – the badge of the Adepts of Mars.

‘All decks hold! Hold fire!’

Alarms clamoured across the bridge, proximity alerts, emergency evasion, firing aborts, damage warnings.

‘Tech-priests?’ said Raniel.

‘Hail them,’ said Galt angrily. ‘Let us see what they want.’

Caedis got there first.

The hiss of static from the star and the backwash from the fleet's arrival could not conceal the fury in his voice.

‘Mechanicus vessel, remove yourself immediately from the area. You are interfering in the affairs of the Adeptus Astartes Chapters Blood Drinkers and Novamarines. If you do not do so, your dangerous warp translation will be interpreted as an attack and we will open fire.’

‘What does he think he is doing?’ hissed Raniel, as he took in the array of giant weapons festooning the Adeptus Mechanicus ship.

The Adeptus Mechanicus reply was swift in coming, broadcast wide band, so any and all could hear it. It cut easily through the star's voice.

‘This is Lord Magos Explorator Vardoman Plosk of the Adeptus Mechanicus. You will cease firing immediately upon the space hulk designated *Death of Integrity* and stand down your weapons.’

Galt licked his lips. ‘On whose authority?’ he shouted. ‘By what right do you command the defenders of humanity? By what right do you interrupt our given task of ensuring the safety of mankind? By what right do you halt the work of the Emperor?’

The vox hissed.

‘On the authority of the Adeptus Mechanicus of Mars, to whom all troves of archeotech are sequestered by right, custom and Imperial law. On the authority of the Holy Omnissiah and the God-Emperor, whose work we do.’ There was a pause, deliberate, calculated.

‘And upon the authority of my sponsors, the High Lords of Terra.’



CHAPTER 4

The Lord Magos Explorator

Galt and Caedis received the tech-priest delegation within Galt's audience rooms. The two Space Marines sat side by side upon their thrones, clad in full armour. The room had been cleared of tables and chairs. Caedis and Galt's chairs were raised on a dais under the ceiling depicting the ascending Emperor. Five Novamarines and five Blood Drinkers veterans stood beside the thrones of their leaders, helmeted, weapons ready. Forgemaster Clastrin stood at the foot of the dais, also fully armoured. The chamber's hidden weapons had been uncovered, and were trained upon the space before the thrones. There would be no warm welcome for the mechanics of Mars.

The magi came into the room in force. Twelve all told, strange creatures of flesh and metal clad in robes of deep red. They came bearing toothed power axes, and exotic firearms not all of which were of human manufacture.

Twenty-four lesser tech-priests and skitarii cybernetic troopers attended them, also garbed in red. Some carried short banner poles bearing holy machine plans, many were hideously altered. Five carried nozzled machines that belched smoke that smelled of burned oil and harsh chemicals. These came first, preparing the way for their masters. A dozen

servitors followed in their footsteps, the flesh stripped back to their skulls, fusion weapons perched on armless shoulders. Servo-skulls dipped and buzzed around the delegation.

The tech-priests' attendants and servitors stopped at the rear of the room in an arc. Nine of the twelve magi walked through them. They formed a second crescent, halted, and together they brought their axe hafts down, sending a ringing crash through the audience chamber. Their augmitters twittered and chirruped.

'Lord Magos Explorator Plosk,' one intoned. 'Magos Cogitator-Lexmechanic Nuministon, Novo Magos Samin. Masters of *Excommentum Incursus*. Chosen Explorators of Mars, most favoured of the Omnissiah.'

The remaining three tech-priests passed through a gap in the centre of the crescent to stand before the thrones of the Adeptus Astartes. Smoke from the censer bearers billowed around them.

One of them pulled back his hood to reveal a jowled face. Their leader. 'I am Lord Magos Plosk, of the forge world Triplex Phall.' Plosk was a stout man. The metal of cranial implants studded his bald scalp, long steel-covered cables went from the rear of his skull to a machine concealed by a hump in the robes on his back. His face was otherwise unaltered, and presented an expression of equanimity. 'I apologise to you, Lord Chapter Master Caedis of the Blood Drinkers, and you, Lord Captain Galt of the Novamarines, for the manner of our arrival. But we cannot allow any harm to come to the *Death of Integrity*.'

'The hulk is the harbinger of doom,' said Caedis. He gripped the arms of his throne sufficiently hard to cause the wood to creak. 'For a third of a century I have followed it, determined to destroy it and spare the worlds of the Emperor infestation by the plague that it carries. And you would deny me at the moment of my triumph?'

Plosk stood firm in the face of Caedis's anger. 'I would.'

Caedis leaned forward. 'I am a Chapter Master of the Adeptus Astartes, Lord of San Guisiga, with a rank equal to that of an Imperial commander. You stand before me impudently, you and your followers do not kneel as is appropriate to my station.' He hissed his words between his teeth, spittle chasing them into the air.

'I do not,' said Plosk equably. 'It is I who hold higher authority here, not you, my lord.' He dipped his head.

'Insolence!' spat Caedis. Galt looked sidelong at him. Caedis's face was contorted with rage. The Blood Drinkers Reclusiarch stepped forward and rested a hand upon the Chapter Master's shoulder plate. Galt was surprised at this lack of deference. Caedis shook it off.

'A fact, my lord,' said Plosk with a shrug. 'I deal only in fact.'

'You are not beyond the customs and laws of the Imperium, tech-priest. You have interrupted a military operation against the enemies of the Emperor. I demand to know the meaning of this outrage!'

'It ever was my intent to do so,' Plosk waved his metal left hand.

From behind the clouds of incense, a pair of servo-skulls flew forward, red eye beams cutting through the smoke. They bore between them a man-high scroll that dragged on the air.

'Behold,' said Plosk. 'My authority. The first part of it. You may see the other fifty-seven segments as and when you wish. This is the pertinent scroll, however, verified by the Masters of Mars, and the High Lords of Terra. This document grants seniority in any and all Imperial matters appertaining to the recovery of STC data. Without exception.'

The servo-skulls floated to a stop in front of Galt, the scroll pulling the smoke into curls. Galt stood, and read the scroll.

'It is as he says, Lord Caedis.' Galt picked up one of the heavy seals adorning the bottom: black wax, and smooth to the touch. 'It is sealed by High Lord Garm, Lord of the Munitorum.'

'Garm died a century ago,' said Reclusiarch Mazrael.

‘Did he now?’ said Plosk. ‘I did not hear, we have been to the very edges of the galaxy and back, beyond the light of the Astronomican, searching for this hulk. And to think!’ he gave a watery smile. ‘Here it was, all this time, lodged as a thorn in the heart of the Emperor’s dominion.’ His smile fell away. ‘Nevertheless, the authority stands, whether Garm lives or does not live. His word is inviolate.’

‘How come you by such authority?’ growled Caedis.

The youthful Magos Samin answered for him. He spoke like a fanatic, and made no attempt to hide his sense of superiority. ‘Magos Plosk has been most efficacious in recovering archeotech. Very successful. The High Lords would see more of that success.’ Samin was barely augmented, some kind of apprentice, thought Galt.

‘I have reason to believe that this hulk contains many first and second generation STC printouts, perhaps still functioning. Even one is a treasure beyond reckoning from the Dark Age of Technology. And you would smash them like brutes!’ Plosk shook his head. ‘This I cannot allow. There are greater considerations here than the immediate destruction of mankind’s enemies. The death of a hundred worlds would be a fair price for such knowledge. Ask your Forgemaster there. He knows something of the inner mysteries, seek his counsel.’ He nodded in the direction of the Techmarine.

Clastrin shook his head. His mehadendrites twitched in the air. ‘I do not serve two masters. I am of the Novamarines and my loyalty is to them alone, not Mars. You misspeak, magos.’

‘But do you hold this hulk a treasure?’ said Galt.

‘Indubitably, brother-captain. You know this,’ said Clastrin in his twin voices. ‘A boon to all mankind, and should what the magos claims exist, of incomparable importance.’

‘I have studied this derelict for long ages, lords,’ said Plosk, gesticulating floridly with hand and mehadendrite. ‘From certain

intelligences I have gathered the length and breadth of the galaxy, I have come to believe that at its heart are certain... vessels, that postdate the ascension of the Emperor to his golden throne by only a few millennia. Perhaps even that predate the time of the Great Crusade and our lord's leaving the world of men.'

'Where? We see no evidence of any such vessel within the agglomeration,' said Galt. Next to him, Caedis seethed.

'And you are expert in these matters, lord captain?' said Plosk. 'No? I humbly inform my lords that I am.'

'Lord Magos Explorator Plosk has retrieved five first-generation STC printouts, my lords,' said Samin haughtily. 'He is an unparalleled master in this field.'

'I understand why you cannot detect them,' continued Plosk. 'Their siting is uncertain, the stellar environment here is... difficult,' he smiled. 'And so our first task must be to map the hulk.'

'Our task?' said Caedis.

'You would not have us simply withdraw, so you can be about your business? When that is completed, then we may conclude ours,' said Galt.

'You are shrewd, lord captain, but no. My authority gives me the power to sequester such forces as I see appropriate to the furtherance of my efforts, and as of this moment, you and your Space Marines seem appropriate to me.'

'You mean us to cleanse the hulk?' said Caedis. He licked his lips. A smile ghosted across them.

'Indeed. I thought you and yours would find that prospect appealing, Lord Chapter Master.'

'If we refuse?' said Galt. 'What then?'

'I will lodge my objections with the High Lords,' said Plosk. 'I recovered the tech-trove of Ophilio the Twisted from the Maelstrom. I broke the ciphers of the long-dead Martusi and brought much power to the

arm of man. I have great influence. Investigation of your Chapters by the Inquisition and a penitential crusade would be the most likely outcome.’

Caedis tensed at this threat. Mazrael shifted. Galt felt this more than saw it, but their concern was palpable.

‘And if we agreed? I admit, the thought of so great a challenge fires me,’ said Caedis. A brittleness had entered his voice. He is hiding something, thought Galt.

The third tech-priest, Lord Cogitator-Lexmechanic Nuministon, rolled forward. His movement was too smooth to have been produced by legs, and Galt suspected a track unit hidden under his robes. It would not have been out of place, for Nuministon’s arms and most of his head had been replaced by metal prostheses and implants. Only fragments of the original man remained. He resembled a spindly, iron skeleton, scraps of grey skin embedded in it to no immediately apparent purpose.

‘In recognition of your services,’ Nuministon said – unlike Plosk’s natural voice, his was that of a machine – ‘the fleet yards at the forge world of Triplex Phall will undertake to construct and present the Chapters of the Blood Drinkers Adeptus Astartes of San Guisiga and the Novamarines Adeptus Astartes of Honourum one strike cruiser apiece in a period not exceeding thirty standard years after date of construction, of a class of your choosing. This we swear by the holy will of the Omnissiah, and will agree to be bound by contract to be astropathically verified by the offices of the Adeptus Terra, Adeptus Administratum, and the Lord Magi of Mars. Let our promise be lodged for all to see, for we shall honour it, this we swear before you.’

Clastin turned to look at the First Captain. ‘Brother-captain, this is an unprecedented offer...’

Galt held up his hand.

‘What use is that to us, if we should lose one cruiser, only to gain another? I could withdraw my fleet now, and save the one I have,’ said

Galt.

Plosk snorted, the fat on his face wobbling. ‘And abandon your sworn duty to defend the Ultima Segmentum? I think not. No, the records speak more highly of the Novamarines than that, lord captain. Do you mean to tell me that you are nought but mercenaries away from Lord Chapter Master Hydariko’s noble leadership? I should like very much to hear what he says in response to your words. In any case, your ship *Corvo’s Hammer* will not survive another transit through the warp.’ Plosk sighed, and inspected his well-manicured right hand. Unlike his metal left, only the smallest digit had been replaced there. Galt wondered at what obscure subsect of the tech-priests this man pledged allegiance to be so unaltered. ‘I will offer this also to the Novamarines, that my fleet shall undertake repairs on *Corvo’s Hammer*, beginning this very day, and make it warp-worthy at the least. Full repair is a possibility, dependent upon the extent of the damage. *Excommentum Incursus* is a Megiron-class forge vessel, lord captain. Such minor works are well within the bounds of its many capabilities. What say you? Aid me to the greater glory of the Imperium, or turn your back upon a legitimate request? All combat operations will remain under your purview. All I request is your aid in my venture, not your servitude.’

Galt sank back into his throne. The servo-skulls buzzed away, trailing the might of Terra behind them. Here was a knotty proposition. What path to take? For a moment he wished that Lord Chapter Master Hydariko was there to make the decision, and that the burden was far from his shoulders. He looked to the lord to his right.

‘Lord Caedis?’

Caedis fixed him with eyes the colour of pale amber. A look of longing entered into them; perhaps almost of fear. The Chapter Master was breathing heavily, his grin fixed. Sparse drops of sweat stood out on his dry skin. He squeezed the throne arms, then released them, and some of

the tension in his face went. He glanced aside to Reclusiarch Mazrael, who gave the slightest of nods. Caedis let out a ragged breath, he had been holding it. When he looked back at Plosk, his features were calm. 'I say let us do it. Yes. Such a challenge, Brother-Captain Galt, one worthy of the heroes of old, do you not agree?'

'I see no legitimate objection I can make,' said Galt. 'Although it vexes me to say so.' He touched his breastplate, his hand unconsciously searching out his pendant. 'Very well. You have the support of the Novamarines, on the condition that you do not interfere with our operations beyond that which is needed to secure any archeotech that may lie within the *Death of Integrity*.'

Plosk gave a broad smile. 'As I said, lord, I wish your aid, not your fealty. It is beyond me to demand that anyway, and what do I know of military matters?'

More than you would have us believe, thought Galt.

'We are agreed then, Lord Caedis, Lord Galt?' said Plosk. His face had become bright.

'Wait, High Magos Explorer,' said Galt. 'I have not yet finished. There is a further condition.'

Plosk glanced at his aides; the withered machine man and the boy. His lips pursed. 'Pray tell, oh lord. We of Mars are listening.'

'I say this to you, should four days elapse, or the hulk begin to drift back into the warp before that time has elapsed, it will be bombed into oblivion by the Novamarines. I trust I may rely on the Blood Drinkers to aid us should this occur. It fits your original intention, Lord Caedis, and it is a sensible intention, no matter how the prospect of combat entices you.'

Caedis nodded, his mouth curled in something akin to distaste. 'Agreed. Come what may, the plague of genestealers stops here, in orbit around the star Jorso. I have striven for too long to see them slip from my grasp one more time.'

‘Marvellous!’ the magos clapped his hands together. ‘Then might I suggest we begin our plans at once, lords? A little reconnaissance will be in order, and time is of the essence.’

The Adeptus Mechanicus had evidently determined that a deal would be made prior to the meeting, for soon after the assault was agreed upon they brought into the audience room a great wheezing machine that hovered on buzzing anti-gravitic engines ten centimetres from the floor. The whole of the thing was black, so black that the edges of it were indistinct to the eye, the many arms grouped around its centre impossible to count. It cut a loathsome shape as it was shepherded into the audience chamber, spinning unsteadily on its cushion of force, until prodded in the correct direction by its handlers. It resembled nothing so much as a dead spider, legs curled in the air, carried upon the back of some pill-shaped predator on the way to its lair. The young tech-priest, Samin, stood back, hands dancing on a heavy instrument console he had taken from a servant and hung by a strap from his neck. The device spat lengths of scroll as he wrote, a serf working quickly to scoop it up from the marble floor, a second folded it efficiently and packed it into a brass-bound wooden box.

Plosk stood aside as Nuministon directed his drones to deploy the machine. Augmitters twittered as he spoke to his minions in the secret machine-speech. The spider-thing wavered to a halt. The buzz of its impellers shut off, and it dropped onto the floor heavily. Arms uncurled from the top, opening like an iron flower. A new electric noise, brazen and harsh, started up. By some contrivance the tech-priests caused the lighting in the room to go out, plunging the chamber into darkness. The sound of movement came from behind Galt as his and Caedis’s men snapped to readiness in alarm, for if the tech-priests could so influence the lights, it was not beyond reason that they could suborn the ship’s other systems, but Galt bade them stand down with a whisper into his vox.

The room burst into view again, a new light emanating from the tech-priest’s device. Formless shapes coalesced above the spider-legs, revealing

its purpose as a chartdesk or pict display, although Galt had never before seen its like.

All of a sudden the most perfect false image Galt had ever seen was suspended above the spread arms of the device. The *Death of Integrity* sailed the air of the room, so real that he thought he could reach out and touch it. It was entirely possible that if he did so, he thought, that his hand would meet solid metal and warp-tossed stone, not light and air.

‘As you can see, my lords, our wisdom is deep. We have many gifts of the Machine-God in our possession. This device, the Imagifer Maximus, comes from the Heptacombs of Danarion, taken from the grave goods of the world’s first human lord, aeons dead and rich with technology.’

Caedis spoke from the half-light. His indignation was not so great as before, but anger stole back into his voice. ‘We are not savages of a forgotten world to be awed by your technology, High Magos.’

‘Quite. I merely bring this to your attention – that together, with your might of arms, and our many blessings, we will triumph all the quicker. There is a further reason for my deployment of the Imagifer Maximus, and it is this. With your leave, I would humbly make a suggestion.’

‘Proceed,’ said Caedis. ‘Quickly. Your prolixity tires me.’

‘No doubt you both have noticed an amount of radiation emanating from the hulk itself. The stellar environment here is turbulent, and our nearness to the star Jorso does not aid our cause one iota.’

‘Aye, we are not fools, Explorator,’ said Caedis.

Galt broke in, seeking to head off Caedis’s building irritation. ‘Our ship communications and deep scans are much affected,’ he said. ‘We are aware, magos.’

‘Then you are also probably aware that the youthful violence of Jorso is not the sole cause of your difficulty.’

The space hulk grew in size until it filled the whole of the room. The long spines of a primeval spacecraft brushed past Galt’s face, so close he

could see how much the hard hand of time had plucked at its surface. The hulk's opacity lessened, the outer shell became near-transparent, uncovering a nightmarish warren of corridors, chambers, and caverns within. This was revealed in far greater clarity than *Novum in Honourum*'s own augur suite could manage. Nevertheless, much of the interior was blank. At the hearts of these dark spots on the map, pict representations of power sources could be seen, picked out in livid purple.

‘Within the hulk are an unusual number of active power sources. The warp engines and reactors of countless ships, that so many are still active doubtless makes our undertaking harder. Much of the hulk is flooded with radioactivity surpassing the sigma ten level. Deadly. But it is also a promising sign.’

The twinned voices of Clastrin rang out, and there was excitement in them. ‘Any datacores may still be not only part-viable, but functioning. Active, not dead, supported by the reactors. More data could thus be present, perhaps all data. A full template database?’

‘Exactly, oh son of Mars. As I said, I believe there are several ships of unsurpassed vintage contained in this agglomeration. By my reckoning, at least three of these are active. It is not beyond the bounds of hope that a full Standard Construct Database might be present. Think of it!’

Silence descended onto the room. This was the grail of the tech-priests of Mars, the condensed knowledge of the Dark Age of Technology.

‘However, it does present us with difficulty, even for our machineries,’ continued Plosk. ‘So many overlapping power signatures in such a vast object make accurate mapping difficult.’

“To go into battle not knowing of the enemy's disposition is folly,” quoted Galt.

‘Just so.’

‘Curse your endless circumlocution, magos. What will you tell us?’ snapped Caedis.

‘There is a way around our particular problem, a manner of mapping that is foolproof and simple.’

Red dots appeared at a dozen places around the hulk.

‘A seismic map?’ said Clastrin.

‘If we were to plant explosive modules upon the skin of the hulk, then we could build an accurate representation of the agglomeration, accurate to within eighty per cent, I would say.’

‘The other twenty per cent?’ said Galt.

The magos spread his hands and made an apologetic face. ‘Seismic mapping is a mathematical exercise, lord captain. Our devices are made aware of what shape and size things are by how quickly waves of force move through materials. Often, we have enough data for our savants and cogitators to unpick the signals and create an accurate map. It is all done by inference, you understand. But certain substances generate unusual signals. Unknown alloys, for example, or liquids of peculiar density, or anything of abnormal atomic structure might throw off our findings, lord captain. There is always a degree of guesswork in our craft. Science is an art.’

‘Very well, go to it then,’ said Caedis. ‘Why not simply proceed?’

‘The sensors operate by measuring the rapid passage of vibrations through the fabric of the gathered mass. By calculating their rapidity, how they slow and accelerate, we can discern what is stone, what is metal, what is void, and so forth. Truly is the wisdom of the Omnissiah great! He is artful and cunning indeed.’ Plosk sighed regretfully. ‘But we require a node for the vibrations, a place from which they may be gathered, triangulated and uploaded for due processing by our logicators and cogitation engines.’

‘For the result to be most effective, brother-captain, that source would best be inside the hulk,’ said Clastrin.

‘A first mission inside?’ said Galt. He sat forward. ‘You propose a reconnaissance in force.’

‘Precisely, lord captain,’ said Plosk with a shallow bow. ‘There are further benefits to an exploratory expedition. While within, other variables could be determined, variables that may well influence the composition and deployment of our – *your* – forces when it comes to the attack. The distribution of the radioactivity that so fills the hulk, the whereabouts of vacuum, gravitic variance, hull density, presence of atmosphere, the operational status of ships within the agglomeration, whether any of the machine-spirits inside cling to life, the placing of informational caches and other, more esoteric yet highly useful data could be gathered, processed by my tech-priests, and the knowledge gained gladly shared.’

‘That is as may be, magos. However, as soon as we enter the space hulk to begin the mapping process, the genestealers will become aware of our presence,’ said Galt. ‘At the present time they do not know of us, and the majority will be in hibernation. To enter the hulk will stir the hornets’ nest. Our few men would be swiftly killed, and then a large force will be waiting, fully wakened, when we attempt the main assault.’

‘You have experience of fighting such infestations?’ asked Nuministon.

‘A great deal,’ said Galt sternly. ‘Have you, magos?’

Plosk ignored the retort. ‘Surely the hornets’ nest will be disturbed should you arrive in force? You would not have time to breach their brood chambers and purge them, then. Besides, we know of the location of but a few of their nests. Without a reliable map your efforts will be cogs too small for good gearing. Immediate assault will provoke the xenos in any case, and as an additional hindrance you will have no reliable charts to guide you.’

‘A number of small assaults is unlikely to succeed, I admit. Stealth and swiftness are our surety against death in situations such as these. They have often served us well aboard such derelicts, but here?’ Galt clucked

his tongue, 'No. Only overwhelming force will suffice.' He gestured to pulsing green clusters, the biosigns of uncovered genestealer roosts. 'They are many, and we are few. Even as two Chapters we are too few.'

'Then I advise stealth first, Lord Captain Galt, the stealth you yourself say is your greatest weapon. And then, why, then the hammer blow, once our intelligence is gathered.' said Plosk. He steepled his fingers in front of his lips and smiled. 'Choose your battleground wisely, good disposition is half the battle.'

'You speak sense, tech-priest, and you quote the Codex at me, whose tenets are dear to all who wear the battleplate of the Adeptus Astartes. You are sly, but slyness alone will not sway my decision. Tell me more.' He sat forward. 'Where would this device of yours require its planting? Show me.'

The hulk rotated. Part of it expanded greatly, pushing the hulk out through the chamber walls. The detail became uncertain, with many gaps. In a dark patch, a ruby skull blinked.

Galt nodded curtly. 'It is possible. The location is far from the brood roosts. Teleportation is impossible I take it, Clastrin?'

'Regrettably so, brother-captain. Matter patterning will not hold in the face of the sun's emissions and the energy fluctuations within the hulk.'

'Then entry must be made from the surface. Here.' Galt pointed a finger at the skin of a starship's back, exposed to the stars. 'They will have to cut their way in. Boarding torpedoes will cause too much of a disturbance. One squad of Terminators, two at most. And they will have to move quickly. Three kilometres down. Hmmm.' Galt sat back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. 'But yes. It can be done. Lord Caedis, what is your opinion?'

'My Chapter has little recent experience fighting such battles,' said Caedis. 'Although we have faced the genestealer threat on many worlds lately, we have not combated them in space for a long time, not for four

recruitment generations. I defer to your Chapter's more recent experience. I propose that you, Lord Captain Galt, should assume responsibility for this initial mission. Choose one of your warriors to lead it. I will provide a squad of my own brothers as support, under your overall command.'

'It is an honour, Lord Chapter Master.'

'It is prudence, lord captain, I am a proud warrior, but I will not let pride come in the way of sense.'

'Cogitator-Lexmechanic Nuministon will accompany you,' said Plosk.

'Impossible,' said Galt.

'Necessary,' said Plosk. 'I doubt even your Forgemaster has the expertise required to activate our seismic probe and extract the relevant data from it.'

Galt checked readings dancing close to the mechanism of the Imagifer Maximus. 'Only Terminator armour is proof against such a high radiation count, lord magos, you will surely perish.'

'I will survive. The flesh is weak, but there is little of flesh about me,' grated Nuministon. 'And you will find my armour to possess a sufficient grade of shielding. We have our means.'

'Very well,' said Galt reluctantly. 'I will not be held accountable for your fate. You come on your own recognisance, and will suffer whatever befalls you on your own account.'

'Agreed,' said Plosk.

'I will accompany them,' said Clastrin. 'My plate, too, is sufficiently shielded.'

'As you desire, Forgemaster,' said Galt, inwardly pleased that the Techmarine would be there. To have ordered him would have spoken too loudly of his mistrust of the tech-priests, that he volunteered removed his opinion from the equation.

'Who will you choose to lead the mission, lord?' asked Clastrin in his twin voices.

Galt did not say. There was only one man who should, even if to attempt this mission might mean his death. One man who had fought against xenos the length and breadth of the segmentum, including five successful hulk purgings.

Veteran-Sergeant Voldo.



CHAPTER 5

Mission the First

Galt stood by the window of his sparsely furnished state room. He had removed his armour, and wore the robes of his order. He toyed idly with his pendant. The room's window lay on the starboard side, opposite to the side facing the hulk and sun. He stared out through his own reflection at a starscape he had come to know very well from every angle over his long lifetime. He knew the ways it changed from place to place in the Ultima Segmentum. The stars always seemed so strong to him out in space, burning with eternal, unwavering light away from the occluding impurities of atmosphere, as if the cosmos were a thing of such cleanliness light could travel unimpeded to its every corner. Experience told him that this was not so, that the pure rays of the stars shone upon uncountable horrors, things that would snuff the life of all of mankind out given but half a chance. The universe was far from kind, no matter the beauty of the stellar light.

How long ago was it, he thought, before he had been accepted into the halls of the dead, and shown a universe he could not have imagined? Time and many wars separated the adept from the boy he had been, a boy who had believed that the stars were the eyes of the Emperor's judges, constantly measuring a man by the tally of deeds written upon his skin,

choosing the most noble of them to present to the Sky-Emperor himself upon their death.

He knew differently now, but part of him still believed. He and the others marked their skins for the Emperor even after they had learned the truth of the stars' nature. They still expected to be judged by their markings by the Emperor. Just as much as he knew that the Emperor had been a man, a man whose legacy he carried within his altered body, still the Lord of Man was also a god to Galt. He could never distance himself entirely from that belief, and his visits to the Shadow Novum only hardened them. The bonds between the Novamarines and their brothers in Ultramar weakened as all things will weaken over time, as the Novamarines stepped steadily further down the road of veneration.

He supposed it was no different for the Blood Drinkers; that they too wandered their own path, further and further away from the habits of their primogenitor Chapter. He had no experience of the Blood Angels, and so could not compare their ways.

'Can not a thing contain two natures?' he muttered to himself. He rubbed at his new tattoo. He hoped it would please the Emperor, on that day he finally saw him for the reckoning of his own deeds, and that he would be judged worthy to join the legions of dead heroes he gathered for the final days. He had a feeling that what occurred here, in orbit around Jorso, would have great bearing on that acceptance.

He considered again using the fleet astropaths to ask Chapter Master Hydariko for his guidance, but decided against it. The captains of the Novamarines operated alone much of the time, and were expected to use their own discretion. That went doubly so for him, captain of the First Company, and heir-apparent to the Chapter mastership of all the Novamarines. Why he had been so elevated, he did not know. He deserved his captaincy; he was sure of his abilities, but to become Chapter Master? He had too many doubts, he was unsure of too much.

The watch chime tolled for evening contemplation, but he would meditate later. Galt had other business. Punctually, a knock sounded upon the door.

‘Enter!’ called Galt.

The door slid back and Major-domo Polanczek stepped in. He bowed deeply. ‘Lord First Captain, Lord Veteran-Sergeant Voldo is here to see you.’

‘Thank you. Show him in.’

Polanczek bowed once more and departed. A moment later Voldo came into the room. He wore the sash over his robes Galt had seen in the Shadow Novum. A chill gripped his spine, and he had to force himself to remain composed.

‘Veteran Brother-Sergeant Voldo,’ Galt said. He stepped forward and grasped his old mentor’s forearm.

‘Mantillio, how are you?’

‘I thought all eyes were on me,’ said Galt. ‘Do you not know?’

‘Eyes are upon you as they should be upon the one who leads us, as lord captain. But I meant, how are you? How is the man, Mantillio Galt?’

‘Captain and Galt... They are one and the same man, brother.’

Voldo scratched an old scar on his head, one that cut through an abstract image of an alien warrior dying under Voldo’s chainsword. ‘There is always room for yourself, even for the likes of us. If we cease to think for ourselves, we lose our usefulness as tools of the Emperor’s will.’

Galt shook his head. ‘If you avoid the rank of captain, perhaps.’

‘Precisely why I did so,’ said Voldo with a grin.

‘Please, sit.’

Voldo and Galt took seats at the room’s only table. The few pieces of furniture within were fine antiques, a selection from Ultramar and Honourum. Galt took a glass stopper from a thin-necked decanter on the table and poured a yellow wine from it into two small glasses.

Voldo picked his up, and swirled it round. ‘Carain. A long time since I tasted this.’

‘I have only the one flask remaining,’ said Galt. ‘Nearly gone now.’

‘Has it been so long?’

‘Six years since we last trod the halls of Fortress Novum,’ said Galt. He held up his glass, they rang them together and drank. The sweet taste of heather and clean, moorland water washed over his taste buds. The alcohol in the drink was rendered ineffective by his gifts, but the drink served a finer purpose than intoxication. Galt permitted his mind to slip back home to Honourum, borne upon the drink’s flavour, the chemical signatures he detected brought the memories of the plants that made it to his mind, adding to the richness of his own recollections.

They sat a moment, savouring the drink and the memory of home and the oath of protection it represented. Galt said nothing to Voldo about his visitation in the Shadow Novum.

Voldo broke the silence.

‘Why did you wish to see me, lord captain?’

‘You of all people need never refer to me as such, brother,’ said Galt.

‘We are brothers first and foremost.’

Voldo shrugged and turned the empty glass around in his hand. ‘We talk the business of the Chapter now. ‘Respect is the foundation of victory’.’

‘So said Guilliman in the Codex Astartes.’

‘Yes. Holy writ.’ He laughed softly. ‘Although I doubt Guilliman intended us to worship his words, I pay heed to them, and I give you your due respect as lord captain.’

‘If anyone deserves respect in this room, brother, it is not I but you.’

‘You are not a neophyte any more, you cannot speak so. You are my lord and I am glad for it. I saw potential greatness in you as a boy and I see greatness realised in you now as a captain. I follow your lead gladly, as any master will when his pupil’s talent is fulfilled for all to see.’

Voldo was old, one of the oldest of all Novamarines, not a millimetre of his skin was uncovered by ink. He was a riot of colour with it, images abstract and realistic, icons, badges, and scripts. Of all men, his soul was the most armoured against the dark, protected by the images that covered his skin. The grey stubble of his hair and the light hair of his arms showed starkly against his ink. Honour badges and citations of every kind adorned him – earrings, service studs, pendants, and badges sewn upon his robes. Engraved silver rings circled six of ten fingers, mementoes of his many secondments to the Deathwatch, as was his sash, embroidered with six Inquisitorial campaign badges. Voldo was highly respected, a living hero, but had always refused promotion. He could have – should have – been captain many times over. Galt had decided some time ago to change this situation should he ever become Chapter Master. He was astounded Hydariko had allowed Voldo to remain a sergeant.

He suppressed a shiver as cold as the wind of Honourum as he remembered Odon's words. 'Death is soon to come for the brother whose phantom so shows itself.' He debated with himself whether he would be doing the right thing sending him into battle. But who was he to defy the will of the Emperor?

'Tell me what you know of the sons of Sanguinius.'

'Of these Blood Drinkers, lord? Little. They have had precious rare contact with our Chapter, as you have doubtlessly discovered in the Librarium.'

Galt nodded. 'They are elegant, and speak well.'

'Pretty princes,' said Voldo disparagingly, 'if they are like others of their lineage, obsessed with form and art. I do not know them, but I know their kind. They neglect their true vocation: war, and the contemplation of war. Our way is better.'

'Are you sure of this? They seem eager for the fight.'

Voldo raised his eyebrows, ‘Oh, I did not say that they were not eager for battle, far from it. A thirst for combat and a deeper understanding of the art of war are not the same thing, lord captain.’

‘Tell me, why does their Chief Apothecary hold such an exalted rank? Caedis introduced him as one of his chief advisors. And his title – Sanguinary Master? I have never heard of such. Their markings and ways all speak of close adherence to the Codex Astartes, but this exaltation of an Apothecary is unusual.’

‘Aye, lord. That it is.’ Voldo set his glass down on the table. ‘I will tell you this. I have never fought with the Blood Drinkers, nor with the ten thousand-times honoured Blood Angels, but I have made war alongside others of Sanguinius’s sons. Here, ninety-six years ago, on my third secondment to the Deathwatch.’ He tapped an engraved ring on his left forefinger. ‘I was part of a kill-team led by Lord Inquisitor Holm on expedition to the world of No Glory. Damned Dovarr had overrun the place. They were alert to our presence and proved to be beyond our means, and so Holm brought out his seal and demanded aid.’ He shook his head. ‘Our kill-team fought alongside the Knights of Blood. And they too had their Apothecaries fight at the forefront, and their captains paid much attention to their counsel.’

‘Were they bold warriors?’

‘Yes lord, bold – bold beyond measure. You speak of eagerness, and well were they eager, but *too* eager. Granted, they were effective,’ said Voldo. ‘I saw them storm a Dovarr fortress, from above and by ground assault, but they were incautious, throwing themselves forward at the enemy when the Codex would have advised staying back, heedless of the risk and paying no mind to the subtleties of greater strategy. They prevailed, although I expected them to perish, and the cost to them in fallen brothers was not one we of the Novamarines nor the Primarch Guilliman himself would have found acceptable. I will tell you, lord,’ Voldo hunkered over the

table, the fine glass tiny by his massive hand. 'I have never seen such savagery before or since. When the enemy were all dead, I thought they would turn on us, such was their fury. Our kill-team stood, weapons raised, thinking the unthinkable was to occur, until Holm himself stepped in and ordered them back. For a moment I thought they would disobey and that I would have no choice but to kill a brother Space Marine, but their Apothecaries and Chaplains restored some order to them, and they departed No Glory without apology before the campaign concluded. Be careful, lord captain. They say the sons of Sanguinius are noble of appearance and manner, but that something dark hides inside them all.'

Galt thought on Caedis's behaviour. 'Their lord, he seems conflicted. His desire to bombard the hulk was considered, yet it was plain to me also that he wanted to blood his weapon.'

'That is my point, lord captain. I mean no slander, they say those of Sanguinius's lineage are amongst the most loyal of the Emperor's servants, and his most accomplished warriors, but still, be wary.'

'Very well, I thank you for your guidance, Veteran Brother-Sergeant Voldo. You remain my teacher in all things.'

'You are welcome to my advice, Lord Captain Galt, and have but to ask to receive it, although the burden of command is yours alone. Whether or not you follow my advice is a matter for your judgement and conscience.'

'There is one more thing I wish to discuss with you.'

'And that is, my lord?'

Galt hesitated. He saw Voldo as he had seen him in his vision of the Shadow Novum, beyond the affairs of the living. He tried to keep his voice steady, not to let tremors of worry for his teacher unseat his authority. Self-doubt is ever the overthrow of reason, Guilliman had written.

'A small matter of a mission, veteran-sergeant. To the hulk. It shall be your honour to be first aboard. You have fought within many space hulks, and you more than any officer here have experience of fighting alongside

brothers of other Chapters. I can think of no one more suited to this task. Success is required, many eyes watch us. The honour of the Novamarines is at stake. You will have but a limited time to succeed, your action must be coordinated with those of the Adepts of Mars upon the surface, and with no means of communication between your men and the hulk's interior, you will be forced to operate with haste to ensure the mark is hit.'

Voldo smiled. 'A grave responsibility, lord captain, but one I gladly accept. I will see us victorious, you may have no doubt of that.'

They spent some time examining mapping data and plotting a route for Voldo's force, debating the advantages and disadvantages conferred by varying squad weaponry, the role the Blood Drinkers would fulfil, and how best to protect Magos Nuministon should the worst occur. It was good talk, battle talk, and the detail of it occupied Galt's mind and drove away his misgivings.

And yet, when they were done and Voldo strode out of his chambers to gather his men, Galt still wondered if he had done the right thing.

The star Jorso blazed at the Space Marines upon the hulk, its angry light unfettered by atmosphere or shielding. The radiation it emitted was enough alone to kill a man, and Voldo was glad of his Terminator armour, and the protection its sensorium offered his own eyes.

Sparks sprayed into space, silent shining rain, as Veteran Brother Gallio carved at the hulk's surface. Voldo felt the action of Gallio's chainfist through feet mag-locked to the skin of the ancient ship they sought to access, some bulky Imperial merchantman of uncertain age. There was no noise in the vacuum. Clastrin, almost as bulky as the Terminators in his full servo-harness, knelt by the veteran brother, plasma torches burning on the end of two of his additional mechanical arms, cutting four metres away from Gallio. Slowly, the pair of them were sketching a hole in fire of sufficient size to allow themselves access to the inner hull, where they

would cut a doorway large enough to accommodate the massively armoured brothers.

Voldo watched their transport lift off and retreat to a safe distance, weaving a path through the clouds of debris sent up by the earlier bombardment. Static hissed through his helmet vox. The remainder of Squad Wisdom of Lucretius stood about Voldo and Gallio in a defensive pattern – Veteran Brothers Militor and Eskerio, and Veteran Brother Astomar with his heavy flamer under his right forearm. The Blood Drinkers Squad Hesperion stood close by, lightning claws gleaming. They wore Mark-IIIc suits, more recent than his own squad's armours, although the youngest was doubtless a thousand years old. Tuilles hung from their belts, protecting their thighs, the adamantium reinforcement ribbing was slighter, while their sensorium augur units, mounted upon the top-left front of their suit cowls, were larger and more complex than those of Voldo's brothers. He read their nameplates again: Genthis, Curzon, Trael, Azmael and their leader, Alanus. Between the two squads were Nuministon and his two servitors, clad in thin, transparent vacuum suits. They carried a device somewhat like a large urn. A foot on a piston descending from a cylindrical component topped with access ports, a screen and a keypad; the seismic probe that would gather the vibrational data needed to form an accurate map of the hulk.

Nuministon wore armour of reticulated plates fitted to his machine body. It was made of a metal that could not decide if it were gold in colour or cold, metallic green and shimmered between the two. His armour incorporated powerful machine legs, and was topped by a pig-snouted helmet adorned with numerous emerald sensor eyes. The insectile look of it was bizarre, not something fit to clad a man. Voldo looked away from it, his eyes offended. He swept his gaze across the unnatural landscape of the hulk, helmet tactical overlays picking out points of strategic interest and peril.

The *Death of Integrity* was the biggest space hulk Voldo had seen, big enough to ape a moon in feature and form. The surface stretched away tens of kilometres, ships' prows raised in baroque mountain ranges, buckled hull skins waterless valleys edged with knives. It was a topography forged of ruin. The shadows cast by Jorso's strong light were hard, night-blue, confusing the pseudo-landscape further, and with the nearness of the hulk's horizon made the scale of the hulk difficult to judge. Still, some parts of the *Death of Integrity* were recognisable as the craft they had once been, and this gave Voldo some reference by which to gauge distance. Close by, the flank of an Imperial light freighter canted at a drunken angle, nose buried in the agglomeration, cargo pods torn, whatever they had contained long gone. Other components of the hulk were beyond comprehension, strange vessels made by alien hands, or rotting things that looked grown, not built. Many were so battered and crushed as to be unidentifiable, reduced to tangled superstructure or plaited rucks of metal. The exteriors of those that retained their shape were scarred with long exposure to space and the warp. Patches of paint and colour were a rarity. Massive rents split the surface of the hulk, leading down into a fuliginous dark so complete as to be tangible. Rock there was aplenty, stray asteroids pulled in by the hulk's weak gravity and impacted into the surface. Dirty ice hid in nooks, and hoarfrost coated every surface not exposed to the sun, the legacy of ruptured water tanks, aquatic shipboard environments, and hydrogen-oxygen mass reaction drives.

Not far distant was the evidence of the earlier bombardment; massive craters, droplets of frozen metal sprayed around them in elaborate patterns. Somewhere beyond that, three other groups would be working their way within the hulk, placing explosive devices just under the surface to generate tremors via sequenced explosions. It was these detonations that would be recorded by the seismic probe, and their timing that necessitated his own party's haste.

Voldo's eye strayed to his mission clock on the inside of his visor display. For now it was still, the eight hours on it would not count down until Galt and Caedis had been informed that the Adeptus Mechanicus teams had withdrawn. When the clock reached zero the Adepts of Mars would detonate sequenced charges, sending shockwaves rippling through the hulk.

He checked the progress of the cutting, wanting to steal a march on the clock's activation. The Forgemaster and Terminator were through the outer layer of the hull. They pulled the metal away, their efforts enough to send it spinning off into space, and quickly cut through the reinforcements, frames, conduits and cables that lay underneath. They stepped down into the pit they had made and began to tackle the inner skin, cutting a smaller hole within the hole. White plumes of gas jetted out as they breached the compartment below and its atmosphere vented into the vacuum. Gallio worked anticlockwise from his starting point, Clastrin starting at the other side, moving towards where Gallio had begun. Gallio's cuts were ragged from the action of his chainfist, Clastrin's smooth and continuous, beaded with molten metal that cooled slowly in the absence of atmosphere, losing heat only through direct radiation.

The gas jets lessened and ceased. The corridor below them had emptied of its air quickly, suggesting to Voldo that it was sealed. He mentally calculated its volume based on the amount of gas he had seen vent. A thought brought up the incomplete map they had of their immediate surroundings on to his visor display. The surface corridors had been as thoroughly scanned as circumstance allowed and were well-defined, but further in, and especially closer to a nearby reactor, the map faded into probabilities, and then blankness. He compared the conclusion to his calculations with the map. It appeared they matched, and so they should. He grunted with satisfaction.

The Forgemaster and veteran brother worked fast. Within three minutes the two cuts were close to meeting. Not too soon either. Debris was falling back down onto the hulk's surface with increasing regularity. Voldo's suit told him that the hulk's gravity field was under 0.02G. Not enough to make him safe were his mag-locks to be disengaged – he would be lost to the void simply by taking a step – but enough to bring some of the debris circling the hulk back down onto the whole, even so soon after the bombardment.

The vibrations from Gallio's chainfist cut out, informing Voldo the entryway was finished. He turned to watch as Clastrin stood and stamped on the metal. It fell inwards.

'The way is clear, brother-sergeant,' said Clastrin, his twin voices broadcast into the helmets of everyone present. Although the pops and crackles of interference marred his words, at such close range he could be heard clearly.

Voldo walked over to the hole in the hull, slowed by the locking and freeing of his feet on the metal. He bent forward and willed his suit light on, his mind interfacing directly with the suit's sensorium via his subdermal black carapace and the nerve shunts embedded into it. A thin beam stabbed down from the cowling over his helmet. A circle illuminated a mesh floor. 'Contacts?'

'Negative, brother-sergeant,' said Eskerio, Wisdom of Lucretius's operations specialist. He had a modified power fist, incorporating a slot for an advanced auspex in its palm. 'But I cannot vouch for the device's accuracy in this environment.'

Voldo brought up the overlay that would show him Eskerio's auspex readings. The display jumped, stuttered by the stellar broil. 'Be steady, my brothers. We go within. Squad Wisdom of Lucretius shall enter first. Inside I suggest you pair your warriors with mine, Veteran-Sergeant Alanus.'

‘Agreed, cousin.’ The Blood Drinkers sergeant spoke for the first time. None of the red-armoured brothers had said anything beyond their initial greeting on the Thunderhawk.

‘Brother Astomar shall lead the way. I shall go second. Magos Nuministon, you and your servitors will stay in the centre of the group unless I say otherwise. Is that clear?’

‘Entirely, lord sergeant.’

Voldo looked around at the fourteen-strong party: five Novamarines veterans, five of the Blood Drinkers, Forgemaster Clastrin, Magos Nuministon and his two servitor drones. ‘Today we are all brothers, although the colour of our plate be different. We are brothers born from similar seed, brothers sworn to the same service, and today in the fires of war, our brotherhood will be forged anew. Protect each other as you would your own, and we shall emerge unscathed, and glorified.’

Voldo switched his helmet vox-caster to long range, speaking directly to the fleet. ‘Lord Captain Galt, Lord Chapter Master Caedis. We are about to enter the space hulk.’

‘Good fortune to you, veteran-sergeant,’ replied Galt, his voice distant and thin in the static.

Another voice, far clearer, broadcast by the arcane might of Mars filled his helmet. Magos Plosk. ‘Mechanicus teams one and two have placed their devices and withdrawn. Mechanicus team three will be done shortly.’

‘You may start your clock now, brother-sergeant,’ said Caedis.

With a thought, Voldo activated the clock. The first digit fell away; seven hours, fifty-nine minutes, fifty-nine seconds remaining.

‘Emperor watch over us,’ said Voldo.

‘We commend our souls to his armies in this life and the next,’ intoned the Novamarines.

‘Sanguinius’s wings shield us all,’ said Alanius.

Voldo stepped into the hole and fell slowly into the space hulk. His feet met its corroded decks with a low clang he heard through the metal of his armour.

The battle for the *Death of Integrity* had begun.

The first corridor was empty of anything but detritus. The party arranged themselves according to Voldo's orders, a Blood Drinker paired with each Novamarine, the tech-priest and Techmarine in their centre, and set out towards a bulkhead door some ten metres ahead. According to the data they had, the ship they had entered was a bulk agri-hauler of antique design. This close to the surface they were in the ship's service corridors, where once upon a time maintenance crews would have patrolled, keeping sensor nets and life-bearing systems functioning, and checking for breaches in the outer hull.

'Is there power?' asked Voldo. 'Forgemaster, do the ship's mechanisms function?'

Clastrin shouldered his way forward, the corridor cramped by the great suits of armour they all wore. He extruded a sensor probe from his harness's lower arm. The metal tentacle insinuated itself into a port below the door keypad.

'They do, but weakly,' he said. 'I detect little in the way of artificial gravity or lighting. This door should open under its own power, however.' Clastrin withdrew, leaving the activation of the door to Voldo.

'Then stand ready, I may need you to recite your prayers for the compliance of the machine.' Voldo reached out his free hand to the touchpad by the door. He depressed a button caked with hardened dust. For a moment, nothing happened, and then a green light feebly glimmered. The door opened, shaking on gears whose oil had long ago congealed.

A brief wind blew out as the chamber beyond decompressed. Voldo stepped in, his feet thunking onto the metal floor. The lights were non-functional, the compartment dark, patches of it lit fleetingly by the Adeptus Astartes' bobbing suit lights.

There was barely enough room in the vestibule for the whole party, but Voldo ordered them all in. If there was atmosphere beyond these doors, he wanted to preserve it. Air of any kind would allow the motion detector's subsidiary sensory systems to awaken; tasting the atmosphere for the taint of xenos, and feeling the mildest perturbation of gas molecules should the enemy move.

With practised ease the Terminators spread themselves around the chamber, each pair of bone-and-blue and blood-red Space Marines covering a door, glancing blows of torchlight shining off their armour as they manoeuvred round one another. Alanius took up station in the centre close by Nuministon. Militor let his storm bolter drop from his left hand to hang by a cord from the wrist. He took out a thick stick of yellow pigment from his belt, cracked the top, and used it to paint a cross on the wall by the doorway they had entered through.

‘Good,’ said Voldo. ‘Mark every turning we make, brothers. I do not trust our maps. Militor, seal the door behind us.’

Militor did as ordered.

Voldo checked the feed from Eskerio's auspex. There was no sign that they had been noticed. ‘Prepare, brothers,’ he said. ‘I will open this door.’

Terminators shifted stance, bringing their weapons up, readying themselves for whatever might be within the next chamber. Voldo keyed the door open. This second portal opened smoothly, the wind that blew from it was over quickly as the pressure between the two compartments equalised. On the other side a handful of ceiling lamps flickered dim yellow, still clinging to their purpose centuries after their intended operational lifespan had been exceeded. They lit a corridor that ran straight down the spine of the ancient craft, still straight, despite the spaceship being pressed hard into the body of the agglomeration.

‘The atmosphere is thin, but breathable should we require it,’ said Brother Azmael, who fulfilled a similar function in Squad Hesperion to

Eskerio.

‘Let us hope we do not, brother,’ said Alanius.

‘This is the way, brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio, gesturing forward. ‘In the centre of this vessel is a vertical shaft – a cargo lift, I judge – that leads right through this ship. From there we shall be able to head downwards, and from a lower deck access the vessel abutting this and so deeper into the hulk. That way we will swiftly reach the point determined by the tech-priests as best for their device.’

‘How far to the shaft?’

‘One hundred and fifty metres.’

Voldo’s eyes flicked over to his rad-counter, down in the bottom right of his helmet display. ‘Radiation levels appear low,’ said Voldo. ‘They will increase.’

‘Yes brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio. ‘This component vessel’s tertiary reactor is still active, and leaking.’

‘Will your servitors last, Magos Nuministon? They are not shielded,’ said Alanius.

‘They are disposable, Lord Sergeant Voldo, and they will last long enough to fulfil their purpose,’ Nuministon said. His voice, unlike the others, blared from his helmet speakers, violating the deathly peace of the hauler.

‘Deactivate your external helmet vox, magos. We are here as shadows. Do not announce our presence. Communicate via vox-caster only,’ said Voldo.

There was a click as Nuministon obeyed without demur. Voldo was grateful, he had half-expected a refusal and an arrogant proclamation on the strength of the Machine-God and the power of the metal over the flesh. He had seen many men die painfully because they held fast to the convictions of one sect or another. In his long experience, providence and plate were better shields than conviction.

‘An oversight on my part. You have my apologies,’ said Nuministon.

‘We proceed. Brother Militor, hold position and cover our rear.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant.’

‘I shall leave Brother Curzon with you,’ said Alanius.

‘That is wise,’ Voldo turned to face the two Space Marines, blood and bone armours stood shoulder to shoulder. ‘The two of you await my command,’ said Voldo. ‘You will cover and monitor this accessway. The nearest known brood chamber lies some way outside this vessel, but we are still deep in the genestealers’ primary habitation zone, and I will not leave our rear exposed.’

‘Yes brother-sergeant,’ said Militor.

There was a rumble. The hulk shook. Flakes of corrosion fell down from the pipes along the ceiling. The Terminators’ massive torsos twisted atop rock-steady legs as they scanned the ceiling and walls. The tremor lasted twenty seconds or so, bringing with it the sounds of grinding metal and the impact of mass against mass before gradually subsiding.

‘What was that?’ said Azmael.

‘A hulk quake,’ said Voldo.

‘Level seven on the Meullin scale,’ said Clastrin.

‘Indeed,’ said Nuministon.

‘The agglomeration is unstable. Our bombardment will have redistributed its mass loading,’ said Clastrin. In any one place in the hulk the gravity was so low as to be non-existent. But gravity wells formed by active grav plates unevenly drew in loosened mass, there was the irregular motion of the hulk to accommodate, and then variance in its own localised gravity fields owing to the density of its constituent parts. All contributed to the violent shifting of the material trapped in the hulk. ‘A further peril.’

‘There will be more,’ said Eskerio.

‘In all probability, brother,’ said Clastrin.

‘Another reason to be on our way, fulfil our objectives and depart swiftly,’ said Voldo. ‘Brothers, on me.’

In a long line the party clumped on down the corridor, alert to signs of the enemy, leaving Militor and Curzon alone in a lonely pool of suit-cast light.

They gained the shaft without incident, their passage disturbed only the dust and the ghosts of the dead. Voldo kept an eye on the mapping and motion tracking equipments’ feeds as they progressed. Within his suit display, corridors sharpened as their equipment gained a grasp on the true form of their proximate environs. The auspex detected no signs of movement other than their own. Only the reconnaissance party showed up on the map. Each member was represented by a pulsing icon; the appropriate badge for their order – skull and nova, blood drop and chalice, and the skull and cog of Mars. Far to the rear of the line in the corridor Militor and Curzon’s markers throbbed. The life signs of Voldo’s men and feeds from their suit picters crowded the left of his visor screen, the tick-tick-tick of the rad-counter a metronomic beat to their advance.

Voldo walked slowly but effortlessly, the great mass of the Terminator armour moved by its own motive systems. As such, its size required only a little more effort on his behalf than his usual plate; it was cumbersome but did not hinder him. His breath came easily, the sound of it filling his helmet. This, the ticking of the rad-counter, his steady, heavy footfalls, the whirr of motors, the quiet hum of the armour’s power plant – these were the sounds that made up his immediate world. The suit’s sensorium, far more complex than that found in simple power armour, filled his vision and his mind with information gathered from the environment. He could feel the armour as if it were his own skin, in a numbing, distant way, like he wore an overcoat made of his own shadow, doubled sensations that required much acclimatisation. The suit’s feeds attempted to be all-encompassing, but paradoxically the effect could be isolating, dangerously

so. One could fall into a kind of trance within the suit. Lulled by the sense of protection it conferred and the womb-noises of its mechanisms, a certain blindness to peril could set in, until it was too late.

The armour, for all its sensorium's sophistication, provided a limited view to his eyes of flesh. His peripheral vision was circumscribed by the edges of the suit's cowl and shoulder pads. He could turn his head only so far to the left or right. In a similar manner, he could not look far either down or up without tilting his torso, the movement allowed by the plastron and outer placard that made up his breastplate being restrictive. He could not, of course, see behind him without rotating the whole of his body, and the suit cameras of his squad were invaluable in providing alternative views of the environment.

On the open battlefield, such things were a lesser concern, but in the cramped confines of the spacecraft, they could be deadly. It was fortunate that the ceramite and armourplating that clad his body was proof against most weapons. Brothers equipped in tactical Dreadnought armour had to maintain a high level of situational awareness. Making war in this manner was mentally and psychologically taxing even for the superhuman Adeptus Astartes. It was not only matters of honour that restricted the armour's use to the Veteran Company; inexperience was as perilous as a direct lascannon hit to those wearing Terminator plate.

A broad doorway emerged from the dark. Glittering motes of dust danced in the beams of their suit lights. Voldo raised his right fist and clenched it. Behind him, the brothers of the Novamarines and Blood Drinkers fanned out. Voldo had his map zoom in, mentally selecting the icons for brothers Astomar, Eskerio and Trael. He used his suit visor overlay to plot new positions for them. He executed the command and sent it to the two squads. All this took a breath, his thoughts conveyed from his mind to the ports in his black carapace and thence to the Terminator

armour's own cogitator and on to the squad. Wordlessly, the veteran brothers obeyed. The deck shook as they plodded past him.

'I request access to your squad's feed, Veteran-Sergeant Alanius.'

'Granted freely, cousin,' said Alanius, his voice was liquid, as perfect as his physical form, but there was a hint of arrogance to the Blood Drinkers sergeant which Voldo found objectionable.

A chime from his vox, and five more square pict views popped into life in his helmet. Those of his own squad reduced in size to accommodate them. In the views from the three Space Marines by the door, he could see a large, high-ceilinged room twenty metres across. A yawning, black square pit seven metres each side occupied its centre.

'Brother Astomar, Brother Tarael, pan left to right.'

The Terminators obeyed, torsos rotating as they tracked their augur eyes over the room. Voldo watched as the suit lights slid over the wreck of dead machinery embedded in the walls. One corner of the room was wrinkled up into a metal wave, never to break, the result of the vessel's impact when joining the hulk.

He developed a better picture of the room. Eskerio had been correct, it was a cargo lift. Doors like the one they stood in were in three of the four walls. A short corridor lined with dirty hazard striping led away from the fourth side to his left, almost certainly to an external airlock.

He watched as the lights went back and forth, bright spots on dead walls, a fainter halo around each, and in that halo...

'Wait!' Alanius said. 'Brother Tarael, pan back one metre, drop the vertical twenty degrees.'

Tarael bent forward slightly, the full beam of his suit light picking out a huddled shape upon the floor.

'Do you see it, Brother Voldo?' asked Alanius.

'Yes. A corpse.'

'A crewman. Cover my advance,' Alanius said.

Without discussion, Alanius clumped past and went into the lift room. Voldo cursed inwardly. That was reckless, as reckless as those damned Knights of Blood had been on No Glory, and he chided himself for not heeding his own warning to Galt. He resolved to keep a sharper hold on his counterpart in future. To stop him now, mid-action, would be a grave insult for one of the same rank, for all Voldo being designated commander.

Voldo checked the motion tracker. Nothing. Annoyed, he followed the Blood Drinkers sergeant into the lifthead.

The impact damage was worse close up. He glanced to the left side, checking the airlock as he walked past. The doors were so buckled they barely deserved the name, ruptures formed jagged metal lips that puckered round slashes of dark. Whatever the craft abutted in the crush of the hulk had formed a seal over the torn airlock, keeping in the tenuous atmosphere.

Alanius knelt on one knee by the corpse. Voldo stood over him and bent forward. His suit beam lit upon a human skeleton within a standard Imperial ship's emergency suit. Both hands were thrown up to the face. Alanius gently lifted an arm with the tip of a claw away from the helmet visor. The glove of the hand was missing, exposing the dead man's grey finger bones. The hand flopped onto the floor with a rattle, bones coming apart and rolling across the metal like dice and bouncing into the air.

Behind the yellowed plastek faceplate a skull gaped. Its jaw hung loose, mouth wide in a silent scream.

Voldo ran his light down the suit. The chest had been ripped open, ribs shivered into fragments.

'Eviscerated,' said Alanius. 'What is your opinion as to this man's fate, cousin?'

'Xenos pirates mayhap. But look, these are surely the marks of claws.'

Alanius ran his light up the wall. 'Aye,' he let it rest on a gruesome sight. A hand and arm hung from the wall. A screaming face protruded

above it, its terror preserved for all time in metal. 'I know of few weapons that can cause such melding between the organic and inorganic.'

Voldo called Clastrin to join them. A moment later he stood by their sides.

'A Geller collapse,' Clastrin's paired voices said, 'followed by uncontrolled translation from the empyrean. This is a likely explanation for the contamination of the ship's metal by human flesh. This man would have become displaced into the metal, becoming one with its fabric.'

'A Geller field collapse? This other was clearly slain,' said Alanius, gesturing at the corpse.

'Pirates, raiders quick to fall upon a stricken ship,' said Clastrin. 'The possibilities are many.'

'Yes,' said Voldo.

Alanius stayed kneeling, staring at the dead man. Voldo felt a rush of brotherhood for the Blood Drinker.

'You think on his fate?'

'Dying, alone in the dark. Yes. It pains me our kind are too few to protect them all,' said Alanius. 'They treat us like gods and yet they still die.'

'The Adeptus Astartes cannot be everywhere. We do what we can. The loss of a billion lives is nothing if the Imperium stands,' said Voldo sternly.

'We are here now, are we not? Too late for him and his comrades. He would have died in terror, with no succour.'

Voldo rested his hand on the other sergeant's shoulder. 'If that is so or not so, they are long gone and we have other foes to concern ourselves with. I admire your care for life, in these dark times men are careless with what is most precious of all, and for the nature of this man's death I feel also grave regret. But we have another task that will save others from similar pain. Come, we must go on.'

Alanius rose from his knees, a laborious action in Terminator armour, despite the minimal gravity.

Voldo asked Eskerio to mark the doorway and then the two sergeants had their men gather around the lift shaft. While Astomar and Gallio kept watch, the others retrieved flares from their utility pods and threw them down into the shaft. The flares flew more than fell, tumbling into the dark until they became little bigger than matchlights. Their connection with the bottom was nearly inaudible, bouncing around the shaft until their energy was spent. They continued to burn, flickering over the dross at the bottom of the shaft.

‘Sounding, five hundred metres,’ said Eskerio.

‘Magos Nuministon, Forgemaster Clastrin, is the lift still functional?’

By this point Clastrin had gone to an interface unit by one of the doors, Nuministon beside him, a freshly unscrewed panel lay on the floor. Various manipulators from Clastrin’s harness were plugged into the guts of the wall. Nuministon’s supplications to the dormant machines murmured in the force’s helmets.

‘No, brother-sergeant. It is inactive. If you would but wait, I will reroute power... Ah. I have it.’

A screech from behind the walls, an unsteady thrum, and running lights flickered on in the four corners of the shaft. Most remained dark, but there were enough to pick out the shaft’s general condition.

‘I have accessed the ship’s datacore, what is left of it. I have activated what systems I can. Our way may be easier ahead.’ said Clastrin. ‘This ship was the bulk agricultural hauler *Father Harvest*, registered 481.M37, in the Segmentum Obscurus. Crew complement of one hundred and eighty-nine, thirteen passengers. Lost 329.M38 with all hands. Take note of the name for the records of the Administratum, so that its fate might be noted.’

Voldo checked his sensorium map. 'We will best exit this vessel by the deck seven below this one. Confirm, Brother Eskerio.'

Eskerio adjusted the device set into his power fist. 'Deck eight has a weakened section that can be cut through quickly, so that we might attain entry to the deeper vessel.'

Voldo addressed Clastrin and Nuministon. 'Once we have reached the deck, use our safety lines to help bring you down. Brother Blood Drinker Trael, remain here with the magos until we call for him. Militor, Curzon, respond.'

'Brother-sergeant,' said Militor, his voice peppered with interference.

'Redeploy to the lifthead. Curzon and Trael are to rejoin us, following down the shaft once we have established a perimeter on deck eight.' If they ran into difficulty, Voldo reasoned, the close combat capabilities of the Blood Drinkers would be useful, while Militor's longer-range armament made him the natural choice for covering such a large area as the lifthead. That Voldo wished to keep all the Blood Drinkers where he could see them was a further consideration.

Trael stood back as the other Terminators stepped over the edge of the void, feet tapping at the walls of the shaft until their mag-locks made a firm connection. Armour motors whining, fibre bundles straining against the hulk's weak native gravity and the armours' mass, the Terminators hauled themselves over so that they were at ninety degrees to the ship's nominal floor. They were facing down directly to the hulk's mass centre, held to the side of the shaft by their boots. The gravity was so weak, up and down were illusory. Safety lines shot out from the back of their suit cowls, super-strong wires tipped with razor grapnels that punched into the ceiling, spreading wide within the ship's skin. Should the mag-locks fail, they would prevent the veterans from floating free.

The descent took some time, the Terminators proceeding carefully. Far below them, they could make out bones amid the debris at the foot of the

lift shaft before the flares burned out.

They made it to the eighth deck without incident, where they clambered into that level's lift room. It was a match for the lifthead, the lift being open on all sides on every loading deck. The Space Marines spread out, investigating the few chambers on the level around them. These were cargo holds in the main, expansive spaces that filled two decks vertically, with entry points so they could be loaded from two points, one every other deck. The holds were full of putrid, unidentifiable rot. Their walls were bowed inwards by the pressures exerted upon the ship by the rest of the hulk, and the catwalks that ran over them were buckled.

‘There is no sign of the enemy, veteran-sergeant,’ said Alanius over the vox, reporting back to Voldo. ‘The damage to the ship is greater here, and in two of the three holds there is a large amount of radioactivity. I am glad we do not go that way.’

While the others secured the deck, Azmael, Eskerio and Voldo repeatedly checked their auspexes. Voldo directed the two veteran battle-brothers to probe this direction and that until he was satisfied they still moved unnoticed. A perimeter established, the seismic device was lowered down and pulled in by the Novamarines. Clastrin, Nuministon and the servitors followed. Clastrin spurned the safety lines, using the four additional limbs of his servo-harness to clamber down the shaft in the manner of a mechanical spider. Then the two brothers of the Blood Drinkers Veteran Company rejoined the main body of the party. Militor remained above. The group gathered together again, Voldo checked the dwindling long-range vox signal strength, and hailed the *Novum in Honourum*.

‘We are on the eighth deck of the agri-hauler, and about to proceed further, lord captain. Communication will become more difficult as we go on.’

Galt's voice crackled back, almost lost to the voice of the star and the seep of radioactive particles spilling from the ships' reactors. 'Let the flash of righteous weapon fire light your way. Come home safe, Veteran-Sergeant Voldo, Veteran-Sergeant Alanius.'

'Yes, lord captain.' Voldo disengaged the long-range link, glad to be rid of the hiss of static. 'Brothers, onwards.'

Further into the ship the Space Marines of the two Chapters went, checking and rechecking each door and corridor as they went.

'Your caution increases, lord sergeant,' said Nuministon.

'Genestealers rarely venture to the very outermost levels of an infested hulk,' said Voldo. 'But it is in dark places like this, deeper in, where the unwary might be ambushed and infected unseen, that they prefer to wait,' said Voldo. 'I would have thought that you, magos, with your remit, would be aware of this.'

'Rarely do I encounter such creatures,' said Nuministon haughtily. 'My work is of a higher order.'

'Be thankful that you do not, then,' said Voldo sharply.

They made it into a corridor where most of the lights were on and the artificial gravity was working. The Forgemaster checked the stability of the corridor's grav plating.

'They are active,' Clastrin said. 'You may disengage your mag-locks.'

Voldo was pleased. With the mag-locking off, they could proceed with greater speed.

The corridor was bent out of true, the damage to the ship's fabric growing greater the deeper they went into the hulk. In one place the Terminators had to squeeze through a section where the floor rose up close to the ceiling. Small cells lined the corridor, crew quarters, or perhaps those for passengers paying for passage on the merchantman. Not far beyond the narrowing, they passed a room of which the doorway was part-blocked. A barricade had been thrown up behind it; heavy bars welded in

place. It looked formidable but had not held, the door had been slashed open and peeled back into wicked triangles, the barricade smashed down.

Voldo had Brothers Genthis and Curzon approach. Light played along their claws as they activated their energy fields. They adopted combat stances, wheeled into the doorway, investigated, and let their weapons drop and deactivate.

‘Brothers, we have found the remainder of the ship’s crew,’ said Genthis. He bowed his head and pointed inside with his lightning claws.

The room, a kitchen, it seemed to have been, contained a scene of ancient slaughter. The bones of the men who had once staffed *Father Harvest* were scattered like twigs across the floor, black bloodstains on the walls marked their passing from this life into the next. All else had passed, ground to dust by the passage of time.

‘Emperor preserve their souls,’ said Alanius softly.

It was a small room, insignificant, its mundane purpose adding to the poignancy of what must have been a desperate last stand.

‘They await the final call to serve, their lot in this life is done, in the next they may excel,’ said Voldo, emotionlessly reciting the prayer of Honourum. ‘Had xenos broken into the ship, at least the crew would have died quickly.’

‘That is somewhat callous, brother-sergeant,’ said Alanius. ‘They were men of the Imperium, men such as we are sworn to protect.’

Voldo turned away from the grey bones and black blood. ‘I meant no callousness nor disrespect to these men, but conjecture on their fate, however awful, is ultimately meaningless. Whatever battle was fought here was done long ago. Long before the ship was attracted to the agglomeration and found another peril to stalk its halls.’

They passed on towards the final corridor they had to traverse in the broken agri-hauler, the way to the next ship in the hulk. They opened the

door to this corridor, and Voldo's rad-counter buzzed like an insect taking flight.

There was a strange mist low on the air, green and heavy. Tendrils of it uncurled themselves into the doorway, trailing across the feet of the group.

'Radioactive fog,' said Voldo.

'It is the air itself, poisoned by the dying of machines,' said Clastrin.

'This we certainly may not breathe.'

'We are far from the sources of active radioactivity,' said Voldo.

'That suggests the fog will only grow thicker as we proceed. The environment here is poorer than anticipated,' said Nuministon. 'This is valuable data, useful for the assault. It will not harm you. Your armour is proof against such hazards, as is mine.'

'You speak truly,' said Alanius, 'but your servitors, magos, their organic components will die.'

'And as I stated before, they will persist long enough to fulfil their purpose,' replied Nuministon.

'We should hurry our pace nevertheless, lest they fail. It would go ill if two of our brothers are occupied with transporting the device and we are attacked,' said Voldo.

'I concur, brother Novamarine,' said Alanius.

The party proceeded, kicking the fog into uncanny shapes. It grew thicker, rising from the floor to fill the corridor to the ceiling, crowding their vision and disabling their long-range sensors. Suit light beams were forced nearer and nearer to their source as the fog grew denser, until each Terminator appeared as a bulky phantom led by a bobbing will-o'-the-wisp. The glow from the ship's functioning light fittings withdrew within the vapour, becoming pale smears of uncertain origin. Doors gaped wide and sudden. Where the floor buckled it came as a surprise and the Terminators stumbled. Lesser men, even lesser members of the Adeptus Astartes, would have felt their nerves fray in these circumstances, but

these were the veterans of two great Chapters, and they felt nothing but a heightened sense of wariness.

‘Switch to echo location,’ said Voldo. ‘Sound will be our guide.’

‘Will it not alert the xenos?’ asked Azmael. ‘When we fought them on Xoros Ten, they appeared to be able to hear well into the ultrasonic range.’

‘Yes,’ said Voldo. ‘They will be able to hear the echo locator’s voice, but only if they are near. It is better to know the ground and risk combat than to be blind.’

The Terminators did as ordered. Sonic units pulsed.

‘This is a poor situation, brothers,’ said Eskerio. ‘Radiation is far higher than we anticipated.’ The motion tracker was a useless fuzz beyond seventy metres, the map limited to a series of stacked boxes painted in high-pitched sound.

‘We are close to the exit point,’ said Voldo. ‘Be steady.’

They came to the end of the corridor, where it took a sharp bend to the left, following the hull’s inside. Further that way the corridor was blocked, the hull and ceiling pressed down as if a hand had crushed the ship, but the wall directly ahead was clear, with space for Clastrin and Gallio to work. They approached, and Voldo and his comrades felt their weight shift.

‘The grav plates here are dead,’ said Clastrin. ‘Re-engage mag-locks.’

A series of clunks sounded as boots locked to the floor.

‘Here Brother Gallio, this is to be our way into the next ship.’ Voldo indicated a patch of wall.

‘I will aid you, Brother Gallio, as before,’ said Clastrin.

The Master of the Forge and veteran brother set to work, the others standing guard over them. Alanius had Brother Curzon station himself by debris, in case something did come through. Others hunted out underfloor access ways, or roof vents and crawlways that led into the ship’s systems. Genestealers could cram themselves into remarkably tight spaces, to emerge where least expected.

The veteran brothers stood as still as statues, green fog caressing their armour, the long silence of the ship torn by the crackle and whine of Gallio's chainfist and the hiss of Clastrin's plasma torches. Voldo checked his mission clock. Three hours in. In another five the tech-priests of the explorator fleet would expect the device to be functional and start their own machines. There was no way to signal them should that not be the case.

The Forgemaster and Gallio were close to breaching the inner skin when Eskerio called out. 'Brother-Sergeant Voldo! Quadrant five, coordinates 917.328.900.'

Voldo sent his map over to that point, a labyrinth of corridors and rooms and crawlspaces and cracks whisked past his eyes. He was just in time to see a small, pulsing red dot, before it moved off the edge of their equipment's effective range. Five hundred metres, slightly forward, down and to the left of them. Not close, but close enough.

'Are we noticed?' asked Alanius.

'It is hard to say,' said Voldo. 'Genestealers sleep most of their time aboard these hulks, but there are always a few awake. Sentries, if you will. If one has seen us, all have. They are psychically attuned to one another.'

'Aye,' said Alanius. 'It is the way Brother-Epistolary Guinian tracked them here, through their psychic bond.'

'They are beasts. Beasts do not post sentries,' said Curzon.

'If our Novamarines brother says they do, believe him. Do not dismiss the genestealers as animals,' said Alanius. 'We have not fought side by side with Master Caedis these last twenty-five years against them. They have claimed more than a few of our brethren who thought as you do. Do not underestimate them.'

'It is my eternal regret our squad was with the Fifth Company all this time, brother-sergeant,' said Curzon.

'Do not despair, brother. You will have the chance to blood your claws.'

‘You have not faced this foe before?’ said Voldo.

‘No. Squad Hesperion had been attached to the Fifth Company’s taskforce for some time, and we have been separated from the rest of our veteran brothers,’ said Alanius. ‘Lord Caedis wished us to accompany you, so that when the assault comes, all the First Company will have faced the genestealers in battle. You have great experience, he desires us to share it.’

Voldo could see the wisdom in that, and the lack of it.

Gallio pulled back a wide section of hull plate with the help of Clastrin’s servo-harness. ‘Brother-sergeant, we are through.’

A black space gaped, into which the radioactive fog was rapidly sucked, spilling over the lip of metal like a waterfall.

Voldo strode forward. The ships had been pushed so hard together the metal of their hulls was mashed into one. He stepped one foot over the raw doorway, and lowered himself the fifty centimetres difference between the two ships’ decks. A black space gaped in front of him, his suit light too feeble to dissipate the imprisoned night.

He drew his power sword. Blue lightning crackled along its edges.

‘Brothers,’ said Voldo. ‘Be on your guard.’



CHAPTER 6

First Contact

The second ship was also of Imperial origin, but far older and in worse repair than the *Father Harvest*. Many of its compartments were crushed to nothing. In places the floor had fallen away entirely, giving view to deck after crumbling deck until they were swallowed by the hulk's fathomless dark. Paths the map showed as clear were clogged with wreckage many metres deep that they could not cut through. One passage was a solid mass of rippled ice, another cut by a chasm they could barely see across. Each time they were forced to double back and find another route. All systems aboard the ship were inert and remained so despite the best efforts of Nuministon and Clastrin to coax them into life. Neither their tools nor their prayers would awaken them, and after a time the Techmarine and magos abandoned their efforts, and the group pressed on as best they could. Every door they encountered had to be cut through. Gallio's chainfist made short work of such obstructions, but the screech of metal on metal and the rapid bangs of the weapon's disruption field shattering matter threatened to bring the foe upon their heads. Each door breached was followed by a tense pause, every member of the party listening for the approach of furtive claws while Eskerio and Azmael scrutinised their instruments.

There was no sign of the enemy.

The Space Marines did not speak but to offer status reports. The ship was so full of holes that every corridor presented a tactical nightmare should the enemy choose to attack. They were free of the fog for a time, allowing their auspexes to see deeper into the structure. No new contacts were reported, but then they passed through a crumpled bulkhead and they were into the fog again. The range of the auspexes abruptly contracted, and Voldo's rad-counter screamed so loudly he was forced to silence its audio function.

Not long after they re-entered the radioactive fog, one of the servitors stumbled and went down onto its knees. The other did not register its companion's malfunction, dragging the seismic probe forward and pulling the dying servitor off balance until Nuministon halted his slave. The kneeling once-man panted slowly behind the clear cylinder of its environment suit helmet, then it toppled forward to lie half-hidden in the mist.

Genthis, directly behind the servitors in the party line, called a halt. He strode forward and pushed the servitor over with his foot. Milky eyes stared out of a face clearly exhibiting radiation burns. 'Dead,' he called. 'One of us will have to take up the burden.'

'Who?' said Astomar. 'You Blood Drinkers all bear claws, you cannot carry the machine, nor can I.' He waved his heavy flamer, its housing clasped firmly around his right hand, by way of illustration.

'Brothers, I will bear it alone,' said Clastrin. 'The other servitor will be dead soon in any case.' He spoke to the remaining cyborg in the twitters of machine speak. It let go of the probe and stepped back. Clastrin moved the dead servitor from his path, and, gripping the device in his servo-arm's manipulators, heaved it off the ground.

'Sergeants,' said Azmael, 'I am picking up contacts.'

'I too,' said Eskerio. 'Fifty metres distant, two of them.'

Voldo hurried his map over to the edge of the auspex's current range. Two blips. They faded.

‘They have stopped,’ he said. ‘They have stopped because we have stopped.’

‘They are following us,’ said Alanius. ‘Could they be herding us into an ambush?’

‘It is possible,’ said Voldo. ‘They might simply be waiting for reinforcements. We have been noticed. Even now, their vile kin will be stirring from their slumber. We must move on quickly.’

‘We are nearly at our objective,’ said Alanius.

‘We are, but our way back is blocked,’ said Voldo.

‘No. If we are quick, we might fight our way free before too many come and retrace our steps,’ said Alanius. ‘My brothers are armed for close quarter fighting. Let them come to us, we will drive a way through for us all.’

‘Very well,’ said Voldo. ‘Brother Astomar, you are to take rearguard. Fill the corridor with promethium should the genestealers come. Burn them.’

‘As you order, brother-sergeant.’

Astomar dropped to the back of the line. They forged ahead, moving as quickly as they could in their armour, all pretence at stealth gone. The corridor they travelled creased inward from both sides, and for one heartbeat Voldo thought they would have to retrace their steps yet again. He pushed on. His plate screeched on the wall, his Crux Terminatus leaving white streaks as it grazed the metal. Then he was through.

They wasted several minutes negotiating the seismic probe through the gap. The mission clock ticked down. In an hour, the tech-priests would detonate their explosives. The probe had to be active by then.

The two dots stayed forever on the edge of the auspex's range, disappearing when pockets of extreme radiation reduced the auspexes’

efficacy, appearing worryingly close when the machines were able to cast their sensing nets out further. Sometimes the contacts were together, and sometimes apart, but always they were there.

The party broke through into a series of corridors and chambers that had retained something of their original shape. Their speed increased. Voldo had Astomar hang back from the main body of the group, covering its rear, before rejoining them under the watchful gaze and gun of Eskerio, and then remaining behind once more. This seemed to keep the creatures shadowing them back a little, and Voldo breathed easier.

They passed into a lozenge-shaped compartment, where the tattered remains of radiation suits hung from rusted hooks and traces of hazard signs were visible under ancient corrosion. A further door led into a square room, double doors marked with sigils of warding and warning at its far side. On Voldo's map the mission objective marker glowed bright in the centre of the wide room beyond.

‘And so providence brings us nigh to our goal, brothers,’ said Voldo. ‘Magos Nuministon, Forgemaster Clastrin, to the front with me.’

They forced open the double doors by dint of main force. On the other side, four long, four-storey machines filled the room, spaced regularly apart; the vessel's Geller field generation room.

Nuministon spoke. His harsh voice was unpleasant over the vox-speakers, but for once Voldo was glad to hear it.

‘We are here. I shall deploy my machine.’

‘There are ten minutes left upon the mission clock,’ said Voldo. ‘Be swift so that we might be away as soon as the soundings are taken.’

Before Voldo would allow Nuministon through, he had Eskerio conduct a thorough scan of the room, then investigated it himself with Brother Gallio and Brother Eskerio at his side. There were two other exits: a door to the left and a broad way opposite the double-doored entrance. This wide corridor was filled with wreckage, a narrow gap at its top.

‘There is a hole in the ceiling, brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio, gesturing upward with his power fist. ‘Easy ingress for the xenos.’

Voldo tilted his torso backward, sending his suit light beam leaping up the wall. The breach it revealed was wide, fringed with streamers of bent metal bracing, the room above inky black. ‘I see it. It is unfortunate. Gallio, cover the breach. We cannot secure this room entirely, but we will do all we can. Brother Astomar, report.’

‘No sign of the enemy, brother-sergeant.’ Astomar was twenty metres back down the corridor by the far door of the old suiting room, weapon pointing the way they had come.

‘If we have arrived at our objective, Brother Voldo, Azmael and Curzon should join your brother at the rear. They can engage the xenos should they weather the flames, while Brother Azmael’s presence there will extend the boundaries of our auspex’s range,’ said Alanius.

‘Yes, a good course of action.’ Voldo checked his map. He set out a plan for the others as Curzon and Azmael stamped back through the forechamber to join Astomar. Genthis and Trael joined Eskerio and all took up station beside the door leading from the forechamber into the suiting room, covering Astomar, Curzon and Azmael’s retreat. By mutual agreement, Alanius set off to the debris pile, ready to intercept anything that might force itself over the top, while Voldo himself strode to the doorway leading out of the side of the Geller room. He sheathed his sword and wrenched the doors open a crack, an impossible task without the Terminator armour amplifying his already considerable strength. The corridor beyond it was empty.

‘Lord Forgemaster Clastrin, please weld this door closed.’

Clastrin deposited the sensor probe where Nuministon indicated and joined his Chapter brother. His servo-harness’s manipulators locked themselves to the doors and pushed them shut again. A hissing plasma

torch descended on a slender mechanical arm and burned into the metal. Voldo looked away, its brightness interfering with his armour's sensorium.

The map within his helmet showed his group's disposition, icons overlaid on a green wireframe representation of the rooms. Nuministon was by his device. Gallio stood back from the hole in the ceiling. He glanced at the magos from time to time, checking his progress. Through Gallio's suit picter, Voldo saw the tech-priest activate the machine. Light glowed from the upper screen. Nuministon pressed at something. Arms extruded themselves from cavities in the device's four corners, descended to the ground and locked it down. The foot, which Voldo had originally taken to be the main support, was now suspended fifty centimetres or so from the ground.

'I am ready,' said Nuministon. 'Now we must wait for the detonations.'

Voldo went through the placing of his and Alanius's warriors one more time, thought of tactical responses to attacks from various quarters, committing courses of action to memory. It was always the same, no matter how many times he fought. The sense of oneness he felt with his armour retreated, the feed from the sensorium crawling into the back of his skull, leaving him feeling pinned and helpless within the suit's thick layers of ceramite, plasteel and adamantium. For more than one brother he had known, the armour had become a trap, and then a tomb. Despite their strength and durability, the Terminator suits could be damaged, and if their own guiding machine-spirits died, they were impossible to free oneself from. And if one could free oneself, it begged the question, where would a brother go? Into the near-airless, toxic environs of the hulk? Voldo was not a normal human. He had not been a true man for long centuries. He did not feel fear as other men feel fear, but all the same in those moments of waiting he became acutely aware of his own mortality, of the air in his lungs, the pump of his hearts; a body that for all its gifts was comprised of weak bone and weaker flesh, a body encased in a machine that itself was,

in the larger scale of things, also weak. Whatever the tech-priests might say, what power technology had in the face of the universe's hostility was meagre at best.

These were not doubts. These were not frightened musings. Voldo knew his limitations, and compensated for them accordingly. 'Only will is indomitable,' he whispered to himself. 'Will is armour proof against any foe. By will alone will mankind rightfully rule the stars.'

Then the feeling was gone, and he felt the suit as part of himself again, its feedback mechanisms sending its machine sensations directly into his mind.

There were three faint rumbles, one after the other.

'My colleagues start their soundings,' said Nuministon. Through Gallio's pict-feed, Voldo saw the magos crouch low over his instrument panels. 'Good, good!' The magos's artificial voice abraded away any inflection; his excitement delivered as a monotonous, electronic dirge.

Three more rumbles resounded through the hulk. Flakes of corrosion drifted free from the ceiling.

'How many must we hold for?' asked Alanius.

'Five repeats,' said Nuministon distractedly. 'That should suffice.'

The hulk rumbled in response. The chamber rocked, Voldo could not be sure in the uncertain gravity, but it felt like the floor dropped ten centimetres or more. He swayed a little, his suit's gyroscopic mechanisms keeping him steady. There were distant sounds, as of metal grinding on metal. After the movement ceased, these continued for several seconds.

'The soundings, they exacerbate the instability of this section of the hulk,' said Clastrin. He swept lights around the chamber and pointed.

'There, fresh buckling. It will do us well to be quick here.'

'Stand firm,' said Voldo. 'The ground may be uncertain, our purpose is not.'

Another set of soundings. The vibrations sent the motion tracker of the auspex wild, crowding it with multiple false positives, and after every one Voldo checked the auspex feed and his own sensorium's data in case their enemy had moved forward as the ground shook. It remained clear. 'Brother Astomar, report!'

'All clear, brother-sergeant.'

'He speaks truth,' said Azmael. 'I too register nothing.'

'No movement here, brother-sergeant,' called Eskerio.

Voldo nodded. They might yet be fortunate, it could be that the movement picked up by the auspex was not what it seemed; more falling or floating debris, or sudden pressure shifts between compartments. Voldo's duty was to slay xenos, and he hungered for their deaths, but far better in a situation as this to infiltrate and withdraw with no conflict. That would be the...

A mighty slam rang through the engine chamber, reverberating around it like the striking of a bell.

'By the Lord of Man, what was that?' shouted Alanius.

Voldo strode from his position, rounding one of the giant defunct generator units to confront Nuministon. He was in time to see the device's broad foot pull itself up and then hammer down into the deck, sending out another deafening concatenation.

'Magos! What is the meaning of this?'

Nuministon was crouched over the device, insectile and horrible. His thin arms darted out to depress this button or flick that switch. He turned his many-eyed helmet to the Space Marine.

'Why, the machine answers, of course. There are sensors on the surface also, only with my machine's reply can we build a true representation of the...'

'Shut it off! Shut it off immediately!'

'That is impossible, lord sergeant, you see we must gather the data...'

Voldo moved as quickly as he could in his armour, sword upraised. ‘No detail was given of this, you will bring every genestealer within five kilometres down upon us!’

‘I am sorry, lord sergeant, a regrettable oversight if so, I believed that all this had been discussed.’

Clastrin stepped inbetween Voldo and the machine. He held up a hand, and shielded the device with the arms of his servo-harness. ‘Hold, sergeant!’ his twin voices demanded. He looked at the screen for several seconds as another series of vibrations shook the chamber, and the seismic probe answered with another loud slam.

‘Brother-sergeant, you have been given overall command, but listen to him. What he says is correct, after a fashion,’ Clastrin said.

‘Why did you not tell me of this, Forgemaster?’

Clastrin looked to Nuministon for a long moment, then said to Voldo, ‘I was not told myself, brother-sergeant. It should have been possible to map the upper levels of the hulk with spaced explosive pulses on the surface, as we were led to believe would be the process. Why this additional sounding, I know not. It is a matter we must discuss when we return.’

‘If this is so, stand aside, we must stop this noise!’

Clastrin shook his head. ‘The damage is done now. The magos is right in one regard. This additional source will provide better mapping, and deeper. To the centre of the hulk?’ he asked of the magos.

‘Yes, Forgemaster, just so. I require one more sounding, that is all.’

Voldo stood back. ‘Very well, conclude your business. But mark my words, there will be consequences to this, magos,’ said Voldo.

The roar of promethium igniting filled their suit helmets.

‘The consequences are upon us,’ said Alanius. There was irony in his voice, and excitement.

‘Incoming!’ called Astomar. Flame light flickered up the corridor. Inhuman screeching followed.

‘Movement, brother-sergeant, all around us,’ said Eskerio. ‘Brother Gallio! Above you!’

The rapid cracks of storm bolter fire echoed in the chamber. Two bolts shot fractions of a second apart from the weapon’s twin barrels, an unmistakeable pattern of sound; the noise from the report from the gun, the ignition of their ammunition’s propellant, the detonations as they impacted, the sequence repeating rapidly as the weapon discharged dozens of rounds a minute.

‘Some consequences are more immediate than others,’ said Clastrin. ‘Argument must wait. We are discovered.’

Weapons fire died away. A dead genestealer fell from the hole in the ceiling, drifting through the air towards the floor, globules of black blood trailing it. A taut silence snapped back into place.

‘Sound off!’ shouted Voldo.

‘Brother Astomar, here.’

‘Brother Curzon.’

‘Genthis.’

‘Alanus.’

‘Gallio.’

‘Azmael.’

‘Brother Tarael.’

‘Eskerio.’

‘Forgemaster Clastrin.’

‘High Magos Cogitator-Lexmechanic Nuministon of Mars present.’

Voldo checked the screen for Militor’s suit pict: a grey snowstorm. The fifth member of his squad was too far away to be hailed and warned. ‘Any signs of movement?’ called Voldo.

‘There is a large group of xenos bearing down upon us, brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio.

‘I register them also, Sergeant Voldo,’ said Azmael. ‘I estimate twenty to forty genestealers, heading towards us on two vectors. One main body split into two smaller groups, one approaches within the ceiling, the other approaching whence we came. There is a third, smaller group coming down from reference 40.3.21.’

Voldo sent his map skittering to the coordinates. ‘The breach in the ceiling. Brother Gallio, stand ready!’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant.’

‘Brother Astomar, keep that corridor covered.’ Voldo looked around.

‘Despite our angry hosts, we have the advantage of knowing the way back, at least,’ said Alanius.

‘Negative. They are converging to mass along our route, brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio.

‘By Corvo’s oath! Cousin Alanius, what suggest you?’ said Voldo.

‘Are there alternate routes?’ said the Blood Drinker.

‘One. Perhaps, but it is poorly defined, and lengthy,’ answered Eskerio.

‘Forty genestealers you say?’ said the Blood Drinkers sergeant. ‘A not insurmountable number. I say again, let us fight our way through, Blood Drinkers to the fore, your men can cover our exit should they decide to pursue.’

‘An inevitability, now the nest is disturbed,’ said Gallio.

‘They have yet to taste our steel, my friend, once they have, we shall have the measure of their enthusiasm,’ said Alanius, and Voldo could hear the excitement growing stronger in it. The Blood Drinkers were shifting about, fists clenching and unclenching.

Like the thrice-damned Knights of Blood, thought Voldo, they are too keen for the fight. There was nothing for it. They had to react swiftly, or they were lost.

‘Very well. We depart the chamber. Brother Gallio, cover the door. Brother Astomar, you are to engulf as many of the aliens as the Emperor

wills in flame. Brother Eskerio, to the front. Thin their numbers, give our Blood Drinkers brothers the greatest advantage when they engage. Brother Gallio, to me! Keep your eyes on the ceiling, beware the third group. We cannot let them outflank us!’

‘We shall smite them righteously with fist, blade, and boltgun!’ said Brother Gallio.

‘So it shall be,’ intoned the other Novamarines in response.

Voldo’s helmet chimed as his threat indicator passed one level and then another. Flashing icons were converging on the corridor, two splinter groups of a greater whole to the front of his party, funnelling into the corridor the party had taken to their objective, a smaller number moving quickly to the breach in the ceiling. ‘Quickly now!’

The party members lumbered from the machine room, hindered by the mag-locks keeping them to the floor. Voldo stopped by the door, covering Gallio as he walked backwards, his storm bolter never leaving the hole in the ceiling. Alanius moved past him, claws active.

‘What of my machine?’ said Nuministon. ‘It is of great value, it should not be left behind!’

‘Perhaps we would not have to abandon it if you had revealed the full extent of your plans, magos. If we survive, and if this cleansing is a success, then it can be collected along with your archeotech treasures. For now, it remains here. Every one of us must fight,’ said Voldo.

‘I must protest!’ The grinding voice of Nuministon became loud and wheedling.

‘Perhaps the magos would rather remain behind and guard it himself?’ said Alanius, bringing forth harsh laughter from the Blood Drinkers.

Voldo waited until Alanius, Clastrin, and finally Gallio, had filed out of the room. He and Gallio then took up station inside the open door, storm bolters ready.

‘They are here!’ called Eskerio. His bolter barked twice. A shrill scream followed it, hard on the heels of that came the whoosh of Astomar’s heavy flamer. The pict-feed in Voldo’s helmet from Astomar whited out. When the flare died back, he noted five or six flaming forms tumbling through the air, a couple coming forward still despite the fire, and then genestealers were crawling through the hole in the engine room ceiling, carapaces glittering in the beams of their suit lights, and his attention was occupied by his own role as rearguard.

Hunched bodies, over-sized heads, yellow eyes, four arms each, two lower topped with hands in parody of mankind’s own, the upper three-taloned claws capable of punching through adamantium, the genestealers came; deadly enemies each and every one.

‘Fire!’ he shouted. He and Gallio opened up, the muzzle flash of their bolters illuminating the field generation room. The strobing light penetrated only as far as the units, obscuring the view of the genestealers further in. The aliens moved rapidly, their sharp claws digging into metal and pulling them along far quicker than the Terminators’ mag-lock boots could. They flickered nightmarishly in the lightning flash of weapons fire, so quick that Voldo was not certain he had hit his targets. From over his head, Clastrin fired plasma from his servo-harness’s weapon arm. A glowing ball of gas blazed through the room. Genestealers shrank back from the plasma’s glare. The round slammed into the wall below the rupture in the ceiling, obliterating two of the creatures as they crawled head-first down the wall.

‘Corvo’s oath!’ shouted Gallio. ‘They are at least a score in strength!’ Voldo’s bolter shouted an answer for him.

They shot round after round, blasting genestealers apart in fountains of green-black ichor. From behind them came the relentless chatter of Eskerio’s bolter and the periodic roaring of Astomar’s heavy flamer. The corridor leading away from the engine room burned; metal glowed dull red

with heat. Snatches of what was happening to Astomar and the others were revealed to Voldo through the suit cameras and squad sensorium feeds: a flash of teeth; lashing, hollow tongues; claws; scurrying movement from things that seemed too big to move as quickly as they did.

Voldo was unfazed by this. Combat was a frenetic affair, that against genestealers especially. He and they were old foes.

‘Stand fast!’ he shouted. ‘They draw nearer.’

The bolts spat by Voldo and Gallio’s guns felled monster after monster, but each xenos down allowed another the chance to come closer. They advanced screeching, heedless of their losses, pushing through the floating gore, and now the aliens were by the edge of the engines, not more than seven metres away.

Gallio’s gun clicked. A red icon sprang to life next to Gallio’s suit-view in Voldo’s visor, indicating the brother’s gun had jammed.

‘Blessed is my wargear!’ called Gallio. He deactivated his power fist’s energy field and attempted to free the stuck bolt, giant armoured fingers working dextrously and without hurry.

Voldo widened the cone of space he was covering while Gallio unjammed his gun. He felled another genestealer, a bolt piercing its bulbous skull between the eyes. The mass reactor within detonated the round, spraying the genestealer’s brains to float in the air. Its arms folded in on its ribbed chest, and it floated serenely backwards.

The sensorium jam icon by Gallio’s feed flashed twice, went green, and blinked out.

‘Clear!’ shouted Gallio. He raised his gun again, power fist field re-engaging simultaneously. Together Gallio and Voldo fired and fired. Twinned magazines dropped from the bottom of Voldo’s storm bolter. Another icon sprang up next to his own emblem in his suit display. ‘I am out of ammunition!’ An alarm chimed.

A genestealer hurled itself down directly from above the door, feet scrabbling to arrest it from bouncing back into the air. Gallio's bolter tore half its upper body away before his magazines too emptied and clattered to the floor.

'Empty!' The Terminators carried spare rounds in their suit's stowage, but such was the bulk of the armour that it was impossible to retrieve them and reload in combat. Clastrin's servo-harness made the dry cough of plasma weaponry still, annihilating genestealers. Those pouring in through the ceiling came quickly forward. Clastrin extended his two lower mechanical arms, those tipped with flamers, and burned the aliens away with a blast of promethium.

'I have but four shots' worth of fuel for my flamer, brother-sergeant,' said the Forgemaster. 'My plasma cutters must cool also, or they will emergency vent and become useless.'

Past the writhing genestealers, more dark shapes moved, a tide of aliens creeping downwards. One launched itself from the wall, powerful legs sending it through the air towards Voldo.

'They are coming again!' shouted Voldo.

Gallio raised his fist. Voldo prepared his blade, and the genestealers were upon them.

Voldo's world narrowed to a maelstrom of flashing claws and teeth as the leaping genestealer landed on his shoulders. Its four arms wrapped themselves around him, clawed feet scrabbling madly at his breastplate. Its long, hollow tongue lashed at his helmet, seeking to implant him with its vile seed. He drove upward with his power sword, the weapon's field crackling as it passed through the beast's chitin and into its gut. Voldo wrenched the weapon and flung his arm out to cast the creature's body from his armour. Immediately he was re-engaged, two more scuttling over the floor, another imitating the first's leap.

The genestealers were so fast it was all he could do to match their speed with his sword. He cut and parried, deflecting blow after blow. One riposte severed a genestealer's lower left arm, and he stepped forward to finish it with a thrust to the neck. A second raked a broad hand, horribly manlike, across his chest eagle, scoring the ceramite. He felt the pain of the machine through his sensorium as a dull throb layered over his body's native senses. Nothing vital was hit, the claws not penetrating far enough to snag a power line or damage the suit's fibre bundles. He pivoted, and slew the genestealer before it could bring its heavier upper claws in for a killing blow.

Gallio fought more slowly, the power fist on his suit was a clumsy weapon. He too expended much effort fending off the genestealers' attacks, but when he did manage to land a blow the effects were devastating, the disruption fields surrounding the heavy gauntlet ripping alien flesh apart at the atomic level with a thunderous crack, bursting the creatures like smashed fruit.

Clastrin waited for a propitious moment before letting off another shot from his flamer. Genestealers dropped writhing, two more fell back, and Clastrin cut them down with his plasma cutter.

And then there were no more.

Voldo panted, body singing with adrenaline. He scanned the room carefully. Nothing lived within. No more shadows flowed down the wall. His helmet was a clamour of alarms, his vision dazzled by icons on his visor. His sensorium filled his mind with further information, the condition of the suit pasted over his own senses as pseudo-pain and phantom sensations. He twisted around, scanning the room with his own eyes and the sensorium of the Terminator armour. The motion tracker was wild with false positives, tripped by the dismembered parts of genestealers floating slowly to the floor all around them.

‘Remain here, brother!’ he told Gallio. Clastrin nodded, and took Voldo’s place as the sergeant turned himself around and lumbered towards the other front of the battle. Clastrin reached for Gallio’s stowage to retrieve a full bolt magazine. He was forced to scrape alien flesh from the clasp. All of them were besmirched with the vile fluids of the xenos.

Astomar and Eskerio had stepped back from the suiting room. Eskerio had his gun trained on a fresh hole in the suiting room ceiling. A dead genestealer hung from the gap, waving as if caught in an ocean current, its black blood wobbling globules that drifted through space. Astomar had retreated around a corner. He was kneeling and had his flamer arm up. He had ejected his promethium flasks from the weapon and was in the process of unclipping a spare from his belt.

What Voldo saw in the corridor beyond the suiting room made the breath catch in his throat. Alanius and his men fought, claws flashing. They were not so fast as the genestealers, but their technique was greater. Energy-sheathed metal blocked alien chitin, and responded with deadly efficacy. The Blood Drinkers were a whirl of motion and blades. Genestealer dead choked the corridor.

The final alien was cut down, a snarl upon its face. ‘We are done,’ shouted Alanius, his voice wild. ‘The enemy are destroyed! Rejoice brothers!’

‘Let the blood flow! Let it flow!’ the Blood Drinkers chanted. ‘Let it flow!’

‘Well fought, oh Adeptus Astartes!’ rasped Nuministon. ‘I knew full well your skill at arms would see us through, and you are all unharmed. A commendable efficiency.’

‘Untrue, magos,’ Astomar said. ‘Cousin Genthis’s suit is damaged.’

Voldo checked the Blood Drinker’s vital signs. The outer ceramite shell of his armour had been cut clean through on his lower chest, but the inner

plasteel layers remained intact, and sealant foam bled from the machine's mechanisms, hardening rapidly to close the tear.

Eskerio held up his power fist, looking to the auspex. 'There are no more signs of movement. Threat indications are low.'

'Then our way home is free!' shouted Curzon. 'Come, brothers, let us return in triumph!' He, Trael, and Azmael turned and marched down the corridor without waiting for guidance from their leaders.

'We should wait, Brother Alanius!' called Voldo. 'We should set our next plans.'

Alanius turned to the Novamarine. His hands would not be still. 'Your own brother says the way is clear, brother-sergeant. And I could not restrain them now if I wished it. The battle-joy is upon them, and nothing will keep a Blood Drinker back when this is so.'

With that, Alanius cast about, rolling genestealer corpses over until he found one that met with his approval. With a great blow of his claws, he carved the thing's exoskeleton away from its chest, and quickly cut free its heart. He unfolded a hook on his suit, and pinned it in place.

'Barbarism,' muttered Gallio. 'Suffer not the unclean.'

'Will you follow with us, brother-sergeant? My men will cut our way through should the enemy return, nothing can halt a Blood Drinker when...'

The hulk shifted. A rumble that built rapidly, and suddenly all was noise and motion.

'Hulk quake! Steady yourselves!' called Voldo.

The quake lasted longer than the others. The hulk rolled and groaned like a man in a fever dream. The corridor rippled, its metal twisting as fluidly as cloth. Alanius swayed, feet locked to the floor. Nuministon stumbled against a wall. Bulkheads buckled under phenomenal pressure as the troubled mass of the agglomeration shifted. The floor under Voldo's feet bent upwards, dislodging his mag-lock, and he toppled forward with a

bang, rebounding to hang in the air. The augur feed from Eskerio and sensorium data from the others' suits jumped wildly. He lifted his head in time to see the corridor collapse.

Tarael was furthest ahead and free. Voldo thought he saw the brother turn and look back as the central section convulsed inwards, Azmael leapt away, stumbling as his suit tried to match his sudden movement and simultaneously deal with the lack of gravity and unstable environment, his claws raking furrows in the corridor walls as he reached out to steady himself. Curzon was not so lucky. The Space Marine had time to look up before floor and ceiling met each other, metal jaws that swallowed him whole.

The hulk convulsed again, and was still.

Voldo checked the suit augurs of his men and Alanius's. Tarael's showed a wall of debris, but judging by the way the picture was moving around, Tarael was free and getting to his feet. Curzon's was active, and his vital signs indicated that he lived under the twisted mass of metal. All Voldo's own men were unharmed and untrapped. He rocked awkwardly, trying to attain a position from which he might once again bring his boots to the floor, lock them, and stand.

Alanius approached.

'It appears you were correct. We are trapped, brother Novamarine,' he said. Black blood from the genestealer's heart ran down his leg. His voice was thick, ripe with arrogance and violence. 'What are your suggestions?'



CHAPTER 7

Caedis

Chapter Master Caedis worked in his chambers. He was stripped to the waist; baggy, blood-red trousers on his lower half, soft black boots on his feet and a black tabard hanging between his legs – the manner of dress all Blood Drinkers affected when out of their battleplate. The battle-barge was warm, the way the Blood Drinkers preferred; warm as the volcanic halls of San Guisiga, warm as blood. Incense drifted from cyborg creatures that flitted about the vaulting of the room. Gentle music, composed by a long-dead brother, played.

An unfinished stained glass panel two metres tall rested within a cradle before Caedis, tilted slightly so that it was not quite erect. Much of the glass was in place, the intricate framework braced and clamped so that it would not sag and break as Caedis fitted it with more coloured panes.

Caedis's room was full of such works. Sculptures of past heroes, tapestries of great victories, exquisitely carved furniture and more, all made by his own hands over the centuries. The creation of art was a tonic to the soul, a distraction from the infernal itch of the Thirst. How ironic, thought Caedis, that it should lose its effectiveness as he worked upon an item venerating Holos, the brother who had brought a measure of peace to the Blood Drinkers and saved them from damnation.

In the glass picture, Holos climbed Mount Calicium. The hero-saint had set out after a dream, disobeying the will of the Chapter Council to fulfil his quest. This was the fifth window in a series of seven Caedis had planned depicting Holos's legend. These earlier parts of the story – Holos's dream, the secret counsel of the Reclusiarch Shanandar, the climb begins, Holos's battle with Lo-tan, lord of the astorgai – Caedis had completed already.

In this fifth window, Holos had reached the summit. His armour had been broken by the violence visited upon him by the astorgai that infested the mountain's crags, so damaged that its spirit and aiding systems had died and its weight become a burden. What armour Holos could free had been thrown off. His arm hung uselessly at his side and his weapons were gone. But Holos's will remained.

As Holos lay close to death upon Mount Calicium's peak, a winged figure had appeared to him, revived him at the point of his death and given him the secret that would enable the Blood Drinkers to keep the Thirst at bay, if they dared.

Holos dared.

Brother Holos had returned weeks later to the fortress-monastery on San Guisiga, long after he had been given up for dead. Celebrations at the hero's return turned to uproar when he revealed what he had been told. What the winged figure proposed nearly tore the Chapter in two, but those were desperate days, a time when more and more battle-brothers were falling into the Black Rage with every passing year, and the Thirst tormented them endlessly. Any measure to alleviate it was attempted, all without success.

These two events – Holos's Return and the Blood Schism – they were to have been the conclusion of the panels, to surround the glass of Holos in Glory that dominated the wall of the Reclusiam at the fortress-monastery on San Guisiga.

Holos's solution, the rite and the way of being he brought back with him from the summit of the volcano, had worked. The Blood Drinkers had since known an equilibrium that the other scions of Sanguinius could only pray for.

The Rite of Holos. The Blood Drinkers' greatest secret and their greatest strength. Without it the Chapter would have descended into savagery and been lost. With it the brothers remained stalwart defenders of the Imperium. There was, however, a cost.

'Celebrate the blood,' murmured Caedis. He recited the catechism of Holos, his eyes fixed on the hero's outstretched arm. 'To deny the blood is to deny life, to deny life is to deny duty. To deny duty is to betray the Emperor. Betrayal is worse than damnation. Service has its price, and we willingly pay it.'

Caedis had completed this panel's Holos some time ago, but a gap remained, the top left quarter of the work was unfinished. The mysterious winged figure who had come to Holos and which Caedis had intended as the focal point of the piece was entirely absent. He had worked on the window cycle for many years. During that time he had always had an idea of how he would portray the angel in this, the crucial panel, but as he had come to craft the being his vision had become elusive. Try as he might, he could not capture the image in his mind, the face he wished to show stayed constant in his imagination until he tried to express it, and then it would shift and change or ripple out of existence altogether, taunting him with inconstancy.

Caedis rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. He feared now, in his hearts, that he would never complete this panel, let alone the cycle. His tools were awkward in his fingers. When he went to his bench to cut the glass he broke it as often as not, sending him back to his crucible to cast more. His body trembled, his anger was never far from the surface of his

thoughts. And the Thirst – hot, dry, his throat burning with it – he was never free of it, not for a moment.

He cast his mind back to Catria, the last world they had freed of the genestealer taint. In the defiled sanctum of that world's saint, Epistolary Guinian had ripped the psychic scent of the brood from the genestealer young. This had enabled them to track down the hulk.

The first signs had come soon before planetfall. Dark dreams, an ache in his limbs. He prayed it would pass, that it was something else, an illness. But a Space Marine's physiology did not allow him to become easily ill, and he had known from the first moment that he was succumbing to the Scion's Curse. Not even after the rite had he known control there. His grasp of himself had slipped as they fought, and he had never truly regained it.

He thought of the seven Catrian soldiers they had been forced to sacrifice. Their deaths sorrowed him, but his usual pragmatic acceptance at the need was absent. He felt only untempered disgust.

Seven sacrifices. Seven panels. How apt, he thought bitterly.

He picked up a goblet from his work bench and drained it. The wine was of an exceptional quality, but did nothing to slake his thirst. Meagre sweat prickled his dry skin. When he closed his eyes he saw sheets of liquid red, blood pouring down glass.

He shook the visions away. 'Table, flat,' he said hoarsely. The cradle swung to the horizontal. A table rose from the floor and pressed itself under the glass. The finished design was sketched upon the surface of the table, although even there the angel was faceless, its outline grubby with constant erasure and re-pencilling. Lifting his tools, Caedis approached. In one hand he held a pair of pliers, their ends coated in yielding pseudoplastic, in the other a light hammer with a long head.

He rubbed at his sore eyes with the back of his hand again – Emperor, they were so dry! – and looked to the bench where the glass pieces he had

cut earlier were laid out. He selected one – part of the visitor's face. He frowned, put it back and took up another, a piece of yellow glass intended to represent a section of the radiant aura of Holos's messenger.

He set the pane carefully into the lead comes, bending their splayed edges until they were snug on the glass. He reached behind him and took up a horseshoe nail of mild steel. He placed its point in the corner where the came crossed another. He steadied his shaking hand, and carefully tapped the nail into the soft lead. His concentration wandered, rivers of red in his mind. He forced himself to continue, tapping nails into all the joins, fixing the glass and comes in place temporarily, ready for soldering later.

Another pane of glass, and another. The halo of light that Holos said had surrounded his visitor took shape, framing a face Caedis could still not quite call into being. Caedis relaxed into the task, delicate and precise as it was, so different to war. Gradually his need to drink of the life-fluid and feel the battle-joy receded and he mercifully lost himself in his work.

Who had been the one who aided Holos? No one truly knew. Some said it was the spirit of Sanguinius himself. Caedis was not sure if Holos had seen anything at all. Death can bring strange visions and inspirations of its own, it could have been that his gifts had saved him. The Emperor's boons were potent, their workings mysterious.

Methodically he built the glass panel up, pane by pane, each small piece of carefully prepared glass slotting into the 'H' cross sections of the comes. Time passed, and his suffering eased. He dared to think that perhaps the Thirst would recede, and the descent into darkness would not come to pass. As dutiful a son of mankind as he was, the thought of sharing the same fate as Ancient Endarmiel, raging within his Dreadnought sarcophagus, filled him with horror; anything but that. He would die in battle if the Rage came upon him, that he silently vowed to himself.

He had another vow to fulfil first. After seeing the destruction the genestealer plague had left on Zanzib he had sworn to track down the source of the contagion and destroy it. Fifteen worlds and twenty-five years later, he had seen rebellion and strife as loyal subjects of the Imperium had been turned on one another by the pernicious psychic influence of the xenos. He had witnessed two planets rendered useless, another consumed entirely by the fires of Exterminatus. The loss of life angered him.

All that blood wasted, a less noble portion of his soul whispered.

Caedis growled. He ignored his unwanted thoughts. It was the only sure way to deal with them, to weather their obscenity until they abated. He set down his tools, judging enough of the glass in place for the time being. He fetched his soldering torch and a spool of soft alloy wire from the bench. The torch was fashioned as a leering devil, bent over at the waist so that its legs formed a handle, hands spread wide by its open mouth.

The worlds they had saved had been reduced, cities ruined, populations decimated. No doubt they would be bled further until the cripplingly slow machinery of the Administratum downgraded their tithe statuses. Caedis knew he could have sped that process, if he had wished.

But he could not. It was too much of a risk.

He ignited the torch. A thin white flame shot from the mouth of the devil.

He had no choice. Contacting the Inquisition would have been the most effective, they could have sped up reclassification and lessened the burdens of the affected worlds, and many would say they should have been informed of such a widespread genestealer plague.

Caedis would not, could not, petition the Inquisition or any other Imperial body for aid. Even calling for help from other Space Marines to destroy the hulk had been a risk he had agonised over for long days.

He had done all he could, sending astropathic messages to the sector and segmentum capital worlds. He prayed nightly that it would be enough.

If he did not end this by the purging of the hulk, the agents of the Inquisition would be drawn here soon anyway. The worlds affected had been of low importance, but so many had been tainted, and the track of the space hulk propelled it closer to the densely populated system of Vol Secundus every time it drifted back out of the warp. The Inquisition's attention would swing implacably towards the sector and his Chapter. He could not allow the Blood Drinkers to become entangled with them. They would not approve of the Rite.

Solder melted under the spike of the fire. He dripped it onto the joints of the came expertly.

A chime sounded at the door. Caedis's body-serf answered. A stick thin, anaemic man, thin arms covered in metal tubing. He struggled as he pulled open the wooden inner door. The serf bowed to the visitor.

'Lord Reclusiarch Mazrael, my lord,' announced the serf.

'Lord Caedis,' said the Reclusiarch.

'Brother,' said the Chapter Master. He did not look up from his work. 'To what do I owe this pleasure?'

Mazrael walked around the table where Caedis worked, examining the glass. 'Lord, brother, I come here as your guide and confessor. Are you well?'

'As well as can be expected,' said Caedis.

'My lord, would you tell me something?' said Mazrael carefully.

Caedis sighed. He flicked the solder torch off with his thumb and straightened to address the Reclusiarch. Like him, Mazrael was stripped to the waist, revealing the mark of chaplaincy emblazoned across his chest. San Guisiga was a hot, volcanic world, criss-crossed with lava rivers as bright as blood. The planet was a furnace, their dress reflected this.

‘Is there anything other than the one great burden that hangs over us, Lord Reclusiarch?’

‘The Thirst,’ Mazrael folded his arms over his chest. ‘It troubles you?’ Caedis shrugged.

‘It troubles us all, my lord, we should perform the rite again soon.’

Caedis continued working. Mazrael watched him for a moment.

‘You work, that is good. Artistry is the great foe of savagery,’ said the Reclusiarch.

‘How goes the mission?’ said Caedis. He reached for another pane of glass, and set about its placement.

‘This is why I visit. There is no word as yet, my lord, as to its ultimate success. The Adeptus Mechanicus have activated their pulse detonators and received an answer from the machine the magos, Nuministon, took with him into the hulk. If everything has gone to plan, then our brothers and the Novamarines were in place to record and process the seismic data and are returning. I thought I would inform you, lord.’

‘Good. No news is oftentimes good news.’

‘They are deep in the hulk, lord. Should they be in difficulty we would not hear their calls for aid, nor would we be able to aid them.’

‘I am aware of this.’ Caedis set a glass piece into place, a brown-grey shard that would delineate part of Mount Calicium’s slopes.

‘You would not rather be aboard the bridge, directing the effort?’

‘Brother Mazrael, three hundred years you have known me, and you ask such questions? What would you know?’

‘I would know only what I ask, my lord.’

‘This mission is the honour of the Novamarines to lead. It does not play to our strengths. Such a mission requires stealth and caution, not the charge of glory or the swift unsheathing of blades. I gladly leave it to Captain Galt, it suits the temper of the Novamarines better.’

‘Disagreeable traits, lord. Better to meet the foe head on.’

‘You sound like Sanguinary Master Teale today, Reclusiarch Mazrael. Maybe they are, but they are necessary traits.’

‘I test you lord, as we all must be tested. Stealth and ferocity, forethought and valour, all and more are weapons in the great armoury of the Adeptus Astartes,’ he paused. ‘It upsets you though, to allow them to be first aboard. I can feel it.’

‘Does it not upset you?’

‘As you aver, my lord, let the tool selected be fit for the task. You would not attempt placement of your glass with a power fist. Emotion and pride is a poor driver of strategy. We must save our passion for combat. Before, there is time to be circumspect.’

‘Precisely so, Reclusiarch.’

‘But lord,’ Mazrael moved closer. ‘I suspect that is not why you are here in your chambers and not upon the bridge. It is not your nature to stand back from a mission, even if you have delegated it rightly to another.’

‘Ah, so I see you have paid attention.’

‘Nor is this your normal attitude. Where is your grace and your kindness today, lord? Such flippancy is... unbecoming to you.’

Caedis placed his glass, took up his hammer, tapped in nails around it, took up another small pane. He turned it about in his fingers, not meeting the Chaplain’s eyes.

‘Do you think the Thirst drowns my finer qualities, Reclusiarch? Am I losing myself? You are wise, tell me what you see.’

Mazrael made a noise in his throat. When he spoke again, he did so carefully. ‘It is my role, lord, to be the custodian of the souls of our brethren. Your behaviour aboard *Novum in Honourum* was unusual. I am attuned to the changes that precede the fall to the ravages of the Thirst and the birth-pangs of the Black Rage, you know that aside from the performance of the rite, this is my duty above all other duties.’

‘And you see them in me now, Mazrael?’

‘Lord Caedis, please...’

Caedis could barely keep the tension from his voice. ‘I am well in body, mind and spirit, Reclusiarch Mazrael, truly. Soon we will perform the rite and all will be well with me and with our brethren. Tell me that you are untroubled. Tell me that there is not another brother aboard this fleet who does not feel the pangs of the Thirst.’

‘I carry the burden, as do we all, lord,’ admitted Mazrael.

‘There we have it then. I will be *well*.’

Caedis raised his head from his work. He smiled at the Chaplain. ‘Once we have performed the rite, we will all be well. I work to find focus before the real fight begins. Let our allies deal with the first sortie, these little brothers of Ultramar. Let them have their glory. When the time comes, we shall show them the correct way to defeat the foes of mankind – at close quarters, with blade and sinew. And this greater battle, the coming assault, it offers such perfect opportunity for intimate slaughter, does it not?’

‘Yes, lord,’ the Reclusiarch bowed his head briefly. His hands fell to his side. ‘Then I must be away. I go to speak with Sanguinary Master Teale about the ritual. Subjects must be selected. As you say, lord, the time approaches.’

Caedis’s smile dropped. ‘Unfortunately so, yes.’

‘Do not grieve for those who give themselves. They serve in their way so that we might serve in ours, lord. All men are servants of the Emperor, and pay fealty in whatever way they can. By the blood of the loyal servants of the Emperor are the stars kept pure – our blood, and that of others.’

Mazrael withdrew, Caedis’s body-serf holding open the door for him. The Reclusiarch paused on the threshold of the door.

‘Will you take the black and red?’ asked Mazrael. ‘When the time comes, lord? Or will you seek the Emperor’s mercy? You have but to ask for either, as is your right.’

‘Neither, my friend. Not yet, not yet, and not for some time to come,’ Caedis said.

Mazrael gave a curt nod. ‘I pray it so, my lord.’ He departed.

The door shut, and Caedis let out a long gasp. He shook with the effort of controlling himself. The pane of glass he held in his hand slipped from his fingers and clinked upon the unfinished work. He grasped the table and shuddered. His skin itched, unable to perspire properly, he felt terribly hot. His throat burned horribly.

‘My lord, are you well?’

Caedis forced himself to look up. ‘Yes, Porphyrio, I...’ Caedis stopped. His serf stood close by, unsure whether to approach or not. Caedis’s eyes ran over the serf’s body, past the blood tubes and letting ports that covered his skin, until they came to rest on the man’s neck. There, the smallest movement, the pulse of an artery. He watched it twitch, twitch, twitch...

‘My lord?’

‘Leave me,’ the Chapter Master said urgently.

‘Lord?’

‘Get out! Now! Go!’ he shouted so loudly Porphyrio shrank backwards, stumbling over his own feet.

Caedis gripped the table edge so tightly the frame holding his work buckled. Whether he was steadying or restraining himself he did not know.

The window within took the brunt of his agonies. There was the sharp crack of glass giving way. Caedis looked down at the panel. A line ran through Holos, across his chest and the arm pointing towards the angel Caedis knew he would never finish.

His throat was dry and hot as desert sand, a horrible clutching sensation crawled from his groin to his scalp, his every hair writhed at the root as if it would be free.

‘By the blood of the loyal servants of the Emperor are the stars kept pure.’ Mazrael quoted Guilliman’s Codex, by which they lived their lives.

Guilliman did not mean by that passage what the Blood Drinkers took it to mean. The unbalanced mind ever seeks justification for its actions.

Caedis staggered over to his work bench, knocking the pane of glass he had dropped from the table onto the floor where it shattered into a score of pieces. Clumsy hands scattered his neatly arrayed materials and tools. He hit upon what he was seeking, and lifted it.

The soldering torch.

He ignited the flame, let it run until the devil's open mouth glowed. Gritting his teeth, he shut off the flame and pushed the red hot metal into his muscular forearm. He stifled a cry as pain ripped through him.

Pain that could not stem the rivers of blood that flowed through his mind.



CHAPTER 8

Trapped

Debris swirled. A particulate fog made up of flakes of corrosion, chunks of metal, spent bolt casings and genestealer remains that scrambled Voldo's sensorium.

'Sound off!' he called.

One by one, the Novamarines called in, giving verbal updates to supplement the sensorium's data. Astomar's leg was pinned, the others were unaffected by the quake. Of Alanius's squad, Curzon was trapped, unconscious but alive, within the crushed tunnel leading from the suiting room. Trael was isolated on the far side of the blockage. Voldo caught part of the conversation between Trael and Alanius as he checked the status of his own men. The Blood Drinker brother stated he was unharmed.

'Forgemaster, how fares the tech-priest?'

'I am well, lord sergeant, and will answer for myself.' The tech-priest pushed himself gingerly from the wall where he had landed, bionic legs searching for the hard contact of the floor.

'I will see to the men, brother-sergeant,' said Clastrin. 'Their wargear needs be checked. I fear a long journey ahead of us.' He went to Genthis first.

‘Aye,’ said Voldo. ‘Eskerio!’ he shouted. The hulk continued to emit worrying sounds. Creaking and rumbles sounded periodically, these accompanied by shudders running through the fabric of the agglomeration. The staccato racket of Gallio’s chainfist added to the noise of the hulk’s complaints as he cut Astomar’s leg free.

Eskerio projected a map into Voldo’s helmet.

‘I have scanned the surroundings as best I can, brother-sergeant. The way back, as far as I can ascertain, is free bar this obstruction.’ He gestured to the blocked tunnel. ‘The Emperor closes one way, and presents us with another.’

‘Can we cut our way out?’

Gallio’s chainfist whined to a halt. He pulled Astomar free from the wreckage and surveyed the closed way. ‘How deep is it, Brother Eskerio?’

‘Fifteen point five metres.’

‘Density?’

‘This corridor and the ones above and below it have compacted into one, brother.’

‘Then it can be done, but it will take time.’

‘We have no time, brothers,’ said Azmael. Voldo flicked his eyes to the map the Blood Drinker’s auspex projected. Amid the visual noise of free-floating debris, bright blips flashed red, converging on the tunnel end.

‘Contacts,’ said Voldo.

‘It is hard to be sure, but it is a possibility, cousin-sergeant,’ said Azmael. His breath was laboured. It was costing him to keep his concentration on his device. ‘They move too smoothly to be anything other than organisms.’

‘Brother Trael! You have multiple contacts converging on your position,’ said Alanius. ‘Retreat immediately! You will have to make your own way back, brother. Find Cousin Militor, return to the fleet, and tell of what has occurred here.’

Tarael's reply was hard to make out. 'Affirmative, brother-sergeant. May the wings of Sanguinius shield you.'

'Emperor protect,' said Voldo. 'Go with speed, cousin.'

Tarael's icon moved away then, as quickly as Terminator armour would allow. Before long he had reached the edge of the auspex's range, and the blood drop and chalice denoting him slid out of view.

'He should get clear,' said Eskerio, tracking the movements of the genestealers, 'if there are no new blockages on his route.'

'The question is, adepts, what should we do?' said Nuministon. 'It is our predicament that requires the more urgent attention.'

Alanius strode over to the tech-priest, claws pointing. 'If it were not for you, then our circumstances might be somewhat better, magos. I advise you to be careful in all that you say.' His claws came to within centimetres of the magos's face.

'An interesting attitude,' said Nuministon.

'Brother-sergeant, please,' said Voldo. 'If we fall upon one another, we are surely lost.'

Alanius growled, for a moment Voldo thought he would gut the tech-priest there and then, but his gauntlet fell, and he let out a ragged breath.

'You are correct.'

'All is not lost, oh warriors of the Adeptus Astartes,' said Nuministon. 'I have the data from the device. If you give me but a moment, I should be able to process it within my own intelligence cores and supply it to you. With the Omnissiah's bounty to hand, then we might find an alternate route from this place.'

'Very well. Brother Eskerio, Brother Azmael, make use of what he can give you. Forgemaster Clastrin, I require your wisdom, if you please.'

Clastrin finished inspecting the armour of Astomar. He flicked an access panel closed with a manipulator on his servo-harness, and joined the sergeants.

‘Forgemaster, let we three talk in private,’ said Voldo. Clastrin nodded, and Alanius joined them in closed vox communication. ‘What is the status of our brethren?’

‘The harness of the Novamarines is all intact, brother-sergeant,’ said Clastrin. ‘We are low on ammunition. Brother Astomar has but one flask of promethium remaining.’

‘Five shots,’ said Alanius. ‘Unfortunate.’ He hefted his own claws. ‘These are weapons whose ammunition will never run dry.’

‘That is so,’ said Clastrin. ‘But for your Blood Drinkers, I have greater concerns. Brother Azmael is experiencing stiffness between the adjoining surfaces of his inner right pauldron and gardbrace. Not a serious malfunction, but it will restrict his right shoulder’s movement, and I cannot effect a repair here. To dismantle the assembly will take an hour or more, and the debris presents a problem – should any become lodged between the two plates, it will sicken his armour further. The repair should be undertaken in a clean and sanctified environment, and proper appeasement offered to his armour’s spirit lest the malfunction worsen.’

‘What of Brother Genthis?’ asked Alanius, glancing at his damaged Terminator armour.

‘That is an issue of greater consequence,’ said Clastrin. ‘The claws of the xenos bit deep. His sealant capsules have closed the rent fully, but fluctuations in his power plant output lead me to suspect his primary sternum power conduit to be damaged. On the face of it, it seems a small malfunction, but the spirit of his suit cannot feed properly, and with time it will bleed energy beyond tolerance.’

‘The armour will seize up?’ asked Voldo.

‘It will. Already his power plant labours hot to cover the shortfall this discharge creates, and his heatsinks struggle to compensate for the plant’s increased activity. In addition, the sealant has stopped all movement between his plastron and placard, while his left tuille has been torn free.’

‘Can he still fight?’ asked Alanius.

Clastrin shook his head. ‘It would be imprudent, brother-sergeant. His combat effectiveness is greatly compromised. I will pray for his wargear’s swift healing, but there is little of material benefit I can do here. We must look to the spirit of his equipment until the armour can be brought to your forge or mine and returned to full operational effectiveness.’

‘That leaves Brother Blood Drinker Curzon,’ said Voldo.

‘As far as I am able to tell, his armour is undamaged. Should the genestealers bypass him, you will be able to retrieve him later.’

‘That is a poor lot for a warrior,’ grumbled Alanius.

‘He will live to fight another day,’ said Clastrin in his twin voices. ‘That is something. Everything.’

‘Can the same be said for Brother Genthis?’ said Voldo.

‘Perhaps,’ said Clastrin. ‘He is still mobile. His power plant should function for several hours yet. There is every chance he will be extracted with us. He is aware of his limitations. His sensorium diagnostics have alerted him, and I took the liberty of explaining further that which was beyond his immediate comprehension. I have disabled certain of his sensorium’s feedback devices, lest the pain suffered by his harness overwhelm him.’

‘Fear not for Brother Genthis,’ said Alanius. ‘He is reckoned brave amongst the brave. He will prevail.’

‘Very well. All that remains then is for us to find our way free of this, and we may yet all return to the fleet,’ said Voldo.

‘Wait, brother,’ Clastrin stopped Voldo before he re-engaged his sensorium with that of the others. ‘The magos. He is hiding something.’

‘We were wrong to trust him,’ snarled Alanius. His battle frenzy had not yet fully receded.

‘Perhaps, perhaps not,’ said Clastrin. ‘But he did hold information from us regarding the true functioning of his device. The machine was

calibrated to map the upper portions of the quadrants agreed by our leaders, but there is more to it than that. The machine is not only a passive receiver, but a seismic emitter in its own right.'

'The foot?' said Voldo.

'The foot,' said Clastrin. 'He maintains the affair to be a misunderstanding, that the foot sent a reply signal to data gatherers on the surface as he explained. This is almost certainly true.'

'I do not understand,' said Alanius. 'Surely that is a worthwhile endeavour. Why did they not tell us of it? We could have adapted our approach accordingly.'

'Because I believe its pounding had another purpose,' said Clastrin. 'It allowed a sounding deep into the hulk. I saw the data displayed for an instant before Nuministon shut off the device.'

'I can only think they do not wish to share the data appertaining to the heart of the hulk,' said Voldo.

'That suggests the Mechanicus have an inkling what lies at the core. But what? And why will they not share their opinion?'

'I suspect an archeotech hoard, Brother Voldo,' said Clastrin. 'Plosk did say he had been hunting this hulk for many years. Why this one? There must be some reason to his pursuit of it. When a valuable prize presents itself, the priests of Mars will do their utmost to keep its discovery to themselves. When they retrieve the archeotech, they will tell us as little of its nature as possible.'

'You are well placed to know, Forgemaster,' said Alanius.

'Indeed. I am inducted into the lesser of their mysteries,' said Clastrin plainly. 'I doubt anything sinister on the part of my colleagues in steel and flesh, but the writ of the High Lord has made them arrogant. It is likely they see us as little more than means to their ends. They are not sharing all they know, and that will make our work here harder.'

‘At least we know now why Plosk was so insistent Nuministon accompany us,’ said Voldo. ‘We must return, and appraise Lord Caedis and Captain Galt of this. Cousin Alanius, I urge you, now is not the time to confront the tech-priest.’

Alanius glanced into the machine room, where Nuministon, Eskerio and Azmael stood by the tech-priest’s device.

‘I agree. I will stay my tongue and my hand, but if I have a sense of real treachery, it will go ill for him.’

Voldo broke the private conversation, and re-engaged his vox and sensorium with the rest of the party.

‘Brother Eskerio, tell us what you have learned from the magos.’

A crisp, fresh map came up on Voldo’s internal helmet display. The map rotated, and zoomed out, providing a clear view of their surroundings. A red line snaked through three vessels to the surface, indicating an escape route.

‘With the data provided by Magos Nuministon,’ said Eskerio. ‘Brother Azmael and I have been able to refine our alternative route out of the hulk.’

‘This information is worth our minor sacrifices so far, do you not agree?’ said the magos. There was a hint of smugness to his grinding voice.

‘The loss of but one battle-brother is a grave one,’ retorted Alanius.

‘Your Curzon is not lost, and will be freed. And thanks to this information, the battle against the genestealers will be immeasurably easier,’ said the magos.

Voldo looked to the Blood Drinkers sergeant, unsure as to how he would respond to this needling.

‘You are correct in that,’ Alanius said, and spoke no more.

Voldo inspected the route. Blinking green areas suggested genestealer concentrations, purple vortices two of the many reactors still burning

within the hulk.

‘The map is relatively certain, brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio.

‘Although the disposition of the genestealers, sleeping and active, is little better than guesswork married to what the deep augurs of the *Excommentum Incursus* spied. This void here, for example—’ A cavern blinked, the crushed hold of a mighty vessel, highlighted in bright yellow, ‘—is prime territory for a nesting ground.’

‘We must go through it,’ said Voldo.

‘There is no way around. We must also pass close to this reactor.’ A purple whorl pulsed. ‘Radiation levels will be high, but our suits will weather it with little trouble.’

‘And cave-ins? This data was taken before the last quake. What are your opinions on the passability of the route?’ said Alanius.

‘Good,’ said Eskerio. ‘Brother Azmael and I have selected the most stable path. It should be free of obstruction, in the main. Emperor willing and fortune behind us.’

Voldo span the map around. The route was sound, Eskerio had plotted his path through as many entire vessels as he could. With luck, the grav plating of the vessels would be active, and they would be on their way swiftly. ‘If it is not, then it is the will of the Emperor also,’ he said.

There was a distant bang, followed by a scraping from the far side of the collapsed tunnel. Alanius turned around, his suit light glimmering from globules of blood. Under the hulk’s microgravity, the mess in the air was gradually clearing, drawn towards the centre of the agglomeration’s mass, which was confusingly at a slight angle to the lay of the ship’s floor.

‘Let us be on our way,’ Alanius said. ‘We can gain nothing by tarrying here.’

Galt stared out of the bridge windows of *Novum in Honourum* at the moon-sized space hulk orbiting Jorso, spines and rocks and broken ships’ prows at the edges catching the harsh light of the sun.

‘No news, lord captain,’ said a communications serf. ‘We are attempting to lock on to the party’s teleport homers, but we cannot find them. The star is loud in its disapproval of us.’

‘Keep trying,’ said Galt. ‘They have been too long.’

‘They have,’ said Mastrik. ‘Brother-captain, allow me to go down to the surface, penetrate the hulk and search for them.’

‘No,’ said Galt. ‘The hulk is vast, and the enemy many. We must conserve our veterans and Terminator armour for the main assault.’ He tapped at his chin. ‘But there is merit in what you say. Brother-Captain Mastrik, assemble two squads, prepare a Thunderhawk each. Do not have them land, but maintain safe distance outside the debris field. I want them close by the surface and ready to help our brothers the moment word is received.’

‘I will call on squads Righteous War and Vermillion, and lead them myself, brother-captain.’ Mastrik turned to go, beckoning to the three Third Company Space Marines who were present on the bridge to follow him.

‘Perhaps they were trapped by that quake,’ said Persimmon. He checked his instruments. ‘It was a strong one.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Galt.

‘If anyone can find a way out, brother-captain, Voldo can.’

‘Indeed.’ Galt addressed the Blood Drinkers Captain Sorael and Veteran Brother Metrion, who were present on the bridge. ‘Cousins, I suggest you advise Lord Caedis of the mission status.’

Soraël bowed. ‘He will agree with your judgement, lord captain Novamarine, although he will be grateful of our update. I will return to *Lux Rubrum* and speak with him in person.’

The Blood Drinker captain drew Metrion to one side, where they conversed quietly.

‘Brother-Sergeant Voldo lives, brother-captain,’ said Epistolary Ranial to Galt. ‘I have not sensed his death.’

Galt glanced at Ranial, and gave a grateful nod.



CHAPTER 9

The way out

Voldo watched as Gallio tore back the last of the hull plate. Clastrin, behind him in the cramped corridor, tugged the sheet of metal away and cut it in two with his plasma torch. Clastrin stuffed the two pieces into a side room, and their way was open to the next vessel.

The silence, now the chainfist had ceased, was sudden and total. It was a risk, employing Gallio's cutting tool. Clastrin's plasma torches were far quieter, but the chainfist was far faster, and time was of the essence. The group was in single file, the corridor too restrictive to permit them to stand side by side; it was a bad place to be caught in a fight.

The auspex remained free of contacts.

They had made good time from the machine room, heading for the side of the vessel. They had come across a section where all seemed intact, a great difference to the remainder of the ship, although all systems remained non-functional. Mapping hulks was so difficult because of the great variety of condition not only between the constituents of an agglomeration, but also within each individual vessel. In parts a ship might be whole, then the next section crushed flat or impaled upon the protrusions of another vessel.

Gallio manoeuvred himself around, craning his head as best as his bulky shoulders would allow into the hole he had made. Voldo watched his suit feed.

‘Brother-sergeant, the vessel is at an awkward angle.’

Voldo saw the corridor, the end concertinaed where it had been forced up against the unnamed ship they sought to leave. The corridor on the next vessel dropped steeply at a twenty degree angle, heading away until it was lost to perspective and the uncertain illumination of lighting millennia old.

‘Proceed, Brother Gallio.’

‘The lighting is active,’ said Eskerio. ‘I would be wary of the grav plates, brother.’

Gallio looked upward. The floor of the new vessel was the ceiling, relative to where they were. ‘Affirmative.’ He said. He eased his bulk through the hole, catching his cowl on the jagged breach. He fished around for a piece of metal, and tossed it far into the corridor. Sure enough, the shard flew true until it passed over into the undamaged section of the corridor, when it suddenly arced and dropped with a clatter to the corridor floor.

Clastrin placed himself in the newly carved door, servo-harness arms extended into the other ship, covering Gallio as he moved forward.

When Gallio got to the section of active grav plates, he walked up the wall, his boots clicking as they drew themselves onto the metal. The corridor was even narrower than the one he had left, a rat run, and Gallio had trouble getting himself into a position where he could make the transition from the wall to this new floor. He wavered slightly as his boots disengaged and the gravity tugged him upward, but then he was standing on the ceiling, and beckoning to his fellows.

Clastrin followed, his smaller armour and servo-harness making his transition from one orientation to another easy.

Eskerio was next, then Voldo. The sergeant reached the section where gravity functioned before radioing to Alanius, who stood in rearguard with Astomar at a crossway that allowed them to stand side by side.

‘We are coming,’ said Alanius. ‘I will be glad to leave this place, until the time to reclaim Curzon arrives.’

‘Emperor protect him,’ said Voldo.

The party walked corridors where dust lay thick. The silence was oppressive, infiltrating their spirits, working itself somehow under the constant hum of their suits’ mechanisms and the chattering information of the sensoriums to suffocate them with its presence. It was a permanent, unending silence, a silence that did all it could to remind them that while their noise persisted it might seem suspended, but would return as soon as they had passed. It was the silence of deep space, of the warp: the silence of death.

Voldo spoke only to give orders, the others to respond. They trudged onward, following the glowing line of Eskerio and Azmael’s map to their salvation. The ship was strangely proportioned, the corridors only just wide enough to accommodate the armour. It was of human build, but like so much of the hulk of unknown age or origin. Clastrin found data portals and briefly interrogated the ship’s spirit, but its databanks were empty, its records stripped away by time or trauma. There were few doors leading from the long corridor they walked, opening onto cramped rooms whose contents were ruined, or which had been crushed altogether.

For two kilometres they walked this peculiar way. The external temperature rose with every metre, until the air reached twenty degrees.

‘The reactor in a nearby ship,’ said Voldo, eyeing a purple vortex on the map some way ahead of them. The ship’s prow projected into a large void, the other side of which the fusion reactor of a much larger vessel burned, locked in a perpetual cycle of matter creation and annihilation.

They passed over a sharp bend in the corridor, where the ship had been folded upon itself. A hundred metres before them were a set of doors.

They approached cautiously, Gallio's storm bolter ready at the party's front.

The doors opened, powered still. They went through into a modest command module: four decks and a bridge, according to their map.

Clastrin cast his gaze around the bridge. There were but three chairs, for a captain and a first and second pilot. There was no navigator's throne, and nowhere else in the command module that one might be found. The bridge was weirdly undamaged. Pristine instruments lay under a layer of dust, some of their standby indicators still blinking. The lighting was functional, if dulled by age, and the gravity plates held things in their proper place. By the captain's chair, a cup sat. The blast shields were down over the two windows.

Clastrin extended a data probe and plugged into a port, bringing up schematics onto a filthy screen.

'Single system vessel,' said Clastrin. 'An interplanetary ore-hauler or container ship.' The vessel's image, made at a time when it had been whole, showed a long, thin superstructure with space for thirty containers arrayed around and along its spine.

'No warp engines,' said Azmael.

'None. But anything that plies space might find itself trapped in an agglomeration should the conditions be right,' said Clastrin. 'A warp storm in-system or being caught in the translation of a larger ship could have cast this craft into the empyrean, or it could have fallen into the gravitic embrace of the hulk while it drifted through real space, and been drawn with it back into the warp.'

'Eerie. It is as if they have but stepped out,' said Azmael. 'And will return soon.'

'I always find hulks so, brother,' said Genthis. 'They are haunted places.'

‘That they are,’ said Azmael, and went back to his auspex. Voldo noted that the Blood Drinkers’ battle fervour had abated, and they spoke now with the hush of learned men abroad in quiet spaces.

‘The great cavity that Cousin Eskerio spoke of lies outside this vessel, does it not?’ asked Alanius.

‘It does,’ said Eskerio. ‘The command module projects into it as an arrow penetrates a board.’

‘Forgemaster,’ said Alanius. ‘Can we activate the blast shields, to see our way forward?’

‘We can,’ said Clastrin. He did not need to examine the ship’s systems to see it was so. ‘If the ship’s windows are broken, this entire section may become subject to decompression, compromising the atmospheric perturbation and sonar detection aspects of our sensoriums. Brother-Sergeant Voldo, what say you?’

‘Brother Eskerio?’

‘The auspex indicates some atmosphere in the void, at what precise pressure, I cannot say.’

Voldo nodded. ‘It is worth the risk. I say open them.’

‘Very well,’ said Clastrin.

The Forgemaster unplugged himself and walked to the first pilot’s console. He brushed away its coating of dust and activated controls that seemed fit for children under his armoured hands. More lights flickered on around the bridge. There came a soft bell, and a request for confirmation in antique Gothic. Clastrin gave it, and the blast shields screeched open, shedding centuries of grime as they slid into their housings.

‘Sanguinius protect us!’ hissed Azmael.

Through the windows, the assembled brothers of the Novamarines and the Blood Drinkers saw a metal cavern, a space captured between the hulls of two ships of overwhelming size – the one opposite them of Imperial origin, the other an alien giant whose smooth skin made up the floor and

nearside wall – and into which the command module of their cargo ship protruded. A split twenty metres wide in the hull of the Imperial vessel revealed the roiling energies of an active fusion reactor within. The light it emitted reached into the cave as the rays of an old and feeble sun, illuminating parts of the hulls with stark light, and plunging their crannies into utter blackness.

Upon the gothic detail of the crushed Imperial ship were genestealers. Scores of them, curled into foetal balls, lying atop or embracing each other with their many limbs. They stirred fitfully as they slept, their fluted bodies moving sinuously against their fellows' as they dreamed alien dreams, their tubular tongues sliding over black teeth.

Bathed in the light and warmth of the reactor, the genestealers rested deep in hibernation, until the chance to infect another being with their awful genes came to pass, spreading their contagion deeper into the Imperium.

‘Our route takes us close by this roost,’ said Clastrin. ‘It is a risk.’

‘There are so many of them,’ said Alanius. ‘To fight them would be a fine way to die.’

‘I am in no haste to embrace such glory, cousin,’ said Voldo. ‘Better to live and serve the Emperor further.’

‘Then what do we do?’ said Gallio. ‘How soon until these genestealers awaken to our presence and pursue us? We will fare badly against so many.’

‘Our route goes from this vessel into the xenos craft beneath us, and passes under the roost space,’ said Azmael. A red line blinked in the Terminators’ sensorium maps. ‘From there, we will be able to access the Imperial vessel, and make our way through it to the surface.’ The map zoomed out, showing the flank of the Imperial vessel heaved up into a low hill on the skin of the hulk.

‘Three more kilometres to traverse,’ said Genthis. ‘A way to go, brothers.’

‘The reactor will pose a problem,’ said Astomar. ‘We can expect the heat to increase, and radiation will be high. How long has that reactor burned? I doubt its fires are clean.’

‘You are correct,’ said Nuministon. He had not spoken for some time, and Voldo was almost surprised he was still there. ‘That is a Helios fusion reactor. I have not seen a functioning model for many years. It is thousands of years old, the knowledge to construct such a compact power source lost. Watch!’ He pointed, and the Space Marines saw a flare not unlike that spat out by a star spurt from the white core of the reactor. Rather than uncurling from the source as a stellar flare would, the containment fields stretched it into a fat band around the central mass. ‘That is a malfunction, the machine is compromised.’

‘The containment fields are not operating at optimum efficiency,’ said Clastrin.

‘What allows energy out, allows matter in. It is likely that the fuel sources have become contaminated with other material, or the reactor would not burn. Such a device operates with near-zero sum inputs, but input is nevertheless required on aeon-scalar periods,’ said the magos.

‘And impure fuel begets poison,’ said Clastrin.

‘How I would love to minister to it and heal its hurts! The reactor alone is of great value, the Lord Magos Explorator was correct in his assumptions about this hulk.’

There was something in the way he said this that prompted Alanius to ask him, ‘You doubted him, magos?’

‘We have had our differences of opinion in the past,’ said Nuministon. His mechanical voice hid the stiffness Voldo suspected it otherwise would have held.

‘None of this will profit anybody if the hulk cannot be cleansed,’ said Voldo.

‘I agree. We must take the data I have gathered to our superiors,’ said Alanius.

‘Which way then, brothers?’ said Gallio.

Eskerio pointed with his modified power fist. ‘Downwards.’

They doubled back to the bend in the ship’s spine. They spent some minutes making sense of the magos’s soundings here, as the data was confused, but eventually it appeared that the cargo vessel’s prow had punched all the way through the alien craft to project into the cavern. The part of the alien ship that had been speared was flat, after the fashion of a broad wing, and it appeared that this had been folded over on itself at some point in the past, leading to a messy geometry in the spaces below them.

Clastrin cut their way from the cargo craft into the alien ship. There had been no sign of the pursuing genestealers for many hours, and so Voldo allowed Clastrin the time to do his work, fearing the racket from Gallio’s chainfist would awaken the genestealers hibernating in the roost.

Clastrin cut the cargo ship’s hull unhurriedly and methodically. The doorway he made was neat, and when it was done he pulled a large section away.

A labyrinth of contorted alien plastics was revealed to them.

‘We must be swift here, brothers’ said Voldo. ‘The genestealers have not found a way into this cargo ship, but the space below us opens in multiple places into the roost cavern. There will be active xenos below, and if they find us, they will bring their siblings to wakefulness.’

They went through the breach. There was no artificial gravity in the alien ship. Whatever race had manufactured it had long gone from the galaxy, for the Adeptus Astartes did not recognise its form, nor did the two initiates to the Martian mysteries understand its construction, which was a seemingly random lattice of spurs that interlocked with little logic.

They floated free, and used this matrix to pull themselves along, quickly at first, but then with wariness. Some of the spurs were solid as iron, others went to powder at the slightest touch, and Brother Astomar was sent careening through a whole section of them when one snapped in his hand. Astomar stopped himself rightly enough, but the noise he made was significant, and the Space Marines were put on edge. They tensed, stretching out their senses through the suits' sensorium suites. Voldo moved himself, his suit lights catching on the matrix.

Voldo was about to signal the all clear when Eskerio spoke.

'Contact,' he breathed.

Voldo and the others searched it out. There at the bottom of the tangled structure, a pulsing mark. It was heading unerringly towards them.

'We must go fast now,' said Voldo. 'We shall abandon stealth.'

Two more red marks flashed, then ten more.

'We are one hundred and fifty metres from the Imperial ship's hull, brother-sergeant,' said Eskerio.

Alanius turned quickly. 'There! Movement!'

'Go now!' shouted Voldo.

The Space Marines shoved themselves off, the sheer bulk of their suits smashing struts to pieces as they flew. Their left hands crackled as they activated the energy fields surrounding their power fists, and they used these to batter their way through the forest-like mass of supports.

Voldo risked a look back. Below them, genestealers launched themselves from strut to strut, scurrying upward, their six limbs lending them a grace and speed in the low gravity that the Terminators could not match. He raised his gun, but did not fire. The targets were moving fast and were in dense cover. 'Conserve your ammunition, brothers!' he shouted.

They bludgeoned their way through the struts. The hull narrowed, the floor and ceiling three metres apart. They were forced to work their way around irregular cysts bulging inward from the fabric of the hull. Voldo

scrambled between two of these, to find Gallio carving a way out of the alien ship. Nuministon came next, then the compromised Genthis, followed by Clastrin, Alanius, Azmael and Eskerio. Astomar was last, kicking at something that dragged at his feet. Voldo caught sight of a leering alien face through the suit picter. The genestealer's lower hands grasped the Space Marine's greave, but it struggled to get its sharper upper claws at him. Eskerio leaned over and discharged his storm bolter. Astomar's armour sparked as the missiles caught him. One found its mark in the genestealer's face and it went limp as its head exploded. Astomar kicked at its hands, until he dislodged it, and pulled himself into the demi-chamber formed by the curved cysts.

The motion tracker was alive with dots, a wave of xenos rendered in flashing red. Voldo glanced back. The three Blood Drinkers were attacking the rubbery material of the hull wall with their lightning claws, gashing it. Clastrin worked again with Gallio. The Forgemaster's plasma torches burned, but made little impact on the strange material that made up this part of the hull. Where Gallio's chainfist penetrated the wall, the hull's elasticity made it pucker around the blade, snagging the weapon's teeth and keeping it from being properly breached. Their exit was minutes away from readiness.

'Brother Eskerio! Clear a way for Brother Astomar! Astomar, let fire on my mark.'

A genestealer lunged at the gap. Astomar punched it in the shoulder with his power fist, caving its shoulder into its chest. He kicked it free. Eskerio shot down three more with controlled bursts from his storm bolter. Grasping claws forced their way between the other cysts, raking at the air, but the spaces between were too small for them to force their way through.

Voldo waited until there were no live genestealers by the gap. The sensorium did its best to differentiate the auspex motion detector's data into dead and live foes, those it deemed no longer a threat turning a deep

amber. Four of these floated in the space beyond the cysts, a sickle-shaped formation of twenty or so live contacts beyond that. It was imperative that the promethium of Astomar's heavy flamer could spread far. If he fired while the gap was plugged, only single genestealers would take the brunt. In the worst case, the fires could wash back into their own space, and they were capable of overwhelming even the great protection of Terminator armour.

‘Brother-sergeant, I have a clear field!’

‘Fire!’ shouted Voldo.

Fire bellied out from the heavy weapon, gushing through the gap and billowing out into the wider space beyond. Genestealers shrieked, and Voldo was gratified to see many more contacts turn amber.

‘Emperor! The matrix is ablaze,’ said Astomar.

Voldo looked himself, shouldering Eskerio aside. The structure of the ship had caught fire.

‘Should keep them back for a while,’ said Genthis.

‘Do not count on it, brother.’ More red dots were closing in on them.

‘Almost there, brothers!’ shouted Gallio. His chainfist squealed, the disruption field banging as alien materials went to atoms.

‘Look brother-sergeant, the fire.’ Astomar drew Voldo's attention back to the blaze. It died back quickly, the bone-like matrix smouldering low. Voldo checked his sensorium.

‘The flames have consumed the available oxygen,’ said Astomar.

‘The xenos will suffocate,’ said Nuministon.

‘No,’ said Voldo. ‘Even a vacuum is nothing to them.’ He looked back to Gallio's work. ‘Ready yourselves!’

The elastic properties of the hull were exhausted, and Gallio's weapon suddenly punctured the material fully. A rush of air blasted in through the rip, the hull flapped like a flag in the wind. The fire, suddenly nourished, exploded.

The force of it was astonishing. The flames blasted into their confined space, jolting the heavily armoured Space Marines together. The hull tore further under the pressure of the firestorm, and Gallio was able to rip a doorway into it large enough to force himself through. He grasped Clastrin, and dragged him after him. The others righted themselves and followed, and so they made their escape from the alien ship and were into the derelict Imperial vessel.

They ran, Voldo at their head.

The Terminators jogged as fast as they were able, their movement helped by the active gravity in the ship. The corridor they followed passed deep into the vessel. Their radiation counters rattled, and the air about them became furnace-hot, baked dry by the roiling energies of the reactor. The corridor was whole, but the outer hull was much fissured, entirely stripped of plating in places and reduced to bracing spars. The genestealers from the roost could therefore ambush them at any turn.

‘Not far now!’ shouted Eskerio. From behind came the racket of storm bolter fire as Gallio lay down covering fire, Astomar beside him ready to fill the corridor with promethium.

Contacts pinged all over the map, coming down from outside and following corridors parallel to their own. Voldo stopped at an intersection and blasted three genestealers coming from the left to chunks. ‘Quickly! More are on their way.’

‘We are making for the outer lock,’ said Eskerio. ‘There should be a door ahead, then a short corridor, then access to the port.’

‘Let us pray to the Emperor that it functions,’ said Voldo.

Astomar’s flamer roared. Genestealers screamed. A dozen motion positives backed away.

‘Thank the Lord of Man, there it is!’ said Voldo. ‘The door.’

The doorway to the airlock access corridor was set into a wall in a hexagonal antechamber. Two more doors opened out from the either side.

He ran to it, and stopped dead.

‘What is it, brother?’ Alanius called. He was supporting Genthis, half-dragging him. Genthis’s suit’s heatsinks were being overwhelmed by the fierce heat of the reactor, his time was running out.

‘There is no control panel!’

‘Let me see,’ said Clastrin. He came forward. More bolter fire came from the rear. Three shots, an inhuman scream.

Clastrin knelt by the door. The panel had been ripped free. Wires hung from it, their colours lost under the dirt of ages. He plunged a metal tendril from his harness into the mess. ‘There is power,’ he said, ‘but I cannot access the command circuits.’ His mechadendrite withdrew.

‘What of direct interface, can you not link with the door directly?’ said Nuministon.

‘No. It is all gone.’

‘Then cut it through!’ growled Alanius.

‘This is a major blast door of prime patterning,’ said Clastrin. ‘Time is needed.’

Red dots crowded in from all sides on the map.

‘Time is a luxury we do not have,’ said Voldo. ‘And such a choice, Brother Gallio’s storm bolter there, or his chainfist here.’

Clastrin cast about, rapidly scanning the walls. Conduits and circuitry showed up in his artificer armour’s displays. He caught sight of a hatchway.

‘There is another way,’ he said. He stood and pointed. ‘A crawlway. I can go through and attempt to remotely activate this door from the airlock’s inner portal.’

‘It is too small,’ said Azmael.

‘Not if I go without armour,’ said Clastrin in his twin voices. ‘Then I will fit.’

‘Are you insane?’ said Alanius. ‘Genestealers descend upon us from every quarter.’

‘Then we will die whether I go or not,’ said Clastrin.

‘What of the radiation?’

‘I shall recite the fifteenth litany minoris, and bring my mucranoid into action. The coating it will give my skin will provide some protection.’

‘Yes, not to try, that is the insanity,’ said Voldo.

Clastrin bowed his head. He reached for the first release clasp, and began the liturgy of disrobement.

Genthis pushed himself upright from Alanius. ‘I will go with him,’ he said. ‘I am no use within my armour. Without it, I can act as an escort.’

Voldo looked from Clastrin to Alanius. The latter hesitated, then stood back. ‘Agreed brother, you are a credit to our order.’

Clastrin stepped forward, using his servo-harness to help Genthis from his crippled armour.

Voldo acted, plotting positions for the remaining Terminators; Gallio and Astomar to hold the rear against the bulk of the genestealers, Alanius beside them to aid them if they broke through. Voldo took the left door leading from the chamber, Eskerio he directed to the right door.

Eskerio hefted his storm bolter. His ammunition was almost spent. ‘Give me his claws,’ he said suddenly. ‘Lend me your weapons, Brother Genthis.’

Clastrin paused his hands, his servo-harness continued undoing retaining bolts and clasps on Genthis’s armour.

‘I have but twenty bolts remaining. Better I give my magazines to our brother-sergeant and let him fire longer, while I go better equipped for close melee.’

‘I did not think such fighting to be your preference, Novamarine,’ said Genthis with humour.

‘All things have their time and place, cousin Blood Drinker,’ said Eskerio.

‘Then you may gladly take them.’

The gauntlets slipped from his wrists.

‘Hurry then!’ said Voldo. A wave of contacts were converging on them, far more than before. ‘The roost has awakened. We must fight now for our lives as well as the glory of the Emperor.’

Eskerio took the lightning claws from the Blood Drinker. Voldo and Nuministon helped Genthis further, releasing the bolts that attached his breastplate to his cowling. With a hiss of air, his helmet came away, revealing his savagely beautiful face.

‘It is hot brothers! As hot as home!’ he shouted and smiled. With a twist, he depressed his belt clasp, and the two-part breastplate unclicked. Nuministon pulled it away, sealant cracking where it had covered over the joins between plates. The tech-priest, with Voldo’s help, next removed the cowl and the reactor within, and set to work on Genthis. Far more quickly than the Novamarine’s sergeant could have hoped, Nuministon had disassembled the armour and Genthis stepped free. What would have taken the forge serfs twenty minutes to achieve, the magos had done in a fraction of the time. Voldo hoped the armour was not offended. The components of Genthis’s battleplate lay scattered upon the floor.

Clastrin had replaced Eskerio’s storm bolter and power fist with the crimson lightning claws of Genthis. Despite the difference in marks between the two Space Marines’ armours, Clastrin connected the blades to the suit’s power source easily.

Eskerio held the claws up in front of his helmet and activated them. ‘My thanks for your arms.’

‘Use them well,’ said Genthis. ‘Do not disappoint my armour’s machine-spirit.’

Shouts came from the rear. Genestealers were prowling the perimeter. Azmael and Voldo moved away, leaving the naked Genthis and Nuministon to help the Forgemaster from his armour. Clastrin deactivated and detached what he could with direct commands via his spine ports, while the magos and Blood Drinker pulled his servo-harness away. They unclipped his backpack, helped him off with his gauntlets, and then he was bare headed, ice-blue eyes staring out from a face tattooed with holy blueprints and the cog of Mars under the Novamarine skull and starburst.

‘We are ready,’ he said as his breastplate came free.

‘Then go, and may the Lord of Mankind guide you,’ said Voldo, his voice hard and loud through his suit vox-grille. The sergeant lifted his weapon and fired. Genestealers were chancing the other corridor.



CHAPTER 10

The power of the Machine-God

The heat was intense, fifty-five degrees at least, but the touch of it reduced to a tolerable level as Clastrin's modified sweat glands secreted an oily perspiration. The smell of the mucranoid's secretions was sharp and somewhat unpleasant. He wiped it away from his mouth, nose and eyes or it would seal them shut. Hibernation was not his aim today.

Clastrin's forte was machinery, but he knew a little of how his biological gifts functioned, for what was biotechnology but another manifestation of the glorious machine? He knew how the long-chain proteins in the mucous from the Weaver aligned themselves with one another, hardening to cover his body in a waxy coating. He flexed his hand, watching as the second skin wrinkled. Another benefit of the Emperor-Omnissiah, and the wisdom of ancient days. He had been Master of the Forge of the Novamarines for seventy years, but his wonder at the might of the Machine-God never diminished.

'Blessed are the works of technology, blessed are the ways of the Omnissiah,' he said.

Nuministon, hurrying to unclip the remainder of the Forgemaster's armour, did not respond.

With his helmet off, Clastrin was exposed to the full noise of the ship. The unshielded reactor filled the space with a persistent roar, distant though it was. The derelict ship vibrated with it. All vessels hummed to the tune of their power sources, but this was a sick song. Clastrin possessed a deep affinity for machines, he could sense what ailed them often without removing their casings. He was surprised the reactor worked still.

Gunfire rattled sporadically. No longer able to access the extended senses of his helmet, Clastrin's view of the combat was restricted to what his own eyes and ears could tell him. The corridors leading out of this small chamber were obscured by the massive bulk of the Terminator armour. He suspected that the genestealers held back, wary of the Space Marines' firepower. They were savage, these xenos, but possessed of a cunning akin to true intelligence.

Nuministon stepped back, holding the Forgemaster's backplate. The neural interface spike slid free of the port in Clastrin's black carapace, and his sense of his war harness departed him entirely. Clastrin still wore parts of his power armour, but he was to all intents already naked.

Nuministon placed the plate on the floor, and helped Clastrin free himself of the rest of his plate.

Astomar's flamer whooshed. Firelight played around the chamber.

'I am ready,' said Clastrin. His own voice sounded odd outside of his armour. The mucous had hardened fully, providing some protection from both heat and vacuum. Useful under the current circumstances.

'Go with the Omnissiah,' said Nuministon. 'I am not aware of the pattern for these portals, but such a simple thing as a door will pose no trouble to an initiate to the mysteries of Mars.'

'Cousin Genthis! We go!' Clastrin had to shout to be heard.

The Blood Drinker nodded. His body was streaked with dried secretions, but he had no protective cover, and his own skin looked unnaturally dry.

Genthis caught Clastrin looking at him, and shook his head.

A loss of a para-organ, then, thought Clastrin. Some Chapters did not possess all of the Emperor's gifts. 'There is no atmosphere in the corridor beyond, cousin.'

'Then I will trust you to work hard to free us,' said the Blood Drinker. 'I shall go first, Lord Forgemaster.' He was thinner than the Novamarine, athletically proportioned, as lithe and hard-muscled as a statue. His face too, was beautiful, its angelic perfection at odds with the feral way in which Genthis bared his teeth as he spoke. 'You are of greater worth here.' He held a knife in his hand.

'Take this,' said Nuministon, handing over an ornate bolt pistol. 'I am no warrior.'

Genthis nodded in thanks. Clastrin picked up his own bolt pistol from the floor.

'We must go now,' said the Forgemaster. The sounds of gunfire were intensifying. He extended his two mechandrites from the housing below his shoulder blades, a gift of a different kind from the temples of the Machine-God. He reached up to the panel covering the crawlway and deftly unscrewed it with the dendrite tips, pulling the plate away. He turned to Genthis and indicated that he would boost the Blood Drinker into the space. Genthis was up and into the hatch easily.

Clastrin took one last look at his brothers, their bone-and-blue armour standing shoulder to shoulder with the red of the Blood Drinkers, then turned, jumped up, grabbed the lip of the hatch and pulled himself in.

He was in the machine, surrounded by cabling. He imagined himself a component in the grand scheme of the Omnissiah, a piece of the greater puzzle of the universe's mechanism. His mucranoid film shielded him from snags and the sharp edges in the crawlspace. Genthis, not so protected, was already cut and scraped in a dozen places, leaving a trail of blood which dried on contact with the metal. It was punishingly hot in the

crawlspace, the air stale and rank, and the other adept's skin was raw with blisters.

‘How far?’ said the Blood Drinker. Wildness had crept back into his voice. He was enjoying this.

‘Not far, thirty metres. We pass alongside an access corridor to an outer airlock. There is a panel towards the end. From there I will be able to remotely open the door and let our brothers in.’

Genthis made a noise of affirmation. ‘Good, good. I long to rejoin them. It is not our way to retreat from a fight.’ He moved forward some way as he spoke, then said, ‘Wait! We come to a crossways.’

Clastrin brought up a copy of the map in his intelligence core. The cranial implant was another gift of Mars, another thing that set him aside from his battle-brothers. A vertical shaft bisected theirs. On the far side the way grew wider, two broad ways filled with power conduits leading at right angles away up and down into the skin of the ship.

‘Go on,’ said Clastrin.

‘Shh!’ said Genthis. ‘I hear something.’

Clastrin waited as the Blood Drinker inched forward to peer down the shaft, then up. He turned back to look at the Novamarines Forgemaster.

‘Movement. The enemy descends upon us.’ He scrambled forward, swinging his legs under him and dropping into the vertical shaft. He looked upward. ‘Hurry Lord Forgemaster, you must be quick! Crawl over the shaft and be on your way. I will hold them here.’

Clastrin wriggled forward. The rattle of claws moving over metal came from above him, but he did not look up. He pushed past Genthis's head, and went on into the further crawlspace. Genthis crawled in backward after him. Clastrin was four metres in when Genthis began shooting.

Praying to the Machine-God and the Emperor for the Blood Drinker's soul, he pushed on. The sounds of fighting intensified behind him, alien screeches echoing metallically in the confined space, the bark of the bolt pistol. The reek of genestealer blood thickened the air.

Clastrin turned his broad shoulders awkwardly; these service conduits were designed for drones and unchanged men, not the giants of the Space Marine Chapters. His arms pinned to his chest, he worked with difficulty to free the access panel. Behind him, Genthis shouted the battle-cries of his Chapter. The noise of his weapon was overwhelmingly loud in the confined space. Shrieks and the thump of falling flesh signalled the demise of genestealers as they plummeted down the shaft, bouncing from its sides as they fell.

Even through the noise, Clastrin heard the click as Genthis's boltgun ran dry, the clatter as Genthis discarded it. The Blood Drinker began to chant, a Blood Drinkers' battle hymn Clastrin did not know. The Blood Drinker was preparing himself for his death.

The panel popped out of its housing. Air blew from the crawlway into the vacuum of the airlock access corridor.

Clastrin drew in a deep breath, filling the lungs he was born with and the third gifted him by the Chapter. With a twist, he wormed through the hatch, and dropped into the way.

Brother Genthis chanted. 'Lo! I see the wings of Sanguinius! They shield me from harm! They bear me up from battle!' The genestealer attacking him crouched in the mouth of the crawlway, its body contorted in a manner impossible for a man. Scrabbling talons raked at Genthis, drawing lines of blood across his scalp. The Space Marine grabbed one of the upper claws in his left hand, yanking it hard over to the side of the crawlspace. The genestealer hissed and struggled, its other arms tangled behind its pinned arm. Its tubular tongue flicked over its black teeth. Yellow eyes blazed. Genthis felt the power of them, felt them trying to subvert his will, but he was a brother of the Blood Drinkers and the wiles of xenos held no power over him. 'Blood is life, the life is blood, through life we fulfil our duty, through blood we continue life!' His voice became increasingly sonorous. 'Take my blood, take my life, you will never turn me from my duty, though my blood lie thickening in the dust, and my life run out and be done!'

He drove his combat knife deep into the glaring eye of the genestealer, twisted it until it ground on bone. The genestealer convulsed so hard it threw off Genthis's hand. Its limbs rattled a drum roll of death on the metal.

Wind sprang up, blowing down the corridor to where Clastrin had gone, and Genthis was glad that the Forgemaster of the Novamarines had made it into the airlock access corridor. He sang louder, against the howl of decompression. Leaving the dead genestealer blocking the crawlway, he backed further down. A pair of large purple hands grabbed at the corpse and pulled it away. The dead genestealer fell from sight as it dropped into the shaft. Three more alien faces regarded him from the end. Without pause, the next of the monsters crept into the narrow space. Legs bent up under it, it moved rapidly. Genthis laughed.

‘Come, come and fight me alien filth! Brother Genthis has not had his fill yet!’

His body was electric with excitement, the joy of battle coursed through him, lifting his spirit and filling him with surety of purpose. At the back of his soul, he felt the dull ache of need, for his last Rite of Holos had been a week ago, and the Thirst had resumed its torments. He did not care. ‘Here is battle! In battle is true service! Service begets joy! Joy begets death!’ he shouted. Genthis felt this joy deeply. To him and his kind, there was no greater purpose in all the galaxy than to fight in the name of the Emperor.

The genestealer scuttled at him, upper claws outstretched. Genthis batted one aside, and stabbed his knife point deep into the chitin of another. The genestealer made a strange, squawking protest and tore its arm back. Genthis's knife was wrenched from his hand.

Genthis sang the Sanguis Moritura, laughing as he did.

‘The blood of life flows quickly! Only in death can it be stilled!’

He fended off the genestealer's claws, turned them aside with his strong hands. ‘Let not mine be stilled easily, let it flow on and outward – let it

flow from me as I slay those who free it!’

He worked his cheeks and spat, acidic venom from his Betcher’s gland spraying into the genestealer’s face. The thing screeched as its eyes dissolved, and Genthis reached for it. He opened his mouth wide, dragged the creature to him and bit deep, his extended canines sinking into its alien neck. He ignored the burn of his own acid venom on his skin. Black blood poured down his throat.

Xenos blood. Unclean. Impure. Satisfying. He gulped as it filled his mouth. It tasted vile, bitter and cold, still he drank. Flashes of alien thoughts played across his mind as it filled his stomach and washed over his Remembrancer; endless waiting, the chill of deep space, and a single purpose so consuming there was space for nothing else. Behind it, a vast and horrifying shape moved, distant, and yet imminent.

Genthis dragged his head back, his hearts chilled by the vision. Dark blood ran down his face. His skin bubbled, acid burns joining the blisters he had received from the hot metal. He blinked, the genestealer’s memories of inconceivable patience warring with his own urgent need for war.

A rending sound came from above him. He twisted his neck. Metal plating peeled back. The terrible face of a genestealer, contorted in fury, glared down at him.

‘Blood is strength, in death it quickens,’ he whispered.

A three-clawed hand drove down into his neck, ripping his windpipe free.

His mind still reeling from its contact with the alien’s soul, Brother Genthis died.

Voldo blasted a genestealer into pieces with his storm bolter, mass reactive bolts tearing it apart from the inside. He swung his power sword around, smashing another of the aliens back. He put a bolt in its gut, and it crumpled to the ground. Gallio stood not far behind him, taking

opportunistic shots past him. To his left, Astomar let fly with one final burst of his heavy flamer.

‘Ammunition depleted, brother-sergeant!’ He called.

By Astomar, Eskerio fought to defend his battle-brother, borrowed lightning claws darting quickly, ripping parallel furrows into alien flesh. Behind Voldo, Alanius and Azmael fought back to back, sending genestealer limbs flying, Azmael seemingly unhindered by his damaged suit. Nuministon crouched by the door, ignoring the combat he worked on its dead control panel. Voldo was impressed by his coolness. Not once did the tech-priest look up from his work.

Despite the suit’s aid and his own superhuman metabolism he was panting with effort. His helmet flashed, the sensorium clamouring at him with a dozen alarms. He cleaved a genestealer in two, power sword flaring, and stole a glance at the door.

It remained locked.

Clastrin was in the airlock access corridor. He went to the inner airlock door at the far end of the corridor from the access doorway beyond which were the rest of the party. The corridor was wide enough for two Terminators to walk abreast. This was once a major access point for the ship, he thought.

He flipped out the access panel to the door control with the tips of his mechadendrites.

The wind was loud as air was sucked from the pressurised cavities by the vacuum in the corridor, battering at him and causing his hair to whip around his face, stirring the metal tendrils at the back of his skull. There must have been a gap in the hull to the outside, for the air whistled ceaselessly over him; the pressure should have stabilised by now. At least he could breath. Over the roar of the wind, he faintly heard the sound of Genthis’s battle hymn and the screams of dying aliens.

‘Focus is the mother and the father of the machine,’ he said to himself. ‘Focus is the enemy of haste, focus is the bringer of function.’ Clastrin

regretted that he had no holy oils or greases with which to paint the exterior of the door panel to supplicate the machine-spirits of the ancient ship. He had invaded systems wantonly all over the hulk. He was a battle-brother of the Novamarines, a warrior first and foremost. Expediency overrode all other concerns; but he was also a priest of the Ommissiah, inducted into the lesser thirteen mysteries of the Cult Mechanicus, and he felt sorrow that he had not been able to approach the devices he communed with on this mission with the appropriate reverence.

He reached out with his intelligence core. Emitters within the cabling at the back of his head beamed his requests into the ship in the timeless language of binaric. There was no reply. With machinery this age, there rarely was, the spirits often having died, fled, or lapsed into electronic senility.

His mechadendrites snaked over his shoulder, their flexible smart metals allowing them to extend, the dendrites' diameter thinning as they did so. Their interface tips searched the cavity for an input port – there!

Clastrin closed his eyes involuntarily as a familiar electric jolt coursed through his mind, his cerebral augmentations seeking communion with the vessel.

There was but a flicker of life in the ship. The reactor burned fiercely, but so much of its energy was radiated through broken containment fields and lost. The hull was broken in so many places that the ship's service infrastructure was likewise interrupted. But from here to the door, from the door to the reactor; from somewhere, energy trickled. And if energy ran, signals could be sent. Voltage was too low; wire warmed rather than conveyed messages, resistances heightened by deterioration in the power matrices. He risked adding gain to the energy flows, sourcing the power from his own cybernetics. A risky play, drawing on his own body. He missed the power plant of his power armour.

Ways opened up. Wires dead for millennia hummed with life.

He felt the door at the other end of the corridor, felt the thickness of it. Brother Gallio would have been at it for twenty minutes, he thought, before scratching it. He felt too the broken panel on the outside, and the connections that had once run to it, severed and dead, deep within the wall sealing the outer hull from the chamber his battle-brothers now fought in.

He reached out through his interface dendrites, the metal cabling on his head warming as his energies mingled with that of the ship's machines. There, the door access switch. A simple piece of optical electronics. He activated it.

Nothing happened. He tried again. It was no use. The double doors at the far end, the ones trapping his brothers, remained closed.

There was movement behind him. Genthis's broken corpse was pushed from the access hatch, landing awkwardly on the floor, his head nearly severed. The blood-smeared face of a genestealer followed. Clastrin did not break contact with the machine. He raised his bolt pistol in one fluid motion and put a round between the genestealer's eyes. Scrabbling noises came from behind as more genestealers tried to gain the corridor.

He spoke. 'Oh great and all-knowing Omnissiah! Oh keeper of knowledge, aid me now.' His eyes screwed shut. He reached out, caressing the switch with his being, at one with the machine.

From somewhere, another touch upon his mind, that of another machine. Fleeting, then gone.

Lights flickered. Clastrin was aware of power relays burning out within the wall. But the double door trapping his brothers creaked, straining against the corrosion that held it closed. A deafening squeal of metal cut into the wind, and the door juddered open.

'All praise the Omnissiah, all praise the father of machines,' said Clastrin. He turned, gun raised, to face the genestealers.

Captain Mastrik of the Novamarines and Squad Vermillion flew in the Thunderhawk *Reprisal*, its sister craft *Hawk's Fury* alongside. Laser light

stabbed out from one or the other as they flew above the hulk's surface, atomising dangerous chunks of debris.

‘Lord captain!’ The second pilot of the vessel turned in his seat. ‘I have sight of Wisdom of Lucretius’s teleport homers.’

Mastrik was out of his own seat in an instant. ‘Where?’

‘Here, lord captain.’ The Space Marine pointed at a glowing orb on the map. ‘Near this energy source. I saw it for a second, and then it was gone, but I did see it.’

‘That is practically on the surface,’ said Mastrik. He smiled. ‘They are coming out.’ He slapped the Space Marine’s shoulder pad. ‘Take us down. *Hawk’s Fury*! Follow us in.’

‘Yes, lord captain.’ The voice of the other pilot was blurred by static, almost unintelligible.

‘Brothers!’ called Mastrik to his men. ‘Prepare for immediate deployment, we have found our brethren, and if they are in need of our aid, we will be ready to give it to them.’

Gallio was first into the corridor, then Astomar. Clastrin watched as he dodged past a genestealer, Azmael stepping forward to take it down with his claws. The Forgemaster saw Voldo stagger back, a genestealer grappling with him. It flew backwards, blood exploding from its back, and then Clastrin could see nothing more in the chamber, the view blocked by his brothers. He turned his attention back to the accessway hatch. Coming through there, the genestealers were an easy target. Three lay dead atop Genthis, another hung from the hatch.

He waited until Gallio was close. He took deep breaths of the rushing air, then opened both inner and outer airlock doors simultaneously, overriding the ship’s safety protocols. He grabbed hold of the open door panel as the rush of air became a gale. The airlock gaped open onto the depthless black of the cosmos. The merciless light of Jorso flooded the revealed airlock chamber. A glittering blast of flash-frozen atmosphere and flakes of paint, corrosion and dust gushed out into space.

‘Many genestealers!’ shouted Gallio as he passed. Clastrin nodded. He was being pulled towards the outside, but his brothers, still armoured, trudged on, weathering the wind as a man might a spring breeze.

Gallio went into the night outside, then Nuministon who bobbed his multi-lensed helmet in thanks as he hurried past. Astomar, Eskerio, then the Blood Drinker Azmael was next. Voldo, his armour cowlings scored deeply followed, firing as he walked backwards. Finally, Alanius. Sparks showered from a tear in his armour. He too walked backwards. Genestealers crept after him, Voldo’s bolts finding their flesh and laying them down in death. Blood and gobbets of flesh splattered Clastrin with every kill. They came closer. There were too many.

Clastrin reached out to the ship again. He found the governors for the grav plates easily. With a prayer to Mars and a twist of binaric code, he turned them up to full.

Crushing weight gripped him. Alanius and Voldo wavered on their legs. The Terminator suits, designed to work under the harshest of conditions, responded, redoubling the strength they lent to the Space Marines. The remaining Novamarines and Blood Drinkers walked out into the endless night.

For the genestealers, it was a different matter. They cried out in anger as their legs collapsed under them and they were pinned by their own mass to the floor. They tried to advance, but could not move, their claws waving feebly.

Clastrin withdrew his mechadendrites, his machine gifts retreating to their housing in his black carapace. Alanius caught him around the waist as he backed out into the airlock chamber. The oppressive gravity dropped away abruptly as they passed the threshold of the door, making his stomach flip, and Clastrin was outside in the hard vacuum with the others, unprotected but for his flimsy mucranoid skin. He screwed his eyes shut, and yet still through his eyelids the blue light seared his retinas. He felt his

skin stretch and blood churn. Only willpower prevented him from opening his mouth in a silent scream. He flung his arm over his face to protect his eyes. The air in his lungs would soon be spent.

‘Lord captain! Atmospheric venting!’

Mastrik looked out of the Thunderhawk’s forward windows. A glittering cone of debris blasted out from the surface of the hulk, as an airlock in a trapped Imperial vessel opened. Bulky figures, their shadows long on the surface, stepped out onto the surface. Teleport homing beacons and suit data sprang up on the Thunderhawk’s screens. Some of the Terminators were damaged, others were absent.

‘Set down! Set down immediately!’ said Mastrik.

Thunderhawks swooped in on jets of fire, blasting accreted dust into space. Assault ramps dropped open, the ships’ air gusting out with them, and two squads of Tactical Marines rushed onto the surface, swiftly forming a perimeter. Clastrin was taken aboard by an Apothecary first, and put into a sealed chamber. Mastrik approached Voldo.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ he said. ‘How went your mission?’

‘A success, although not without its complications,’ the older man replied. ‘We have the mapping data. Brother Curzon is trapped in the hulk, and Brother Trael’s whereabouts are unknown. Brother Genthis is dead. Our own Brother Militor remains as rearguard near where we came into the hulk.’

‘The armour of Forgemaster Clastrin, and Brother Genthis?’

‘Brother Genthis’s body lies just within, lord captain. His armour and that of the Master of the Forge are at the end of the access corridor.’

‘Then we will retrieve them,’ said Mastrik. ‘And the Progenoid glands of Brother Genthis. We will present his armour and his gene-seed to Lord Caedis. It should take the sting from their loss a little.’

Mastrik signalled to his men. A brother with a flamer went to the airlock first. The tunnel was at an angle to the surface of the hulk, and he had to

adjust his aim accordingly. Two others dragged out the body of Genthis and handed it to the care of the Apothecary accompanying the retrieval group. Then the corridor was cleansed with promethium. Mastrik had Nuministon readjust the gravity, and his squads went in, three brothers abreast, firing as they went.

In a short time, the armours were recovered and borne with reverence to *Hawk's Fury*.

‘Honour the battlegear of the dead,’ said Mastrik, as the vast bulk of Genthis’s Terminator suit went by on the shoulders of six Novamarines. Two of his own were wounded. A fair exchange for the retrieval of ancient wargear.

They fell back into the ships in good order, and the Thunderhawks flew. Voldo, helmet off, conversed with Mastrik in the operations room to the rear of the flight deck.

‘Lord captain,’ said Voldo. ‘We discovered a large roost of genestealers during our escape. It lies here, not far from the reactor.’

Mastrik looked at the map.

‘A few well placed shots should detonate the reactor, brother-sergeant.’ Mastrik smiled.

‘Indeed. I say fewer genestealers would make the coming fight easier.’

‘Hail the fleet!’ ordered Mastrik.

‘Brother-Sergeant Voldo,’ came Galt’s voice, ripped by static. ‘It is good you still live.’

‘Lord captain.’ Voldo relayed his news, and the location of the reactor near the surface.

‘Then we will smite them,’ said Galt. ‘Open fire on Brother-Sergeant Voldo’s coordinates.’

‘No! Not the reactor! It is a treasure beyond your comprehension,’ pleaded Nuministon.

‘We have retrieved Genthis’s armour. The roost by it is a treasure we can do without,’ said Galt. ‘There is sure to be much more archeotech elsewhere within the hulk, be content with that.’

‘We will have vengeance,’ said Voldo. From his sensorium, he sent out the coordinates of the reactor, the Thunderhawk’s communications suite boosting the signal back to the fleet.

The two Thunderhawks skimmed over the surface of the hulk, back towards the party’s initial insertion point. A streak of metal sped across the black behind them, a bombardment cannon round. The hulk shook as it impacted. Bright fire burst upwards, followed moments later by a searing flash.

‘The reactor,’ said Voldo.

Nuministon turned away, the remaining organic parts of his face hard.

Fire shot out of the hulk, bodies and debris billowing out into space around it.

‘Death to the enemies of mankind,’ said Voldo.

‘It is the will of the Emperor, and it pleases me greatly to be its instrument,’ replied Mastrik.

Militor tried the vox again. The incessant buzz of subatomic particles cutting up his comms channels was all he heard. His fleet access was restricted to their locator beacon, voice contact was so broken up as to be useless, and although he knew where the fleet lay, he doubted they could tell where he was. From the group there were no messages, which was to be expected under the circumstances, but he had been on station for several hours and the expedition should have returned by now.

‘Brother Militor to *Novum in Honourum*, Brother Militor requesting audience with Lord Captain Galt.’

Nothing.

His own limited sensorium auspex showed him nothing untoward, only the radioactive broil that filled the hulk below him, and the snow of atoms blasted out by the sun. He had seen and heard nothing the whole time he

had been there. The tech-priest's devices had gone off at the appointed time, and he wondered if the great hulk quake that followed had somehow been caused by their machinations. There was no knowing with the priests of Mars. Militor was grateful for the weapons he carried and the armour which shielded him, but the less he knew of their arcane workings the better. Technology was a dangerous knowledge, fraught with peril.

He paced around the lifthead, suit lights catching on the edges of ruptured metal and the dead crewmen. He made his circle as quietly as he could, pausing at each door to let his sensorium extend his senses into the spaces beyond.

This was poor duty. He wished he was below with his brothers of Squad Wisdom of Lucretius, the other adepts with whom he had fought a hundred battles. It pained him to think of them fighting without him, not least as in these circumstances a single additional storm bolter could turn a battle in their favour. But also he knew a little envy; this was not a mission that would bring additional skin art, not for him.

He put his feelings aside. Envy was not a worthy emotion.

A noise came from the lift shaft. He turned, amplified hearing working hard to pick up sound in the attenuated air.

One of the wires rippled, twanged metallically, and went taut.

Militor raised his storm bolter and approached the edge of the lift. There it was, the sound of boots locking and unlocking to the side of the shaft. An icon lit on his helmet map.

One of the Blood Drinkers. Where were the others?

‘Brother Militor speaks, who approaches?’

There was no reply, the vox continued its hiss.

The footsteps continued upward, the safety line jerking.

Several minutes went by. Militor remained cautious. Then, a voice in his ears.

‘It is I, Novamarine. Brother Trael of Squad Hesperion. I am in sore need of your aid.’

The Blood Drinker sounded weary, and Militor soon saw why.

Trael hauled himself over the lip of the shaft, digging his lightning claws into the deck to aid him. His armour was scored in a dozen places, cut clean through in two. He got to his feet, and Militor saw that his left leg dragged. The power fields were out on his right gauntlet, one of the blades sheared off, cables on the back of the weapon ripped open. His helmet had sustained damage, cracks spidering one lens. Suit sealant bubbled all over him.

Militor went to the red-armoured Space Marine’s side and steadied him.

‘The others... They were trapped in the quake,’ said Trael haltingly. ‘I was left on the other side of a cave-in. Brother Curzon was buried, I do not know the fate of the others.’

‘You had no contact?’

‘They were alive when I left them. They told me to return to you, and bear the news to the fleet.’

‘Then we shall make our way back so you may fulfil your orders,’ said Militor. ‘There is little we can do for them now.’

‘Aye,’ said Trael. Fresh noises came from the lift shaft. ‘And with haste. I fought my way through, but the xenos have not abandoned their pursuit of me.’

Casting frequent glances back at the lift shaft, Militor aided the limping Blood Drinker out of the lifthead, back towards their insertion point.



CHAPTER 11

Brothers of Bone, Brothers of Blood

Clastrin lay in a bed on crisp sheets, red-hooded apothecarion serfs working quietly around him, the cybernetic modifications they sported attuned to the machines that monitored the status of the wounded Forgemaster. Webbing and bandages covered his hurts; mainly flash burns from the strong light of Jorso. His eyes were covered with gauze; monitoring machines were plugged through gaps in the bed into his spinal interface ports.

Galt stood by his bed.

‘How much longer must I remain here, lord captain? I would return to my machines and their ministrations. All battlegear must be sanctified and blessed by the rituals of maintenance before battle. With such a hard fight against us, I would check the wargear of our brothers myself.’ Clastrin’s body was injured, but his twin voices had lost none of their strength.

‘Your Techmarines have been trained well, Forgemaster,’ said Galt. ‘You must rest awhile.’

‘My hurts are slight.’

‘Exposure to vacuum is not to be taken lightly, even within the protective embrace of the Weaver. Your tissues have ruptured and the

damage must all be accounted before I can allow you to take up your duties. You must remain here for four days, so Apothecary Raandal says,' insisted Galt.

Clastrin hesitated. 'And my eyes?'

'Will heal, Forgemaster.'

Clastrin nodded and relaxed into his pillows a little. 'The flesh is weak, brother-captain. I see the burning face of Jorso still.'

'Apothecary Raandal assures me that the retinal damage is not permanent.'

'How go the repairs to *Corvo's Hammer*?' said Clastrin.

'She lies alongside the *Excommentum Incursus*. The Adepts of Mars hold good to their word. Brother-Captain Aresti tells me they make swift progress,' said Galt.

'And the others from the mission, how do they fare?'

'All bar Cousins Curzon and Genthis are unhurt. Cousin Trael has minor injuries. From the Third Company, Brother Luitio and Brother Collo were wounded retrieving your armour with Captain Mastrik, Collo seriously.'

Clastrin nodded. 'It is only right. A risk in lives, but the holy tools of war must be retrieved so that they can be employed anew. Flesh is in plentiful supply, adamantium is not.'

'Lord Caedis was most grateful that we brought back the armour of Genthis and his Progenoid glands.' Galt stepped out of the way of a serf and continued. 'There were no further casualties, the mission was a remarkable success. A commendable kill rating.'

'And now I must lie abed,' said Clastrin.

Galt sought to reassure him. 'Do not fret, you still may serve your duty now. Tell me of what happened within the hulk. Tell me of this deceit of the magos.'

‘Magos Nuministon was not telling us the whole truth, brother-captain. His machine had capabilities we were not aware of, a secondary mapping function designed to penetrate deep into the hulk.’

‘Useful data. Why did they hide its gathering?’ asked Galt.

‘Cousin-Sergeant Alanius said the same thing. I surmise that there is something of great value within the hulk, and they would not have us know of it. The priests of Mars are jealous of their secrets.’

‘You share them, brother.’ Galt said so carefully, wishing to test Clastrin gently.

‘I am a brother of the Novamarines Chapter first and foremost, brother-captain,’ said Clastrin.

‘And a valued one at that. I mean no offence.’

‘Upon the screen, lord captain, I saw something deep in the hulk.’

‘What?’ said Galt. His eyes narrowed. He had his own doubts about the lord magos’s motives.

‘That I cannot tell you. It was a void, an absence of data where there should be data. Without access to the information I can say no more,’ said Clastrin. ‘There is something there these magi are hiding from us about this agglomeration. There are various aspects of it that trouble me. Consider this, captain. The hulk held its orbit well under intense bombardment. It is large, but so full of cavities that its overall mass is low. It should have been pushed off course. Surely we should have seen a deterioration in its orbital distance from the sun, but nothing. Secondly, the regularity of its departure from a system, and the arrival of it by so many stars of this class.’

‘Hulks are strange by their nature, Forgemaster. At what do you drive?’

‘Nothing at all, brother-captain, if not for this – there was something... else, brother-captain. A presence in the machine when I accessed the door to allow the others to escape.’

‘What?’

Clastrin sighed. Galt was glad at least that the Forgemaster had been spared the healing tanks. 'I am not sure. I entered the mechanisms of the vessel. I could not open the door, then I did – I swear by Corvo's oath that something aided me and the door opened.'

'You underestimate your ability, Forgemaster. Without your expertise the party would have been lost and the mission a failure,' said Galt.

'But I did not open the door, brother-captain,' insisted Clastrin. 'I am sure of it.'

Galt was silent.

'There is something else in the hulk, brother. Something the magi do not wish us to know of,' insisted Clastrin. 'I doubt their intentions are nefarious, but I would not put it past the priests of Mars to hide their knowledge of certain treasures should it suit them to do so.'

Galt nodded. 'I have noticed certain irregularities in their behaviour, but such is the way with the adepts of the Machine-God. They operate clumsily if so, brother.'

'Yes,' said Clastrin. 'A man like Plosk has many successes behind him. He is arrogant, secure in his accomplishments.'

'Maybe, but he deals with the Adeptus Astartes now, not some planetary governor,' said Galt. 'I thank you for your intelligence, Forgemaster. Now rest, recover. The sooner your talents are available to us, the better.'

'I will return to duty soon, brother, I wish so fervently.'

The Hall of Meetings was crammed full of adepts – Adepts of Mars, and adepts of the stars. They stood in stalls that rose in serried tiers around the full circumference of the room. The massive doors to the hall interrupted the run of terraces only briefly; the stalls running up and over them. Now full with the mightiest of all humankind.

The Imagifer Maximus had been shepherded into the hall, and squatted in the middle of the circular floor the stalls surrounded. This tiled circle was the arena from which important strategies were relayed or rhetorics

and lessons delivered and filled the centre of the room, illuminated by coloured light while the rest of the hall was dark. A fine mosaic of Guilliman arrayed for war, a world in one hand, a quill in another, decorated the floor, although the Imagifer Maximus obscured much of it at the moment.

Galt and Caedis occupied thrones on a dais that had been set up opposite the doors to the chamber. Sanguinary Master Teale and Reclusiarch Mazrael stood to the right of Caedis, Chaplain Odon and Epistolary Raniel to the left of Galt. Captains Aresti, Mastrik and Sorael paced the floor around the Adeptus Mechanicus relic, addressing the assembled brothers and priests with the plan of attack conceived by Galt and Caedis.

‘Brothers!’ shouted Mastrik. ‘Magi of Mars! The mapping data provided by the Adeptus Mechanicus has revealed the layout of the hulk in fine detail. Lord Caedis, First Captain Galt and your other leaders have met and discussed what shall be done to eradicate the genestealers and retrieve the hulk’s technological treasures. Here is the strategy we have decided upon. May the Emperor and the primarchs place their blessings upon it.’

The coloured lights were turned low, and the Imagifer Maximus activated. A perfect map of light was projected by the ancient device into the air.

‘Behold! The *Death of Integrity*, its secrets revealed to us,’ said Sorael. ‘And with its secrets revealed, so shall it fall!’

The Blood Drinkers shouted and stamped their armoured feet, raising a thunder in the room. The Novamarines looked to one another; such open fervour was not their way. Instead the brothers of bone-and-blue hummed low and loud, the haunting sign of their appreciation.

The map was of fine detail. In much of it, the level of precision took in the tiniest of ducts. Its fissures and caverns, halls and chambers, stone and steel were revealed for all to see. So cunning was the artifice of the Imagifer Maximus that this illusion appeared as real as the agglomeration

it depicted. Depending on how one looked at the image, the machine would alter the hulk model's opacity, presenting walls as solid or transparent. This was determined by what each viewer wished to see, and his view was visible only to him. Truly, the Imagifer was a marvel of the elder days.

This detail was absolute, save in a few places. Certain areas had a sketchiness to them, the data needed for the machine to describe the hulk interior was incomplete. Towards the centre of the hulk this problem became pronounced, the veracity of the map shifting from total fidelity to speculation, thence at the heart of it to darkness.

‘The *Death of Integrity* is vast,’ said Aresti. ‘Fortunately the volume of pressurised space is relatively small, and concentrated towards the western part of the hulk’s northern hemisphere. The majority of the active reactors are here, and we suspect atmospheric generators to be operational. This access to air and warmth explains why the principal genestealer roosts are located in this area. We have found five all told here. We cannot rely on the xenos to be dormant still after our recent incursion. However, they are unlikely to have scattered far, and we believe the majority to be found within this area still.’

An irregular green shape pulsed on the map, framing a good fifth of the agglomeration; the area of genestealer infestation.

‘In order to cleanse the hulk of the xenos, we have determined to drive them into this cavern,’ continued Aresti. A cavity in the hulk flashed up to the south of the green zone. The cavern was large, delineated by the inner wall of a single giant vessel on one side, the rest of the walls formed by a number of ships and a large asteroid.

‘Within this space, brothers from both Chapters will be able to set up effective kill-zones. Here we can use our ranged weaponry to full effect. Additionally, unlike in other areas of the hulk, this space is free of the high levels of radiation found elsewhere, and so our brothers armoured in

standard power armour may be deployed. The majority of our battle-brothers and Terminators will be sent here, and we name them Battleforce Anvil, for it is against this gathering of might that the genestealers shall be crushed. Brother-Captain Mastrik of the Novamarines Second Company and Captain Sorael of the Blood Drinkers Fifth Company will be in command.'

Mastrik took over. 'I will hold the near side of the cavern, while Sorael will occupy the pocket limned by this bulge in the asteroid wall.'

Sorael inclined his head in acknowledgement at this mention of his role.

'Our first task is to breach the hull in these five areas,' said Aresti. More graphical representations and icons flashed on the Imagifer. Animations showed the results of the described actions in stunning clarity. 'This will be done by demolition teams on the surface. The Adeptus Mechanicus have agreed to perform these duties, they will also lay a relay web that will amplify our vox signals, and allow us to communicate without difficulty. For this removal of our greatest strategic weakness, we thank them.'

'It is aid gladly given, lord captain,' said Plosk.

'Scout elements of both Chapters will aid the Skitarii of Triplex Phall and guard the Mechanicus while they are upon the surface. Once breached, the atmosphere in these key parts of the hulk will vent into space, and drive the occupants of the roosts further into the hulk, towards the kill zone,' said Mastrik.

'Forgive my ignorance, lord captain.' A brother of the Blood Drinkers from the stalls spoke. 'We have little experience of fighting these beasts in space. How will this work? They endure years adrift in the void, surely the lack of air will not trouble beasts such as these.'

Galt spoke. 'Genestealers can withstand vacuum, but not forever. Without air, they are forced, after a time, to become dormant. Within hulks they can only survive in their active state in areas with at least a

trace of oxygen-bearing atmosphere. They have an overwhelmingly strong desire for survival. They will instinctively follow gas trails to viable air pockets. Deprived of air they will sink into deep hibernation and eventually die, though this suffocation may take a hundred years. Do not fear, this is a sound tactic, one we have used several times in the last eight centuries alone.'

'To this end, we will prepare three tunnels,' said Aresti. Three ways were duly delimited by the Imagifer, long tunnels that wormed past each major roost. They ran through vessel after vessel, in certain places the whole length of particular ships, in others cutting through and then back out again in the space of metres. 'These tunnels will require some time to prepare. Once these are completed and the atmosphere vented, Terminator teams, deployed earlier by boarding torpedo and gathered close by the roost exits, will drive the gathered genestealers before them into the cavity. This force we designate Strikeforce Hammer, for it is this which will descend upon the genestealers in most rightful smiting. In the cavern, the genestealers will be surrounded on all sides and cut down en masse. Search and destroy groups will scour the remainder of the hulk to hunt out remaining pockets of the enemy. Any that flee the cordons in the main killing field will be forced into the airless portions of the hulk. There they will enter hibernation, and will be easily overcome. There are other, smaller roosts in the airless parts. Four of these are in isolated air pockets, in the others the genestealers will not wake from their state of suspended animation. So necessarily, it is the xenos of the main roosts we must destroy first, the others, my brothers and noble cousins, must wait their turn for the Emperor's judgement.'

Sorael stepped in. 'A fine plan, brothers. A little short on the close engagement every brother of the Blood Drinkers correctly yearns for, you might fear. But fear ye not! The Emperor provides us the opportunity to prove ourselves the way that suits us best. There are several obstacles to

overcome. Seventeen critical corridors that could allow the genestealers to escape into the greater hulk must be sealed off before the attack can commence, eighty-four secondary exits must also be closed. Numerous bulkheads and twelve hull walls are to be opened up. Sundry other objectives need to be completed in order to create sealed runs for the genestealers to be funnelled down into the killing zone.’ The relevant areas were highlighted upon the Imagifer Maximus’s image. Some of these access points were so small as to be dots, others large enough to dominate the part of the map they were situated in.

Galt stood from his throne. ‘This action will account for over four-fifths of xenos upon the hulk. We are fortunate they are gathered around this area of active reactors.’

‘For all their wickedness, they crave warmth and air as do all living things,’ said Aresti. ‘This weakness will be their downfall.’

‘Once the majority of the genestealers are destroyed, the effort to salvage the archeotech might begin,’ said Galt.

‘My lord captain, I beg to differ.’ Lord Magos Explorator Plosk stood to address the chamber. Galt’s face hardened at the interruption. ‘The retrieval of archeotech must begin as soon as the operation commences.’

Caedis roused himself. He had been quiet in the strategy meeting, as if greatly wearied, even if his words were wise enough. Throughout the briefing in the Hall of Meeting, he had kept his eyes to the floor. Galt had not expected him to speak. ‘You wish to go into the fire? You tech-priests are more valorous than I thought.’

‘We have all the courage we require, where the matters of the Omnissiah are concerned,’ countered Plosk.

‘I will not allow it,’ said Galt.

Plosk made a reproachful face. ‘I am afraid you have no choice,’ said Plosk.

‘Damn your permissions, magos, you kept information from my brothers. Might I remind you that you pledged you would not interfere in the military side of our operation.’

‘What occurred during the first insertion was a regrettable incident, my lord,’ said Plosk. ‘I have discussed the matter with Magos Nuministon. It appears he undertook the second sounding himself, without consulting me. I of course would have dissuaded him from this course of action. I apologise for the peril that it put your warriors in. Forgive him, Magos Nuministon is not used to the field of combat.’

‘Then why send him? The mission was jeopardised.’

‘It will not happen again. He has been disciplined. And you must admit, lords, that the risk was perhaps worth it. See how detailed our data is!’ He paused. ‘As regards the speed with which we must act, I refer not to my permissions. Magos Nuministon has redeemed himself.’

‘How?’ said Caedis. His voice had lost its elegance, as if he had to force the words from his throat.

‘He has examined the data presented by the noble adepts of the Blood Drinkers further, that appertaining to the arrival and departure of the hulk. We have three days at most before it begins its journey back into the warp.’

‘By what mechanism?’ said Galt.

‘That we would dearly love to know ourselves, lord captain,’ said Plosk. He bowed his head. ‘The quest for knowledge is unending.’

‘So demands the Omnissiah,’ intoned the tech-priests in the room.

‘If I find you have withheld information from me again, magos,’ said Galt warningly. ‘I will not have a repeat of your previous errors.’

‘I will share all. In fact, I will reveal to you now something else that Magos Nuministon has uncovered within the hulk.’

A graphical representation of the binaric information leapt into the air, a striated, three-dimensional graph that undulated repetitiously.

‘And what is that?’ said Caedis. ‘Speak, magos, we do not understand the ideograms of machines.’

Plosk smiled. He did not speak for a moment. His gaze darted around the room. ‘This, I believe, is the data signature of a fully functioning, intact STC datacore. Not a printout, although there are surely many within the *Death of Integrity*, and not just one priceless device, but the collected knowledge of all the long millennia of the Dark Age of Technology. This is the holiest of holies of our priesthood, the goal we have striven for millennia. If we retrieve this, it will transform the Imperium, lords, and you will be heroes for all eternity.’

Galt and Caedis glanced at each other. The chamber was plunged into uproar. All within had some inkling as to what such a find would mean.

Samin, sat with Plosk and Nuministon, leaned forward and whispered to his masters, his words lost amid the shouts. ‘Forgive me, master, I am but young still. Tell me, these other energy signatures, in the sigma ostrakon range. What do they betoken?’

Plosk gave his tutelary a stern look. ‘For another time, Samin. Ask later when we are in unmixed company.’

Galt was calling for order, but the tumult continued. Caedis spoke. His quiet, sibilant voice cut through the noise like a knife.

‘Enough!’ He was paler than usual. ‘You will wait, magos, as Lord Captain Galt dictates. We have our plan and you a prize beyond reckoning, but you heed our words or it will slip through your fingers.’ Caedis forced himself to his feet with great effort. ‘There are rituals to be performed aboard the *Lux Rubrum* and *Novum in Honourum*.’

Plosk opened his mouth to speak, then pursed his lips. ‘Very well,’ he said finally. ‘We will do as you demand.’ He made to sit, but stopped, as if something had just crossed his mind. ‘Let me ask, my lords, how do you intend to descend to the cavern?’

‘By these passages,’ said Mastrik. The Imagifer flashed as he passed his hand over them. ‘Seven descent routes.’

Plosk examined them. He nodded his head. ‘There are many obstacles.’

‘There are,’ said Aresti. ‘They will be removed.’

‘Cutting through with plasma torch and chainfist will take time,’ said Plosk. ‘Perhaps I might suggest a better way? There are certain machineries aboard *Excommentum Incursus* that we will avail you of, so that the assault will go the quicker.’

‘No tricks, magos, no omissions,’ said Galt.

‘Of course, lord captain. I merely propose to gift you a road.’

‘That would be welcome,’ said Sorael. He and the other two captains on the floor of the hall looked to their masters. Galt and Caedis nodded.

‘I will see to it immediately,’ said Plosk. He inclined his head.

‘Then let us be about our business,’ said Caedis. ‘Whatever the magi believe they will find here, we have our own purpose, and that purpose is the destruction of this most pernicious of threats. Not content to slay the sons of Terra, genestealers want nothing more than to poison the very genetic wellsprings of humanity. So has it been since the first of their vile breed stole onto a ship out of the moons of Ymgarl, so it will be for all time. But, brothers!’ His voice rose, regaining something of its strength and diction. ‘This branch of their plague stops here, in the orbit of Jorso, by our blades and bolts! We are to send nigh two hundred Terminator-armoured brothers into battle. Such a deployment is the stuff of legend, and has been witnessed by the galaxy but few times since the birth of the Imperium. We are Adeptus Astartes, of two storied, noble Chapters. The magi have their goal, we have ours. Service! Death! Purgation!’ Caedis held up his arms and stood tall, seeming to grow in size.

‘Service! Death! Purgation!’ shouted the warriors of two Chapters.

Caedis smiled and nodded. He slumped a little, diminished by his effort. ‘Let us see to our souls and to our weapons. The joy of battle awaits.’

Ninety-six Terminator suits stood in alcoves within the Armor Armourium, the great arsenal of *Novum in Honourum*. Clamps held the armour in place on stands behind glass screens; for the moment they were empty of occupants. Five Techmarines walked the rows of armour, a coterie of servitors equipped with fine-tooled limbs following them. They checked the armour in batches of five, chanting the canticles of waking and good function as they opened the alcove's glass fronts. Light flooded each alcove as the priests of iron opened them. The suits, mounted on wheeled turntables, came out from the wall. The Techmarines carried on their hymnals as they checked the exterior of the armour, rotating them carefully. Then the Techmarines opened panels and inserted their diagnostic tools into the armour's external access ports.

Each set of plate came alive for five seconds, energy plants online, visors shining, suit lights blazing. They flexed in their cradles as fibre muscles contracted deep under adamantium rods and plasteel and ceramite plating. The Techmarines made the ritual responses to the machines' proper activation, the implants in their minds filling with data from the sensoriums telling them precisely the condition of every component. When they were satisfied the armours were properly functional, the Techmarines withdrew and the suits slumped back from attention. Scented oil was spattered onto each as servitors droned Gothic hymns and chattered binaric blessings, and the next five suits were approached and the process begun again. In this way each suit was checked, activated, diagnosed, deactivated, and blessed. None were found wanting.

Patiently, and with great devotion, the Techmarines worked through the night.

In the Grand Chapel many decks above, the majority of the Novamarines were assembled; more than two hundred and twenty brothers of three companies. Only those in the infirmary or on sentry and command duties aboard the fleet's sundry vessels were absent. Hooded and silent in their robes of bone-and-night-blue, they kneeled in the lambency of candles and prayed for victory.

The walls of the shrine reverberated to the songs of war as choirs of serfs gave voice to their desires to see their masters returned safe and victorious from battle. Chaplain Odon stood with two other Chaplains within the presbytery of the chapel, the sacred space reserved for the Chaplains within the apse. Their platform was reached by three broad steps in a recessed semicircle. Behind them, the sanctuary rose, wherein at the top of a steep flight of stairs was Corvo's Memorial, an exact copy of the sarcophagus within the Great Tomb of Fortress Novum. An effigy of Corvo lay in repose atop it, armoured in stone, his sword clasped in both hands, point towards his feet. Odon and the others were dressed all in black, their skull tattoos sinister in the shadows of their hoods. Odon held the Cup of Brotherhood in his hand, his crozius held horizontal on a stand behind him. Chaplain Kornak stood to his right, Chaplain Ardio to the left, both carrying their croziuses. Black-clad servitor-worshippers and serfs flanked them.

Odon blessed each of the brothers in turn as they stepped forward, granting each a sip from the Cup of Brotherhood which contained the waters of Honourum blended with those of Macragge. This ritual was one of the first undergone by the novitiate Novamarines, and remained principal to their creed throughout their lives. The taste of two homes intermingled, representative of the Legion their ancestors had left behind, and the territory their founder had sworn to defend forever. The cup was small, the brothers in multitude. Apparently of worn wood, the cup's nature was mysterious. Not until the last brother had sipped at the cup and the blessings of Corvo painted on his face with its water did it run dry. There was always precisely enough, no matter if it were a squad blessed or the entire Chapter, although such a gathering had not taken place for twenty centuries. Traditionally guarded by the First Company, the cup was among the most holy of the Chapter's relics, touched as it was by the lips of every Novamarine from the time of Corvo to the present day.

The ritual was unhurried. The brothers themselves were silent as they approached Odon's place, cowls up and hands thrust deep into the sleeves of their robes. They took their sip and the whispered blessing of the Chaplain without speaking before returning to their pews. Once the last had returned to his place, the songs of the serfs dropped to their ordinary susurrations, the sound of the wind of Honourum intertwined with the oaths of fealty Lucretius Corvo had made so many thousand years ago.

The First Company veterans were called forward. The majority of them were in one place for the first time in living memory – eighty-seven Space Marines of the highest order, men who had fought for the Emperor for generations of normal men's lives. Tattooed with so many icons and scenes of triumph their skin was blue-black, between them they were hung with every badge of honour known to the Chapter. There an iron halo, here the aquila, there the laurels of defiance, and more.

The veterans knelt before Odon in a broad semicircle, still silent. Sergeant Voldo, most senior and decorated of all, knelt at the centre, the Chapter ancient to his left, the Chapter champion to his right. In front of him, on the second of the three steps leading up to Corvo's Memorial, Captains Galt, Aresti and Mastrik, and Epistolary Raniel took their places. Kneeling behind them on the first step, but in front of Voldo, were the other officers of the Chapter – the lower ranking Librarians, the four Apothecaries, those Techmarines who did not labour in the arsenal – fourteen officers in all.

Odon walked down from the memorial platform, and passed the cup to Chaplain Kornak, who followed him. He went to Voldo first, bent low, and kissed him upon both cheeks. 'Corvo's might be yours,' he said, then dipped his finger into the cup in Kornak's hand. He drew a circle on the sergeant's forehead. 'This circle symbolises the nova for which we are named,' he said quietly, the words intended for Voldo alone. 'This circle

symbolises the territories we are sworn to respect, this circle symbolises the eternal oath of Corvo.'

Odon and Kornak passed from Voldo to the next man, then the next, blessing them all in the same fashion. As he went from Space Marine to Space Marine, the serfs' and servitors' song became louder again, the brothers of the Third and Fifth Companies joining their song; a long complex plainsong speaking of loyalty, honour, and the glory of death for the higher purposes of mankind.

By the time Odon returned to the officers, forty minutes had passed. He likewise blessed them in their turn, two kisses, the giving of might, the drawing of the circle, the description of its meaning.

Chaplain Ardio went to the foot of the steps leading up to the memorial. He paid obeisance at the bottom, then mounted the stairs. At the top, he made a series of complex passes over the warrior-lord's stone face. A drawer slid from the stone, lined in blue velvet. He leaned into it, and took out Corvo's relic.

There were fifteen sacred relics of Corvo, many at home on Honourum, the rest entrusted to the largest taskforces of Novamarines. *Novum in Honourum* was fortunate indeed to play host to the hilt of the hero's shattered sword. Only Corvo's laurels, bestowed upon him by Roboute Guilliman himself, and enshrined forever in Fortress Novum, were more holy to the Chapter.

With the ceremony appropriate to such an item, Ardio walked down the stairs. The First Company joined their brothers in song, and the Grand Chapel echoed loudly to their gathered voices. The song changed the quality of the place, transmuting it into something more than a chamber within a spacecraft. The unity of their song removed the walls between the individual warriors, making them one in mind and soul.

Odon took the sword hilt of Corvo from Ardio. It was ancient, almost as old as the Imperium itself. The features of it were worn smooth, metal

shone with the touch of a hundred generations of Chaplains. Spots marred this lustre, dark rust eaten into the metal. The fragment of blade that projected from the hilt was dull, the components of the mechanism that had once imbued the blade with the ferocious power of a disruption field had corroded into an undifferentiated mass.

Yet, this was still the sword of Corvo.

The song reached a crescendo, and swooped low to a deep finish that left the fabric of the chapel reverberating.

The song departed, unity remained.

Odon held the hilt high.

‘This is the sword of Lucretius Corvo!’ he said. ‘This is the weapon he wielded at the side of Roboute Guilliman himself, the sword he lifted when he renewed his fealty to the Emperor, the sword he bore on Astagar where he destroyed the dread Titan Fellghast, the sword he held in both hands as he had made his oath to defend the Ultima Segmentum in the name of the Lords of Macragge and the Emperor of all mankind!’

‘We take the oath, we renew the oath,’ intoned Kornak and Ardio.

‘We renew the oath,’ shouted the Novamarines, and the chamber shook.

‘Corvo said, “As I leave Macragge for the last time, I swear to you”,’ said Odon, reciting the oath of their founder. ““Lord Roboute Guilliman, primarch of the Emperor and my sworn liege lord, that I and my successors shall undertake the protection of the Ultima Segmentum from now unto eternity’s end. Not death nor dishonour nor wavering of spirit shall distract us from this task. Though death take me, though my soul be riven. Nothing shall sway me from this duty, not for now nor until the end of time. This I swear. This is my oath!””

‘This we swear! This is our oath!’ shouted the Novamarines.

‘Unity! Honour! Strength of purpose!’ said Odon.

‘Unity! Honour! Strength of purpose!’ roared the Novamarines.

Minds cleansed by the waters of their homes, oath reaffirmed, Odon led the Novamarines in prayer. Silently the brothers of the Third and Fifth Companies filed out of the Grand Chapel and returned first to their arming chambers, and then to their cells. In the confines of their simple rooms, they spent the night fasting and checking their weaponry, preparing themselves for the morrow. The cloistered habitation decks were alive with the clicking of guns disassembled and rebuilt, and whispered prayers.

The First Company veterans remained in vigil in the Grand Chapel, thoughts bent only on their duty to the Lord of Man, and through that duty, victory.

They did not sleep.

The Hall of Life sat at the centre of *Lux Rubrum*, the very heart of the mighty vessel, and a heart it resembled: red and hot.

In shape, the hall was a wide circle, the walls bulging like a ribcage as they ascended, curving back inward to meet as a pointed dome. From this high ceiling censers depended, clouding the air with fragrant blue smoke that reeked of the fireblooms of San Guisiga.

Six-sided pillars of porphyry quarried from the flanks of Mount Calicium braced walls of red-brown granite. These alternated with pillars of skulls, the stacked trophies of five thousand years of war. Slabs of the same granite that made up the walls made up the floor. This stone was polished bright, so that all who looked into it would see their face reflected as from a pool of drying blood. Lights were set within bowls carved into the pillars, casting a ruddy glow on the ancient battle honours and standards that lined the stone walls. Glass sarcophagi topped with elegant metalwork and statuary held the bones of the Chapter's most honoured dead, skull-faced cybernetic vat-children crouched at the head of each vitreous tomb, ready to whisper the great deeds of those within to any who would pause by their sides.

At the centre of the chamber a depression was sunk into the granite, the shape of the blood drop of the Chapter. Square channels cut into the floor led to it, turning this way and that in a continuous line, so that they formed the chalice of the Blood Drinkers insignia below the blood drop. Thirty more channels ran out from it, to alcoves set within the walls. At the narrow end of the drop, an altar soared high. A relief of helmetless armoured brothers circled it carved of red carnelian, each one with a skull for his head, bowed over hands clasped around the hilts of swords and axes.

Upon the altar channels were also cut, below manacles of bright adamantium, leading from places that would correspond to the major arteries of the human body's limbs should a person be laid out upon it: carotid, femoral, ulnar and radial. The channels ran from these points to gather, then as one led to the apex of the blood drop.

The altar was empty and it gleamed. Behind it, a stained glass window five times the height of an adept. Holos's stern features, captured in glass, stared down at the hall in eternal judgement. The fires burning on the other side of the glass made his eyes glimmer with life.

A pulpit was above the altar, an angel's wings spread wide formed its sides. The angel also was of carnelian, and had a fleshless face. It held a sword in one hand, an hourglass in the other. Everywhere in the Hall of Life were skulls: skulls of the righteous dead, skulls of stone, skulls of volcanic glass. This was a place of life only for the brothers of the Blood Drinkers, to all others it brought death.

The room was hot as the volcanic caverns of San Guisiga were hot, the light red as the light of the lava canyons, the air thick and sweet as the air of their home world was thick and sweet, ripe with the scent of copper, iron and incense.

All one hundred and seventy-nine battle-brothers of the Blood Drinkers Chapter present in the strikeforce stood around the chalice cut into the

rock, their upper bodies bare. None were absent. Serfs and machine-spirits watched over the fleet. The wounded stood alongside the hale.

Baggy scarlet trousers cinched at the ankles were their robes, black tabards embroidered with the yellow blood drop and chalice of the Chapter hung between their legs. The decorated belts they habitually wore, denoting their role and rank within the Chapter, were absent. Techmarine stood with battle-brother, neophyte with initiate; stripped of their badges, all were equal for the Rite of Holos. They stood shoulder to shoulder in an arc, facing the altar. For the duration of the ritual the matter of their brotherhood was paramount. Distinction of rank or suborder was unimportant, a distraction from their fundamental sameness in the face of the Thirst.

Only the strikeforce's Sanguinary Priests and Chaplains stood apart, all four armoured and bearing their marks of office; crozius and chalices gleamed in the chamber's febrile light. They flanked the major portal leading into the room, Reclusiarch Mazrael and Chaplain Gorwin facing the white garbed Apothecaries Zozymus and Feir. Ten Sanguinary Guard stood behind them, armed and armoured also, five with the Chaplains, five with the Sanguinary Priests.

Teale, however, was not among them. Teale would arrive separately, for the Rite of Holos was a ritual of blood, and the Sanguinary Master had the lead role to play.

Caedis stood among his brothers, his own badges removed. Like them he swayed slightly, his mind drugged with anticipation of the coming ritual. The remembered taste of blood filled his mouth. He drooled freely.

The stone doors of the Hall of Life swung open, as silent as death's approach. A procession of serfs came first, bearing holy icons of Holos and Sanguinius. Sanguinary Master Teale walked at their centre. Behind him came a serf carrying a wooden box. Behind him, more serfs – one hundred and fifty of them, all thin, metal tubing all over them; the ways to

their arteries and the fluids that sustained the Chapter. These latter arrivals fanned out as they entered the room. They proceeded to the heads of the thirty channels, five to an alcove.

Sanguinary Master Teale walked to the pulpit, ascended its steps, and took station inside. 'Brothers!' he called.

A low sound escaped the lips of the Blood Drinkers, halfway between song and a moan.

'One and a half thousand years ago, our Chapter stood upon the brink of destruction. We were ravaged by the Thirst, the Black Rage descending upon scores of our brothers at a time. Barely had they finished the rites of initiation before brothers were taken. The Flaw revealed itself strongly within us. Extinction beckoned, but would we go the way of the Exsanguinators, the Brothers of the Red or the others of the scions of our lord lost entirely to the Black Rage?'

The torpid minds of the Blood Drinkers shook themselves at this. 'No!' they called. 'No, no.' Not as one, but individually these shouts came. They were tinged with sorrow, anger, and with shame.

'No brothers! We would not!' bellowed Teale, his voice rasping and sinister through his helmet. 'And now, look at us. We are strong! We are powerful! We have persisted in glory and service for a further fifteen centuries! All thanks to Brother Holos! Were it not for him and the secret he brought back from his vision upon Mount Calicium, we would be a red footnote in history. And yet we serve! The enemies of mankind fall before us and fear our wrath.'

'All praise Brother Holos!' shouted the Chaplains and Sanguinary Priests.

A ragged repetition from the brethren.

'The blood is the key! Denial is not the answer! We shall not quake before our appetites as our brother Chapters do, but take them to our hearts! The monster within us all cannot be defeated, it cannot be denied.'

But it can be fed, it can be sated, and if sated, its strength can be borrowed! The blood is life!’

In the alcoves, the serfs bent over the heads of the channels. They held out their wrists and twisted the taps on the tubes that ran into their skin. Blood ran out from the taps, gushing in thin streams into the channels. Thirty red rivers nosed across the floor towards the chalice. In the heat of the chamber, the smell of the blood was carried from the floor, instantly filling the room.

The brothers woke a little more. Their eyes glittered in anticipation. Their shoulders and chests heaved with ragged respiration.

‘The blood is life!’ they repeated. Their eyes followed the blood as it ran into the grooves depicting the Chapter chalice.

‘In life there is service!’ shouted Teale.

‘We live to serve!’ replied the brothers.

‘To deny life is to deny service!’ said Teale.

‘To deny service is to betray the Emperor!’ they shouted.

‘Do we choose service or betrayal?’ said Teale.

‘We choose life! We choose service! We choose blood!’ they roared as one.

From a wooden box, Teale took forth a heart, a human heart.

‘What is blood without a heart to force it around the body? The rite demands a heart. I give you the heart of Brother Genthis!’ he handed it to a serf, who took it to the blood drop, and placed it at the bottom. ‘He comes home to his brothers to share his courage with us one last time!’ A laser beam emitted from the eyes of a soaring angel in the ceiling hit the heart. The smell of roasting meat joined the tang of blood. It abated, as the heart blackened rapidly, then turned white. Fine ash collapsed in on itself. The laser beam cut out.

‘In blood is life! In life is service! In service purpose and honour!’ shouted Teale. ‘Blood freely given!’ he continued, sweeping his

narthecium out to encompass the serfs patiently bleeding themselves, adding in a low voice, ‘And blood taken.’

Through the doors came two further Sanguinary Guard, resplendent in golden armour, their faces masks of Sanguinius. Between them they held a man, not a serf, some poor soul snatched from one recruitment world or another the Blood Drinkers used; kept in stasis, perhaps for centuries, all for this one moment. He was the Chapter’s monstrous price, the blood-tithe.

His hands were bound before him, his mouth gelled shut. As he came into the room, his eyes widened and he began to struggle harder, but before the giant adepts his efforts were those of a child fighting an ogre, and the guard dragged him forward. They pulled him to the altar. His hands were freed, and then quickly trapped again as he was roughly spread-eagled on the altar. The fear in his eyes told that he knew what the grooves in the stone were for.

‘All must serve the Emperor!’ said Teale. Zeal poured from him, further exciting the others in the room. ‘We serve as we can, we sacrifice all – our lives entire, our souls, our individuality, our very beings! Others must also do their part!’

He dipped his white helmet towards a serf below. The serf activated a mechanism. The man on the altar’s back arched as blades emerged from the altar and penetrated his body at the sites of his arteries. Blood gushed from his bucking body, pouring into the channels and thence in a squared red fall down into the blood drop. The blood of the serfs filled the channels forming the chalice, and overflowed into the drop, mingling their given blood with that taken, both soaking the ash of the heart of Genthis. The Chapter icon shone, painted in liquid red.

Teale undid his helmet’s seals, and removed it. He placed it upon the pulpit. His eyes glowed with savage delight, a touch of fervour, a touch of madness. This was his time, the time of submission, the giving in to

powerful appetites. ‘Now brothers! Drink! Drink so that the monster might be sated, and that you might steal its strength.’

The Blood Drinkers fell to their knees, an awful keening escaping their lips. The Chaplains and Apothecaries and Sanguinary Guard undid their own helmets and approached the dying man on the altar, cups extended. The brothers lapped frantically at the stuff of life. In the alcoves, those serfs that were still conscious shut off their taps and those of their collapsed comrades. They retreated quietly, leaving their masters to their debased appetites.

Their faces smeared red, the brothers fell upon the altar, and tore the dead man to pieces.

Later, when the Thirst was quenched, Reclusiarch Mazrael would lead them in prayers of atonement and then of preparation. They would reaffirm their oaths to the Emperor, and beg forgiveness of one another for the lives they had taken. The Techmarines would take a measure of blood from the brothers themselves to placate the Chapter’s weapons and armours. Only then, with the beast inside them tamed, would the brothers’ minds turn fully to battle and the destruction of man’s foes.

Later. For now, the Blood Drinkers lived up to their name.

They fed.



CHAPTER 12

The stirring of the Rage

Galt waited patiently for Chapter Master Caedis. The Thunderhawk's ramp was open, its red-lit interior exposed. Two of the Blood Drinkers' ornately attired honour guard stood to attention either side of the doorway, and servitors wearing the red of that Chapter clumped about the ship, mindlessly fulfilling their duty. Of Caedis, there was no sign.

Galt relaxed into the wait. There was opportunity in reflection in all things, and he allowed his mind to wander where it would. He ran his gaze over the vessel's lines, so red, so shocking in the drab, starkly lit hangar bay of the Novamarines.

There was a movement under the wing. A shape. Too small for an initiate, too nimble to be that of a servitor. He walked closer to the vessel, and caught sight of a serf working on an atmosphere filter. It was the first of the Blood Drinkers' human servants Galt had seen. Where the Novamarines' servants were tall and well-formed, this creature of the Blood Angels seemed less than human. He was stooped, and thin to the point of emaciation. He was bare to his waist, wearing a long kilt emblazoned with the yellow blood chalice. Metal tubes sparkled on his limbs and torso, disappearing under the skin in places Galt's trained,

killer's eye could not help but notice were close to major blood vessels. Ritual scarification criss-crossed the man's back.

The serf paused in what he was doing, feeling Galt's eyes on him. He turned and looked directly at the Novamarines First Captain. His eyes were fierce and defiant above his face mask, and he did not drop his gaze from the lord captain's face as he should have. Galt raised his eyebrow at the servant's boldness. The serf dipped his head, and disappeared into the red gloom of the Thunderhawk passenger compartment.

Seconds later, Caedis strode out.

The lord of the Blood Drinkers wore Terminator armour, its magnitude accentuating his already imposing size. He wore a double-handed power sword at his waist. He was focused, eyes bright, his skin ruddy where before it had been pale. But there was still the trace of strain behind his confidence, he was holding something in.

'Well met, Captain Galt,' said Caedis. The taller man looked down at Galt.

'Well met, Lord Chapter Master,' replied Galt.

'I apologise for dragging you away from your duties, captain. I wished to see you one final time before the mission commenced.'

'Then allow me to take the opportunity to thank you for allowing me overall strategic command.'

Caedis looked over Galt's head, and smiled as if he had seen an old acquaintance somewhere, the kind of smile that was welcoming yet condescending. A pained look marred his features and he swayed a little. His yellow eyes flicked back to Galt's face. They took a while to focus on the Novamarine's face, but when he spoke, he did so clearly. 'Cousin, your talents are better suited for this particular role. I would lead my men from the front and smite our foes alongside them. A cool head such as yours is better employed coordinating the greater action.'

‘You will be unable to give effective orders once you are away from your insertion point, my lord. The radiation fields are too strong for suit vox to penetrate. The Adeptus Mechanicus boosting web will not be installed until the genestealers are driven towards the killing zone.’

‘I am aware of the limitations this action imposes upon me, but I trust in your direction, first among captains of the Novamarines. Give me and mine an order, and we will obey. And Captain Sorael is an excellent commander,’ said Caedis. ‘I am sure he and your Captain Mastrik will excel themselves in the killing zone whether I can comment upon his actions or not.’

Galt nodded, somewhat reluctantly conceding the point. ‘Captain Aresti leads our men in the Hammer of the Emperor. Our men should begin the venting of the hulk’s atmosphere soon enough.’

‘Once I am on the hulk, I will order my men to follow him.’

‘You will not lead them yourself?’ said Galt.

Caedis shook his head, and for a second, Galt thought he might falter.

‘No, there are certain... Rites, rituals that I must complete. My attention will be elsewhere. I defer command to him.’ He was struggling with his words, whether in finding those that were appropriate or because he was exhausted Galt could not discern.

‘Might I ask, Lord Caedis, are you well?’

Caedis smiled as if that were an amusing jest. His smile dropped quickly.

‘Yes, and no. My time grows short, Captain Galt. We of the Blood Drinkers can... We know when our end approaches. Do you understand?’

Galt hesitated. He thought of the Shadow Novum and the messages delivered there. Who knew what beliefs the Blood Drinkers held?

‘I do, Lord Caedis.’

Caedis nodded thoughtfully, and for a moment Galt saw respect there.

‘Then I shall return to my ship and gather my men,’ said Caedis. ‘The

magi?’

‘They wait as commanded. I will accompany them on their retrieval mission when I deem the hulk safe.’

‘Very well,’ said Caedis. He offered his hand. Galt took his forearm in the warrior’s clasp. His grasp was firm and unwavering, if his gaze was not. ‘Until we meet again, captain. May the Emperor’s foresight deliver our foes to the points of our swords, and his mercy shield us from theirs.’

Talking to Galt took all of Caedis’s remaining self-control. The Rite of Holos had been held only hours before, and already the Thirst clutched at his throat. Flashes of light accompanied by starbursts of pain vexed his eyes and mind. When he closed his eyes, glimpses of something that was not his own life dazzled him, cast him adrift from the flow of time. His ears buzzed. He walked with all the dignity he could up the ramp into the Thunderhawk. The craft was empty but for a trio of serfs and Chaplain Mazrael.

Mazrael stood at the top of the second ramp inside, the one leading up into the Thunderhawk’s upper deck. He wore his Terminator armour, winged crozius in his hand. His helmet was a skull with glowing red eyes and sharp teeth. His torso was encased in a gold-chased ribcage, his limbs carried bones sculpted in relief onto the armour plates. Lit red, he was a devil steeped in blood. Caedis stopped at the top of the boarding ramp, eyes fixed on the daemoniac figure above him.

The ramp clanged shut and Caedis’s head reeled. He staggered and sank down onto his knees.

‘Mazrael, help me...’

‘Hush now, my lord, my son. I recognised the signs,’ said Mazrael gently. He walked down the ramp to where Caedis knelt, a fallen giant in armour fit to clad a mountain. Mazrael placed his hand on Caedis’s head and the lord of the Blood Drinkers raised bleary eyes to meet with Mazrael’s unblinking helmet lenses. ‘What will you take, my son? The black and the red, or the Emperor’s mercy?’

Caedis's face furrowed. He was on the verge of forgetting something important. Light flashed through his mind, searing migraine running hard after it. He walked stony ground on feet that were not his own, and his breath was laboured as if his body worked hard. He blinked the image away. He tried to speak, but his throat was so dry. He swallowed, no saliva came. Mazrael signalled behind him, and a serf hurried down, bearing a jewelled cup whose bowl was fashioned from a human skull.

‘This is the Calix Cruentes,’ said Mazrael. His skull helmet wavered in Caedis's eyes as he spoke. ‘Only those who succumb to our curse ever see it. Drink from it, it will hold the visions at bay a short while.’

Caedis reached out a hand. His eyesight splintered, like light forced through a prism. His view became one of two places, a stained glass window made up of parts from two different images. His hand, and not his hand. One armoured, one naked and bloodied. He took the cup to his mouth and drank, a sip at first but then great gulps. Slippery liquid ran down from his mouth as he guzzled at the contents. The liquid was rich, a volcanic spice to it. It slicked his throat and vocal cords. Blood, always blood.

‘Slowly, my lord!’ Mazrael pried the cup away from his lord. ‘There are preparations added to this life-fluid that are dangerous if imbibed too swiftly.’

Caedis felt himself returning to the present. The sense of dislocation retreated, that feeling of otherness replaced by the thrum of the Thunderhawk's systems. Mazrael's osseous helmet stared down from on high, death's own judgement. The serf, overtopping Caedis only by a head although the Chapter Master knelt, looked at him dispassionately.

‘Can you speak?’ asked Mazrael.

‘Yes, yes I can speak,’ Caedis said. He closed his eyes, but it brought no comfort, bringing the buzzing in his ears to a cacophony within which were hidden secret and terrible words.

‘Then what do you choose?’

‘I choose... I choose the black and red.’

Mazrael nodded. ‘I expected nothing less of you, my lord, but I had to ask again. It is not unknown for a brother to change his mind once the full horror of what awaits becomes apparent.’ He beckoned to the other serfs. ‘Prepare him.’

Two of the serfs went to Caedis’s side, and began to remove his armour’s outer plates. The third wheeled an auto-artisan down from the upper decks. This they would use to paint his armour black.

‘Brother Luentes,’ Mazrael voxed the pilot. ‘Take us back to *Lux Rubrum*.’

‘Yes, Lord Reclusiarch Mazrael,’ the pilot replied. The engines immediately kicked into life, building to a roar.

‘My brother, my lord, my son,’ said Mazrael. ‘Now, we shall pray together, pray to Sanguinius and the Emperor, for you shall soon be joining them both.’

Mazrael’s prayers faded from Caedis’s consciousness. Caedis replied to the catechism as best he could, each response activating deeply buried psycho conditioning; certain hypnotic states triggered by key words and ritual recitation implanted in him as a neophyte should the Black Rage come upon him. He realised this numbly, that this was no longer the Thirst, but that he was succumbing to the worst of the Flaw. A curse wrapped around his every cell; the thorns around the genomic flower of his gifts pricking at last. For the Blood Drinkers and other scions of Sanguinius, their gifts were double-edged. But he was as detached from his realisation as he was from everything else. The rocky path was beneath his feet again, and then it was not, and he was looking at his repainted armour being replaced upon his limbs. And then he was on the lava road out of Fortress San Guisiga, hurrying away in secret and at night, and then he was walking the corridor from the docking bay on *Lux Rubrum*.

Brothers in full armour knelt at his passing, heads bowed in sorrow and deference. Lining all the way to the boarding torpedo launch tubes, half

chanting his name low and regular as a heartbeat as others sang the hymn of mourning. And he was climbing up rocks hot with volcanic heat, splintered vision scouring desiccated skies for the silhouettes of the astorgai. He was in an acceleration chair. His men around him, men he had fought with for five hundred years: Epistolary Guinian, Reclusiarch Mazrael, Brother Ancient Metrion and others. They were helmetless, and they were singing a low dirge. The words were lost to him, sounding from far away, as sound travels through water, or through blood.

An astorgai swiped at him. Its wings flapped its burned-flesh stench deep into his nostrils and it cursed him in corrupt Gothic. The blow of its pinion-claw dented his plastron, only it was not his armour. Then it was not the astorgai's blow that forced him back, but the sudden acceleration of the boarding torpedo, a fanfare of fire heralding its exit into space. The acceleration abruptly ceased, the pressure came off his chest and he came back into himself. He looked to his men, his companions, his friends. They wept, some of them.

What was this? What did he see? This was not Sanguinius's death, not the communion with his primarch he was expecting. He tried to speak, to say what he saw, but he could not. He writhed against his restraints and shouted, and he was not sure if he shouted for himself or the man he was in his visions. 'Who will guide me? Who will show me the way?'

Mazrael's hand grasped the edge of Caedis's shoulder plate, turning him so that his skull helmet filled his world.

'I will guide you, lord, I will show you the way,' said the Reclusiarch gently.

Caedis blinked. Reality shifted about him. The boarding torpedo's klaxon sounded, alarm lights flashed. All around him, the song abruptly ceased, and helmets were placed on heads and sealed to armour. Mazrael helped Caedis put his on.

All was thunder and violence. The occupants of the torpedo were thrown about in their seats as the vessel punched deep into the hulk. Metal squealed along its windowless hull.

The torpedo reached its predetermined depth. Retro-rockets roared and it slammed to a halt, hurling the Space Marines forward against their restraints. The forward hatch blew open, the metal skating across the deck outside. Their harnesses slammed upward, and the Adeptus Astartes were up and into the hulk.

Metal glowed white hot from the retro-thrusters. Scorch marks blackened every wall, smoke choked the corridor. But this area was not airtight, and the exhaust was rapidly sucked away. From all around them the sound of other torpedoes hitting home reverberated through the metal of the hulk.

‘Lord, are you lucid?’ asked Mazrael.

‘Yes, yes I am with you,’ Caedis said. He swallowed. His mouth was still dry, but being here, with a mission to perform, he found he could focus his fracturing mind. He could more easily recognise the men with him. Brother Metrion, Reclusiarch Mazrael, Epistolary Guinian, Brother Erdagon, Sergeant Sandamael, Brother Quintus, Brother Kalael; all bar Mazrael in Terminator armour and armed with lightning claws. Where were Atameo and Hermis? They should be here, he would have preferred them over Brothers Hordus and Donas. He was about to ask Mazrael when the memory of their deaths on Catria rushed back. So many deaths. How many had he seen die? How many had he killed? How many had given their blood so that he might serve?

‘My lord?’

Caedis gripped the hilt of his sword, *Gladius Rubeum*. It grounded him. ‘We must go to our allotted position, Reclusiarch, there to await the orders of Captain Galt. He is your commander now. We must trust to the warriors of Honourum to see us through this battle.’

The Terminators fanned out either side of their officer, Sergeant Sandamael directing them via the sensorium.

‘And you, my lord?’ asked Mazrael, dropping his voice to a private channel.

Caedis included Guinian in the conversation. ‘Find me a good death, my friends. Find me something worthy to fight. Brother Guinian, search out their mightiest so that I might slay him face to face.’

‘Yes my lord,’ Guinian said. He prepared his mind, and slipped into a trance.

Epistolary Guinian let his mind drift out into the greater hulk. His warp-sense told him things that should have been unknown, the location of his brothers and their Novamarines allies, and the location of their genestealer enemies. This he saw not in terms most men would understand, not even other psykers, for he experienced his extended awareness through a series of layered metaphors. Images that made little sense if taken at face value took the place of hard reality. He was a psyker, blessed with witch-sight, an inheritor of the strange mutation that granted the immortal Emperor his power. His ability was far less than that of the Lord of All Men, but potent still.

Because of this he possessed an understanding of reality different to that of others. Like the Techmarines, the Librarians of a Chapter were privy to mysteries that set them apart from the other brethren. But where the concerns of the Forge were entirely of the material, those of the Library were quite the opposite, the ephemeral and unknowable; that which could not be seen, only sensed. If the forge commanded steel, the apothecarion flesh, the chaplaincy the soul, then the Librarians knew the secrets of men’s hearts, and more besides.

The mass of metal, ice and rubble that made up the hulk was as a dark rock on the shore of an endless sea. Bright points flickered on the stone, the wavering lights of the souls of battle-brothers. They were puny in the dark, strong though they were in the terms most men would understand.

Brighter stars shone in this non-firmament, the glowing minds of the other psykers. Raniel of the Novamarines was as bright as the nova burst his armour bore. He stood upon the surface of the hulk. The other four Librarians in the joined fleet were lesser, those of Librarium neophytes barely brighter than those of their non-psyker battle-brothers. Give them time, thought Guinian, soul-fire flares brighter with training and experience.

Outwards from the stone, other outcrops of denser reality dotted the dark beach of the sky – the ships of the Novamarines and the Blood Drinkers. More lights, the fires of the lives of men, inconstant sparks that were so easy to snuff out. Astropaths and Navigators on the ships showed larger. He dipped into the chatter of the latter, like a man trailing his hand in water in the wake of a boat. Abstract images filled his mind, the best and strongest of the soul-bound projecting words and images. Focused beams of thought punched through the warp, informing Chapter fortresses far away of the actions of the fleet. Somewhere out on the further shores of his mind construct – Guinian dared not seek it out – was the glaring beacon of the Astronomican, a light that would sear his soul if he looked too deep into it.

He drew himself back. There were other minds here, dark and alien and opaque to his understanding. Their minds were distinct, but meshed together into a web so tightly woven it was difficult to decide where one ended and another began. Guinian touched his thoughts across this network of alien minds, gently so as not to alert it. It appeared to him as a green-black web, a powerful stench coming off it, the toxic desires of the alien. The outflung edges of this web touched every planet the genestealers infested, the threads sometimes so faint they were barely visible, but it was always there, and after thirty years of hunting these creatures, Guinian had become proficient at detecting it. Now, to be so close to its source made him feel unclean. He steeled his soul and plunged his mind on.

He felt a thickening in the alien mind-web. It came together, knotting tighter and tighter until...

Something powerful and evil stirred in its sleep and regarded him.

Guinian gasped, his eyes snapped open.

‘My lords,’ he said, not daring to drop out of his trance entirely, lest he lose the creature. ‘I have found something. A powerful mind at the heart of the web of minds that directs this infestation.’

Caedis stared at him, his face unreadable behind his suit helmet. Guinian felt his mind more keenly than ever, a turmoil of psychic energies more potent than any he had ever felt the Chapter Master emit. He suppressed a shudder. The Black Rage was a spiritual affliction as much as a consequence of their flawed gene-seed.

A long moment passed before the Chapter Master spoke.

‘Then we will find the creature within whose head it resides. Brother Guinian, you do not have to follow me to my doom, but your abilities would be welcome.’ Caedis’s voice was hollow and distant. ‘This is not an order, but a request, from one brother to another.’

‘I would be honoured to aid you, lord, this last time.’ He fought back tears. He knew his beloved leader was close to his end.

‘I will join you, you will need my guidance,’ said Mazrael. ‘Let us tread this road together.’

‘To the summit of Mount Calicium,’ said Caedis, his voice trailing into a slur. ‘Captain Aresti?’

‘Yes, lord?’

‘You are in command here. I have other matters to attend to. The wings of Sanguinius shield you.’

‘My lord,’ said Aresti. Galt would have told him what Caedis intended, but he still sounded surprised. ‘Are you certain?’

The Chapter Master of the Blood Drinkers did not reply. Caedis, Mazrael, Guinian and his guard squad were working their way out from

the beachhead. Quickly, more quickly than Caedis's walking speed and the efficacy of the Novamarines' equipment would suggest, Caedis and his followers faded from the strikeforce's monitoring equipment, and disappeared into the hulk.



CHAPTER 13

Hesperion's Folly

A giant square frame formed the outside of the cutter. Glass or some other substance glittered in its forward edge, reflecting Jorso's angry light.

'The cutter has to be precisely sited, lords,' said Plosk. He wore a suit of rust-red power armour, as did his aide, Samin. Nuministon wore his greenish-gold suit, its helmet aglitter with its disturbing lenses.

Mastrik was with them, Epistolary Raniel and Captain Sorael of the Blood Drinkers alongside. They watched from atop a jutting spaceship engine block that rose over the hulk. Servitors in flimsy vacuum suits worked on the plain below, securing the device with hawsers, Novamarines Scouts clad in armoured space suits guarded them. Pistons terminating in broad, claw-like feet pushed out from the cutter and into the surface of the hulk. The cutter was a simple hollow square of metal, forty metres long on the sides, five bulky units housing its feet mechanisms and power inlets. This square was now held at a twenty-nine degree angle to the surface of the hulk. Or so Mastrik's sensorium told him. To do this it underlaid a uniform value to the uneven hulk surface, calculated off the hulk's mean elevation. Three sets of three black pipes bound together snaked off over

the hulk to portable reactors of some size. Other smaller cables led off to a control landau; an open, legged conveyance full of equipment and tech-priests.

‘Is this worth the effort?’ said Ranial. ‘We could have cut several ways in ourselves in half this time.’

‘Oh, I do not think so, my lords,’ said Plosk. Mastrik heard the smile hidden behind his helmet. ‘You are about to witness a great efficiency.’

‘This is a great artefact, an atomic disintegration field cutter,’ said Samin hotly. ‘It dates from the times of knowledge, you will marvel at its power.’

‘No need to be so defensive, Adept Samin,’ said Mastrik. ‘My Brother-Librarian voices a question as he is entitled to. He too is the guardian of old knowledge, albeit of a different kind to yours, and exhibits his natural curiosity. If he is wrong, he will graciously admit so.’

Ranial made a non-committal noise. Samin bristled, evident even through his armour. Emperor, thought Mastrik, I’m annoying both of them today. Mastrik was a bluff man, with a broad sense of humour that occasionally jarred upon the sensibilities of the serious-minded Novamarines. Ranial was capable of an amount of dry wit, but as a Librarian possessed of a portion of the Emperor’s own godlike abilities, could also be more serious-minded than most. Mastrik and he were good friends, but his mood could be difficult to judge, and so sometimes they came to argue.

‘I meant no offence,’ said Mastrik. ‘How long until your priests are ready, magos?’ He checked his mission clock.

‘Any moment now, lord captain,’ said Plosk. His own armour was large, made bigger by the rack of manipulators and devices Mastrik had no name for sprouting from his back. Still, it was small compared to the Terminator battleplate Mastrik, Soraël and Ranial wore. ‘The erection of the cutter takes time, I admit, but once in operation, well, you shall see...’

Servitors walked away from the cutter, their tasks done. The tech-priests followed.

‘They must retreat to a safe distance,’ explained Plosk. ‘There is something akin to molecular shrapnel generated by the activities of the cutter. A magnetic shield extends around it, to snare these stray atom-clumps and funnel them away safely, but it requires distance to exert itself fully. To be close to the actual blade itself while cutting is under way could be fatal.’

Warning lights flickered all around the cutter’s outside edge; no alarms audible in the vacuum.

‘You may begin,’ ordered Plosk.

The tech-priest in charge of the cutter’s bulky, portable control vehicle leant over its controls. He pointed, directing his juniors in the appropriate activation sequences. Mastrik had his sensorium magnify the scene so he could better observe. Whatever the tech-priests were doing was incomprehensible to him. He moved his gaze over the hulk’s surface, its coat of dust blinding in the direct light of Jorso. His helmet lenses darkened in response.

Mastrik watched the frame. The glassy material glowed a dark green. Light flickered all around it, sparks that arced and burst brightly when they touched. This caged storm intensified, until the whole of the frame was alive with dancing angles of energy.

‘You see? The device is now at thirty per cent total power capacity. Blessed be the Omnissiah,’ said Plosk.

The process reached a critical point, and the lightning ceased to be. In its stead was a flat screen of energy, nearly invisible were it not for the fact it turned all viewed through it faintly green.

‘Sixty per cent,’ said Plosk.

At the control landau, further activity. Mastrik felt the hulk vibrate. The disturbance built. His sensorium jumped at the backwash of

electromagnetic energy generated by the cutter.

‘Aha! Ninety per cent and...’

A perfectly square beam of energy, angled as the frame that projected it, stabbed down through the hulk. A flash of light as it met, and then further reflected lights as the beam met denser matter in the body of the agglomeration and atomised it.

‘And there we have it,’ said Plosk, with pleasure.

The beam cut out. A black rectangular hole had been made in the hulk’s skin, leading down. The edges of it glowed faintly. Plumes of white jetted into space, atmosphere leaking from the hulk.

‘You have answered my earlier question,’ said Ranial.

‘It would make a fine weapon,’ said Sorael.

Plosk nodded in agreement. ‘Just so, and indeed it operates on similar principles to the disruption fields built into your power weapons. But the manner in which the device attains the projection of the field forwards, the maintenance of its coherency so far out from the projectors, the safe exhaust of the excess energy generated as the matter is annihilated, the overall magnitude of the field, the smooth manner of its disintegration... Well,’ he said apologetically. ‘I could go on for some time. These are mysteries now known only to the Machine-God.’

‘We will uncover them,’ said Nuministon in his machine voice. ‘Given time.’

‘That we will, Magos Nuministon, that we will,’ said Plosk. ‘When our lord deems us worthy. And it is by such actions as this retrieval mission that we prove ourselves to be so.’

‘Brother Ranial, I believe you owe Adept Samin here a small apology,’ said Mastrik. He checked his clock. He turned around to face the other side of the engine-mount. There, shaded from the sun, was the majority of the taskforce. His hearts quickened as he took them all in; one hundred and sixty Terminators stood at the front. Few were the Space Marines of any

Chapter who had witnessed such a sight. Behind them, squads of power armoured brethren. The Novamarines quartered heraldry broke up their silhouettes, providing unexpected camouflage, whereas the blood-red of the Blood Drinkers was tinted deep mauve and obvious by the blue light of Jorso. In all, nearly four hundred Space Marines of two Chapters waited on the plain. Three Thunderfire cannons – two of the Novamarines, one of the Blood Drinkers – and five Devastator squads armed with anti-personnel heavy weapons were the extent of Battleforce Anvil's heavy support.

‘A fine gathering,’ said Sorael. ‘We will fight the enemy eye to eye, and it is glorious that it is so.’

By the sloping shaft, another Adeptus Mechanicus machine moved, a tracked vehicle carrying a giant spool of some material upon its back. Mastrik had never seen the like, but Plosk had assured him that the spool was wound with a road, a road which would go rigid once deployed, granting them easy entry to the depths of the hulk and thence to the killing zone.

‘As you see, my lords, you have your abilities, and we have ours,’ said Plosk.

‘Very impressive,’ said Ranial, ‘and far better than working our way through the hulk to the killing zone. I offer my apologies.’

‘We are ready, Lord Captain Galt,’ said Mastrik over his suit vox.

‘Give the order for your men to take up their positions,’ replied Galt. ‘The attack begins soon.’

Ten kilometres away, at the beachhead recently vacated by Lord Caedis, three squads of Novamarines Terminators and two of the Blood Drinkers spread out. Their role was to cover the main points of egress the genestealers might use to escape their depressurised roosts. The areas they began in were close to the edge of the hulk, bereft of atmosphere in the main, but the genestealers could scatter in any direction. They were to hold, await the return of the five Terminator squads and the Techmarines sealing the main ways deeper in and then advance once the roosts were

blown, and encourage on into the killing zone any genestealers for whom the loss of breathable air was not a sufficient spur. Captain Aresti commanded them now that Lord Caedis had stepped down.

Many levels down, in the last of the vessels the routes to the killing zone would run through, Sergeant Voldo and Squad Wisdom of Lucretius were hard at work. Voldo watched as a door, immobile since the time of Goge Vandire, ground out of its housing to seal a major intersection. The Techmarine accompanying the squad directed his servitors to unhook the mobile generator wired into the door panel's innards, and set himself to welding the door shut with his servo arm.

'Four minutes, and they will not be able to use this exit, brother-sergeant,' said the Techmarine.

'It is as the Lord of Man wills it, Brother Techmarine Estrellius,' said Voldo. The sergeant ran his map up and down the main way to the killing zone. Data transmission was still poor. Boosted relays were being installed throughout the tunnels to allow better communication with the fleet, but they would not be operational for some time.

Doors were being sealed all through this part of the hulk, others cut through bulkheads and hull walls, transforming a rat run of passages into three, long tunnels leading directly through the hulk into the cavern.

Things had been quiet, but recently there had been reports of a genestealer attack from Novamarines Squad Glorious Ruin. Every so often the noise of their guns reached Voldo's sensorium, the sounds of bolters reduced to a feeble popping by distance.

'The enemy stir,' said Astomar.

'Why now, I wonder,' said Militor. 'Is it an omen? Are they warned of what occurs?'

'I pray not,' said Voldo.

Estrellius stepped back from the door. 'I am done here.'

'Very well,' Voldo said. 'We go on to our next objective.'

Voldo scanned the feed from Eskerio's auspex. Excepting the small swarm of red dots around Squad Glorious Ruin's position, the only movements they could see were friendly. 'This is too easy,' he said, 'brothers, be on your guard.'

Sergeant Alanius stood in total darkness. The two remaining members of his squad a blur of grey slabs in his sensorium's heat vision, radioactive fog up to their waists, the heat leakage from their power plants illuminating the room with infrared light.

They had been assigned point duty, ranging ahead of Novamarines Terminator Squad Glorious Ruin, and guarding the next open way on the list of those they had to seal. This way, so Galt had planned, those squads accompanying the Techmarines could avoid ambush.

'This is no fit task,' said Azmael. 'Guarding a passageway that none will take.'

'Silence, brother,' said Alanius. 'We are under strength and are given a role fitting to our weakened state. This is the final of Squad Glorious Ruin's objectives. Once they have dealt with door ninety, then they will come here and seal this corridor, and we can join the greater battle.'

The breathing of Azmael and Tarael was harsh over the vox. The Thirst might have been sated by the Rite of Holos, giving them more control over their actions, but the blood drinking had wakened the battle-joy and they were desperate to fight.

'Caedis would not have put us here,' said Tarael bitterly. 'This Novamarines captain does not know the hearts and minds of Blood Drinkers.'

'Nor should he brother, better our secrets remain our own,' said Alanius.

'We should not be here,' said Tarael. 'Such sentry duty is demeaning.'

'I ordered silence, Brother Tarael. Captain Galt is in command, he works his resources as he sees fit,' said Alanius, but his rebuke was half-hearted.

His blood sang fiercely. Energised by the rite, he was as impatient for the fray as his squad mates.

Alanius glanced back at the door. It gaped open, the corridor beyond dark. In places the monochrome image in his helmet brightened with the radioactive heat-glow of the fog, but the corridor quickly went into black. The door opened automatically – unlike most of the systems on this vessel, it still functioned – and they could not seal it. They needed technical support for that.

‘We wait,’ said Alanius. He checked Squad Glorious Ruin’s position on the map. Icons leapt around the rendering of the hulk where they worked, the auspex carried by Azmael unsure. Background radiation here was high, and the device’s capabilities were compromised.

The blackness was utter. Each enhanced man was a world unto himself, walled off from the rest of the universe by thick armour.

‘Wait!’ said Azmael. ‘Brother-sergeant, the motion detector.’

Alarms pinged in their helmets. The locator beacons of Squad Glorious Ruin fizzed on the visor screens. Red dots swarmed around them.

‘Where did they come from?’ said Azmael.

‘It would be impossible to seal all the secret ways of a hulk like this,’ said Tarael. ‘This is a fool’s errand in more ways than one.’

The sounds of distant fighting reached them, amplified by the enhanced hearing the suits and their superior physiology granted them: the distinctive discharge of storm bolters, the crackling bangs of power fist energy fields annihilating matter, the screams of genestealers.

An icon depicting the skull and starburst of the Novamarines flickered and went out.

‘One of them has fallen,’ said Azmael.

‘We should go to their aid, then they will be able to more quickly seal this corridor, and we can be on our way to join Lord Caedis and the others,’ said Tarael.

Alanius considered Trael's proposal. If Squad Glorious Ruin fell, and their Techmarine died with them, the assault would be delayed, granting the genestealers more time in which to waken. He thought on it as dispassionately as he could, keeping his battle-joy on a tight rein. They had been ordered to remain here. But to what end? Trael was correct, to a degree. This corridor was a minor branching; its strategic value was low. Surely it would be better to ensure the safety of their Novamarines cousins? He licked his lips. He would seek guidance. 'Lord Caedis?' he tried. 'Lord Captain Soracl?' He tried to connect with the fleet, then the Novamarines. The relay system was not yet active. All his attempts were met with static. He tuned into Squad Glorious Ruin's frequency. He could hear their squad chatter, their battle chants and warnings to one another, but the sound was broken and when he attempted to speak with them, they did not hear.

Alanius felt a shudder of delicious anticipation at the battle's noise. His Chapter celebrated the violent side of their heritage. Unlike Sanguinius's other sons, they drank deeply of the stuff of life, seeking not to sate their unnatural appetites, but to provoke them. They channelled the Thirst, drawing upon its power, and it made them strong. The Blood Drinkers could control their urges this way, and were not as reckless as some of their brother Chapters. But the battle-joy gave counsel whether sought or not, and its advice was always the same: attack, attack, attack!

Alanius weighed this against the need to guard the corridor. The battle-joy won out. It always did.

He looked around him one last time, and made final consideration. 'Come,' he said. 'We will aid them, but you, Brother Azmael, will remain here.'

'Yes brother-sergeant.' There was disappointment in Azmael's assent. 'By Sanguinius, I shall do my duty.'

Alanius and Trael moved off, mag-lock boots clicking on the metal.

Alien eyes watched the Blood Drinkers depart. The genestealer had no name, and no conception of what a name was. Names are human things, and the habits of humans were irrelevant to it. But it understood their actions. Its quick mind, geared to purposes unintelligible to the human mind, saw its opportunity. The invaders were gone, drawn away by its kin, and the way was open into the deeper hulk. Only one of the interlopers remained, one soft entity cased in hard metal. The genestealer hissed at those accompanying it. Hard chitin rattled as the creatures unfurled themselves. The genestealer crept forward, driven by an intellect even greater than its own. The wishes of their broodlord were felt and understood by his family, they operated as one. The nearness of them, the touch of their minds on each other was their comfort and their strength. They advanced silently in the dark.

An alarm went off in Brother Azmael's helmet. His eyes whipped upward to where the auspex feed was displayed within his visor. Motion indicators blinked, dozens of them. The enemy was close, very close.

Azmael had time to voice a garbled cry for help before the first of them was on him, and then he was fighting for his life.

Sergeant Voldo caught Azmael's vox burst as a clatter of static and disrupted words.

'Brother Eskerio! Find me the source of that transmission.'

The corridor glared actinic white as Estrellius sealed another duct. Sparks leapt from the metal and danced across the floor.

'Sector 4.9.201,' said Eskerio, homing in on the source of the message instantly.

Voldo's onboard cogitator ran the message over and again, each time shaving away the layers of interference, until a voice leapt out of it.

'Brother Azmael, of the Blood Drinkers,' Voldo said. 'He is under attack.'

'I have him,' said Eskerio. The auspex feed shifted. The motion detector was operating at maximum range, the depiction of Azmael's struggle

spotty. There was no hiding the numbers attacking him. ‘There are between fifty and seventy xenos.’

‘He doesn’t stand a chance,’ said Astomar.

‘What were the orders for Squad Hesperion?’ asked Militor.

‘To guard that section, until the door could be reached and sealed by a Techmarine,’ said Voldo. ‘The doorway was allocated to Squad Glorious Ruin’s group. They must still be delayed. Any word on Brother-Sergeant Crastus?’

‘Negative, brother-sergeant,’ said Eskerio. ‘We are too far away now to know our brothers’ fates.’

‘When will the relays be operational?’ asked Militor.

‘I calculate soon, brothers,’ said Estrellius. ‘I must place a relay here. My brothers-in-the-forge will have placed most of the rest of the relay poles by now. They will not function until all are in place.’ He ordered a servitor to him and took a long metal stave topped with a bulbous device from it. Estrellius grasped it firmly and placed it upon the floor. He twisted his armoured hands in opposite directions around the relay’s activation mechanisms, and a spike shot from the end of the pole, burying itself in the floor. Estrellius touched further controls near the head, and the light atop it began a slow, red flashing.

‘I see only Azmael on the auspex,’ said Astomar. ‘Where are his brothers?’

‘They could be there, the radiation is high in that area, the auspex struggles to show us the truth,’ said Eskerio.

‘Brothers,’ said Estrellius. ‘I am done here. That is the last of my allotted tasks. We may rejoin the battlegroup.’

‘Let us go to the aid of Azmael on the way,’ said Voldo. ‘It is less than one kilometre. Brother Estrellius can seal the door, and if need be we can relieve Squad Glorious Ruin as we turn back. Azmael and his brothers aided us greatly, we owe him a debt of honour. Away, and swiftly now.’

Although as he said this, Voldo wondered if it was the same impetuosity he had long ago seen in the Knights of Blood that had endangered the Blood Drinkers.

Estrellius's servitors gathered up his gear, and the Techmarine fell in behind the Terminators. The group moved as quickly as they could down the buckled corridors of the ship. They had been assigned the deepest vessel in the chain of linked ships that Strikeforce Hammer would enter; those craft nearer the cavern would be tackled by squads from Anvil. The craft was a cruiser once of the Imperial Navy, lost long ago to the vagaries of space and the warp. Its prow rested atop another ship nearer the surface, the second route to the killing zone passing along most of its length before heading down through a hole they had earlier cut through the hull wall. Its compartments were distorted, the whole of the craft pushed out of true by the shifting mass around it. There was little power to be found, and no artificial gravity. Squad Hesperion was stationed further up the vessel, towards the prow. Squad Glorious Ruin, who had been assigned many of the doors in the ship above, were not much further on.

Voldo and his squad kept up a steady pace. All eyes strayed to the auspex, willing Azmael to survive. Seventy genestealers were stiff odds even for six Terminator-armoured brothers, but honour dictated they aid him.

‘Brothers!’ said Eskerio. ‘The genestealers.’

‘What is it, brother?’ asked Voldo.

The auspex motion sensor grew clearer as they drew closer to Azmael. Several blips were around the chalice and blood drop icon denoting the Blood Drinker, but others were streaming past him, down the open corridor.

‘What are they doing?’ said Militor.

‘They are escaping, brother, is it not clear?’ said Eskerio.

‘These are a cunning foe,’ said Astomar.

It took just over ten minutes to traverse the whole of the kilometre to Azmael's position. Surprisingly, he still lived. They hailed him as they came, urging him to fight harder.

Voldo came first, bolter spitting fire. His suit light illuminated a wall of writhing chitin. Azmael was hidden by a press of genestealers. He had been forced back from his doorway and into a room. There he had taken refuge in the entrance to another corridor, one choked with wreckage. From there he could fight the genestealers one at a time, but he could not stop the greater part of their number running through the unsealed door. Voldo's gun wavered between the stampede of aliens scuttling into the open way and those attacking the Blood Drinker. He aimed at those attacking Azmael, and blew apart two from behind. Those fleeing hissed at him, but did not stop.

The other Novamarines joined him, emerging into the room and fanning out. Bolter fire rang out, muzzle flash whiting out their sensoriums' various image compensators. Voldo deactivated his heat vision and light intensification. He watched genestealers smashed into pieces by the short-lived bursts of light from their guns. Azmael emerged fighting, lightning claws flashing. He wheeled and swung his arms, cutting down two.

Squad Wisdom of Lucretius turned their guns on the fleeing genestealers. Brother Astomar made his way around the periphery of the room, pointed his heavy flamer into the corridor and filled it with promethium.

There were seven genestealers left. Trapped by the Space Marines, they attacked with unrestrained ferocity. Two were blown into shreds before they reached Voldo's squad. The fight became a close-quarters struggle. Voldo's power sword cut one across the chest, another fell to Militor's power fist, its head crushed with a bang. Militor dropped another with a bolt. Astomar fended the sixth off, batting at its darting claws with his

powered gauntlet, and then Azmael was with him, claws emerging from the creature's chest.

The remaining genestealer died quickly.

'I burned half a dozen at least,' said Astomar.

'Many more escaped,' said Eskerio. Red dots swarmed away down the corridor, disappearing outside the auspex's effective range.

Azmael's armour dripped with black alien blood. Marks were scored into the metal.

'Your armour, cousin,' said Estrellius. He went to the Blood Drinker.

'It functions.'

'You have minor damage. Come, I will aid you.'

'What happened here?' demanded Voldo.

'My brothers went to aid your brothers, Veteran-Sergeant Voldo.'

'In defiance of your orders,' said the Novamarines sergeant.

'Sergeant Alanius sought guidance, but none was forthcoming. He acted upon his own initiative.'

'Thanks to this initiative, fifty or so xenos have escaped our trap, and you nearly paid with your life.'

'I do my duty,' said Azmael. 'Do not challenge me as to how I fulfil it!' Azmael's voice was angry. He shrugged off the attentions of Estrellius. 'Enough! My armour serves.'

They are no better than the Knights of Blood, thought Voldo.

'Brother,' said Estrellius. 'All relays are active. Communications coming online in three, two, one...'

Their helmets filled with the familiar chatter of active operations. Squads reported from all over the hulk, status updates flying through the relay system, up to a booster on the comms-service and then on to the fleet.

'Relays active,' said Captain Galt. Carried by the devices of the Adeptus Mechanicus, his voice was clear. 'All hatches and doorways sealed.'

Strikeforce Hammer of the Emperor to regroup and await detonation of roost walls.’

‘Lord Captain Aresti, I request an audience,’ said Voldo.

‘Captain Aresti,’ said the Fifth Company commander. ‘What can I do for you, brother?’

‘We have had an... incident, here. Fifty plus xenos have escaped the perimeter. I request permission to mount a search and destroy mission.’

‘As do I,’ said Alanius as he and Trael strode into the room. ‘Chapter Master Caedis, lord, allow me this mission.’

‘Lord Caedis is occupied, cousin,’ said Aresti. ‘You are to take direction from me, by his order. All elements of the Hammer strikeforce are under my command.’

‘Lord captain,’ said Alanius. ‘Then it is you I humbly petition.’

‘You fought with us bravely on our first mission, Sergeant Alanius, but it is your abandonment of your position that leads us to this pass,’ said Voldo.

‘Your brothers live because of it,’ countered Alanius. ‘And their mission is fulfilled. You cannot criticise us for success.’

‘I am sure they could have held their own, which is more than I can say for the lone brother left here.’

‘Do not test me, cousin...’ growled Alanius.

‘Enough!’ interrupted Aresti. ‘Sergeant Voldo, I grant your request, and that of Cousin Alanius. If he truly is at fault – and his efforts did aid our brothers, do not forget that – then what better way to atone? You may detach yourself from our drive and head into the deeper hulk. Fifty genestealers loose is unconscionable. Destroy them.’

‘Yes, lord captain.’

‘Captain Aresti out.’

Voldo and Alanius faced each other.

‘There you have it,’ said Alanius. ‘We fight together once again.’ His breathing and voice returned to normal. ‘And I for one recognise this as an honour for my brothers. Do you?’

Voldo remained suspicious. ‘I have fought with others of the line of Sanguinius before, Sergeant Alanius. It did not end well.’

‘Which Chapter?’

‘The Knights of Blood.’

‘Ah,’ said Alanius. ‘Our Chapters are brothers, true, but brothers can be different.’

‘They fought without consideration.’

‘With valour?’

Voldo paused.

‘Yes, with great valour.’

‘Then that is the least you can expect from us.’

Azmael spoke, calmer now. ‘Could the genestealers have drawn us off purposefully? Did they mean to escape?’

‘You learn the ways of this foe quickly,’ said Voldo. ‘One cannot discount the possibility, which suggests this corridor has more value than we assign it. Brother Estrellius! Inform Brother-Sergeant Crastus that he and his might return to the strikeforce. You will seal this door behind us! Do not let any other pass. Then return to the strikeforce yourself.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant,’ said Estrellius.

Next Voldo sent a message across the Space Marine’s linked comms net. ‘All brothers, be wary when passing door ninety-one, sector five. There is an entry way there which we were unaware of.’ He gave a brief description of the action his squad had been embroiled in. ‘Can it be sealed, Brother Estrellius?’

‘A ventilation shaft, I think,’ said the Techmarine. ‘I am sure I can render it useless.’

‘Good, good,’ said Voldo. ‘And now,’ he said, dropping his vox-channel to the two squads, ‘we hunt.’ Voldo walked through the door and into the cramped corridor beyond. His suit light shone from radioactive mist.

‘We go into the dark once more,’ said Alanius joyfully. ‘Look to your brothers. This will be a hard fight.’

At the beachhead, Aresti’s aides counted in the returning Terminator squads and their Techmarines and directed them to their allotted places. They would soon be all back, then the venting of the genestealer roosts’ atmospheres could begin, and so Aresti was deep in conversation with First Captain Galt.

‘Lord Caedis has gone, brother-captain,’ said Aresti.

‘It is not unexpected,’ said Galt. ‘As I told you, he intimated to me this might happen. But gone where?’

‘I do not know. He and his squad, and their Reclusiarch. Squad Vincus saw them depart the beachhead.’

‘His other men all remain as he promised?’

‘Yes, brother, all bar his bodyguard. The Blood Drinkers look to the Novamarines for guidance and command. Lord Caedis himself ordered them to follow our lead, then I lost contact.’

‘Where did he go, I wonder?’ said Galt thoughtfully. ‘He spoke of a rite, surely one of combat.’

‘I do not know where he went, brother. To the nominal north and then down. They must be deep in the hulk. Their locators no longer show, even with the aid of the booster relay.’

Galt paused. ‘If the other Blood Drinkers remain, then you have enough brothers to fulfil your objective. There is some strangeness to the actions of Caedis, but he is Lord Chapter Master of a loyal and glorious order. We must trust that he has his reasons, and that they are sound reasons. No doubt he has some objective in mind that will benefit us all. Put him from

your mind, you must prepare. Captain Mastrik and Captain Sorael are nigh to their positions. Atmospheric venting will begin soon.'

'Then matters proceed smoothly, and to timetable,' said Aresti.

'We have not won the war yet, brother,' said Galt. 'I urge a time of caution, later there will be time enough for valour, and we will slaughter the foe in the name of the Emperor.'

'So let it be,' said Aresti.

'I will be in touch before I order the charges detonated,' said Galt. 'Look to your wargear, for in it lies the salvation of humankind.'



CHAPTER 14

The Ascent of Holos

Caedis and his companions forged onward, far out from the beachhead. Guinian guided them, taking an unerring course to the north pole of the hulk, before directing them downwards towards the heart of the *Death of Integrity*.

Caedis's mind fractured as the effects of the Calix Cruentes wore off. His sense of place grew unreliable, and he found himself lost between two worlds once more. He looked to his feet, and the ground beneath them changed. One minute he strode, Terminator shod, the hard deck-plating of the derelict vessels under his feet, the next power armour boots traversed the stone-strewn ground of San Guisiga. He wore a helmet, then he did not, only the mask grille of the helm in place feeding him oxygen, as the hot suns of his home world beat down on his unprotected head. The suit of power armour he wore in this other place was unfamiliar to him. And then it was unfamiliar no more, as Caedis's mind was subsumed into that of the long-dead saviour of the Blood Drinkers.

Holos was cut free from time, for he stood upon the brink of the Black Rage himself, and was thus dimly aware of Caedis, as he was dimly aware

of the others that had accompanied him before and accompanied him now. This was the first time he had made the ascent of Mount Calicium, and it was the nineteenth. Holos was only as aware of this as he was aware of the souls of the brothers who accompanied him; a vague sensation of déjà vu, nothing more. This perturbing sensation was only one among many.

Holos/Caedis left the rough road he had followed since he had left the fortress. He turned eastwards, towards the rising of San Guisiga's second sun. There was no path, for none dared try the climb that his dream had told him he must attempt.

The volcano was slumped in on itself. An eruption had brought much of the mountain down, leaving one side as the peak. The summit jagged up over the collapsed cone, giving it the appearance of a broken tooth. Foul vapours issued from fumaroles and rolled down the slopes. Mount Calicium radiated a dangerous heat.

Holos/Caedis stared at the volcano for a long time, until both suns were high in the sky. Realising he could wait no longer, Holos began his ascent of Mount Calicium once more.

The wind of San Guisiga was hot. His power armour did its best to cool him, but his bare face was tortured by it. Holos's skin's glands were atrophied, many of his pores closed. This change to the epidermis was not one originally sought by the Emperor when he crafted the gene-seed of the Adeptus Astartes. It was a mutation of the Weaver, the mucranoid gland, unique to the Blood Drinkers, turning a gift that should have helped to a hindrance. There was no treating it, it was their own particular quirk of the Flaw. Lacking sebum as well as sweat, Holos's brothers all bore its mark; the dry, insufficiently nourished skin of the Blood Drinkers.

Holos stumbled, he felt hands upon him, phantom limbs that he could not see. He pushed them aside angrily. He must complete his climb alone.

San Guisiga's suns burned bright. Noon came. The red giant, Krov A, was a baleful presence, washing the world with angry red light. Its white dwarf companion, Krov B, was a point of light the size of a fingernail,

many times smaller but brighter by far than its dominant partner. At this time of year the two suns were close in the sky, a handspan between them. The warmth they gave was negligible. San Guisiga's ferocious heat was provided by the tidal forces of its large moon, Haemos, pulling at its guts.

Churning geology wracked the planet with endless earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The planet was phenomenally active, its surface was remade once every ten thousand years, sheeted over by fresh rock spewing from its many volcanoes, volcanoes like Mount Calicium.

The mountain shuddered. Rocks pattered down its steep flanks. Holos stopped and looked up, watching for the first signs of avalanche. There were none, and after a time he began again.

Holos clambered upward. One hand in front of the other, power armour and enhanced muscles working as one.

Periodically he looked up into the burning orange sky, wary of the astorgai who made their eyries in the crags above.

Caedis was Holos, and he thought Holos's thoughts. Caedis lived in Holos's mind. Caedis was aware of the hero's memories and his thoughts were shaped by them, but they remained frustratingly distant, for Holos had experienced them, not he. As Holos settled into the rhythm of his ascent, he drew into himself, and he remembered with the sharpness that only a Space Marine can experience. Caedis went with him, seeing the fabled dream Holos had had of a cowed, winged figure on the night-time surface of San Guisiga. It raised a skeletal arm, and pointed to the pinnacle of Mount Calicium. The volcano blew no fire, but others did; drops of molten rock spewing upwards and dropping down in fountain arcs all along the horizon. The clouded sky burned with their wrath, but Mount Calicium was silent, hard black against the inferno torrents of its brothers.

The figure had said nothing to Holos, but his message was clear – the answer to the troubles that gripped the Chapter lay at the peak of the volcano.

Caedis saw blood and slaughter as Holos remembered the times before the rite became established. The savagery of the Chapter's large Death Company, the constant desire for death and sacrifice to sate the Thirst that bedevilled every brother, their stoic resistance. Their lapses. Holos's own lapse.

Again and again the woman's terrified face loomed large in Holos's mind, a loop of fear that ended with teeth tearing flesh and the hot gush of blood.

Holos felt shame, and Caedis felt it with him, as did the other shades of men not yet born who accompanied the hero. Shame for her death and excitement, and redoubled shame at that excitement. Round and round Holos's head, on a poisonous Möbius strip of memory that had no beginning or end, shame and excitement chased each other.

Caedis saw other fragments of Holos's life: the onset of the Thirst that would not be alleviated, the first tremblings of the Rage; the Chapter Council's ban that denied Holos's request to climb the mountain. The collusion of Reclusiarch Shanandar in Holos's escape and secret journey. Some of these things Caedis had long imagined himself, hoping to capture them in glass or stone. Many instances formed the subjects of his glass panels. Caedis had not seen things truly, how could he? He had not been there. Now he was, and he saw how much lesser the reality of it was. He saw how Holos doubted himself, how furtive his escape.

Memories of confrontation and furious words in the Chapter council chamber dissolved, the deep dishonour of Holos's dismissal from there by Ganlan Sang, the Chapter Master in those dark days. This troubled Holos even more than the face of the terrified woman and the taste of her blood.

Holos turned his concentration to climbing. Will was the greatest weapon against the Thirst, concentration the expression of will.

On Holos went, recreating his climb, this moment in time two thousand years in the past reinvigorated and played anew through the medium of

Caedis's soul. The suns grew hotter. Then came the First Period of Shadow, as Haemos dragged its apricot body across the sky, blotting out the sunlight in its twice-daily eclipse of the suns. Hot winds blew hard when this happened, drying Holos's meagre sweat to salt on his face. The shadow was welcome, and Holos went on with renewed determination. He reached the top of a bluff of rock, a harder protrusion in the unstable slag of the volcano's cone.

Atop the rock he encountered his first astorgai. It attacked him without hesitation, swiping at him with its pinion-talons.

The monster was small, a fledgling, although its pinion-talons were still deadly. It had yet to grow its dexterion-claws, those small maniples that grow from a pubescent astorgai's chest. It hopped forward on its single foot, and slashed its hardened feathers at Holos. They hissed through the air towards his face.

The Space Marine snatched his power sword from its scabbard. He dodged backward, bringing himself dangerously close to the edge of the outcrop. The astorgai laughed and cursed in a tumble of words, some of which were recognisably human. The astorgai were curious creatures. No one was sure if they were truly sentient, or animals keyed into the psychic space of the warp. How many of them there were, where they nested, how they bred – all was unknown. There were certain ruins on Haemos's forbidden, poisoned surface that hinted that the astorgai might be the devolved remnants of a civilised xenos species, but that was hotly disputed by the Chapter and Adeptus Mechanicus xenologists both. All that was certain was that they had been on San Guisiga longer than men, and had defied every attempt to exterminate them. To the Space Marines who made their home on San Guisiga they were a nuisance, to the small baronies the Blood Drinkers drew their recruits from they were a deadly menace.

Holos ducked a pass of the astorgai's wing, the razor-sharp keratin of its pinion-talons rattling as they whisked overhead. With the economy of long

practice, Holos stepped inside the arc of the weaponed wings and skewered the astorgai child upon his power sword. The weapon passed into its flimsy body with minimal resistance. Smoke issued from the wound under its prominent breastbone. The thing's beak clacked once, its hard, forked tongue hissing alien words of hate at him, then its three eyes slid shut, its wings folded, and it died.

The creature slipped from Holos's sword. He did not spare it another glance.

Caedis shoved at the arm gripping him. The astorgai lay behind him. He had triumphed. He had to climb!

'My lord! My lord! It is I, Reclusiarch Mazrael.'

Caedis's eyes refocused. The mountain was gone. He was no longer Holos. He wore his Terminator armour. *Gladius Rubeum* was in his hand, holographic scenes of old victories playing on the faces of its blade. At his feet a genestealer lay dead in a nest of leaves, the point of his sword through its heart. He glanced up. A riot of blue-black foliage crowded him.

'Brother? Mazrael?' Caedis's voice sounded wrong to him. His throat was dust-dry and the words that had come from it similarly so. But it was more than that. Caedis had expected to hear the voice of Brother Holos, not his own. 'I dreamed, brother, a waking dream.'

Mazrael gripped Caedis's shoulder guard. 'I know, lord.' The vox clicked as Mazrael shifted their conversation to a private channel. In his confused state, it did not seem significant to the Chapter Master.

'Why do I see the trial of Holos? Why not the travails of Sanguinius? I do not understand.' He said.

'The Black Rage blesses you, my lord,' said Mazrael. 'Those great heroes of our Chapter do not see what the other scions of Sanguinius see. They are few, but they are gloriously blessed!'

'To see Sanguinius's final moments is not a blessing?'

Mazrael shook his head, his voice cracked with emotion; tears, and laughter. ‘No lord – do you not understand? While our brothers see the cause of our damnation, we witness the moment of our salvation – the climb of Brother Holos, the very thing that set us free! This is why we, lord, among all of the sons of the Blood Angels, feel hope. This is the greatest hope of all, and you are party now to its final mystery. Rejoice lord, rejoice as you witness the events that saved us!’

Caedis looked around the room they were in. His Terminators stood easy, the gravity here was functional and only slighter higher than Terran norms. They were in a domed garden room. The glazing of the roof was all broken, part of the framework pushed in by the ruined hull of another ship. But somehow the room’s miniature sun glowed still, water flowed through a recycling loop, and the garden’s plants had run wild. To waken to this strange oasis from Holos’s climb was doubly disorienting.

The plants had twined into one another, stems merging and forming hollow, cell-like compartments of wood. The room was crammed to half its height with thicket. The Terminators had forced their way through. Signs of combat scarred the place, flames guttered in the foliage, and many dead genestealers lay on the floor or caught among the branches.

‘How long will I remain with you? How long until I rejoin Holos?’

Mazrael shifted his grip upon Caedis’s armour. ‘I do not know, brother. Since Holos’s time, only a few brothers have relived his climb. Of those brothers who succumb to the Black Rage in our Chapter, the majority see things as all of Sanguinius’s sons do, they might get a glimpse of the living Sanguinius, or feel the pain of his death. Others more favoured might relive the whole of his death combat against the Warmaster. But for the most part, they feel only his anger, or his rage at Horus’s betrayal of their father, nothing more. But there have been those who have not witnessed the ruin of man’s dream, but trodden in the footsteps of hope, climbing with Holos to the source of our salvation. You are the eighteenth,

the eighteenth in two thousand years, lord. You are privy to the ultimate mystery of our Chapter.'

'What do they find, at the end, these brothers that follow in Holos's wake?' said Caedis. Using his voice was painful. He swallowed, no saliva came, and the sensation of his muscles contracting was like glass in his gullet.

Mazrael shook his head. 'None know. All die.'

Caedis closed his eyes behind his helmet visor. He sagged and nodded. Of course.

'Will you rest, lord?'

'No. I must climb, climb to the very summit of Mount Calicium.'

'Very well.' Mazrael signalled to the others that they would go on. They pushed through the vegetation, glass from the long-shattered dome crunching under their armoured feet.



CHAPTER 15

Fear the Alien

The Adeptus Mechanicus road into the hulk went downwards at a steep angle. Its surface was spongy but otherwise firm, the consistency of it unchanging whether it covered solid metal or bridged broad canyons. It was not of any metal that Mastrik knew; nevertheless, when the Adeptus Mechanicus advised the battle-brothers to activate the mag-locks on their boots to better secure themselves, they found the road anchored them in place well enough.

The road went down in a dead straight line for several kilo-metres, towards where the cavern lay. It had been carefully chosen, the Adeptus Astartes banking on the genestealers heading for the deepest atmosphere-bearing chamber they could. There, rather than the safety they craved, the genestealers would find only death.

The army descended twenty brothers abreast. They chanted their hymnals as they went, the songs of two Chapters clashing on the airwaves. Techmarines and Mechanicus adepts set relay beacons at intervals on the walls, linking the force to the fleet. The technology the Adeptus Mechanicus used was potent, almost scouring the angry roar of Jorso from their communications entirely.

The shaft and its road ended in a new airlock some fifty or so metres out from the cavern where Battleforce Anvil was to stand its ground. The airlock had been attached to the side of an alien freighter by the Adepts of Mars, in order to keep the atmosphere in the cavern. A road wide enough for the Space Marines to march three abreast was being cut on the other side of the airlock. Mastrik ordered his men to halt while the work was finished. He and Soraël went over the images of the chamber and reviewed the marching order of their men. A vanguard of seven Terminator squads were to go first to guard against ambush, followed by the battleforce's Devastator squads. This would allow them to spread out quickly to advantageous firing positions.

Twenty minutes later, Plosk informed them that the airlock and final passageway were complete. In batches of forty, the Space Marines began to pass into the hulk cavern.

Epistolary Raniel, Captain Soraël, and Captain Mastrik were among the very first through, preceded by the guard of Terminators. Half a dozen Techmarines stood behind them; their role would be to finish the tunnels prepared by Strikeforce Hammer.

The airlock chamber was roughly skinned with a soft plastic that had bonded itself to the walls. The Mechanicus had not bothered with atmosphere extractors. The entire force would be through in six batches, and the volume of air in the cavern was so great that the loss of a few hundred cubic metres was immaterial. Thus air rushed into the temporary airlock with a thunderclap as the doors to the cavern were opened. When the next group came through, it would rush into space.

Frost rimed the Space Marines' battleplate as the gas condensed on vacuum-chilled metal, fogging their helmet lenses. Mastrik willed his armour to dissipate some of its power plant's excess heat through its outer shell, and his vision presently cleared. They went out into the huge space of the cavern, Terminators first. Then the officers, who stood to one side as

the Techmarines marched out and down onto the cavern floor in the wake of the Terminators. The Terminators escorted the Techmarines across the cave to where they would cut two entryways, the third tunnel's mouth already existent, being a rent in the wall of the cavern.

The airlock closed. Two minutes later it opened again. Four squads of Devastators came through, and headed to various vantage points on the cavern wall. They bounded upward relative to Mastrik's position, pulling themselves easily along in the low gravity.

Mastrik's bodyguard, and that of Sorael, waited at a distance as the three officers surveyed their battleground. Mastrik's sensorium thrummed with data, too much to be properly displayed within his helmet's display. He carried a supplementary auspex on the outside of his suit. It was plugged directly into his Terminator armour, drawing from its power and interfacing with the suit's cogitator. Mastrik held this device up, using its screen to display a broader view of the cavern than his helmet could accommodate.

He ran the auspex over the cavern, his eyes darting between the graphical representation and the cave, his enhanced mind comparing the two. As the Imagifer had predicted, the far wall was almost entirely taken up by the side of an immense, alien vessel. The part of it visible was several hundred metres long and two hundred high. More of it lay below and above them, inconceivably huge. Panels had come away from the body in a few places, exposing the superstructure beneath, but in the main it was sound. Where paint had survived, faded stripes of yellow and green that must have been garish once crossed the hull. Blocky alien glyphs covered a portion of it. The side of the cavern the Space Marines occupied was also as depicted by the Adeptus Mechanicus's device. A large asteroid made up the majority of the wall. It leaned into the alien vessel high above to form a ceiling with a steep apex. Lower down, its irregular body bulged inwards, creating a choke point roughly two-thirds of the way into the

cavern from the airlock. The cavern widened out beyond this, in the manner of a true cave, but even at its narrowest extent the floor was seventy metres across.

The rock of the asteroid was relatively smooth; the rest of the wall it was embedded in was not, comprising a number of smaller craft and pieces of debris jammed against each other. This part of the cavern presented a jumble of jutting spars, square caves and ledges. It was directly opposite the tunnel mouths opening into the cavern, and it was in this three-dimensional maze that a number of the combined Chapters' Devastator squads took up station.

The tunnel mouths – two now being cut as Mastrik watched – were towards the bottom of the cavern. But to see the disposition of the Adeptus Astartes forces, and indeed the cavern itself, in terms of up and down would be a mistake. The centre of the agglomeration, and hence the pull of its weak gravity, lay at an angle four degrees steeper than the Adeptus Mechanicus' entry tunnel, but the gravity field of the hulk was so weak as to be almost negligible. The agglomeration was large in size, but its cumulative mass, filled as it was with many cavities, was low. There was a 'downward' gravitational force, but if a Space Marine were to fall from his perch above the airlock, it would have taken him minutes to reach the floor.

Mastrik snapped off his auspex. 'The Imagifer Maxiumus's representation of the cavern is almost one hundred per cent accurate, Brother-Captain Galt,' said Mastrik.

Galt replied, his signal conveyed by the lines of booster poles laid by the Adeptus Mechanicus and Techmarines. His voice was clear, but thrummed still, the signal waves perturbed by the uneven power outputs of the hulk's functional reactors. 'Good. Have your brothers take up position. Strikeforce Hammer has sealed the corridors on the upper levels and gathers for the attack.'

‘Our own men go to their tasks here, cousin-captain,’ said Sorael.

‘The tunnel mouths are being prepared,’ said Mastrik. ‘The ways within opened and all necessary escape points in the lower fifth of the three tunnels are in the process of being sealed.’

Information to that effect was flowing in from all over the hulk to the fleet and the captains in the cave. The cavern teams’ tunnel missions were going well. Flaring light from plasma cutters lit the tunnel mouths like fire in dragons’ dens.

‘Look at this place,’ said Ranial. ‘I have not experienced such a hulk before. The scale of it is impressive. It is no wonder that the Adepts of Mars wish to plunder it.’

‘They will be able to soon, and with my blessing, for now they marshal their resources on the surface. They will enter the hulk from the cavern, but for now this is our concern alone,’ said Galt.

‘Have there been any enemy contacts, brother?’ asked Mastrik.

‘Captain Aresti reported a breakout of genestealers from sector seventeen. Sergeant Voldo is in pursuit.’

‘A breakout? Surely they lack the intellect for such behaviour, cousin,’ said Sorael.

‘Do not underestimate the genestealers, captain,’ said Ranial. ‘Their minds are alien, but powerful, and there is something...’ he trailed away.

‘Brother Ranial?’

Ranial stirred himself. ‘Nothing. Nothing as yet. I feel something, perhaps, a greater mind. It is hard to tell. The warp is confused in such a place, so much history lies upon it, so much death. These places are the houses of ghosts and phantoms. I will monitor the situation.’

The third group of Space Marines were entering the cavern. The cave was coming alive to the movement of transhumans in brightly coloured armours.

Sorael bowed his head. 'With your permission, Captain Galt, Captain Mastrik, I will make my way to my own position.' Sorael had been given oversight of the far end of the cavern, the pocketed area part closed-off by the asteroid.

'Be aware, brothers of two Chapters,' said Galt. 'We will not have found every way into the cave. We do not know the location of every genestealer roost. The enemy is legion. Be on your guard.'

'As ever, lord,' said Sorael. He quoted the Codex Astartes, 'The enemies of men are many, our vigilance cannot cease for a moment.'

'That is so, captain of the Blood Drinkers, that is so.'

Forty minutes later, and the tech-priests confirmed that all doors marked for sealing had been sealed. Two new tunnel mouths gaped lips of raw metal in the skin of the alien ship. Three twisting ways through half a dozen major ships and masses of lesser debris were ready. Each sported spurs leading off to the five genestealer roosts. The last stragglers of Hammer rejoined the main force near the surface, some twenty kilometres away from Battleforce Anvil. The Techmarines of Anvil re-emerged from the tunnels back into the cavern and made their way to Mastrik's position. There they saw to the siting of their Thunderfire cannons and prepared their servitor drones for combat. Everything was in place. The cavern stilled, and a peculiar peace fell over the space.

'Captain Galt, Battleforce Anvil is prepared,' reported Mastrik.

'The Hammer is ready to strike,' said Aresti.

'All demolition teams stand ready to detonate on my mark,' ordered Galt.

On the surface, five demolition teams. Comprised of Adeptus Mechanicus servitors, they were guarded by the few novitiate Scout Space Marines accompanying the two Chapters, clad in space suits as their bodies were not yet ready for power armour.

Each team's site differed, and their equipment was suited accordingly. At site Alpha, a large laser weapon stood poised to burn its way through

one hundred and fifty metres of hulk. At Beta, shaped charges were attached to the skin of the hulk, only a metre or so from the roosting genestealers on the other side. And so on, each breaching method designed for its particular spot on the agglomeration's surface, each one with the exact same purpose in mind – to rupture the hulk and vent the atmosphere of the roosts into space. The teams retreated to surface armoured craft, or took off in their shuttles, or stood by drilling rigs, and waited breathlessly.

‘All demolition teams!’ Galt’s words rang out across space. ‘Prepare to vent atmosphere in three, two, one, mark!’

At five places, three differing methods of breaching the hulk were activated. The explosives were the most rapid. Sheets of metal peeled away in short-lived fire bursts and wheeled into space. Then the laser-cut hull sections. The result was the same, white geysers of flash-frozen gas rushing into space.

The officers of the Adeptus Astartes watched as their auspexes detected a burst of sudden movement in the roosts.

Captain Aresti’s forward group was stationed in a large chamber at the head of the corridor leading down to the roost designated ‘Perdition’. At their post, they felt the rumble of the detonation through the ceramite of their Terminator plate and their minds sharpened. At first, there was no sign the breaching had been a success. Then scrips attached to their armour wafted as the air in the hulk stirred. The current rose quickly to a howling gale. The noise of it was muted within Aresti’s Terminator armour, its sensorium warning him of the air’s flight with a persistent pinging.

On the auspex, the roost chamber came alive with red motion indicators.

‘Roosts are active,’ he said. ‘Prepare.’

With satisfaction he imagined the genestealers coming awake, fighting over one another to get away as their precious air was drawn away, scrabbling for the exits. Not all of them would make it; some would be

sucked out into space by decompression where they would perish. Aresti wondered if the genestealers knew fear. He prayed it was the case, such wicked things should feel what their victims felt.

Further alarm chimes sounded in his helmet.

‘They come!’ shouted Brother Lucello of Squad Blazing Dawn.

‘Stand ready!’ ordered Aresti. The auspex showed a crowd of red dots coming up the corridor leading down to the roost. ‘Wait until they are in the corridor before opening fire!’

The Terminators formed into a line. They raised their weapons. The whine of assault cannon barrels rotating up to firing speed cut over the roar of escaping air.

The genestealers came out into the corridor, as sudden as bats scared from their cave. Bowed, crooked backs crested with high knobbls jostled one another as the genestealers stampeded, their multiple arms held up protectively under their bellies. They turned as one, like a flock of birds in flight, down the corridor leading to the cavern. They came on and on, an endless flood of shining blue chitin and lurid, purple flesh.

‘Fire!’ ordered Aresti.

Nine storm bolters and two assault cannons gave voice. The howl of the wind was lost under a storm of explosions. A swathe of genestealers were cut down, falling as crops fall before the harvester. Craters the size of men’s heads marred their exoskeletons, their innards burst outwards as if as desperate to escape as the genestealers were. Lines of bright fire stabbed out from the assault cannons as tracer rounds helped their bearers draw a bead on their targets, although in truth this simple aid was not required, and nor was that of the suits’ sensoriums. There were so many genestealers that it was impossible to miss. But as many as the Terminators mowed down, twice as many fled down the corridor.

Something changed. A portion of the flock turned, peeling off from the mass of their comrades. Hissing, their long tubular tongues waving in the

air, they rushed the Terminator line, claws snapping.

Ten, then twenty, then three dozen fell. The stream of genestealers escaping the roost had split in two, half going down the tunnel to the killing zone, the other charging the Terminators. It was a good thirty metres across the chamber to the Terminator line. The genestealers tumbled headfirst, heads exploding, limbs blown free. A few took the bolts and did not slow. They came closer, though their wounds were terrible. Not a single one made it within grasping distance. Their bodies piled up so high that they were forced to clamber over one another, and still they died.

Suddenly, the second stream ceased. A wall of dead xenos lay across the chamber, blocking the Terminators' line of fire to the fleeing aliens.

Almost as if they planned it, thought Aresti.

He ordered his adepts forward, but by the time they had reached the pile of dead and pushed their way through, the stampede had become a trickle of stragglers. His squads loosed shots after these as they fled, killing some. The auspex's motion detector feeds calmed. The rash of red spots moved off down the corridor.

'Squad Novum's Expanse, head into the brood chamber and eliminate any remaining genestealers,' ordered Aresti. 'Squad Blazing Dawn, finish off any wounded and prepare to follow me. Phase two of our mission is done.'

Aresti checked the datafeeds from the other squads in Strikeforce Hammer, and called up the squad sergeants under his command one by one. All reported similar experiences – genestealers in flight, some diversionary or protective tactics at all roost entrances, many dead xenos. Strikeforce Hammer had sustained three casualties, only one dead, and they were being recovered without incident. He looked around the chamber at the piles of aliens. His sensorium highlighted each corpse in bright green as it counted them. Fifty-nine dead or dying.

Squad Novum's Expanse pushed on into the roost chamber. Blazing Dawn's warriors went from alien to alien, caving in the heads of those that still twitched with their power fists.

Reports came in from elsewhere. Altogether they had slaughtered one hundred and thirty-six of the genestealers, not counting those that had been annihilated in the venting episode, or that were wounded and had fallen further on. Only the entrances to the upper three roosts had been so covered. The other two were too far into the hulk's body. Space Marines deployed there would potentially have been caught between two forces of genestealers. Those roosts had been mined, but they had been allowed to empty without the numbers of aliens being thinned by direct fire. The full brunt of those roosts would fall upon Anvil.

'The genestealers come,' Aresti signalled to Galt and Mastrik. 'A good tally has been made here. We advance.'

'Lord captain.' Sergeant Kallat of Novum's Expanse spoke. He was close by the reactor the roost had been warmed by, and his vox signal suffered. His voice broke up.

'Say again brother,' said Aresti.

'...signs of hundreds of genestealers... I...'

The emissions of the reactor killed the transmission, but Aresti understood.

'Brother Lucello, give me an estimate of overall numbers killed or fled from this roost.'

'Around one hundred and fifty, lord captain.'

Kallat came back online. 'Captain, take a look at this.' The sergeant's suit feed sprang up in a box on the captain's visor. Suit light played over the inside of the roost, lines of interference tracking over it. The ragged breach led up into space above. Genestealer corpses floated past and banged into the walls. There was a muzzle flash in the background. Kallat's suit pict-feed revealed another round hole in the wall.

‘An altern... exit...’ said Kallat. The picture jumped.

‘That was not there when the soundings were taken,’ said Aresti.

‘Brother Galt, come in, Brother-Captain Galt.’

‘Brother-Captain Aresti.’

‘Brother-captain, something is amiss, Sergeant Kallat found this alternative exit from roost Perdition.’ He sent a recording of Kallat’s feed with a thought. ‘This is a new channel, not present on the...’ A rush of static blasted Aresti’s ears. He winced, and thought the volume down. ‘Brother Galt? Brother Galt?’ The loud interference of the sun had returned.

‘Brother-captain?’ Chaplain Odon, assigned to Strikeforce Hammer, and stationed by roost ‘Vile Nest’, spoke. His signal crackled explosively.

‘What occurs?’

Aresti could not answer for a moment. Only one answer presented itself to him, and it was unpalatable. ‘The relay net. It is down.’

‘Brother Voldo, we have lost the booster signal,’ said Eskerio. ‘We are no longer in contact with Hammer or Anvil. We are not close enough to reactor five yet for that to be the explanation.’

‘A malfunction of the Adepts of Mars’ equipment then,’ said Alanius. ‘We are fools to rely on technology where our own strength alone will prevail.’

‘Aye!’ shouted Trael and Azmael.

‘Be on your guard!’ said Voldo harshly. ‘Not all is as it seems.’

‘Surely you do not suggest the genestealers have the wit to sabotage the booster network?’ said Azmael. ‘You tell us not to underestimate these xenos, and that is fairly said. But surely it is you who is now at error and overestimate them. Be careful cousin-sergeant, your caution will make you timid.’

‘Will it now?’ said Voldo levelly.

‘Brother Azmael, you will address the sergeant correctly and treat his wisdom with more respect,’ rebuked Alanius.

A pause. ‘I am sorry, brother-sergeant.’ Azmael sounded far from sincere.

‘Group, halt,’ said Voldo. The Terminators came to a stop, strung out in a long line in a narrow passageway.

‘Look to the map. Quadrant forty-seven, coordinates 72.3.46.’

They checked the auspex feeds.

‘There! Contacts! Our prey flee us, we should be on our way,’ said Trael.

‘Are you so sure this is the group who assailed your Brother Azmael?’ said Voldo.

‘Who else would it be?’ said Azmael.

‘No, he is right,’ said Alanius. ‘I do not see how that is possible. They move obliquely from us, and at speed. If they have been travelling so quickly since the combat, they should be far ahead of us by now.’

‘You are correct, brother.’ Eskerio sharpened the auspex focus. Without the booster relays, the image was spotty. ‘I have multiple contact groups. These are those we pursue.’

‘A second band?’ said Trael.

‘And a third,’ said Azmael. ‘And a fourth.’ He pushed his auspex as wide as it would go. The map, generated from the Imagifer Maximus’s data, held firm, but new motion detection data was erratic at best without the boosting signal of the relay system. ‘Even accounting for over half being false signals, they are many.’

‘I calculate there are at least one hundred and eighty of them,’ said Eskerio.

‘Look! These tunnels were supposed to have been sealed,’ said Militor. The tunnels he spoke of flashed amber.

‘They were,’ said Voldo. ‘The genestealers are advancing through passages we thought sealed or impassable. They evade our trap.’

‘How is this possible if they do not think, brothers?’ said Alanius.

‘And if they think, is it then inconceivable that they might not have destroyed some of the relay network?’ said Voldo.

‘Where do they go?’

‘An ambush!’ said Trael. ‘Our brothers are in danger.’

‘We should inform Captain Galt,’ said Alanius.

‘I cannot,’ said Eskerio. ‘The reactor is scrambling our vox signals, and without the relay poles we are many hundreds of metres from a viable broadcast point.’

‘We press on, kill them from behind,’ said Voldo.

‘This is a trap,’ said Alanius.

‘Yes, but not for us,’ said Voldo. ‘With good fortune we can disrupt their outflanking manoeuvre before they have a chance to harm our brothers.’

‘Brothers!’ said Eskerio. ‘A fifth group.’

Eskerio directed their sensorium displays to a part of the hulk where red dots sparkled over the wireframe map.

They were heading right for Squad Hesperion and Squad Wisdom of Lucretius.

‘And now it appears it is a trap for us also,’ said Alanius. He activated his lightning claws. ‘What do we do?’

‘Here they come! Stand ready!’ Mastrik tensed as he gave the order. His fingers tightened on his storm bolter trigger. ‘Today we write our names into our Chapter histories in fire and glory!’

The genestealers came in a great rush, two of the tunnel mouths vomiting them out into the cavern. They spilled forth in a boiling mass. From Mastrik’s position, the genestealers were made small by distance, their six limbs further making them seem like insects. Fire blossomed around them as missiles and bolter fire poured into them from above

Mastrik's head. The aliens were lofted high by each explosion, slamming into the roof and walls. The air was filled with body parts and shrapnel in short order, clouding targeting sensors and spoiling the aim of the Adeptus Astartes. The genestealers ran on. In the wider space, they dispersed rapidly, groups of them leaping upward. The wind dragged back at them as it rushed from the cavern, but the gravity was so weak they made good progress against it through the air, unerringly heading towards the Space Marines' heaviest guns. Many died as they flew, blasted to pieces. The genestealers were without fear, uncaring of their colleagues' deaths, and the few that got through fought savagely. Genestealers bounded from ledge to ledge, or scuttled insanely fast, disappearing behind cover as shots raked the uneven cavern floor behind them. They covered the distance between the closest Space Marine units and the tunnel with preternatural speed, and fire patterns were disrupted as more and more of them made it into close assault. They targeted the power armoured brothers, their lethal claws ripping hard into them, so fast they stepped around the most skilfully placed blows, landing their own deadly replies.

The cavern was a three-dimensional battle zone. Space Marines had been deployed all around it in order to maximise their firepower. But they had underestimated the speed with which the genestealers would emerge from the tunnels, and how quickly they would close. Fire criss-crossed the room, slamming into the metal dangerously close to emplaced brothers as squads tracked their fire after their targets. Casualties from friendly weapons were becoming an uncomfortable possibility. An explosion shook the ledge near to Mastrik. 'Squad Blood of Ramillies, check your fire!' he shouted.

'There are surprising few of them, brother,' said Raniel. 'And I do not see our pursuing squads. I cannot sense them either.'

The Epistolary was right. The numbers of genestealers pouring out of the tunnels was thinning, and there was no sign of pursuit.

‘They dwindle too rapidly,’ said Mastrik. ‘And why are there none coming from tunnel two?’ He pointed at the tear in the spacecraft hull. ‘Brother-Captain Aresti, reply.’

Nothing.

‘The booster relays are down!’ shouted Mastrik. ‘Captain Galt, we have lost contact with Hammer.’

‘This is Galt, there has been a booster malfunction, stand firm, I repeat stan—’

Galt’s voice cut out suddenly.

‘A second malfunction?’ said Mastrik incredulously.

Ranial looked all around the cavern. ‘No, it is something more than that. The presence I felt. It grows. It watches us. The genestealers are being directed. This is not the play of mindless animals panicked into a stampede.’

Mastrik swore in the rich language of Honourum as he watched a squad of Blood Drinkers Devastators abandon their position and jump into combat with a party of genestealers running at another unit, the low gravity seeing them among the foe rapidly. ‘All squads, stand firm! Maintain positions!’

‘Lord captain! Above!’ A brother pointed up.

Mastrik span on his heel, craning his neck as well as his restrictive Terminator cowl would allow him. ‘Above’ was a relative concept, but the Space Marines had designated an up and down to help them make sense of the maelstrom of fire and flying bodies of battle.

‘There!’ he followed the pointing finger. Genestealers were emerging from a crack between two crushed spacecraft, crawling down the wall stealthily upon a Novamarines Devastator squad.

Mastrik called out to them, but too late. The genestealers fell upon them, and the squad’s fire ceased.

‘More! There are more coming!’

The air was alive with frantic vox chatter as sergeants gave orders to their squads, and the captains gave orders to the sergeants. The hubbub grew deafening as the various units scattered around the room became aware of genestealers coming from cracks all around them.

The tone of the battle changed. The concentrated fire patterns they had so carefully planned disintegrated as the squads turned to face the infiltrating aliens. The fight splintered into a number of uncoordinated squad-on-alien actions.

The genestealers of tunnel two took the opportunity to emerge, shielded by the confusion sown by their kin. A stream of them came rushing into the cavern, unmolested by the Space Marines' bigger guns.

'Throne!' said Mastrik. 'Squads Fidelis, Ultramar Remembered, Holos's Price, Gideon, Wallbreaker and Five Lords to the tunnel mouths!' he shouted. The squads of Terminators responded quickly, lumbering their way through the battle towards this new force of genestealers.

'More lord captain, coming Sorael's way!'

'I have them,' said Sorael. The distance to his position was a mere fifteen hundred metres, but without the boosters, his vox was a rattle of interference. 'We will contain them here, but you cannot rely upon our assistance.'

'Lord captain,' Raniel's voice was firm and quiet in the chaos. 'I have sent a telepathic message to Lord Astropath Feldiol, apprising him of our situation. But without him focusing his attention on our location, I cannot guarantee he will receive it.'

'Thank you, Brother Raniel.'

'You may honour me for it later,' said the Epistolary drily. 'There is more. I reached for the alien mind directing this attack. It is powerful, and turned me aside. But while I did so, I chanced upon a glimmer in the warp – Epistolary Guinian of the Blood Drinkers. He is near the source. And if he is there, then so might Lord Caedis be.'

Mastrik raised his gun and filled a genestealer forty metres distant with bolts. The creature ran on before exploding as the miniature missiles detonated, sending globules of blood and flesh out in every direction.

‘Then let us pray that Caedis is the end of this mind, or it will be the end of us.’

Radioactive fog swirled around Aresti and his two squads. It had appeared from nowhere, drawn along with the escaping atmosphere. It came unevenly, in rags and billows or twisted helices. The radioactivity of it was intense, and hot. Lucello speculated that it might have come from a breached coolant unit from a nearby reactor, only two decks away. Whatever its provenance, it clouded all their senses. Their eyes could not see well, and their sensoriums fared little better. The heat of it confused their infravision, the radioactivity scrambled many of the sensoriums’ other functions, while its rapid movement prevented the less esoteric aspects of the motion detectors from operating correctly.

They were blind, unable to communicate even with the nearer elements of their strikeforce.

Aresti had his men proceed cautiously, his two squads covering each other in a bounding overwatch advance. What was intended to be hot pursuit of the genestealers had become instead a painstakingly cautious process. Aresti very much felt that they had become the hunted. They were on high alert, expecting ambush at every turn.

They were not long disappointed.

It was Brother Lucello who shouted out, ‘Genestealers!’

The creatures leapt out from the fog from three directions: from the ceiling, from in front of them, and from the left. Brother Ignatio of Squad Glorious Ruin was sent staggering as one landed on his back, claws digging into the plasteel and ceramite of his cowl. Aresti turned on the spot and shot the thing in the lower part of its spine. The bolt exploded, breaking it into two pieces. It gave a terrible cry and fell to the floor.

The Space Marines were fast, dropping four of the creatures as they charged. One made it through, and gouged Brother Uxerio's leg armour so badly the fibre bundles within failed and his limb locked.

'Bring up the assault cannons! Make way, brothers!'

The squads' heavy weapons brothers were let through as the first rank of the Terminator group, three wide, fought hard against the assaulting xenos. They grappled with genestealers, smashing them down with power fists or shoving them back so their bolters might do their deadly work. The first wave was slaughtered and another came at them.

'Clear! Clear! Clear!' shouted Uxerio. He let himself topple to the floor. Those next to him, Ignatio and Sergeant Hendis moved aside. Andas and Gallio had a clear line of fire.

Their assault cannons whined as they rotated up to firing speed, then fire blazed from them. Their multiple barrels blurred as they spat hundreds of rounds a minute into the genestealers. The Terminators swept their guns to the left and then to the right, filling the corridor with depleted uranium bullets. Genestealers screamed as they were riddled with holes. The guns ran hot, still the brothers fired, fired until their ammunition boxes were dry.

'Halt!' called Aresti. 'Lucello, report!'

'The way is clear. A small group. I have six motion signatures heading away from us. The auspex cannot see far thanks to this Emperor-damned fog, but I am confident the majority are slain.'

'Then forward, but slowly.'

They helped Uxerio upright, then left him to cover their rear, as he could no longer walk. Their numbers reduced to ten, they went onward past a ragged opening in the metal wall carved by claws.

'That is new, made since the mapping,' said Aresti. 'We may have underestimated our enemy.'

They advanced around a corner and the fog grew thicker. Visibility and effective auspex range dropped further, and the Terminators slowed to a crawl. Ahead, according to the Imagifer Maximus map downloaded into their sensoriums, was a large chamber. Its sides were oddly distorted. An artefact, the tech-priests had explained, of their seismic waves running through material of whose particular nature they could not determine. Without this parameter of essence, they were unable to determine the parameter of shape. They had shrugged their iron shoulders and pointed out the clarity of the map's remainder.

A silhouette, then another. Three of them, coming out of the fog. As one, the brothers to the fore opened fire.

The fog thinned just for a second, granting the captain a view into the chamber beyond. Too late, Aresti found out why the Imagifer Maximus had failed to make an accurate representation. There was liquid in the room, enclosed in tanks. He saw the chemical units through the gap in the radioactive vapours; tall orange canisters topped with metal valves, corroded white. Arranged in groups of four, the canisters filled the room either side of a catwalk down the centre. Dozens of them.

The genestealers had led them directly to it.

Aresti experienced the closest thing to panic he had for a long time. 'Stop! Cease firing! Cease firing!' He shouted. He barged into Brother Lucello's arm, sending his shots awry. But he could not stop them all. The Space Marines let their fingers slacken on the triggers of their guns as soon as their sharp minds registered the order, but the bolts were already in flight.

Three punched neat holes in the side of the lead canister stack, a trio of insignificant 'pinking' noises as the metal was pierced. Aresti had time to pray that there was insufficient mass to set off the bolts' detonators before the munitions exploded.

Whatever was in the canisters was highly reactive, or else had become so through a process of chemical alteration over the long years within the plasteel bottles. The tanks burst, and fire roiled outwards. Chunks of plasticised metal scythed through the air, puncturing other bottles and setting them off in a thunderous chain reaction. Half a canister slammed into Aresti's chest, sending him sprawling. The corridor became an inferno.

Three of Aresti's brother's icons blinked out.



CHAPTER 16

The Ascent

Caedis was Holos, Holos was Caedis, where one began and one ended had ceased to matter. All that concerned him/them was the placing of one foot in front of the other, as he/they scaled the side of the unforgiving mountain. The slope was steep in places, and Holos was forced to pull at the ground with his hands. The material was loose, and he found himself dislodging great fans of it as he climbed. He slid backwards frequently, and at these times the climb became laborious even for his enhanced physique, each three steps forward bought at the cost of two back. Rocks fell from above with increasing frequency. The mountain grumbled under him as he embraced it, angry at Holos's presence upon its flanks.

Holos's mouth was dry as dust. His suit should have kept him hydrated, recycling the excreta of his body and injecting it back into him in the form of nutrient-rich liquid. But this was no natural thirst that assailed Holos and the spirits of the yet-to-be brothers who haunted him. Knowing how he would be so afflicted, Holos had brought water and wine on his climb. Sips of this had helped assuage the burn of the Thirst for delightful seconds, but the canteens slung at his belt had long since run empty, and he had discarded them one after another. They littered the side of the mountain, bright glints by the dark tracks of his boots.

Shrill cries carried down from on high, and Holos looked upwards to see the astorgai wheel around the pinnacle of the volcano. He was weary, nevertheless he quickened his pace; the position he was in was not favourable should they choose to attack.

‘What does he speak of, Reclusiarch, when he talks of Holos? I reach out for him with my mind and sense a great disturbance in him.’ Guinian pitched this question directly at the Chaplain, isolating their conversation from the brothers who marched with them. They had descended a further hour since the garden room oasis, passing through two more ships.

‘I am forbidden to talk of it, brother,’ said Mazrael. ‘It is the ultimate mystery of our order, and not one to be shared lightly, even with so mighty and honoured a hero as you. Only the Reclusiarch may know the whole truth of it, it is my burden. Be glad I cannot share it with you.’

‘I understand,’ said Guinian. In the Librarium of the Blood Drinkers the psychic brothers kept plenty of secrets of their own.

‘It is good that is so – curiosity is the downfall of wisdom.’ Mazrael’s tone lightened. ‘You are one of our Chapter’s mightiest sons, perhaps you will discover for yourself one day.’

‘Perhaps.’

Guinian cast a sidelong look at Caedis. ‘Where is he? Is he here, or is he there?’

‘Here, there – what do these things mean?’ said Mazrael. ‘You of all the brethren should know that reality is more than it seems. Wherever he is he serves, and he walks by our side. Service is all that matters.’

The Terminator brothers ahead, Quintus and Kalael, stopped. The corridor came to an unexpected end, sliced away by whatever disaster had caused the vessel to die and join the agglomeration, and was now pressed hard against a vessel of alien build in a frozen metal kiss. Quintus and Kalael’s suit lights illuminated a double circle of bulbous, greenish

material. Mazrael stepped between them and ran his fingers over it. He pulled his hand back and looked for Guinian.

‘Brother?’

Guinian nodded and replied, his voice characteristically lugubrious.

‘The entity lies within this ship.’

‘Then we go on. Sergeant Sandamael, organise your men.’

Sandamael had Erdagon come up, for he carried a chainfist alongside his bolter. He set to work on the alien hull, then stopped. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘this may take a while. The hull is composed of some kind of composite poly-laminate, very tough.’

Mazrael glanced at their lord, who stood so still only the lights on his suit gave away the fact that it was occupied. ‘Proceed as quickly as you can brother. We have little time.’

‘The mind,’ said Guinian. ‘It watches us.’

It took a long time, as these things are measured, for Brother Erdagon to carve his way through the spacecraft wall.

A cliff many hundreds of metres towered over Holos. From the ledge he could not see to the top. As legend suggested, there was no ascent to the crater rim and thence the peak, only the cave of the astorgai offered a route.

The mouth of the cave was a dark tube in red rock. Holos had cause to hesitate, this was the lair of the lord of the astorgai, Lo-tan, a great monster five times the size of his subjects. Four great heroes of the Chapter had set out to slay him, four heroes had died, their wargear and lives lost in his lair.

Holos’s mind was clear on the matter. This was the only way to the top of the mountain.

He drew his weapons and walked into the cave.

Guinian shouted in exultation as he gathered the energy of the warp into his mind and cast it from his hand in the form of a bloody red spear.

Guinian was renowned for his dour temperament. The other brothers said there was nothing that could make Guinian smile. And why should he? He, unlike them, felt the fear of those they killed to sate their thirst for blood. He felt their confusion as they were slain by their beloved angels, their sense of betrayal as they were destroyed by those that were supposed to protect them left a bitter tang in his mind.

Isolation was the normal state of affairs for most Chapters; long wars against endless foes sent every order across the galaxy. And isolation could be a danger. The brothers within the Chapter had their purpose; they had their sense of belonging, reinforced by tradition and ritual thousands of years old. But they were separate from the run of the Imperium's citizens, armoured by faith and technology that few others might ever see, and fewer yet understood. To an unenhanced human, a Space Marine was a creature of myth, a benevolent one at that – the sky warriors of the Emperor; the angels of death. Such separation and adulation could breed arrogance in those so separated and adored.

The death they brought was supposed to fall upon the xenos and the traitor, the mutant and the unbeliever. What then did the sons of man feel when a citizen was taken and bled like an animal for the sustenance of the Blood Drinkers? Guinian knew only too well. He was sensitive to the emotions of others, to subtle threads in the warp some of the other Librarians were not. He felt their pain and their terror. As a Librarian Guinian was also privy to things other brothers were not. The rituals of the Librarium concerned dark things not for the minds of non-psychic brothers. He knew fully of the daemoniac terrors that lurked beyond the veil of real space, for he had to know them to resist the whispers they sent. He saw the bloodletting of his Chapter, the sense of righteousness in committing an evil to prevent greater evils. For all the prayers, and the guilt, and the Chapter's focus on the safeguarding of life wherever it could, he saw in the harvesting of the unwilling hints of an arrogance that

could lead to their downfall, an echo of the temptations that had led more than half the Emperor's own, godlike sons from their chosen path in the time of the Heresy.

This was why he rarely smiled.

Nevertheless the others were wrong about him. He did smile. He smiled now as the bolt of ruby energy he cast from his hand jinked around Brother Quintus and speared a genestealer through the chest, knocking the creature backwards, arms and legs suddenly lifeless. It smashed into a wall and crumpled to the floor.

Guinian laughed. He boiled with the power of the warp and the battle-joy combined. He sang the warding prayers of the Librarium as he drew on the immaterium. The uncanny energy quickened his mind and his hearts, and the effect was intoxicating. He raised his bolt pistol and loosed five rounds. His shots landed unerringly, stitching a line of craters in a genestealer attacking Brother Erdagon, culminating in the detonation of its head. A genestealer leapt from a low platform. Guinian took a half-step backwards and smashed the xenos to the ground with his force staff. He grinned savagely behind his Terminator helmet; blood ran down his chin where his lengthened canines punctured his own lips. Red light blazed around his fists. Another Blood Lance leapt from his outstretched hand.

These xenos were bigger and faster than those they had previously encountered. Underneath the blind aggression of the battle-joy, Guinian suspected these creatures had not bred from human stock. Their lower arms had two elbows and terminated in jabbing points of bone, rather than the grasping hands of the others, and drooping frills of manipulative tentacles twitched all along their forearms. Their faces too lacked the slight echo of humankind many genestealers possessed. The ship they were in was not of human manufacture, the corridors were low and broad, with long ramps in place of stairs and elevators. The lights and gravity were on, but neither was of a quality comfortable to standard human

beings. The light was purplish and dark, with much of the illumination at the ultraviolet end of the spectrum, the air a choking mix of sulphur dioxide and nitrogen. Perhaps there was a vestige of the ship's crew in these genestealers, perhaps not. In either case, these genestealers were xenos bred with xenos, and that made them all the more loathsome in Guinian's eyes.

He held out his hand, charging his mind from the depthless well of the warp. He lifted his hand to let fly once more.

Pain assailed him as a great and powerful entity reached out from deeper within the ship. A cold, malevolent spirit touched his own, burning from the core of his brain outward, passing up his optic nerves. Something gave in his left eye, and he felt a trickle of blood run down his cheek to join with that slicking his chin.

He cried out, and sank to one knee. Just in time he raised his staff, blocking a wheeling blow from a genestealer. He tried to stand, but could not, the attack of the genestealer was too fierce. A flurry of blows from its four limbs drove him backward.

Lord Caedis saved him. *Gladius Rubeum* shone with pure light, the victories of the past playing along its blade. A genestealer stepped in to intercept him. Caedis chopped diagonally down with the sword. The creature span around with the force of his blow, guts flung outward. Caedis moved with an agility that should not have been possible in his Terminator suit, and drove *Gladius Rubeum* through the neck of the genestealer attacking Guinian. He twisted the blade to free it, and the creature fell dead. Without acknowledging the Librarian, Caedis stalked away in search of more victims.

Guinian struggled to his feet. The battle was going poorly. Mazrael was backed into a corner by two of the creatures, his crozius arcanum flashing brightly as its disruptor field met the creatures' arms. Brother Kalael was slumped upon the floor. His torso was torn open. He held at the wound

with his hand. Suit sealant mixed freely with blood, and he muttered the Sanguis Moritura over and over again. Quintus let out a roar as a genestealer jumped onto his back, ripping at his helmet. Metrion and Sandamael fought side by side, power fists sweeping. A genestealer reared up in front of Sandamael, half as tall as the Terminator was again. Recovering his wits, Guinian blasted it from behind with his bolter, the litanies of hate on his lips.

Quintus howled as his helmet was torn free. His blows turned frantic as he sought to drag the genestealer from his body, his face reddened as he fought with his breath held. The battle hung at a pivotal point, for a brief half-second, Guinian saw the room with his warp-sight, something that only ever happened to him under moments of extreme stress. The chief of the Librarium did not quite understand this ability of his. Every psyker's gifts were slightly different, granted by the Emperor himself. It was a form of blood divination, an ability to see the future when the blood flowed thickly. When this occurred to Guinian, movements tracked into time and future, blurring into multiple possibilities. He saw the Blood Drinkers triumphant, but in the main he saw them all dead. He saw them all dead many times over.

And then Caedis was striding through the battle, smiting all about him. A genestealer jumped for him, bone spikes and claws raking down his arm and bringing sparks from the metal. Caedis smashed it backwards with his forearm and caught it by the throat. With superhuman strength, he lifted it into the air and with a jerk of his wrist snapped its neck. Guinian gasped. Caedis cut only one path into the future, and as he walked time reordered itself until there was only victory.

Caedis howled with the blood-rage, his emotions boiled like the lava of Mount Calicium. Guinian was staggered by the psychic impact of it. He sensed many things, he saw many things. He saw, for a moment, a cave and a man in power armour facing a winged astorgai. Holos, it could only

have been Holos himself. He saw, beyond and beneath that, a third vision. The interior of a hellish vessel, gripped by Chaos, two brothers fighting, one winged, the other a traitor.

Then it was gone. The faint second vision collapsed into the vision of Brother Holos, and then he too faded from view until there was only Caedis and bloodshed and death.

The psychic backwash of Caedis's Black Rage energised all in the room, none more so than Guinian. He threw his head back, his hymns disintegrating into a long and joyous whoop. The pain in his eye disappeared. His mind roared with power. He pushed away the pernicious influence of the xenos mind and fell upon the genestealers with euphoric zeal.

Holos slew the astorgai. Brothers fought by his side, but although they wore the blood-red and badges of his Chapter, he did not know them. Caedis would have recognised them as Guinian, Mazrael, Sandamael, Quintus, Kalael, Erdagon and Metrion. There were others there with them that he would not, others who fought alongside the seventeen other heroes who had joined Holos's climb and now relived it again. To Holos these men were phantoms, tricks played by the Thirst torturing his body. It is doubtful his mind would have been able to grasp the truth. They wheeled in and out of visibility, all engaged in the silent dance of death. Snatches of sound from seventeen battles reached out to him, scintillas of battlefields chased the now of the cave away. He fought them off as efficiently as he fought the astorgai.

His sword, *Encarmine Dread*, flashed in his hand, darting swiftly into flesh. The astorgai came at him from burrow entrances all around the chamber. They spread their wings and glided down at him, they bounded along the floor; wings, dexterion-claws and single feet propelling them. Their blasphemies and taunts tainted the air along with the stink of their dung.

Holos was undaunted. He cried out as claws raked his arm. A flicker in time – he saw a tentacled bone spike, turned it aside with a sword that was not his own, then it changed, and he saw the pinion-claw sweeping back for another strike. *Encarmine Dread* met it, parting the hardened feathers and flesh of the creature's wing as it would part silk.

There were so many, but Holos fought like a man possessed, the shades of Blood Drinkers not yet born fighting their own, unknowable battles alongside him. And then there were no more.

Holos panted in the midst of ruin, his blood mingling with that of the slain astorgai.

‘My lord.’

Holos's head rose slowly. Two brothers were before him. They shimmered as a mirage over the lava traps, and vanished. A Chaplain stood in their stead. It was he who had spoken. Holos thought it was Reclusiarch Shanandar for a moment, but no, he did not know this man.

‘My lord, we must go on.’

Holos swayed on his feet. A flash of a leering face, mocking him as it broke his wings. He screwed his eyes shut, bit the insides of his cheeks raw until it departed. ‘The Black Rage,’ he said, not knowing to whom he spoke, for surely he was alone, ‘It takes me. I do not have much time.’

Caedis looked into Mazrael's skull-mask. Dead genestealers were scattered all over the alien chamber. Alarms rang in his helmet, the sensorium warning him that more were on the way. Caedis was deaf to them.

‘How do I speak with you? I am alone.’

‘A brother of the Blood Drinkers is never alone, Lord Holos.’

Caedis appeared to understand this.

‘Lo-tan, it is he I must slay if I wish to gain the peak of Mount Calicium. I must go on!’

Mazrael nodded. 'I will take you to him, my lord.' He took the lord of the Blood Drinkers by the arm.

'This way,' said Guinian. 'He is waiting for us.'



CHAPTER 17

Blood is life, life is duty

Voldo had his squad arrayed in a staggered line, enabling as many weapons to come to bear as possible. They had gained an intersection forming the shape of a 'Y' before stopping, judging it a good place to fight. The corridor broadened slightly where the corridors met. Lockers for equipment that had rusted to nothing were set into its wall, but the intersection was cramped with enough room only for two Space Marines to fire down each of the corridors. Twin lines of red dots were converging on their position.

'We cannot destroy them all, brother-sergeant,' said Alanius.

'We cannot escape them,' said Voldo. 'We make our stand here.'

'While we fight, the main body of xenos is free to attack our brothers!' said Azmael. Emotion was thick in his voice.

'What choice do we have?' said Voldo calmly. 'We will do what we were born to do, fight the Emperor's enemies. He will know whether we are to be successful or not already, and those of us who fall have already been judged.'

'Brother-sergeant!' shouted Eskerio. 'They are coming.'

'And now from three directions,' said Voldo. 'Militor, cover Sergeant Alanius.'

Alanius nodded. 'Tarael, join our brother Novamarines.'

The Space Marines shuffled around one another into the prescribed position.

'Brother Astomar, let fly at twenty metres range. If necessary, down both corridors to our front,' said Voldo. 'Then retire and let Tarael through.'

Azmael and Alanius stood shoulder to shoulder, both twisted slightly to the side so that Militor could fire down the narrow corridor forming the stick of the 'Y'. A minute passed. The Space Marines watched the red dots move around out of range; their motion detected by Eskerio's advanced auspex and fed into their sensoriums.

'They seek to delay us further, by delaying their own attack,' said Azmael frustratedly. 'Come to us, come to us now!'

'That cousin, or they marshal their forces to destroy us more efficiently,' said Voldo.

'Be glad, Blood Drinker, they come now,' said Eskerio.

'Brothers! Prepare!'

Bolters were brought up. Prayers of good function and true ranging were voiced. Silence.

In a rush the genestealers came, a huddle of them down both of the corridors in the sticks of the 'Y' at once. Bolters fired, the distinctive double crack of weapon discharge and the propellant ignition of the bolts as they left the barrel followed by their delayed explosion as they penetrated flesh or metal, all doubled again by the storm bolters. Storm bolters were boltguns with two barrels and sophisticated fire control, capable of a withering rate of fire, and the Novamarines used them well.

Genestealers fell, dropping under the feet of those that followed. The gravity here functioned, but the genestealers used every surface, scuttling along the ceiling and walls as well as the floor. In the short-ranged illumination of the suit lights, the corridors were full of aliens. The

boltguns spat their peculiar explosive song, every round finding a target. The xenos were tough, some requiring several shots to bring them down. Every dead genestealer was one less set of rending claws to trouble the Space Marines, but every death brought them two or three footsteps closer, and the genestealers were in seemingly endless supply.

Militor's storm bolter jammed, and the genestealers gained metres of ground before he had it cleared and opened fire again. Several more died before they were within striking distance, and Brother Militor was forced to stand back to allow Azmael and Alanius to fight effectively. They sang songs that sounded barbaric to the Novamarines, songs of blood and songs of death welcomed. But all of them recognised the sentiment of service that threaded the hymnal through and through. Deadly claws flashing with powerful energies, the Blood Drinkers methodically killed every genestealer that came within reach.

At the other side of the intersection, Astomar sent a burst of promethium down one corridor, and then the other. The maximum range of his heavy flamer was about thirty metres, but he waited until the genestealers were within twenty metres as ordered, engulfing as many of the xenos as possible. The promethium burned so hot it made the metal glow red and set everything else ablaze. Paint peeled and burned, plastics dripped from seals and fittings, droplets igniting as they fell. The temperature rose markedly. The genestealers screamed, a terrible, polyphonic reedy sound with enough of a human voice to it to raise the hair on the adepts' spines. It was the kind of scream that appealed directly to the baser levels of consciousness, those so deep that could not be altered by the training and mental conditioning the Space Marines underwent, only contained. The flames died back. Genestealers braved the corridors again, but in fewer numbers. Astomar stepped back, allowing Trael to take his place. His brothers fired and fired. Genestealers fell. None came close enough for Trael to engage.

The number of movement blips in the auspex dwindled until the arms of the 'Y' were nearly clear.

On the other side, where Alanius and Azmael fought, it was another matter. The corridor was a red block of movement on the motion scanner, jammed with genestealers. The sheer weight of their numbers were pushing Alanius and Azmael back.

'Brother Voldo, go! Go now!'

'You cannot hold them!' said Voldo. 'You will die. Step back and let Brother Astomar through.'

Astomar readied his flamer.

Alanius panted as he eviscerated another genestealer. 'The blowback will hit us, stay your hand Cousin Astomar.'

'We can take our chances, our armour is strong,' replied Astomar, levelling his weapon down the corridor.

'It is too much of a risk! Go now, while your way is clear, you can achieve more if you attack the xenos ambushers from the rear while they attack our brothers. Here, we will do nothing.'

'Except survive,' said Voldo. But he recognised the wisdom of what Alanius said.

'Or die, and I will do so willingly only if it serves some purpose in the service of the Imperium! Go now!'

Voldo ran the auspex map around. They were not far from the cavern where the combined forces of the Blood Drinkers and Novamarines of Battleforce Anvil fought. The genestealers they had been pursuing would already be there. Between his squad and the rear of the genestealers outflanking group was minimal resistance. 'You speak truth, Brother Alanius, but we can aid you in other ways.'

Alanius and Azmael were forced back further. The genestealers pushed at them. Voldo had his men fire past the Blood Drinkers where they could, or pick those genestealers off who tried to come in along the ceiling. Alien

flesh rained on the Terminators. Alanius and Azmael moved back a little, and more bolts found their targets. The pressure ceased as the genestealers backed away, jaws snapping. They withdrew to the far end of the corridor. Alanius turned to face Voldo.

‘They will come again. There are dozens of them. They pause to mass once more.’ The Blood Drinker was breathing heavily.

‘We go. We will send aid for you as soon as we may.’

Alanius shook his head and laughed. ‘Whoever comes will find we have gone to the Emperor. I will convey your good wishes to him!’

Genestealer shrieks echoed up the corridor.

‘Brother Astomar, lend our cousins of our meagre purse of time.’

‘Affirmative, brother-sergeant.’ Astomar pushed Alanius aside before he could voice an objection. The noise of the approaching aliens was drowned out by the roar of promethium igniting. A trio of genestealers at the far end were caught in the billow of fire. They fell to the floor writhing.

Astomar stepped back, leaving the corridor aflame.

‘You have a few more seconds, at least,’ said Voldo.

‘The Emperor watch over you,’ said Militor.

‘Sanguinius’s wings shield you, brothers,’ said Trael. ‘May the blood sing your demise in bright song. I will carve a eulogy into alien flesh for your sacrifice.’

‘It has been an honour to fight by your side, brother, cousins,’ said Alanius, dipping his helmet at each in turn.

Voldo did not answer immediately, weighing his words before he spoke. ‘And by yours,’ he said. ‘Come! Brother Militor, to the front. Brother Trael, behind him. We have little time if we wish to be of use to our brethren.’

The Novamarines positioned themselves in Voldo’s order, and clumped off down the left-hand branch of the ‘Y’, backs swaying as they went.

Alanius turned back to face the burning corridor, Azmael at his side. Alanius's armour was reporting multiple minor breaches all across his suit, with drops in power to various subsystems. Azmael's armour fed its own data to Alanius's sensorium. It was in similar shape.

'Here is where it ends brother, the long song of our lives,' said Azmael.

'We have served gladly, and I for one would do so again,' said Alanius.

'Let us face the Emperor together and beg his judgement of our worth.'

Alanius began to recite the Sanguis Moritura, the death song of the Blood Drinkers. His voice was a low growl at first, rising to a loud song as he continued.

'The blood of life flows quickly!' Alanius said. Azmael joined him, repeating the lines Alanius sang before he had finished them, creating a harmony in two rounds. Together they sang, their voices were harsh with the battle-joy, and yet there was a beauty to their music. Like everything about the Blood Drinkers, it was a beauty marred by monstrous violence, nonetheless a beauty that could not be hidden.

Down the corridor, alien eyes glittered in multitude, flames dancing in them as the fire in the corridors died back. Claws flexed as they waited out the heat.

'Only in death can it be stilled!' They sang. 'Let not ours be stilled easily, let it flow on and outward – let it flow from us as we slay those who free it!'

'Blood is strength, in death it quickens!'

They sang an eerie, wordless tune, their voices low and sorrowful. Within it were expressed all they were and all they had been. They were notes full of the certainty of the song's ending.

The last flames guttered out. The genestealers advanced.

'Blood is life. Life is duty,' said Alanius.

'To deny the blood is to deny life,' said Azmael.

'To deny life is to deny duty,' said Alanius.

The first genestealer bounded along the corridor, using all six limbs to propel itself. Alanius braced for the impact of it, turning away its claws with his own. He skewered it through the chest, but the impact of it sent him back a step. Others were coming.

‘To deny duty is to betray the Emperor. Betrayal is worse than damnation.’

‘Service has its price, and we willingly pay it.’

‘We choose duty, we choose life,’ they said together.

‘We choose the blood.’

Then the genestealers rushed forward, a wall of black teeth and razor talons. The Blood Drinkers fought hard, and many were the foes they slew before they found the judgement they sought at the feet of the Lord of Mankind.

Captain Sorael struggled to hear Captain Mastrik. Reception was bad and the entire cavern was a maelstrom of battle that deafened him even through his helmet.

‘There is no sign of the pursuit groups,’ Mastrik said, his voice indistinct. ‘We are mired in close combat. The genestealers continue to outflank us. Hold the west of the cave, hold the—’

Mastrik was interrupted. He shouted something Sorael did not hear, there was the sound of boltgun fire, and the screech of dying xenos, then the feed cut out altogether.

The situation worsened.

Genestealers had emerged in small groups from crevices all over the wall. Contact with the surface had been lost. There had been reports of genestealers daring the vacuum to attack the Adeptus Mechanicus and their machines before the network had been brought down.

The Novamarines, for all their experience of fighting genestealers aboard space hulks, had underestimated this foe. What should have been a ranged extermination of the aliens had turned into a desperate close-

quarters battle, and it was a battle the genestealers were better equipped to win.

Sorael's helmet display was crowded with tac-data, information fed from his squad sergeants all over the cul-de-sac. Through the overlays on his visor, he could see the genestealers running and leaping through the cavern, unhindered by the low gravity. Their four arms helped greatly, pulling them along walls and ceilings as easily as the floor. Sorael had to exert all his will to keep his mind in the tactical situation, and not throw himself into personal combat with the genestealers. He was a great warrior, and he would claim many heads; but if he were to abdicate his tactical responsibilities his part of the task force would be left without guidance. He ground his teeth in frustration, such was the price duty demanded of him.

Terminator squads fought hand-to-hand battles, aiming to keep the less heavily armoured brothers of the tactical and Devastator squads safe. Sorael himself was stationed with these lighter-armoured brothers upon a low rise in the cavern floor, close to the overhang of the asteroid. His tactical squads were spread in an arc, his four Devastator squads behind them. A few of the power-armoured brothers had succumbed to the urgings of the Thirst, throwing themselves into combat, but many of his men held their ground and laid complex patterns of fire that took a heavy toll on the genestealers. There were few Chapters among the sons of Sanguinius who could claim such restraint.

'All praise Brother Holos,' said Sorael to himself.

Two of his three assault squads roared through the thinning air on jump packs, better able to counter threats in the three-dimensional battle space than the others. Sanguinary Master Teale led one of these airborne squads, his laughter and exhortations to slaughter commanding in the multiple audio threads clamouring for Sorael's attention. The third assault squad was embroiled in a vicious melee near a gap in the wall. They had

acquitted themselves well, but the fight had devolved into one of attrition, with fresh genestealers feeding into the fight, and only four of the red warriors remained.

Sorael shouted orders into his vox, sending a mauled tactical squad back behind the line of Terminators. The rearmost portion of his position, where the Devastators were dug in, covered them as they fell back. Genestealers were consumed in balls of fire as missiles slammed home, their severed limbs flying outwards.

The line of red was holding. Casualties were light. There could not be an infinite number of the xenos. Surely their numbers would dwindle eventually...

A shout, then another. The fire from the Devastators' heavy weapons tailed off, and the sounds of combat and quickly voiced orders replaced their reports in Sorael's helmet. He turned around to see genestealers emerging from a fold in the metal. A tunnel they had not found, despite their vigilance. Several xenos had slipped through undetected and attacked the heavy weapons' position. More came through, then more again. Some of the Devastator brothers turned their weapons upon them, but they were so fast that only a few shots got through before the genestealers were among all four squads, and combat raged. The Tactical Marines in front of them could not fire through their comrades. More warnings were shouted, a second group of genestealers were rushing headfirst down the side of the asteroid. Sorael urged his tactical squads to hold their ground and deal with this other threat with righteous bolt and steady aim.

Inside his helmet, Sorael smiled a humourless smile. It looked like he would get to vent his battle-fury after all. Raising his storm bolter, he strode forward.

Mastrik gunned down another genestealer. The rest were dealt with by his bodyguard. Raniel drove his force staff through the head of an alien he had pinned to the floor under his boot.

‘That was too close, brother,’ said Mastrik. His usual humour had gone.

‘The third attack on our position. Intentionally so. They are guided, brother-captain. There is strategy behind this assault. They target us.’ Raniel pointed his staff at a group of genestealers. They ran then changed direction, all of them switching at once. ‘See how they move?’ said Raniel. ‘Their psyches are linked to one another, and to something more besides. The mind that guides them is like none I have encountered so far. Vast, alien, powerful.’

‘This is the largest group of genestealers we have faced for many years. But surely there is mention of similar leadership in the Librarium?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Raniel. ‘If so, it is old wisdom and forgotten.’

‘I cannot re-establish contact with Sorael. Things are turning against us. How close are Lord Caedis and his men to the source of the psychic emanation? The death of the xenos’s master will see us to victory.’

‘Closer, brother-captain, but not yet unto it.’

All around the cavern, brothers fought. Those in power armour fared badly against the genestealers. The casualty counter in Mastrik’s sensorium ticked upwards.

‘They must hurry,’ he said.

Kalael was dead, gone to the Emperor. Mazrael said quick prayers over his body before they moved on. Quintus too had been left behind. He had tried to take Kalael’s helmet so that he might continue, but the seal at the neck of Quintus’s armour was broken. His multi-lung struggled with the toxic alien atmosphere of the alien ship, and the Space Marine was soon unconscious. His hibernator put him into a deep sleep where the oxygen in his blood could be made to last for many days. If they were successful, they could recover him along with his armour, as well as the armour and gene-seed of Brother Kalael.

Six of them went on: Brother Erdagon, Sergeant Sandamael, Ancient Metrion – as always never far from Lord Caedis, Reclusiarch Mazrael and Epistolary Guinian. Guinian pushed forward gingerly with his mind, wary

now of the powerful nature of the xenos they sought. His last encounter with a genestealer psyker had been with the false Saint Hestia on Catria. A fourth-generation hybrid almost human in appearance, but alien in mind, and utterly slaved to the monsters she had given birth to. Her power had been raw but devastating; this was something different. The xenos mind was a black wall, a featureless boulder of solidified might hanging in the empyrean. No emotion, no desire; only infinite patience and hatred.

Guinian pulled back his mind. They were close. Gelid malice chilled the space between the walls.

They were deep into the alien ship, and the corridors had become progressively wider and taller. Thick vaulting like the ribs of a great animal braced the vessel's inner hull. Ramps led down to the curving floor every one hundred metres, the tops of them reaching out to galleries held out on thin struts. Seven holes opened up off each of these galleries, leading off into a warren of increasingly narrow tunnels. All this Guinian saw through his sensorium; the echo locator of his suit matching details with the Imagifer Maximus's map and filling his visor with a false image.

The walls of the corridors they traversed were not visible to the eye. Fog filled the place. The members of Squad Hesperian had told of the mists that filled large part of the hulk, but this was thicker than the material Guinian had seen recorded by their suits. A nauseating mustard-green, it was impossible to see through and extremely radioactive. If Guinian deactivated his suit sonar he would be blind. From afar, he felt the glancing touch of Ranial, the Novamarines Epistolary. Strange, thought Guinian, to feel such relief in the contact of someone who was not a brother. There was no message to it, not that Guinian could read; he was not skilled in the thought transmission and reception such as the astropaths used, but he felt a powerful sense of urgency.

The rad-counter in his helmet was a rattling annoyance. His brothers were distant in the fog. He felt alone, stalked through the fog by an

invisible, powerful enemy.

A burst of gunfire shocked Guinian out of his reverie.

‘Movement! Movement in the fog!’ Brother Ancient Metrion, the Chapter standard bearer and Caedis’s sworn bodyguard. More gunfire. A scream of pain. Blood splashed across his visor. In the mist, he saw movement, something large and powerful caused it to swirl. His suit sonar sketched a huge shape, but it was quickly gone.

‘Halt!’ shouted Guinian. He raised his gun and fired into the mist. The explosions of the bolts were muffled.

‘Report!’ said Sandamael, the squad sergeant. Their communications were fuzzed and grating, pulled at by the radiation in the fog.

‘Metrion.’

‘Epistolary Guinian,’ shouted the psyker.

‘I, Mazrael, live, as does our lord. Brother Erdagon?’

‘He is dead.’

Tension settled on the small group.

‘I can’t see a thing in this! Why aren’t our sonar pulses showing us the enemy?’ said Sandamael.

Guinian replied. ‘It is fast, and it does not wish to be seen.’

‘We must go on, we have to go on,’ said Mazrael. ‘The Emperor has guided us here, and our lord has one last service to perform.’

‘We cannot fight what we cannot see!’ said Sandamael.

‘It is not for us to battle this evil, but for our lord and our lord alone,’ said Mazrael.

Sandamael swore.

‘Fall in more tightly. That way we will not be caught unawares,’ ordered Guinian.

The remaining two members of Squad Blood’s Fury drew in closer to the three officers. No one spoke. Eyes were firmly fixed on the false image.

‘There!’ called out Ancient Metrion.

A green outline moved from left to right across their false images. It was too fast for the sonar units to define its shape for them. They raised their weapons as one and opened fire. They were gratified with a roar, but whether of pain or defiance was impossible to tell.

The psychic presence of the creature was so intense as to have a smell: a cold, dry scent that was offensive to Guinian in every way. A part of it touched upon him. He felt contempt from it. It drew away.

‘What is it doing?’ shouted Metrion. ‘Come here and fight us, xenos coward!’

In reply, a genestealer reared up from a tunnel mouth that opened up suddenly in the floor. Metrion was quick, and filled it full of bolts.

‘It is not alone.’

‘Contacts, brothers, I have motion all over the room!’ said Sandamael.

‘The leader, where is it?’ said Mazrael. ‘Lord Caedis must kill it.’

‘I will find it.’ Guinian was wary of contact with its mind, but he had little choice.

He opened his mind.

His soul was exposed, raw and vulnerable to the full might of the creature, this... broodlord. It regarded him dispassionately, with unblinking evil. Its mind covered the hulk with a dark umbrella of psychic energy, strands of it linking to hundreds of other, lesser genestealers. The thing was powerful, far greater than anything Guinian had experienced for a long time. He had experienced contact with mightier minds than this, and fought some, but it was the glassy implacability of this one that perturbed him, its absolute featurelessness. There was nothing in it other than a need to head onwards, infecting and subjugating, before heading on again. It was a bestial urge, but emanated from no beast. It was too... perfect. There was something it fled, not from fear, but from instinct. Guinian dared to look beyond. From its mind weak tendrils reached outward, touching upon all the broods of genestealer which it had created

across space. Beyond, a greater network still, linking it to other minds, faint presences far away, but all as particular, as featureless in their singular purpose.

Behind that... Guinian could never describe it. A mass. A blank space in the empyrean, a terror. A zone where the roiling variety of the immaterium had ceased to be. A shadow in the warp, distant yet, but imminent.

The creature let him see, of that Guinian had no doubt. Then it turned its full psychic might against the Librarian, funnelling the sense of dread the shadow generated, a horror born of incalculably deep space and time. It filled Guinian's mind. He clutched at his helmet and sank to the floor, a low moan escaping his lips. For the first time since he had been made a Space Marine, Guinian knew fear. Only his psychic hood prevented his mind being boiled off into nothingness.

He saw the genestealer in his mind's eye: bloated, as powerful in body as it was psychically. It regarded him with a species of alien humour, and he was certain it was enjoying his pain.

The noise of gunfire around him intensified. The cries of alien monsters troubled the fog. He was almost helpless. Almost, but not quite.

He reached out to Caedis's troubled mind. With one last effort of will he pushed the location of the genestealer broodlord into the Chapter Master's thoughts. Caedis's head moved sharply, and he strode from the room with purpose.

Guinian had in return from Caedis's mind an impression of somewhere else entirely, before the claws of fear closed about his being. He looked at the shadow in the warp, and it looked back.

With a cry, Guinian collapsed into unconsciousness.



CHAPTER 18

The Two Hundred

Holos was lost deep in a labyrinth of lava tubes and fissures in the side of Mount Calicium. Choking, sulphurous vapours obscured his way. The cries of his enemies mocked him from the fumes.

Holos despaired. The enemy were afraid of his might and they hid from him, they preferred to let him die in this poison than fight him face to face.

‘Come out! Come out and fight!’ he roared. Rage gripped him. He was thirsty, so thirsty. He would not last long, he had to make the summit and fulfil the prophecy of his dream. He would find the answers it prompted him to find, or his Chapter would die. Under the burning need of the unfettered Thirst, through the intermittent and troubling visions of the Black Rage, he knew this as well as he knew his own name. It was not his own salvation he quested for, but that of his brothers. Frustration tore at his heart. He would have cried, had his dry eyes still had tears to weep.

‘Lo-tan! Guardian of the peak! Come to me and face your doom! The Blood Drinkers will persist, their salvation demands your death!’

No reply. The lesser astorgai cackled and whooped at him, repeating his words in their parrot-like way, adding mocking nuances to his words.

‘Gah!’ he shouted. He smashed *Encarmine Dread* into the wall, its energy fields carving away a chunk of stone. He raised his sword for another blow. Confusion passed over his face, he regained a measure of control. He fell to his knees and gripped his sword hilt in both hands, point down. Through the fugue, he uttered a prayer.

‘Help me, oh Emperor. Show me the way to my foe, so that I might slay him for you and be done with this place. Aid me, so that I might aid my brothers.’

Instantly, he felt a presence. He looked up. There was a mind touching his, then many minds, fragmented presences from many times, all showing him the way. He fastened on the strongest. He had the impression of a different fog, a brother of sad countenance in an Epistolary’s armour, then that was gone and only the guidance remained. He bared pointed teeth and went where the mind bade him, through a series of passages, taking numerous turns he could not hope to remember. The cries of the lesser astorgai dwindled. Twice he was forced to kill, but these astorgai died quickly; Holos’s purpose and will were reinvigorated. He went past bubbling pools of volcanic acid, over deep chasms, past rank holes whence the rotten-smelling vapours issued. Eventually, he left all this behind. The floor rose, bringing him above the broil and into a long cave. There, enthroned on a pile of human skulls, squatted Lo-tan, lord of the astorgai, and guardian of the way to the peak of Mount Calicium.

The creature attacked without preamble, launching itself into the air and gliding right at Holos, single foot outstretched. It stank of carrion and old blood, smells that Holos had become all-too familiar with as the madness had gripped his Chapter.

Holos dodged the creature. Lo-tan was quick and changed its path mid-flight with a twitch of broad, red-mottled wings. Holos was barged aside with such force he slammed into the wall. *Encarmine Dread* was trapped beneath him. He pushed himself from the stone as the chest-claws of Lo-

tan grabbed at his left arm. These were mighty, and the metal of his armour buckled under the monster's strength. With a grunt of pain, he twisted from the wall and swung around his pinned arm, sweeping *Encarmine Dread* around. The weapon bit into the chest-claw of the astorgai, half-severing the grasping hand. The creature jerked back, twin-beaked mouth roaring. Green blood pattered to the floor. Holos stepped backwards, sword ready. Lo-tan did the same. The two circled each other, altered man and alien monster looking for the kill.

Lo-tan was twice the size of the other astorgai. Its three eyes were protected by ridges of bone in a pointed face. The skull terminated in a pair of horned beak-like protuberances that gave the mouth a bisected appearance, although these were actually horned, forward-facing, flesh-tearing tools, the mouth proper being situated behind them. When it roared, Holos saw the curved teeth that lined its throat. If it caught him, this would hook into his flesh or the gaps in his armour, and by a series of powerful convulsions Lo-tan would pull him in. The rear of the head was a mass of fronds, erect with anger and stiff as quills.

Lo-tan stalked around, bent into a bow, wings spread out around it like the cloak of a suppliant before a lord. It rested its weight on the two fingers that tipped each wing. Holos was no fool, he knew the astorgai well. The pose they adopted in combat looked ridiculous, but the creatures could move fast with a push from their single leg, sending the hardened ends of their pinion feathers scything at a warrior with lightning speed.

Lo-tan gurgled deep in its throat. Its head bobbed on a long neck. He did not speak. It was said that only the younger astorgai spoke, an ability they lost as they aged, and Lo-tan was the oldest of them all.

Holos gulped for air. He was tortured by visions of long-ago battles, troubled by those that were yet to come. Filled with the rage of the ancients, he wanted nothing more than to fling himself at the beast and hack at it with sword and teeth. But Holos was a Space Marine of

uncommon will, that is why, or so it would be said in later centuries, he was chosen to travel to the peak of Mount Calicium. He held himself back, determined not to fall into the well of blackness overflowing from his second heart.

With a shriek, Lo-tan struck...

...and Caedis stepped back. The genestealer broodlord was so fast its claws were but a blur. Caedis took the blow on *Gladius Rubeum*. The metal rang as it had under the hammer at the time of its forging, and the images that played along its blade went out for a second.

Caedis blinked. He was himself once more. Holos was there in his mind, the hero's memories trying to usurp his own personality. He could see the cavern Holos fought in, he watched the astorgai as it attacked, its movements and form overlaid on the genestealer broodlord. He thought to fight it, but did not. He was not in control of his actions any longer, not truly. He lived a repeat of Holos's adventure, and there was no choice involved. He knew full well that this was his final battle. He submitted himself to the will of the Emperor and rode out the tide of the blood-fate.

The broodlord was four metres tall. It was old, old beyond the count of men, a monster that had grown huge in the interstellar night. Fattened on the love of its stolen family, it was the biggest of its kind for thousands of light years in any direction. It had ridden the tides of the warp for millennia, growing stronger and larger, its potency multiplying along with the number of its vile brood. Countless worlds had been infected by its seed, the will of millions of sentient beings subverted by the minds of its offspring. Their parental instincts perverted, those tainted by the genestealers had no choice but to nurture the terrible children they birthed. These things meant nothing to it. It did as it was bred to do, its great mind only served to allow it to do so more effectively, or so later generations of magi biologists would maintain.

In actuality, what thoughts troubled such a mind were forever beyond humanity's grasp. There were few psyches as alien as those of the genestealers. Through eyes devoid of mercy, that mind looked down upon Caedis. That it recognised a hero of the human race is questionable, but what are heroes to such a creature? Where a being has little freedom of choice, can it appreciate the sacrifice heroism demands? The broodlord had encountered hundreds of kinds of thinking creatures in its journey across the stars, and millions more that were not sentient. All had fallen to their knees, wills withered by its stare.

It tilted its head, nostrils flaring in its alien face. With its unknowable mind it reached out to this small product of evolution, a weak creature that struggled, at the moment of its extinction, with its own nature. Such things did not trouble the broodlord.

But to think the genestealer entirely at odds with the human psyche would be wrong. It possessed paternal instincts of a sort, and when it detected the death-stink of thousands of its progeny clinging to Caedis's weak human soul, it reacted as any father would react to the murderer of its children – with great and untameable anger.

The broodlord delivered a punishing smash from its upper arms. Caedis lifted his sword and blocked the blow, taking both arms' force onto the blade. The chitin that clad this creature's flesh was hardened by aeons, and did not sunder at *Gladius Rubeum*'s edge. It leaned harder, forcing Caedis onto one knee. Its lower hands, unlike those of its bodyguard, equipped with something akin to fingers, reached out for him. Caedis raised his bolter and fired, blasting a chunk from the broodlord's shoulder armour. It looked at the gouge in its carapace with puzzlement, then swiped hard with three of its arms, sending the Chapter Master reeling backwards. He did not fall, and regained his balance. *Gladius Rubeum* out, he circled...

...Holos was in grave peril. His armour had saved him from five blows, but it was gouged and cracked, its systems failing. Lo-tan was likewise

harmed, green blood dripped from a dozen cuts to its body, some of them serious. One wing hung limp at the shoulder, cut to the bone by the blade of *Encarmine Dread* it lunged...

...and the genestealer's claws smashed into Caedis's helmet. *Gladius Rubeum* came up too late to stop it, grating ineffectively against the genestealer's shoulder, and jarring Caedis's hand in turn. Alarms rang in his helmet, the visor overlay of the sensorium obscured by electronic snow. His head snapped back painfully inside. A second claw descended, and this Caedis did parry, flinging it wide with a great effort that left his body exposed. The genestealer saw this and reacted, grasping hands seizing the Chapter Master about the chest, its fingers long enough for the monster to encompass his torso entirely. The ancient broodlord lifted Caedis into the air, and slammed blow after blow into his helmet with its three-taloned upper claws. All the while it squeezed at the Space Marine, hard enough that ceramite cracked and plasteel buckled. Caedis raised his sword...

...and Holos deflected the pinion talon of the great Lo-tan as it slashed and slashed again at his unprotected face. He was pinned underneath the creature by its single foot, the weight of it squashing the life from him, its talons closing, squealing along the metal of his power armour. The thing's remaining dexterion-claw scrabbled at his face, ripping his flesh. The taste of his own blood made him wild. He bucked underneath it with renewed strength, the wing came down, he brought *Encarmine Dread* to meet it...

...and the broodlord's claw span away into the darkness. Blood pumped from the stump. The other claw came down, tearing *Gladius Rubeum* from Caedis's hand. The blade wheeled end over end, to embed itself in the floor. But Caedis had done a grave insult to the broodlord, and the creature relaxed its grip upon him. Caedis pulled at throttling alien hands with all his might and tore a hand free from its grip about his chest. He kicked it hard as he sought to brace himself against the ribbed chitin of the beast's torso, his boots raking across the thing's body. He achieved his aim. With sufficient leverage available, he was able to wrench hard at the broodlord's arm. Its other hand pulled at his own, the remaining upper claw slamming

into his helmet again. Alarms chimed, air hissed from a rupture in his visor glass, but Caedis was in the grip of the Black Rage, the killing fury of the sons of Sanguinius. With superhuman strength boosted by his armour, he pulled. Sinews stood out on his neck, his teeth splintered as he ground his jaws in effort. The wiry muscles of the broodlord writhed as it pulled the other way, but in vain. It was in the grip of a Chapter Master of the Space Marines, one of mankind's greatest warriors.

With a gristly tearing, Caedis wrenched free the arm of the broodlord. He slid to the yielding, alien floor, with the limb in his hands, pursued by a torrent of blood, ragged tendons and veins dragged out from the beast as he went. The broodlord bellowed in pain and fury as Caedis stood. It retreated from him warily, wounded upper claw held protectively to its breast, blood pumping from the socket of its stolen lower limb. Caedis brandished the severed arm of the genestealer above his head and shouted.

'I am Caedis, Lord of San Guisiga and Master of the Blood Drinkers Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. My brothers bear the gifts of Sanguinius and the Emperor himself. You will not defeat me!' He cast the arm aside, ran forward, snatching up *Gladius Rubeum* from the ground as he built to a run. He raised the sword in both hands.

'Blood is life! Life is duty!' He cried, and swung the blade. The glittering edge of *Gladius Rubeum* went in a wide arc that connected with the genestealer's chest. The momentum of his charge, aided by the sword's power field, sent the sword clean through the creature's exoskeletal armour, cutting through the thorax, severing vital organs from one another, and out the other side. Blood was flung up the walls from its tip. Caedis controlled the swing, brought *Gladius Rubeum* to the guard position, and stood facing the beast.

The genestealer was cut clean to its spine. A torrent of black, alien blood rushed down its chest. With a roar, it fell to its knees. The oppressive presence of its mind wavered, then went out.

With a crash, the broodlord toppled to its side and lay still.

Caedis was already losing himself as he walked over to the genestealer and looked down upon it. The floor warped and changed to the guano-deep rock of the astorgai's lair. The light brightened, shafts of orange illumination came through cracks in walls that were becoming those of a cave. As he stared at his defeated foe, he no longer saw the broodlord, but the crumpled form of Lo-tan, lord of the astorgai.

'I am Holos,' said Caedis, 'sent by a dream to save my brothers, and I will climb this mountain.'

Without pausing to clean his sword of the alien's blood, Caedis turned and limped towards a gaping set of doors, to his eyes a wide tunnel mouth from which a weak draught blew into Lo-tan's foetid eyrie. He could smell the evening air of San Guisiga upon it.

Holos was sorely wounded, his armour was failing, and his strength spent, but he was nearly at the summit.

Mastrik had no time to issue orders to his men. Genestealers attacked him from every side. Recognising him as one of the Space Marines' officers, they strove their hardest to bring him down. His armour was scored by claw marks, his bolter had long run out of ammunition. He fought on with his power sword. Raniel stood by his side, wielding the energies of the warp in their defence against a never-ending stream of the aliens. Once many of the Adeptus Astartes positions had been invested, the enemy came in great numbers from the third tunnel mouth, reinforcing the shrinking numbers of their kind that had been in the first and second waves. From Sorael, there had been no word for some time. Mastrik had been forced to abandon the higher ground and retreat towards the cavern floor when genestealers started to come through the airlock. There on a rise in the floor of the cavern, fifty Terminator brothers of the Novamarines stood firm in a wide circle. Ten more fought hard up on the slopes of the cavern wall, forming a bulwark to safeguard their power-armoured brothers, for where the genestealers got among them, the struggle rapidly turned against the Space Marines.

Genestealer corpses drifted in thick clumps towards the floor, forming piles like bloody driftwood when the weak gravity finally brought them down. They were accompanied by the broken bodies and armour fragments of bold adepts. The Terminators were either low on, or out of, ammunition, and slowly, inexorably, things were turning against the Novamarines. Casualty tallies and situation reports clamoured for Mastrik's attention, but he could not respond. He fought with cool determination, the shadow of desperation coalescing at the back of his mind into the will to destroy. He dodged and thrust, the weak gravity a hindrance to his movements – strike too hard, and he would be sent hurtling into the air by reactive force, move too slow and it would not be long before alien claws found a chink in his armour, and through that, his death. Mastrik and his men were therefore locked in place by their armours' boots.

He deactivated the mag-locks in sequence so he could move effectively, but this added a further consideration to the combat, and he tired. The genestealers were made for low-gravity conditions, the long claws on their feet seeking out cracks in the ground, or grabbing with unshakeable tenacity to the armour the Space Marines wore.

In his hearts, he realised they would not last long. For every genestealer smashed into the air by a power fist, another two took its place. One by one, his warriors were dying. They were outnumbered and outmatched. The air in the chamber was running out, the gale generated by the atmospheric venting now a breeze. But the genestealers would have finished him and his brothers by the time the vacuum forced them away from the cave. He stabbed his sword into the heart of a genestealer, pushing on the pommel with his free hand to drive it home. There was only combat now, no time for tactical reaction or clever ruses. The plan had failed.

'Ave Imperator,' he said. 'Soon you will see my flesh, and judge me by its story.'

‘Brothers! Smite and rend! Tear and kill! You are the Blood Drinkers, send the enemies of the Emperor to their ruin!’ Sanguinary Master Teale shouted to his brothers, channelling their frenzy. ‘Let slip your bloodlust! Only fury will save us! Drown the enemy in their own blood!’

The Blood Drinkers fought like men possessed. Their Terminators were bloody islands in a sea of blue-black alien integument. Brothers in power armour bludgeoned alien flesh with bolters. Knives ran black with alien blood. Teale’s own squad rocketed from one place to another, striking lightning blows before retreating to do so again.

Sorael listened to the Sanguinary Master’s encouragements. His own life fluids sang with the battle-joy; the desire to rip his helmet from his head and attack the aliens with his teeth was strong.

He was surrounded by genestealers, more pouring out of the gap every second. His Devastators were grappling on the floor with the four-armed monstrosities. Glimpses of blood-red armour came and went, mostly all he saw was surging, night-blue chitin.

Something slammed into his legs, knocking him forward. Another impact. Two genestealers were trying to tear his feet free of the floor. Another leapt onto his face, claws jabbing at his armour’s cowl, feet scrabbling at his helmet. He swung his sword blindly. It bit flesh, and was wrenched from his hand.

His foot came free. They were dragging him down.

He clawed at the alien on his face. Warnings sounded shrilly in his suit.

Sorael recited the opening lines of the Sanguis Moritura. He grasped the feet of the genestealer at his front as pain shot up his leg. His armour was breached.

He wrenched hard at the creature. Unexpectedly, it came apart in his hands, its blood spreading in a black fan of droplets in front of him.

Through it, he caught a glimpse of bone-and-blue. The genestealers had ceased coming from the crack in the wall, in their stead strode Squad Wisdom of Lucretius, bolters blazing, they cut down a dozen genestealers

before they were noticed. They spread out. Brother Trael of his own Chapter followed. Lightning claws flashing, he charged headlong into a knot of the aliens. The brother in the Novamarines squad with the heavy flamer – Sorael did not know his name – levelled his weapon and sent an expanding ball of fire into another group.

‘Emperor be praised!’ bellowed Captain Sorael. ‘We are aided! To me my brothers, to me!’

Sanguinary Master Teale heard his command, and his squad came rocketing in. Three Terminators waded through the press of genestealers, taking up station around Teale’s squad and Sorael. This group of twelve brothers formed a nucleus of resistance upon which the hinge of battle turned. The Novamarines forced their way to them.

‘Sergeant Voldo of the Novamarines,’ said their leader. ‘How can we aid you?’

With the stream of outflanking genestealers cut, Sorael set about reorganising his men, and the battle for the far end of the cavern began in earnest.

Ranial fought grimly on, his brother Mastrik with him always. The mind of the beast guiding the genestealers was strong and poisonous, only with great effort was the Epistolary able to muster his own psychic might in the face of its intrusive presence.

And then, suddenly, it was gone. ‘Brother!’ he shouted urgently.

‘What, Brother Ranial? I am a little preoccupied,’ replied Mastrik. He sounded weary and angry.

‘The mind, the control of the xenos, it has gone!’

Mastrik cut the legs from under a genestealer. ‘Lord Caedis was successful?’

‘No trace remains in the warp, brother-captain. I believe so.’

The two adepts looked at one another. No new genestealer attacked them.

‘Come,’ said Mastrik. ‘Let us apprise ourselves of the tactical situation.’

Mastrik and Ranial left the front line of the fifty-strong Terminator band, their ranks closing behind them, and moved to the top of the low rise they surrounded.

All around the cavern, the genestealers were in disarray. They were just as ferocious, just as deadly, but the coordination between their actions had gone. They moved and fought as individual groups, not as a gestalt whole. The pressure on Mastrik’s position eased.

‘Brother! Look!’ shouted Ranial. Joy was evident in his voice. ‘Brother Aresti comes!’

From the tunnels emerged a battered group of Terminators, the first bearing the personal heraldry of the captain of the Fifth Company. Although reduced in number, the two squads accompanying the captain came into the cavern firing. Others followed, coming in ones or twos or in groups. Aresti commanded them to his side, forming them into a broad arrow. He waited for a group of stragglers, then ordered the formation forward. A further forty Terminators of both Chapters joined the fray.

‘By Corvo’s oath,’ said Mastrik, the smile returning to his voice. ‘We might just win this yet.’

Behind him, on the wall facing the giant alien ship, the combat was swinging back in the Novamarines’ favour. The relentless pressure of the alien advance slackening, units of power-armoured brothers were freeing themselves from close entanglements and beginning to open fire again.

‘Let us crush them!’ Mastrik shouted. He ordered the Terminators at his position into a line also, to match that of Captain Aresti. Across a floor crowded with milling alien bodies, the two formations of Terminators closed on one another. From the eastern end of the cavern, blood-red armour replaced blue chitin as the Blood Drinkers advanced from their positions.

From somewhere behind them, a Thunderfire cannon opened up, raking the ceiling with heavy rounds.

Nearly two hundred Terminators were in the cavern now. The genestealers faltered. They fought on. Still deadly, still tenacious and cunning, but the tactical acumen and overall battle order they had exhibited before had gone.

Great was the slaughter of the xenos that day.



CHAPTER 19

The heart of the void

‘Great is the wisdom of the Emperor, to him we commit our service, to him we give our fealty. So swore Lucretius Corvo, so swear I.’ Galt prayed, running the beads of his Chapter icon necklace through his fingers. The words came to him as automatically as breathing, inculcated into him from his first days as a neophyte, repeated as a novitiate, finally sang with pride as he became a full initiate. The prayers and cants grew more complex and important as he passed through each stage. They all had their purpose beyond devotion to duty, whether they were hypnotic triggers to activate his gifts, or epic histories of the Chapter that helped weld an organisation of soldiers into an order of brothers, but those first words remained the most potent.

Today, Galt gave thanks for victory. The others were returning from the hulk. There would be a proper ceremony later. Excepting the cathedral serfs and servitors, he was alone, kneeling at the feet of Lucretius Corvo’s giant statue.

When the communications had gone down, Galt had gone directly to the surface of the hulk only to find the tech-priests there under attack from xenos. The genestealers were hardy indeed, seemingly untroubled by the extreme cold and radiation of open space.

Galt had taken command, directing the servitors of the Adeptus Mechanicus alongside his own men. He had found that unpleasant. Servitors served the Emperor in their own way, as all his loyal servants did. Many served aboard the fleets and in the fortresses of his Chapter. Even so, for the Novamarines they represented a fate worse than death, for the souls of servitors were forfeit to the Machine-God, and so they could not enter the halls of their ancestors. That they laboured ceaselessly all around him was of no consequence, but a warrior must have a soul, and servitors had none. The use of them by the forge as heavy weapons platforms was tolerated along with all the Techmarine's other peculiarities, but Galt did not approve of it.

Still, needs must. He and his men had advanced down the Adeptus Mechanicus's strange road. All along the route, the beacons the tech-priests had set up were smashed. Teams of tech-priests had been slaughtered, along with some of the Space Marines assigned to protect them. By the time they had fought their way down and broken through to the airlock, the battle was over. Galt had ordered the Terminators resupplied and sent them off on search and destroy missions as per the original strategy.

He clenched his hands tighter about his amulet, the words of a prayer tumbling from his lips. The plan had worked, but by a hair's-breadth. Without Caedis's sacrifice and the death of the broodlord, they would surely have failed.

Galt's self-doubt plagued him. He had underestimated the xenos. His initial intention to obliterate the hulk had been correct, but he had been required to find a way to clear it. The plan was in part of his own devising, and he had almost failed. He felt the eyes of Lucretius Corvo boring into him from the statue's head. What would Chapter Master Hydariko say?

He pushed his doubts away. They had won, and he had other problems to solve before he would have the time to fully dissect the rightness of his

actions. The casualty numbers ran through his mind. Ninety-three brothers of both Chapters dead or soon to be accepting the Emperor's mercy.

Among them was a disproportionate number of veterans, with seventeen of the Novamarines' most experienced lost, and perhaps equally harmful to the Chapter, five Scouts dead on the surface. Two of the veterans would be found places in the armoured tomb-suits of the Chapter's Dreadnoughts.

Twenty-nine suits of Terminator armour from the Novamarines armoury had sustained heavy damage, two were practically unsalvageable.

Fortunately, none of the Chapter officers had been wounded, nor had any of the stone Crux Terminatus badges been lost. Much of the battlegear of the dead had been retrieved and would be repaired and re-sanctified for use by new recruits, as had the majority of the fallen brothers' gene-seed. Overall material losses were low. The loss of Chapter Master Caedis cast a shadow over the operation. The Blood Drinkers Reclusiarch, Mazrael, had assured him that Lord Caedis had died in a fitting manner – Galt had seen a pict of the monster Caedis had slain and had been amazed – although the Chapter Master's armour and body were missing. In better tidings for the Blood Drinkers, they had retrieved the brother trapped in the first mission.

Nearly five thousand genestealers had been slaughtered, a kill ratio of fifty-three to one. More would die soon. Already kill-teams closed in on the roosts where additional genestealers slumbered in vacuum. These would prove no trouble in their extermination. Doubtless further brothers would fall in pursuance of these objectives, but the real battle was over. An impressive result, yet still Galt agonised over every one of his dead brothers. 'They will be buried with all honour,' he said to himself, 'interred in the tombs of Fortress Novum.'

Shrines would be raised to their memory. Their glories would be recorded. New brothers would take their place. Such was the way of the Chapter, and it had been so for eight thousand years.

Fortress Novum. He thought of the damage to *Corvo's Hammer*, and the losses his force had sustained these last years. The surviving novitiates with them were ready for their final elevation to full brotherhood; many of his squads were under strength. He needed to restock, resupply and take new orders from his own master.

It was time to go home.

First there was the matter of the space hulk's archeotech.

A hand fell upon his shoulder. Galt opened his eyes. Sergeant Voldo stood over him.

'Lord captain,' he said.

'Brother-sergeant,' said Galt. He got to his feet and genuflected to the statue of Corvo.

'Asking for guidance?' said Voldo.

'Giving thanks for a victory delivered, and for those of our brothers who were not.'

Voldo nodded. 'I am told you are to go into the heart of the hulk.'

'Yes, brother. Already teams of tech-priests scour the vessels in the hulk deemed clear. Our ally Plosk is planning an expedition to its centre. It is there that he believes the STC data to be.'

'And you do not trust him,' said Voldo.

Galt shook his head. 'He has omitted important details more than once. Wherever Plosk goes, I will go.'

'You are right to be wary. Why will these tech-priests not tell us what they know? We all have the same goals after all.'

'Forgemaster Clastrin says their organisation is as plagued by factionalism and division as any other. It may not be us he is keeping this information from. Will you walk with me? I find the chapel calming.'

Voldo fell in beside Galt. They went together slowly along the edge of the cathedral. The walls were heavy black marble, niches in the stone filled with skulls of ancient worthies who had aided the Chapter in some

way. Servitor-worshippers sang songs of distant Honourum. Serfs muttered prayers as they cleaned the huge space.

‘You have not assigned me any duty, my lord.’

Galt smiled a little tightly. So, here it came. ‘You have done enough, brother.’

‘Not one brother has ever done enough, not ever,’ said Voldo harshly. ‘To rest one second is to allow the enemies of our lord time to act.’

‘So says Guilliman’s Codex,’ said Galt.

‘I quote with purpose. Let me come with you.’

‘No, I have made my decision.’

Voldo swore. ‘Mantillio, do you think me too old? Is that it? I am still in my prime, I am not ready yet for some sinecure position on Honourum counting soup rations for the neophytes.’

‘Only you can speak thusly to me, Voldo.’

‘Something I have earned, Mantillio. For long decades I have been here for you and you repay me with this dishonour.’

‘You have fought long and hard here already, and earned another fine addition to the tally of your skin. Rest, let another take your place. There will be combat aplenty for you to partake in another day,’ said Galt.

Voldo grabbed the man he had trained by the shoulder and span him around to face him. His eyes narrowed as he looked into his face.

‘What is it, lord captain? I have known you since you were a boy. You are hiding something from me.’

Galt looked to one side, then back to the sergeant. ‘My voice betrays me.’

Voldo smiled. ‘It always did. You are a fine strategist, but you have much to learn of diplomacy before you are ready for the Chapter Master’s throne.’

Galt nodded. He hesitated before he spoke again. ‘If I hold you back here, it is not to dishonour you, but to keep you safe, my mentor.’

Voldo gave him a quizzical look. He tightened his hand. 'Go on.'

'When I received my last flesh art, I travelled into the Shadow Novum. There I was greeted by one of the spirits of the dead.'

'As it should be. What wisdom did he show you, did it concern me?'

Galt considered lying then, but untruthfulness was not part of the Novamarines' creed. To do so would have been a betrayal. 'No, brother.'

'Well then.' Voldo's hand dropped.

'It was you.'

Voldo folded his arms and looked to the floor. 'I understand.'

'Chaplain Odon told me that it is not uncommon to see the spirits of those who live, for it is a timeless place, and all who served or will serve our Chapter are to be found within.'

'I know, boy, I know. I know what it means. So you would seek to deny fate?' Voldo's face was hard. 'Such arrogance is not fitting for one of your office.'

'I wanted only to protect you.'

'What? By defying the will of the Emperor himself? Foolishness.' He pointed a finger at the left of Galt's chest, where his birth-heart beat. 'To make decisions based upon this is dangerous. That way lies temptation. Have I not told you this many times?'

'Yes, Brother Voldo.'

'Here,' he pointed at Galt's forehead. 'Here is where your true voice is. Tell me, what does it say?'

'It says that you are the most experienced veteran in the entire Chapter in the matter of cleansing space hulks. That to leave you behind would be rash, and an insult to your pride and to the oath we all swore.' Galt smiled. 'It also tells me you should have been a captain long ago.'

Voldo laughed. 'Ha! I serve better where I am, Mantillio. If I were a captain, when would I have the time to set you to rights? So, I ask you, when do we leave?'

Galt changed his orders. Then he sat in the pews of the cathedral with the man who he saw as his father, and prayed with him for the last time.

Blessed be the Machine-God and all his works, thought Plosk as another shuttle, laden with technological treasures, took off from the hulk and flew towards *Excommentum Incursus*. Plosk turned back to the data-slate set into the cogitation nexus of the control landau. He scrutinised it, half fearful that he had been mistaken. But then a spike in the graph playing in the upper quadrant of the screen brought a rush of exultation to his breast. There, the signature.

He smiled. ‘Magos Nuministon, it is there. Oh, by the Omnissiah, it is there!’

Nuministon peered at the screen. Above them, the energy shield protecting the control landau flared once, then again, as micro-meteors hit, debris from the Adeptus Astartes’ bombardment being pulled back into the greater body of the hulk. Nuministon wore a cable from the back of his head that plugged into the landau’s cogitation engines. He communed with the thing’s machine-spirits a moment. He would be running the data himself, checking the information.

‘The signals are faint, but inescapable. You are correct. Well done, Lord Magos Explorator.’

Plosk’s fleshy face split in a wide, self-satisfied grin. Around the landau the hulk’s surface glowed ferocious blue-white in the glare of Jorso. A detachment of troops from his ship’s skitarii formed a cordon around the landau. He had not wanted to deploy them; they were too valuable a resource to him. Why should he waste his own men when he had four hundred Space Marines to use in battle? But the genestealer attack on the surface had rattled him, and so he had called on his own resources. He was miserly with information and resources both, but he was not a fool.

‘Do the adepts of the stars know?’

‘Not yet. Of course, they will in short order. But there is no need for them to know yet. Who knows what spies and tattle-tales they have among

their ranks? All it takes is for one of their Techmarines to have the ear of a rival temple, or for one of their oh-so-incorruptible serfs to be anything but, and my claim will immediately be disputed.'

'You found it, lord.' Nuministon did not think these suppositions likely – all Space Marine Techmarines were trained together, and their loyalties invariably lay first and foremost with their Chapter. They were not on Mars long enough, nor inducted deeply enough into the inner mysteries, to become politicised along Mechanicus faction lines. He did not voice this. Plosk was inclined to a caution that bordered on paranoia, but it generally served him well.

'Yes, yes, yes.' Plosk flapped a hand in front of his face. 'But that's not the point, is it? Something of this magnitude will bring Machine Adepts from all over the galaxy swarming like flies. If so, I will lose my advantage. Half of them will want to destroy the vessel once they learn what is aboard it. No, this prize must be conveyed directly to Mars under my command, only then will I benefit from its finding. If I were to lose exclusive first rights, then what would I tell my patrons? One does not wish to anger a High Lord, Nuministon.'

'Garm is dead.'

'The dead ones are the most dangerous, my dear fellow.'

'When will you tell their leader of the threat?'

'When the time is right, if at all. I seriously doubt he has the wit to understand what we have found. He is awed by the talk of the STC data we might recover. Let him be, and let him remain unaware of any difficulty accompanying that. For all we know the ship is harmless. Captain Galt does not need to be told that it might be otherwise. This is machine business, let it be undertaken by those who understand it fully. Now the Space Marines have cleared the majority of genestealers from the hulk, we may deal with whatever guards the STC core, if indeed anything does,' he said breezily. 'But first we have to retrieve it, and if these data readings

are correct, then the vessel is readying itself to depart. Troublesome indeed.’ He tapped his fingers on the data-slate screen. ‘Well, it is not to be helped. We have triumphed over greater odds for lesser prizes.’

‘They are coming,’ said Nuministon. A star in the sky grew in brightness and size, revealing itself as a Thunderhawk of the Novamarines Chapter.

Plosk pursed his lips in annoyance. ‘The captain of the Novamarines, Galt, he insists on coming, of course. Let us hope he is not much of a hindrance.’

The Thunderhawk flew once around the Adeptus Mechanicus in a flagrant demonstration of power, then swept down to land in a blast of dust.

The craft’s assault ramp slammed down. As Plosk expected, Captain Galt came out first. His heart fell a little when Reclusiarch Mazrael of the Blood Drinkers stepped onto the surface of the hulk behind him, but he had more than half-expected to see him. Both were clad in Terminator armour. A full squad in the bone-and-blue of the Novamarines followed them, then four Terminators in the red of the Blood Drinkers. With a casual contempt, Plosk data-linked to their suit’s cogitation engines. The histories of the armour unspooled in this mind, accompanied by flashes of pict footage and combat data.

The names of those who wore them now came last: Voldo, Astomar, Militor, Eskerio and Gallio for the Novamarines; Tarael, Sandamael, Metrion and Curzon of the Blood Drinkers. Tarael wielded lightning claws, Astomar a heavy flame unit, the sergeants and Galt had power swords and storm bolters, the rest power fists and storm bolters. Their armament did not concern him so much as the auspexes Curzon and Militor bore, but Plosk was a calculating man, and he gambled that by the time the Space Marines’ sensoriums revealed the nature of the prize, it would be too late.

The data came to him easily, the Terminators unaware he had linked to and examined each and every one of them to the finest degree of minutiae.

He pulled a face when a twelfth figure stepped out off the ramp. The Master of the Forge of the Novamarines, Clastrin. He had recovered then, and that genuinely was poor luck for Plosk. He refrained from attempting a link to him. Clastrin was only a glorified Techmarine, one of the lowest ranks of tech-priest – barely worthy of the name, in fact – and would not be able to stop Plosk's data probe, but he would notice it, and Plosk would rather he remained unaware he was systematically spying on each and every one of his brothers for information.

‘Lord Captain Galt, Lord Reclusiarch Mazrael, I greet you.’ Plosk made a bow. Doubtless its irony was lost on the Adeptus Astartes. Plosk hated all these formalities, he was of the mind that while he bore the seal of the High Lords all should simply do as they were told, but the lords of the Space Marines were as touchy as they were ignorant.

Galt rudely forwent formal preamble. ‘We are accompanying you into the centre of the hulk, Magos Plosk. You will be unsafe without proper protection.’

‘Ah, but your men have done so fine a job of clearing the hulk, lord captain.’

‘Many genestealers remain. As such, your expedition is a combat operation, and we agreed, did we not, that the Adeptus Astartes would have authority in these matters. I am coming with you, magos, whether you like it or not.’

Plosk pulled a sour face. He was glad the captain could not see it. Had he had more time, he could have led the captain on a merry dance around the hulk, saving the discovery of the true prize until the Novamarine grew bored and left. But he did not have more time. ‘As you wish, my lord.’

‘As I command, Magos Plosk.’

‘I thank you for your concern, my lord, but I have many servitors to protect me, your presence really is not required.’

‘I was told they are susceptible to the radioactivity in the hulk, and where you intend to go is among the most radioactive areas of all,’ said Galt.

‘Do you not trust me, my lord? We are after all on the same side.’

‘I do not trust your ambition, lord magos,’ said Galt. ‘I believe that you think you operate in the best interests of the Imperium, but I have seen politics cloud men’s judgement as surely as lust or rage. And you have lied to me already.’

Plosk held up his space-suited hands that may or may not have been a gesture of apology. ‘An honest mistake. I suppose you of the Novamarines believe you are above the pettiness of politics?’

‘In the main we are, Lord Magos. We serve, that is all.’

Plosk sighed. ‘Nobody is above politics, lord.’ He spoke next to Mazrael. ‘And the Lord Reclusiarch? I take it you intend to accompany us as well?’

‘I do. The last segment of Lord Caedis’s telemetry recorded in Sergeant Sandamael’s sensorium show him heading to the hulk’s centre,’ said Mazrael. ‘I would recover his body and his armour and grant both the proper rites.’

‘Of course, all honour must be made to him and his battlegear,’ said Plosk. ‘We must be away soon, the hulk could begin translation at any time.’

‘I am well aware of this,’ said Galt, ‘and have instructed the fleet to destroy this agglomeration should any sign of an imminent warp tear manifest itself, whether or not we are still aboard.’

This was altogether too much for Plosk. ‘Idiocy!’ snapped the magos. ‘You do not know what you destroy.’

‘Why do you not enlighten us, magos?’

Plosk calmed himself. ‘I have already told you of the great archeotech trove that could be within. You will not achieve the destruction of the

Death of Integrity on your own.'

'In light of Lord Caedis's disappearance, I have been given direct command of the two Chapters here,' replied Galt.

Oh, how insufferable he was! Plosk loathed dealing with the Adeptus Astartes. They were so dogged in their devotion, so caught up in their holy missions and crusades and petty prejudices that they could never see the bigger schematic. The intentions of the Omnissiah-Emperor were beyond their ability to understand. They were made to fight; anything else was beyond their comprehension. He pitied them for that.

'Very well. It is what we agreed,' he said, though it rankled him to remain reasonable. 'We will be ready to depart in ten minutes, lords.' He bowed, and beckoned to Nuministon to follow him.

'The Reclusiarch is lying, he is hiding something.' Plosk, who had often to resort to diplomacy and brokerage while about his duties, had numerous means of proving the veracity of others' words, and those of the Adeptus Astartes had been duly tested.

'I have heard rumours regarding this family of Chapters, those descended of Sanguinius,' ground out Nuministon's uninflected voice.

'Perhaps Mazrael's omittance relates to this secret.'

'Perhaps,' said Plosk. He brightened. 'It would be most useful to learn the details. A fine piece of leverage. One never knows when one will require influence.'

'Indeed,' said Nuministon.

'Now, I require Samin's aid. Where is he?' said Plosk.

The expedition into the heart of the hulk began as a procession. Dozens of tech-priests and over one hundred servitors went into the perfectly square hole and down the road into the dark. They sang as they went, a low droning song broadcast on every frequency, and so unavoidable. The majority of the words to this dirge were impenetrable to the Space Marines, save Forgemaster Clastrin, to whom the cant of wheel, cog and sub-quantum relay switching was as familiar as bolter drill. He refrained

from joining them, although he knew the songs, instead he voiced the fourteenth canticle of battle along with his brothers and the brothers of the Blood Drinkers.

All down the road, new doors had been cut and old ones wrenched open. An artery of thick black cables ran along one wall, held in place by welded staples. Into each opening some of these cables wormed to re-emerge depleted in number, and the swags of them hanging from the wall grew thinner the lower they went. Everywhere was a bustle. Servitors tramped up and down in endless lines, carrying pieces of machines or crates, or were hard-linked to grav-sleds and tracked litters bearing larger artefacts. Arc lights blazed from openings. Plasma cutters burned. The tech-priests were working fast to strip the hulk. Galt was somewhat taken aback. *Excommentum Incursus* was a giant vessel, but he had miscalculated how many tech-priests it carried.

One by one, tech-adepts split from the column and went on their way to whatever mysterious tasks they had to perform, taking their servitors with them. The songs of the cyborgs lessened in power as their number reduced. By the time they reached the airlock only a score of them were left and their prayers were in contest with the incantations of the working tech-priests. The airlock was open, and they went into the cavern without the tedious business of repressurisation. The air had bled away completely after the battle, and there had not been time to re-establish an atmosphere. So it was they passed amid a frenzy of activity that, vox aside, was performed in total silence. The tech-priests had cut many holes into the sides of the large alien ship, from where they carried a great number of technological prizes. From the amount of praise being offered to the Omnissiah, Galt guessed that the artefacts were of high value.

‘Xenos technology,’ said Plosk disparagingly, ‘but valuable nonetheless.’

Galt called a halt while he conferred with Captain Aresti, who was in command of the forces in the cavern. Captain Soraël had led the majority

of the Blood Drinkers into the warrens of the hulk, chasing down the remaining genestealers, leaving the Novamarines to destroy the xenos dead and guard the labours of the tech-priests. Mastrik remained on board *Novum in Honourum*, in command of the fleet in Galt's absence.

Satisfied all was in order, Galt allowed the impatient Plosk to continue onwards. They headed out of the cavern via a new doorway cut into the alien ship, and from there through a crush of compacted metal and stone into a heavily damaged Imperial vessel of extreme vintage. Much work went on there; lights had been set up all along its corridors and savants were plugged into data outports, scouring systems for soft data hidden within cogitation systems. Two of the remaining tech-priests went to their colleagues here.

Three more ships directly down and the streams of servitors porting technology to the surface dwindled to nothing. The final tech-priest went to his task, leaving only Plosk, Nuministon, Samin, nine armed servitors and three semi-aware data-savants with the Terminators.

They went through this last ship and came to an old airlock set in a comparatively sound wall. A wide chasm opened up here between this ship and the next, and a prefabricated bridge had been laid across. As Galt crossed it he looked upwards. The chasm extended to the surface. The nearside lip was lit by the ungentle illumination of Jorso, above was a narrow strip of black space.

On the other side of the bridge were two lamps. Beyond that, no signs at all of an Imperial presence.

'I calculate that we will be able to salvage most of the material from the upper levels before the hulk disappears once more into the warp. These other ships here are of lesser interest, although it is regrettable that we will not be able to explore them fully. One never knows what one might uncover, but in my long experience as Explorator, I have learned to prioritise,' said Plosk.

‘There is no Imperial presence from hereon in?’ said Sergeant Sandamael.

‘Aside from a few relay beacons so that we might communicate with the surface, and a few servitors patrolling and surveying the corridors in case there is something of use. No. We are all the Emperor’s bold explorers here, my lords, not just I,’ said Plosk.

Tarael’s lightning claws activated, patterning the dark walls of the ship with blue light.

‘Then lead on, lord magos,’ said Galt. ‘Take us to this treasure you have found.’



CHAPTER 20

At the summit of Mount Calicium

Holos emerged from the chambers of the astorgai, broken but unbowed. The light came suddenly after the darkness of the labyrinth in the mountain. At first the light of the setting suns hurt his eyes, and he lay on the warm rock of the volcano until the burning of the light passed. In his hearts and mind, the Thirst burned him also, and the combination of the two was too much to endure. He closed his eyes and gathered his strength. Astorgai wheeled on the thermals above him, calling out and wailing; their king was dead, and they would not approach his slayer.

Holos rolled onto his front, and pushed himself with great effort onto his knees. His armour was broken, its spirit he thought dead, for the support it ordinarily gave his body was gone. Joints ran freely without power assist, if they ran at all – his left knee was locked, the plates deformed from his fight with Lo-tan. His left arm was heavy and pained him when he tried to move it. He watched in thirst-gripped fascination as his blood dripped from the tears in the armour. His Larraman cells were only now causing it to clot. That it had bled for so long indicated that the wound was a grave one.

Holos attempted to stand. His legs would not bear him, so he put his sword point to the ground, to push upon it and rise. It scraped white lines

in the stone and fell twice before he had it steady. With a gasp, he stood erect, leaning his weight onto *Encarmine Dread*.

Once he was on his feet he felt stronger, if only a little.

Ahead, not two kilometres distant, was the peak of the mountain. It was not a true peak, but a higher part of the volcano's rim raised like an animal's tooth above the caldera of the volcano, the relic of one of the cone's many periodic upthrustings and collapses. The cone's broken rim ran up to it at first, but then the peak pulled up and away from the rest of the mountain with rapidity. The rock of it was multifaceted, and the stacked columns looked almost artificial in appearance. A strange spur arced out from it, a platform on the top some one hundred metres above the rim, tilted slightly towards where Holos stood.

Through images of battles past and those yet to come, Holos saw the figure from his dream, a cowed, winged being standing before him. It raised a skeletal finger and pointed to the platform on the peak. Holos nodded and licked desiccated lips. He began to walk, and the figure faded. Each step sent pain shooting through his wounded arm. His armour dragged at him, pulling him back when it should have been carrying him forward. He had never had cause to walk in deactivated armour, not outside of his training. He was astonished at the weight of its betrayal.

He sheathed *Encarmine Dread* clumsily, and pushed shaking fingers at the clasps on his pauldrons. The heavy shoulder plates disengaged and fell to the ground one after the other with dull clangs. He walked a little easier. He fumbled tools from his belt, and set to work on the rest of his battleplate as he walked.

Soon the trail of his footsteps was punctuated by discarded pieces of armour.

‘There is much activity ahead, lord captain,’ said Eskerio. ‘Genestealers.’

‘We cannot delay,’ said Plosk. ‘We do not have much time.’

‘How many?’ asked Galt.

‘Twenty-nine, maybe more,’ said Eskerio. ‘They are in hiding, being cautious. I’ll warrant they know they are being hunted.’

‘That will play well for us, cousin,’ said Sandamael.

‘What do you propose to do?’ asked Plosk.

‘Fight our way through,’ said Galt. ‘That is what you would have us do, I think. Or would you relinquish your prize?’

‘Of course not,’ said Plosk brusquely. ‘Please, make use of my servitors.’

‘That will not be necessary. Have them guard you. Lord Reclusiarch Mazrael, what will you and yours do?’

‘We shall come with you, lord captain,’ said Mazrael.

‘Very well. Forgemaster Clastrin, remain here with the magi. You may take Lord Magos Plosk up on his offer. Command his servitors. Establish fields of fire. Do not allow the genestealers through.’

‘Yes, brother-captain.’

‘My thanks!’ called out Plosk.

Galt ignored him. He had the Terminators advance rapidly from the crossways they were in and into the corridor where Eskerio’s auspex had detected the movement. This ship, so close to the heart of the hulk, was in poor condition and immeasurably ancient. This deep into the agglomeration, many of the component vessels were crushed into impassibility, and this one differed only in that a clear way to the heart of the hulk existed through its crumpled halls. The corridor they entered was wide and tall, its metal heavily corroded. It had been the access way to the ship’s warp engines, but was now broken open along much of its length so that the compartments that had once lined it had become a part of the corridor. Consequently, the space was a deadly tangle of low walls, crumpled bulkheads and hanging catwalks.

‘If only the lights and gravity functioned here,’ said Militor. ‘It would make our lives a little easier, brothers.’

‘I do not think we will find any machine activity this deep into the hulk,’ said Eskerio. ‘These vessels are as old as the Imperium, if not older. Their spirits are broken and fled.’

‘It is surely the business of Forgemaster Clastrin to declare such as a fact, brother,’ said Astomar.

‘Quiet, all of you!’ said Voldo.

‘What is it, cousin?’ asked Trael.

‘Sounds. Not of motion, but of power.’

‘Cousin Voldo is correct. I’m getting a reading, brothers,’ said Curzon.

In the sensoriums of the suits, energy indicators jumped. A tortured groaning went up deep in the ship. A series of bangs accompanied a building whine.

The Terminators sank into themselves suddenly as ancient grav plates under their feet activated. Lights flickered. Many burst in showers of sparks. Crackles of energy sputtered from power relays and severed cables. A grav plate imploded with a thunderous crack. Small fires leapt into being as ancient machinery failed, dying as quickly as they drank the small measure of oxygen in the stale air. A door shuddered into life. It shook as it attempted to close, stopped, then tried again.

‘What is this?’ hissed Galt.

‘A refutation of your words, from the Machine-God himself!’ said Plosk over the vox. ‘Tread carefully in these halls, oh captain. You walk nigh unto a tabernacle of the Omnissiah himself! Do not doubt me, lord captain! We are close to His presence.’

The genestealers attacked. Scared out of their hiding places by the unexpected light, they leapt through holes in the rusted walls, dropped from their hiding places high in the ceiling, running at the Terminators from gaping doors.

The Terminators reacted without delay, decades of training and experience guiding their arms. Genestealers died with raucous screeches

as bolts cut through the air. The space was open, the genestealers disorganised, only a handful got through to the Terminators' position, where they were rapidly slain by Trael, Voldo and Galt.

Plosk did not wait for Galt to give the all clear, but walked into the ruinous corridor as soon as the last bolt had been fired.

'You see, Captain Galt, the Machine-God is with us here. We are close to the source of his power, the STC data core, so mighty is He incarnate that He answers even the prayers of the unbeliever!'

'This is nonsense,' said Mazrael, but there was uncertainty in his voice.

'Come,' said Plosk, 'we are close.' He walked arrogantly through the Terminators. Galt signalled them and they followed uncertainly, servitors clomping mindlessly behind them.

'Be on your guard,' said Galt.

The engine walkway stopped. The hull that had bounded it was long gone. Plosk stepped through the gaping hole in the ancient ship, and out onto a shelf of rock. Galt came close behind, careful of his footing as the gravity abruptly ceased.

The shelf of rock – the surface of a small asteroid – finished seventy metres away, rearing up to form one side of a small cave. A mangle of structures, ice and rubble made up the majority of the rest, but one component stood apart from this; a spacecraft of a kind totally unfamiliar to the Space Marines.

The greater part of the spaceship was buried in the mass of debris, but the side of it presented to them was undamaged by time or the shifting crush of the agglomeration. His sensorium could not penetrate its gleaming hull, but Galt estimated it to be around three hundred metres long, small by Imperial standards. It was clean of line and unembellished, which made the craft appear strange to Galt's eyes. No Mechanicus runes marked its outer surface, nor were there any statues or artistic flourishes of any kind, yet in its functionality there was a clean aestheticism. It did

not appear like any ship crafted by men, but Galt knew instinctively that this vessel had been built by human hands.

‘This is what you hide from us?’ said Galt, wary and awed in equal part.

‘Hide? No, captain. You are here with me. I merely did not wish to burden you with excitable supposition,’ said Plosk.

‘Or alert his rivals,’ said Clastrin quietly.

Plosk walked forward. Light erupted into life along the ship’s length, the glow coming directly from the hull itself.

‘Wait!’ shouted Galt.

Plosk ignored his warning. ‘Long have I searched for this vessel, several lifetimes of lesser men,’ he said. ‘On Vardus Prime, far out in the Halo, did I find a mention of it, buried deep in the *Liber Solentus*, penned by men who never knew the light of the Emperor, and who were destroyed long before they could be saved. I have searched and searched and searched. There has only been one other of its kind reliably documented, the ill-omened doom-ship the *Blade of Infinity*. I surmised if there was one, there must be, *have* to be more.’ He was speaking to himself now more than the others, close to incoherence as human emotion overran his electro-mechanical faculties. He fell to his knees. ‘And it is real!’

Another light came on, its radiance undimmed by time or corruption. It lit a message on the side of the hull in a strange script Galt could barely read. As alien as the straight lines of the font seemed, they were human letters, a plain form of the Gothic script. The words, however, were meaningless to him.

Plosk pointed to it. ‘See! The Machine-God shows us the truth of it. Here, my lords, as I predicted, rests a pre-Imperial starship.’ His voice shook with triumph as he read the ancient script aloud. ‘The *Spirit of Eternity*.’

Plosk collapsed into fevered prayer. Nuministon and Samin joined him in supplication, bowing before the ancient vessel. Clastrin hesitated,

stayed by Galt's suspicions, but overwhelmed he fell to one knee. Their servitors looked mutely on.

'Look, lord captain,' said Voldo. He pointed at an object upon the floor close by the *Spirit of Eternity*.

Mazrael walked past them, right up to the skin of the ship. He bent down and picked the object up.

'A vambrace. It is Lord Caedis's,' he said.

'He is alive?' said Metrion. He took a hopeful step forwards.

'He was recently,' said Mazrael. If Galt was expecting some sign of joy from Mazrael at the news, he was disappointed.

'He is inside the ship then,' said Voldo.

Mazrael examined the ship before him. The ship was clean, as if newly made. 'I cannot tell. I see no doorway.'

'Stay back, lord,' warned Voldo. 'Who knows what evils it has carried through time.'

'No!' said Plosk joyfully. 'The ways of the ancients are beyond your ken, my lord. There is no harm here, only knowledge. The doorway will not be obvious to the likes of you, I, however, can see it.'

'Then how do we gain entry to the archeotech you seek, magos?' said Voldo. 'Do we have time for you to cut your way in?'

Plosk started to answer, but a great rumbling interrupted him as the hulk underwent a tremor. They watched nervously as the component vessels of the cave's walls moved past one another, like fish in a net struggling to be free from the fisherman. Hull skins crumpled. The chamber was airless, yet the group heard the shifting of the tortured agglomeration through their feet, a roaring and grinding of overwhelming volume. They struggled to keep their footing in the near zero-gravity. Those of the Terminators that could, mag-locked themselves to the wall. Others shot out their safety grapnels. One of the servitors and a data-savant, their butchered brains not quick enough to respond to the rapid movement, were cast from their feet

and were sent hurtling into the cave walls. There they died, broken by the impact.

The magi remained unmoving, bent in serene worship throughout the quake.

The tremors lessened. The magi stood.

‘Lord Plosk has searched the length and breadth of this galaxy for four hundred years, gathering the lore that led us to this momentous point in time,’ said Samin scornfully. ‘Do you think he would not also gather the information unto him required to access such a craft?’

‘Quickly, Lord Plosk,’ said Nuministon. ‘I am reading data commensurate with warp field generation.’

‘Warp field generation from where?’ said Galt incredulously. ‘From the ship?’

The mage priests ignored him, and dropped into a rapid conversation of screeching binaric.

‘It cannot be active, surely, lord captain,’ said Brother Militor. ‘It is at the heart of this hulk. It must have been here for thousands of years.’

‘And the lights, cousin, and the energy emanating from the vessel?’ said Sandamael. ‘I do not like this, lord captain, it has the stink of corruption to it.’

‘It is a vessel from the Dark Age of Technology,’ said Plosk. ‘From a time blessed by the Omnissiah himself, before those who wielded His powers were adjudged unworthy and had His light withdrawn from them. It functions, oh it functions!’

‘And the warp engines, do they function too? Damn you, mage priest, what more are you concealing from me?’ shouted Galt.

‘The warp fields are generated by the space hulk, not this vessel. Once an agglomeration has sailed the tides of the warp, its fabric develops a sympathy for it. Any perturbation in the veil between real space and the empyrean can drag it back.’

‘The gravitic well of the sun Jorso?’ said Clastrin.

‘Perhaps so, Forgemaster,’ said Nuministon.

‘Are we to retrieve the datacore, or are we to argue as the hulk breaks up around our ears?’ said Plosk. ‘I will explain all, but first we must gain entry.’

Galt looked to the Forgemaster. The Techmarine chief gave a brief nod.

‘Very well, but be quick.’ Aftershocks troubled the chamber still.

‘The unbelievers must withdraw,’ said Plosk.

‘I see no door,’ muttered Trael. ‘This is a waste of time.’

‘Where there is no way, there will be a way,’ said Nuministon. Galt was certain he was quoting something.

Mazrael rejoined the other Terminators, Caedis’s armour clasped in his hand.

Plosk’s servitors formed a semicircle about the magos, and began a low mumbling drone, thick with formulae and holy data.

Plosk threw his hands wide and spoke over his choir. ‘Oh mighty vessel of the Omnissiah! We, the humble servants of He who made you, we who have searched for long eternities to find your like, we request access to your holy innards, and the information that you contain therein. Let us prove ourselves worthy to you and to our Lord, so that mankind might slip the shackles of ignorance, and learn anew the true runes of knowledge!’

Nothing happened.

‘He has lost his mind,’ said Trael drily. ‘He speaks to a wall.’

Voldo made a noise of agreement. ‘Brother Gallio?’

‘Wait, my lords!’ said Samin, holding up a hand. ‘He only greets it as it should be greeted – he treats it with the respect it demands. To approach otherwise would be an affront to the vessel’s spirit and perilous to us all. Only now might he utter the codes of access.’

Plosk began to speak rapidly in a language none understood. It was not the electronic chitter of binaric, but a true, spoken language of men. A

chill went down Galt's spine as the tech-priest went on; the language was foreign to him, but amid the babble were words that sounded half-familiar, as if Plosk spoke High Gothic distorted by a dream.

And then the ship replied.

The Terminators stepped backwards, weapons raised.

'Hold!' said Nuministon. 'It is only a voice-activated ward, nothing more. The machine's spirit has a voice as our servitors have a voice.'

The ship's voice was soft and emotionless; it too used the ancient tongue.

Plosk's hands dropped. The servitors sang on.

The ship responded, and the way opened. A section of the hull glowed green, forming a solid square. The light receded, so that the square became a doorway with rounded corners, delineated by a band of brightness. And then there were steps, appearing in some manner Galt could not understand. The light dimmed, lighting the new doorway and stairs in soft lambency. The ship looked as if it had always been that way, as if there had always been a door and not been a solid wall of metal only seconds before. Data flooded into their sensoriums and auspexes as the inviolable skin of the craft parted for them.

'Witchcraft!' gasped Mazrael, tightening his grip on his crozius. The Space Marines backed up further. Mutters of alarm came from all of them.

'No, my lords! Power, technology. Behold the true might of the Omnissiah revealed!' Plosk said. He looked into the vessel. 'And soon it will all be ours again, and mankind will rule the stars rightfully, totally, and alone. But as much as I long to enter, we must plan our escape. As Nuministon says, we do not have much time. Teleportation is our only hope.'

'I have a clear reading from within the vessel now,' said Eskerio.

'As do I,' said Curzon.

‘The energy fluctuations of the ship’s secondary reactor will not allow a firm pattern lock,’ said Clastrin.

‘We should turn back now,’ said Eskerio.

‘No!’ said Plosk. ‘There is a way. The reactor can be deactivated. Once it is, then we may be safely away with the ship’s secrets.’

‘What do we do, lord captain?’ said Voldo uneasily.

‘If the ship opened for us, it may have opened for my lord,’ said Trael, taking a step forward. Mazrael said nothing.

They all looked to Galt.

‘So be it,’ said Galt finally. ‘So be it.’

Caedis passed through the hulk in Holos’s fugue, wandering deeper and deeper into the *Death of Integrity*. Sometimes he was Caedis, and on the edge of his perception he was aware that he was casting away his armour as he walked, an act that had lost any sense of importance. It must be done, so he did it. Then there were times when he thought he was Caedis but could not be sure, for the roar of his own blood in his ears was deafening. His twin hearts pounded like war drums, and the Thirst tore at his soul with dripping claws. Sometimes he was Holos, climbing metre by painful metre up the side of Mount Calicium. Sometimes he was neither. He, Holos and the other shades which climbed with him were sent tumbling into the distant past by Holos’s own Black Rage. Caedis suffered the Rage and through suffering it he suffered Holos’s own Rage, until the two multiplied each other into an infinite tunnel of dark memories of war. An eternity of slaughter and bloodshed and burning torment beckoned.

Holos dragged himself along the lip of the volcano’s crater with his one good arm. The rim was narrow, no more than a few metres wide at its narrowest, and his movement sent rocks tumbling over the edge. They bounced higher and higher as they fell, towards the steaming, poisonous green lake at the centre. Holos had discarded what armour he could, but his chestplates and leg assembly would not come free. His hand and arms were bloodied from dragging himself along the sharp stone. The

hypercoagulants in his blood sealed the wounds quickly, but each painful metre fresh wounds were torn into his flesh by the spines of the mountain.

The smell of his own life fluids drove him deeper into insanity. He blacked out twice, finding himself soaring high in the air over a battlefield he did not recognise. The sensation of unaided flight was so intoxicating, he almost lost himself. Doubtless had he not had the will, Holos would have died raving upon the rim of the volcano, and the Blood Drinkers would have died with him. But Holos's will to survive was mighty, and his pride in his Chapter mightier still. He dragged himself back to the present. Holos was aware of the others who climbed with him only fleetingly.

Sometimes Caedis was aware that he was not Holos even as he experienced the hero pulling himself over the sharp rocks. At other times Caedis found himself crawling through wrecked corridors of spacecraft. He, unlike the ancient hero, could still walk, and he would become confused, then pull himself upright and stagger on. As Caedis, he went through places of intense cold, places with no air and no gravity, or choked with poisonous gas. He should have died, but something more than his engineered physiology allowed him to survive. Perhaps, like Holos, it was his will alone. Perhaps not. Fate has a way of saving those it values.

He was Holos for a time, falling painfully back to the floor, and the peak of Mount Calicium was so far away. And then he was Caedis, naked, his armour all gone. He was in a ship that was lit and warm and full of air sweeter than any he had ever tasted, pure and untainted by volcanic fume, pollution, or the rot of old blood. He marvelled at the vessel; proportioned for men but not like any ship he had ever seen. He looked groggily for a crew, but found none.

Time pulled him away to its own whims. He felt blood on his hands, the death of a genestealer; it passed. He went elsewhere.

The slope of the peak rose steeply from the rim of the crater. Holos stared up at it. A lesser man would have stopped. Holos did not. Reaching out his

good hand he hauled his battered body upwards. Betrayed by his armour, he proceeded by the dint of his will alone.

The suns were rolling behind the horizon, taking day away with them, when he attained the summit.

Holos rolled onto his back. He lay gasping, his great strength spent. The sky turned from orange to a deep purple, heralding the oncoming night. Ash clouds streaked the dome of heaven in herringbone patterns. The air at the summit was thin and full of poisonous gases. They burned his throat, his birth lungs. His multi-lung laboured to drag what little oxygen there was from the air.

He wavered in and out of consciousness, back and forth in time; to the days of the primarchs, and far into the future.

The first stars pricked at the sky, and it bled hard light.

‘There is no one here,’ Holos said, his voice strange in his ears, thick with exertion and dust. ‘The vision was a lie!’

He fell into a dark sleep. Dreams of wings tormented him.

He awoke with a start. The last hold of day was slipping. The shadows were as long as time, rocks moulded by the volcano burned orange again with the dying fires of the setting suns.

Something had changed.

He craned his neck, tilted his head backwards. His scalp grated against grit, but Holos was past the point of pain.

The peak ended in a spur, a weirdly sculpted branch of stone that stood out over the steep sides of the cone. A vertical ellipse of blinding light shone at the top of this spur. Within it, a figure was waiting, the figure from his dream.

Holos’s battered body filled with adrenaline. His feet scrabbled at the stone as he righted himself. The armour was as heavy as sin. He got to his knees and, cradling his injured arm against his chest, crawled slowly to the foot of the rock spur.

The figure waited. It was impossible to make out its features. A silhouette attenuated by the glare was its body, its face a shapeless blur. Only its broad wings, feathers shimmering with iridescent colours, were clear.

With great effort, Holos got himself into a kneeling position. He was afraid, for this was something beyond the material world. This was not something that would yield to the bolter or the sword. He stared nevertheless into the light. It seared his retinas, but he felt the Rage retreat within himself, and he felt the blessed return of sanity.

‘I am Holos, son of Dolkaros of the tribe of Sumar, Initiate of the Blood Drinkers Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. I am a warrior of the Emperor, and I would save my kin from the madness that afflicts us. I have come,’ he spoke boldly. ‘I have followed my dream. I have passed the test given me. Tell me how to save my brothers, as was promised,’ he said, his voice quavered. Emotions long suppressed broke through his conditioning.

‘You have come,’ said the figure. ‘You have passed the test. You are worthy of what I must tell you. Hearken, hearken to the secret that will save your brethren.’ Its voice was old and harsh as dry parchment, the sibilants hissed, tailing off into half-heard words that meant something quite different to what the figure seemed to say. The conversation between Holos and the figure continued, but muted. Other conversations began to overlay it, one at a time, as Caedis became aware of himself as separate to Holos. The conversations overlapped each other like ripples in a pond, and Holos’s exchange with the saviour of the Blood Drinkers became unintelligible.

‘Welcome, Caedis, Lord of the Blood Drinkers. You too have been proven worthy.’

‘Worthy enough to join Holos on his endless climb,’ said a second voice from the light. It was raspier and less wholesome than the first.

Then Caedis was on the mountain, not Holos. How it came to be, he could not say. The scene had a hyper-real clarity. If it were a vision, it seemed more real than life.

Caedis shaded his eyes. He got a fleeting impression of a pair of heavy heads moving on sinuous necks before his vision blurred, disarmed by the light around the figure. This was not how he imagined Holos's visitor, or was it how he had imagined it all along, and was unable to capture the figure in glass because his mind would not accept the truth of it?

‘Why am I here?’ said Caedis. ‘Why do I not suffer the Black Rage as my brethren do, reliving the last hours of Sanguinius? Who are you?’

The figure shifted, as if it leaned upon a staff. Caedis glimpsed a large, inhuman hand tipped with claws.

‘You are worthy,’ repeated the second voice.

‘I am he who gave to Holos the secret of how to preserve your Chapter. I am the saviour of the Blood Drinkers. You do not suffer as other sons of the Blood Angels do because I have decreed it to be otherwise. Would you know the secret? Would you know what I told Holos?’

Caedis did not answer. The thing in the light went on anyway.

‘I told him to embrace change.’

‘Embrace it!’ said the other voice.

‘Only through change can one survive, only through evolution is there life. Your gene-seed is corrupt, you are changing. You try to deny it, and that is why you were dying. But to embrace it... Ah!’

‘To embrace change is to live,’ said the thing's other voice. ‘Reject it and die.’

A sense of terrible horror gripped at Caedis's hearts. There were things few men knew of; things that made the most degenerate xenos creatures in all the galaxy seem benign. All Space Marines had some knowledge of the Ruinous Powers. Few among their number were fully aware of the Dark

Gods' actual influence on the material universe, or the nature of their servants, or how those servants could manifest themselves.

But Caedis knew. Caedis was a Chapter Master, and thus the most awful secrets of the universe had been laid open to him.

Before him was a Chaos daemon.

'What do you want of me?' he said, determining to say as little as possible. Some of the daemons were master tricksters, and would bend his own words against him.

'What do I want of you?' the thing's voices spoke as one, the harmonies between the two carrying another layer of meaning. 'I would ask you a question, that is all.'

'Why?'

'Why would I not wish to? All change is Chaos, all Chaos is change. Change is inevitable, and so Chaos is inevitable. I ask you, will you embrace change? Will you embrace Chaos?'

'Never!' Caedis shouted as loudly as he could, his spirit crawling in revulsion within his skin. What had Holos done? What diabolical pact had he made to save the Chapter? His mind rebelled against it. All his life's work, his service, a lie!

'You fight the war of the mountain against the rain and the wind. The mountain seems strong, but in the end, the rain will win,' said the other voice.

'I will never submit to a power that is not the Emperor of mankind!'

'Who says you have any choice, Chapter Master? Does the pawn choose whether it is black or white? Does it have a say in its movement across the board?' said the first voice.

The creature's other voice spoke. 'You oppose change, and yet you are the epitome of change yourself, altered by the weak science of your kind, you are far more than that which you once were.'

'And far less than you were intended to be.'

‘You are not untouched by Chaos,’ the thing was staring at his lengthened teeth. ‘Yet you are weak still. You are weakened by your loyalty to the corpse that is your lord. Cast aside your loyalty.’

‘It is a chain that weighs you down as your armour weighs Holos down.’

‘That strangles and binds.’

‘A chain of servitude.’

‘I should cast aside the service to which I have sworn myself, to serve a daemonic master?’ said Caedis. ‘And what will be my reward? Betrayal of my kind? Eternal torment? My soul fed to the creatures of the warp? I am no fool. Our struggle is daunting, but I will not abandon it!’

‘The warp will prevail. The long war has been waged for far longer than you reckon it, and soon it will be done. Follow me, bring your warriors to fight. Victory is pre-ordained. I will make you powerful.’ The thing was beguiling. Caedis fought its promises with all his might.

‘Go back and eternal suffering awaits you. There will be no respite,’ said the other voice.

‘No rest.’

‘You will not die, we will not allow it.’

‘You will experience the depths of the Black Rage. You will suffer what Holos prevented. You will see the depths of your monstrous nature. Your humanity will burn in its fires, and you will be powerless. Your Emperor made you as you are, not we. What then is just?’

‘Change, change is Chaos. Change is inevitable. Chaos is inevitable. Embrace Chaos, or be consumed by it. Embrace change!’ the second voice shrieked.

Caedis stood and stared into the light unflinchingly. He drew himself up to his full height. His voice was firm as he replied.

‘No. I defy you. My soul remains my own. If I must suffer the torments of hell itself in order to serve the Emperor, then I will. Service is life.’

‘Blood is life, is that not how your ritual goes?’ said the first voice mockingly.

‘No. The blood is a means, it is regrettable, but it is the road to service. All is done in the name of service. I do not know what Holos agreed with you, but we defy you still, two thousand years on. Can you not see? We will never turn to Chaos. It is we who have tricked you.’

The creature shifted in the light. Its form wavered, flickering through a myriad other indistinct shapes before settling back upon the form it had before. Caedis was sure he could make out two heads now, heavy and beaked, not unlike the astorgai, held upon long necks.

‘And you think this a secret, this dealing of Holos with we?’ said the first voice. Wisdom and wickedness were at one within it.

‘Shanandar was the name of the Reclusiarch, it was he to whom Holos told the whole truth,’ said the second, and listening to its voice, one became aware that death and life were the same.

‘From Shanandar to Melios, Melios to Dravin. Down the line of your skull-masked priests, to Gurian, Canandael, Solomael and Curvin,’ said the first voice.

‘From Curvin to Doloros, from him down to Quiniar, and from Quiniar to...’

Caedis spoke the last name, his voice a deathly hush. ‘Mazrael.’

Caedis got the impression of a head turned sideways, a laterally mounted eye, bird bright and calculating, regarding him. ‘My master’s brother has his warriors of blood, though they know it not,’ said the daemon’s first voice. ‘I will bring my own to present to my master in time for the final war. You will submit, and if you do not submit, one of your predecessors will,’ said the first voice.

‘Or those that follow.’

‘One has.’

‘A change, a change from “no” to “yes”, and that, mortal, is the easiest change of all to make. You may say no, and you do. Very well. Another will come, and another, then another still. As long as your kind utilise the rite...’

‘The rite of blood given, and the rite of blood taken.’

‘...to defer your rightful fate, those like you will continue to follow Holos in his trek up the mountain. They will fight, and they will struggle, and they will come to me.’

‘Many may say “no”.’

‘It matters not. Only one need say “yes”. And one will.’

‘We have seen it. It has already happened,’ the voices spoke as one. ‘Your Chapter will fall, as your brothers fell before you. Now,’ they said, ‘fall!’

Caedis lunged at the light, hands outstretched, aiming to break the neck on the right. He brushed against something that felt like feathers and flesh, but which made his skin shiver with revulsion. A stench of old carrion, the dry scent of birds, the astringency of electricity, and then he was past it. The light winked out, taking the being with it.

He twisted, his feet catching on the end of the rock spur. His arms windmilled as he sought balance. He caught a glimpse of Holos, head bowed at the rock, deep in his own conversation two thousand years ago, and he wondered at what price the hero had bought the temporary salvation of his Chapter.

The daemon’s prophecy came true. He fell into the volcano-smogged air of San Guisiga, and plummeted towards a field of fanged granite far below.

He hit with bone-jarring force. His legs broke. His fused ribs caved in, crushed by a point of stone. His skull shattered.

The vision ended.

Caedis coughed. He was fully himself. The Thirst had abated for now, taking his strange visions with it. But it writhed in the pit of his gut, making him nauseous and hungry at the same time. He thought of the daemon's words. It would return redoubled, and soon. He had to get out of the hulk and tell the others what he had learned. He had to put a stop to the rite before it was too late. He thanked the Emperor that he, as Chapter Master, had the power to do that, to undo the evil that Holos had wrought.

He rolled onto his side, hands pawing at smooth metal. He was so damned weak!

A long tendril of something wrapped itself around his ankles. Two more grabbed his wrists. His arms were pulled apart, and he was lifted into the air. He had no strength to resist.

‘Well, well, well,’ said a silken voice that came from everywhere and nowhere. ‘What have we here?’

Caedis opened his mouth to address the voice, but no sound came.

He was trapped.



CHAPTER 21

The power of the ancients

The doorway led to a sloping corridor several metres long that joined an arterial way wide enough for four Terminators to walk abreast. The ship's interior was eerily untouched. Its artificial gravity was functional, the curved ceiling glowed softly. There was little dust, and no corrosion. The air was far purer than that aboard the *Novum in Honourum*, an atmospheric mix of rare quality. The design of the ship was superior in virtually every way to those on which Galt had been. Like the exterior it lacked the heavy embellishment so beloved in the Imperium. Even so, it was as beautiful in its way. Sinuous lines defined its architecture, the parts of it seemingly all of one piece. Only close inspection showed that this was not so.

The mage priests chattered to one another in their screeching code as Plosk called a halt by something that might have been a sculpture. If it was, Galt could make no sense of it; it was a series of abstract curves and intersecting planes of quicksilver-bright metal.

‘I have located a data portal,’ said Plosk.

‘I detect nothing,’ said Eskerio. The contempt in his voice was growing every time he spoke. He no longer used the tech-priests’ honorifics.

‘These technologies are beyond our own, but not beyond understanding,’ said Samin. ‘Allow my master peace so that he might commune with the

vessel's spirit.'

Plosk and Nuministon stood close, their helmets almost touching, and fell silent. If they spoke with the ship it was not apparent.

'I have never seen a ship such as this, Brother Clastrin,' said Galt over a private channel.

'Do not be seduced by its simple beauties, brother,' said Clastrin. 'This ship dates from a time when technology was given freely by the Omnissiah, but was used ignorantly and left unhallowed. For that, he turned his back upon mankind.'

'Is there threat here?'

'There may well be. At the least there will be a test – the Omnissiah will not return to the unworthy that which he took from the unworthy.'

Plosk and Nuministon stood apart. Plosk undid his helmet clasps and pulled it free. He breathed the air deeply and smiled.

'I have accessed the machine's datacores. What we seek is located on the bridge.'

Galt spoke publicly. 'How long do we have, Magos Nuministon?'

'The warp fields that gather themselves about the hulk will push the agglomeration into the empyrean in one hour, forty-two minutes and seven seconds, lord captain.'

'The reactor?' asked Galt.

'It is to the aft, five decks down. Repair is necessary if we are to teleport free. Samin is ready, are you not, Adept Samin?'

Samin looked anything but ready.

'To split our forces could be folly,' said Sandamael. 'But I see little choice in the matter.'

'I will lead the party,' said Voldo. 'Lord captain?'

Galt hesitated. This was the time, he knew it in his bones. This was the real message of the Shadow Novum, the death of his mentor, and it was

upon him. He looked at Voldo. From behind his helmet lenses, Voldo looked back.

‘Now is the moment of peril for you,’ said Galt to him privately.

‘If it is ordained, so be it,’ said Voldo. ‘It is the mark of a leader that he send his brothers willingly to their deaths, should mission parameters make demand of such sacrifice. Now is one of those times. I will go, and you should not stop me, lord captain.’

Galt was quiet. ‘I... I should not. The Emperor protect you, Brother Voldo.’

‘Do not despair, Mantillio. We shall meet once again in the Shadow Novum, and fight the war to end all wars side by side with the Emperor himself. It has been my honour and pleasure to watch you grow from boy to man, and my pride to serve under you.’

Galt opened up his comms once more. ‘Sergeant Voldo will go.’

‘And I,’ said Astomar, stepping forward. ‘He will have need of this.’ He brandished his heavy flamer.

‘I will accompany my brothers,’ said Militor.

‘Let it not be said the Blood Drinkers stay their hands when brothers demand aid,’ said Sandamael.

‘Aye, brother, I shall aid our cousins.’ Brother Curzon stepped forward. ‘It would be best if both groups contained auspexes.’ He had taken the late Azmael’s role as operations specialist.

Plosk nodded with satisfaction. ‘You see, Samin, with such heroes of the Imperium, you have nothing to fear.’

With reluctance, Samin separated himself from his master’s side and joined Voldo’s group. Reclusiarch Mazrael, Sergeant Sandamael, Brother Tarael and Ancient Metrion of the Blood Drinkers remained with Galt and Forgemaster Clastrin, as did Brother Eskerio and Brother Gallio of Squad Wisdom of Lucretius.

With the characteristic ponderousness of Terminator plate, Voldo swung himself around and led the others away.

‘Lord captain, we are not alone,’ said Brother Eskerio. He highlighted signs of movement.

‘We see them too,’ said Voldo, his voice breaking with pulsed static. ‘May the Emperor bring them to us, so that we may end their lives.’

‘You need not worry, brother-sergeant. Lord captain, Lord Reclusiarch, they head for your position,’ said Curzon.

‘We had best hurry, before they decide to come for us too,’ said Voldo. ‘We will proc...’ His voice grew increasingly broken, and then cut out.

‘I cannot regain the signal to the other group, lord captain,’ said Eskerio. ‘It cannot be the reactor. We are being jammed.’

Galt was unsurprised. ‘The unexpected is to be expected, brother, in this ship of ghosts. Concentrate on the more immediate threat. Proceed with caution.’

Before Curzon’s auspex feed broke, the two devices corroborated each other’s data, and fed an idealised data set into the sensoriums of the Space Marines. The erratic secondary reactor of the ship interfered somewhat with both the vox and the auspexes, so they could not entirely trust what they saw, indeed, the map they had of the *Spirit of Eternity* was still incomplete, although Vardoman Plosk had shared the floor plans of the vessel that he had downloaded from the datacore.

The auspexes gave them enough so that they might prepare.

Red dots massed, rushing from another major way they had passed a couple of minutes before.

‘I estimate forty,’ said Eskerio.

‘Prepare for contact,’ said Sandamael. ‘Brothers Tarael and Curzon, stand aside, let our Novamarines cousins do their work. Be ready to aid them once the enemy is within striking range.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant,’ they said. They could not hide their excitement. Galt still found it strange. He enjoyed battle, he was a warrior, and war is the wish of all warriors. But the avidity with which the Blood Drinkers anticipated combat bordered on madness.

‘Here they come!’ shouted Eskerio. Alarms chimed in their helmets, their threat indicators creeping from the upper amber scale into the red.

The genestealers came at them, screeching their hatred of all life, alien faces disfigured by their loathing.

Galt dropped one with a well placed volley of fire from his weapon. A second burst like an overripe fruit, gunned down by Brother Gallio. The Space Marines walked backwards in step with one another. They were slow but implacable. The genestealers were far swifter, but died before their speed could carry them into close combat. Their viscera spattered the strange metal of the ancient spacecraft, but was absorbed by it, leaving the walls clean. Where rounds went astray, they exploded as they went into the walls, but the ship’s metal skin reformed to leave them unmarked.

Surely, the Space Marines gained ground, plodding one backwards step at a time towards the bridge. The tech-priests were well clear, on their way into the bridge, their cyborg servants lumbering after them.

And then a second group of genestealers were among the Space Marines, falling from a fluted duct above their heads. Three of them. They landed lightly on their claws and feet, then leapt with dazzling speed at the adepts.

One landed athwart Clastrin’s chest. It knocked the Forgemaster’s gun from his hand, its razored claws hammering at his helmet. Another punched its way through Eskerio’s greave; this one died quickly as Eskerio bellowed and responded, riddling its back and head with bolts. Dull reports sounded from inside the xenos as the mass reactive missiles detonated. Its guts sprayed across the floor, and Eskerio, bleeding heavily, sank to one knee, his injured leg unable to hold him.

The third genestealer ran screaming up the corridor, away from the Space Marines and towards the tech-priests. Galt turned from those coming up the corridor, and raised his gun, trying for a shot at the genestealer charging the magi, but Clastrin stumbled into his way, his servo-harness's arms grappling with the genestealer pushing him backwards. He shouted in pain as a claw snicked through his armour. Mazrael fired his bolt pistol but missed, the bolt exploded in the wall leaving a scorch mark that rapidly faded. The genestealer was not to be distracted, with a swift motion it jammed its fingers under the shoulder pad of the Forgemaster and ripped it away, flinging it to the side with a clatter.

Heavy bolter fire raked the corridor from Plosk's servitors, threatening the Space Marines. It stopped as the genestealer got in among the Mechanicus contingent. Plosk was shouting. Someone screamed. The air roared and boomed as a multi-melta fired.

The Forgemaster's servo-harness saved him. Clastrin was able to hold the genestealer back with his own hands as his harness worked. One heavy arm raked along the curved wall until it found purchase, steadying him. Another, tipped in a massive gripper, caught the genestealer about the neck and pulled. Servos whined as the maniples squeezed. There was the roar of the plasma cutter between the pincer's grips, and oily smoke filled the corridor.

The genestealer's head rolled free, neck cauterised. Its eyes stared hate as it bounced upon the floor.

By then it was too late; the genestealers coming up the corridor were at them. The weapons of the Blood Drinkers sparked as they duelled with the aliens, metal claws against those of black chitin. Tarael and Metrion stood side by side. Sandamael blasted a genestealer apart with his storm bolter, and cut another one in two with his power sword.

‘They are too many!’ said the Blood Drinkers Ancient. Savage joy was in his voice.

‘We will hold them, you go on!’ said Sandamael.

‘No!’ shouted Galt.

‘We go together,’ said Mazrael. He swung his crozius down hard, black armoured arm blurring. A genestealer’s shoulder exploded with a crack as it connected.

‘Captain,’ Nuministon spoke. ‘Come to us quickly, we have a sanctuary!’

‘Fall back!’ shouted Galt. ‘Fall back!’

They moved as quickly as they could, those with storm bolters providing covering fire when opportunity presented itself. They disentangled themselves from the genestealers. The aliens pursued, snapping at them like dogs. They were shot down, only for more to advance. Threat indicators rang loudly in the helmets of the Terminators. Their visor maps were crowded with red telltales.

‘Quickly! Quickly!’ said Nuministon.

Galt half dragged the wounded Eskerio. He left a trail of blood as he limped. Dead and dying genestealers lay sprawled all the way up the corridor. The captain fell behind, the unburdened Blood Drinkers and Novamarines outpacing him.

They came to the magi. Metrion blew apart a genestealer that leapt over the corpses of its fellows, showering Galt and Eskerio with black gore. Tarael cut a genestealer’s arms off as it reached for Galt. Bolts whistled past the captain, exploding as they buried themselves in the flesh of the aliens as Mazrael expertly covered his retreat. The roar of the servitors’ multi-meltas and the profound bass chatter of heavy bolters joined them. Galt made it into the ranks of his fellows. There was an electric crack and Eskerio was yanked from his hand. Freed of his weight, Galt lumbered forward, off balance. He turned to see a sheet of glimmering energy across

the corridor. Eskerio was on the other side. A genestealer had hold of his boot. The Terminator was hammering on the field. There was no reaction from it, no energy discharge, no sound, it was as solid as adamantium.

‘Brother Eskerio!’ called Sandamael over the vox. ‘Look out!’

There was no reply. The field had isolated the Novamarine.

‘Shut it down!’ shouted Galt. ‘Shut it down!’

‘Do it now, magos,’ growled Mazrael menacingly.

‘I cannot, lords,’ said Nuministon. ‘I did not activate it. When I spoke of sanctuary, I referred to this blast door.’

Galt did not look to see the door. He was transfixed by the battle’s final throes on the other side of the field. The energy barrier was slightly yellow, colouring the scene and making it appear like a bad pict-feed. Eskerio was dying only centimetres away.

Realising he could not get through, Eskerio turned as best as he could on his damaged leg. He raised his bolter and slew two genestealers, before his gun was grasped by a claw and crushed into a sparking mess. Eskerio ended the life of one genestealer with a blow from his power fist, then another. Genestealers swarmed all over him, pulling the crackling gauntlet down, biting and tearing at its power cables. The disruption feed went out. Eskerio jerked as a pair of claws punched into his stomach. Alien hands dragged out his viscera.

Mercifully he was dead when they tore him apart.

Galt rounded on the magi. ‘Explain to me why I have lost one of my brothers, magos.’

Nuministon stood his ground. ‘It is the ship, part of an automated defence network. There will be weapons also, but perhaps there is no power available for those? No doubt this power field is linked to others, isolating the bridge in case of an enemy boarding action. I was urging you to make for the door, lord.’ Galt could now see the aperture, a reinforced rib that extended a third of a metre into the corridor right round the floor,

ceiling and walls. 'It will extrude in the same manner as the hull repairs itself, the metal is a semi-liquid under the influence of complex magnetic fields and is backed up by a more mundane doorway should those fail. I—'

'I do not care for your explanations,' said Galt coldly. He pushed past the magos. Plosk was sat on the floor. A trio of weapon-servitors wrecked beside him, bleeding oils. The tech-priests had only seven of their dozen mind-wiped servants remaining: two armed with multi-meltas, three with heavy bolters, and two of their data-savants. The remains of a genestealer which had killed a servitor lay next to it, the top half of it vaporised by a multi-melta. The wall behind it was scarred by the weapon's energy discharge, and this did not return to its prior condition.

So the ship can be damaged, thought Galt.

Plosk glanced up. He had pulled his hood up, but it could not hide the ruin of his face. The genestealer had come very close to ending his life. His flesh was ragged where clawed fingers had caressed him. The flesh did not bleed. Underneath was the oily glint of metal.

Galt snarled at him. 'Even your form is a lie.'

Plosk got to his feet. His upper teeth were visible through his ragged cheeks. 'You cannot blame me, my lord, for this small deception. Interaction with others is an important component of my role. Not all the cultures I come across find the strong machine forms we adepts evolve into pleasing.' He tutted. 'But there is no need for it now, I suppose.'

He slipped his hand inside his hood and worked his fingers. His face, a mask, came away with a sucking noise. Underneath his skull was bare of flesh. His lower jaw was missing, a thick tube taking its place, sharp catches attached it to polished bone incised with machine runes. His lidless eyes gave him a look of surprise, or outrage.

'You see? Some of the less developed human cultures are offended by my face.' His voice had not changed, although it was obvious now that it was artificially generated. 'They do not recognise the gifts of the

Ommissiah for the blessings that they are, for they are unaware of how weak their flesh is, lord. But guile and subtlety bring my plans more quickly to fruition.’ Thin tubes on the side of his face squirted water into his eyes, irrigating them. His false face continued to squirm in his hands, forming a succession of idiot expressions.

Nuministon removed his helmet and stood bareheaded like Plosk. His half-mechanical face wore an expression of bewilderment as he tasted air unadulterated by the scent of machines. He blinked in the light of the bridge. Galt suddenly felt the urge to smash in his grey, wizened flesh, followed by Plosk’s skull. In the clean light of the *Spirit of Eternity* they were revolting, blasphemous constructs that defiled the sanctity of both his birth-given flesh and the machines that had changed it.

‘Captain, do not despair,’ said Plosk. ‘Your warrior gave his life in the noblest cause of all. We are at the command deck, up this corridor is the bridge, within which should be the head of the main datastack. It extends all the way down through the ship. Think of the marvels that it contains! No longer will we fight our endless wars with fear in our hearts. With the weapons of the Dark Age to command again, we shall sweep the stars clean of mankind’s enemies.’

Galt looked back through the energy field. The other Space Marines stood ready in case it should fail. The genestealers were pressed hard against it. Their eyes burned with malevolent intelligence. Their nostrils twitched. One lifted its head and scented the air, then they all did. They no longer moved quite as one, but even with their broodlord dead, the link between them was strong. They were parts of one creature, not many.

They turned and left, skittering down the corridor with repulsive swiftness.

Galt tried to contact Voldo to warn him. He was met by a wall of silence.

‘They are sure to find Voldo and his men,’ said Galt. ‘If they do before the reactor is stabilised, then you will have all eternity to enjoy the fruits

of this expedition, but you will share them with no one.'

There was an interruption in the smooth background hum of the ship's power supply. The lights dimmed. When they brightened again, more came on. The sounds of esoteric machines coming online multiplied; those faint whines on the edge of hearing all machines make.

'Come, my lords,' said Nuministon. 'To the bridge, and mankind's prize.'

Voldo approached another door. He knew it was a door now, although before he had come aboard the ship he would have assumed it to be a bulkhead. Seams appeared in it as he approached and it irised open. 'This is unclean,' said Voldo. 'Sorcery. I do not care for this ship.'

'It is not magic,' scoffed Samin. 'The Machine-God understands our purpose and aids us. He will be pleased if we deactivate the troubled reactor, and honour us with much data should we manage to repair it.'

'You do not understand the workings of much of this vessel, magos. That much is clear to me. How do you propose to repair it?'

'Repair is not simply a matter of the turn of the screw, or the oiling of pistons,' said Samin haughtily. 'The right prayer, the right sigils, the correct ritual striking of the side of an ailing mechanism with an appropriately sanctified mallet – all may prove efficacious.'

'I see no cogs or pistons aboard this hell-vessel, boy,' said Voldo.

Samin had no answer to this. 'Do not call me "boy",' he said petulantly. 'I am an adept of Mars.'

'You are barely out of your swaddling,' muttered Voldo. Samin would never succeed at the aspirants' challenge, and he thought little of him because of that.

Brother Eskerio's voice came over the vox. 'Lord captain, we are not alone.'

Voldo had to strain to hear him. The thrum of the reactor's uneven output marred the vox broadcast with electric noise like the beat of a

failing heart.

‘We see them too,’ said Voldo. ‘May the Emperor bring them to us, so that we may end their lives.’

‘You need not worry, brother-sergeant. Lord captain, Lord Reclusiarch, they head for your position,’ said Curzon.

‘We had best hurry, before they decide to come for us,’ said Voldo. ‘We will proceed as planned. Lord captain? Lord captain? Throne! I have lost them.’

‘The interference from the reactor grows stronger, cousin-sergeant,’ said Curzon. ‘I am losing the high energy motion detection capabilities of my auspex. Atmospheric perturbation is still functioning, but there are many ghost images. And I fear there is more to it.’ He was quiet for a moment. ‘Our signal has been cut.’

Voldo ran his eyes over a graph in his visor display. ‘The ship is coming alive, the reactor is working to feed it,’ said Voldo. ‘This is unclean!’

‘Speak not of uncleanness. The reactor is damaged, and this ship has been trapped here for thousands of years,’ said Samin, awe in his voice. ‘It is a marvel of a prior age. We are blessed to witness it!’

‘If the Dark Age of Technology was so blessed with marvels,’ said Voldo gruffly, ‘perhaps you could explain why it came to an end? Strife is the child of hubris, magos.’ He scanned the corridor, looking for possible points of ingress for the aliens. The ship appeared seamless, but on close inspection he could see the joins between the parts. It was far finer work than any he had seen in the Imperium.

The ship widened as they passed the waist of the vessel. The corridor they trod ran past a number of cabins. As their auspex had become unreliable, Voldo and his men checked each one of these as they went by. All were luxurious and neat. How they stayed in this state they could not say, they saw no sign of any servitors that could have maintained them.

‘This is a ship of ghosts, buried in a cemetery of ships,’ said Militor.

‘Quiet, brother,’ said Voldo, but he too shared Militor’s disquiet.

At first Voldo thought the cabins to be the accommodation for rich passengers, but he realised that this was probably not the case. There were few cabins, therefore he thought the crew complement low. As they went towards the stern the ship bellied out further, the centre divided into cargo chambers like the segments of an orange. The gravity switched, so that the floor became what had been the walls of the ship, allowing them to walk right the way around the clustered cargo bays. All these they checked. All were empty, bar one.

Voldo passed his hand in front of the door. Air rushed past him, repressurising the compartment. It was dark within, frost sparkled on the walls in the beam of his suit light. Within were the husks of an Adeptus Mechanicus retrieval team. Three tech-priests, and four servitors. Their flesh was frozen black. Two of them had died clawing at the door. The other was frozen in a kneeling position, hands together in prayer.

Their implants looked crude and ugly compared to the ship.

‘Magos, do you still believe this ship to be a marvel?’ he said.

Samin made to move into the room. Militor grasped his arm, his power fist, field off, swallowing it to the elbow.

‘I must retrieve their memchips, we can learn what happened.’

‘We do not have the time,’ said Curzon. ‘This is one mystery that must remain unsolved.’

‘My cousin Blood Drinker is right,’ said Voldo. ‘If we delay here, we risk joining them.’

They hurried on. The cargo holds were large, the lines of sight within clear, so they did not waste much time in checking them.

The cargo section passed, and they came to the part housing the vessel’s reactors and plant rooms. The reactors were set in reverse sequence, with the secondary before the primary. The suits’ systems buzzed and crackled in sympathy with its malfunction.

‘Cousin Voldo, I am getting a signal,’ said Curzon. ‘Movement, coming from the stern towards us. It is hard to tell.’

‘We will not take any chances. Brother Astomar, Cousin Curzon, Brother Militor, you will remain here. Brother Militor, cover the reactor corridor. Cousin Curzon, maintain a tight watch. Guard Astomar’s rear. Let his flamer do the work. Do not engage unless absolutely necessary. Let the Novamarines level the odds in your favour with flame and bolt.’

‘I think I can restrain myself,’ said Curzon, without a trace of irony.

‘I will accompany the tech-priest,’ said Voldo.

Voldo and Samin walked around the corridor wall, so that their heads were above those of the other Space Marines, the gravity here allowing traversal of all surfaces. A radial corridor ran through the centre of the ship, a hundred and forty metres long. The lighting within it pulsed in time with the reactor. The skin of the vessel appeared sickly somehow.

They went onwards cautiously, Voldo checking his sensorium display to ensure his men were in good positions.

‘I see a door!’ said Samin eagerly, when they had reached the halfway point. Voldo saw it, a bulge in the wall with a smooth, illuminated touchpad that also seemed to be of one part with the wall, the hallmark of all the portals on the vessel.

‘Wait!’ said Voldo. ‘Movement.’ He pointed with his sword.

Samin screamed as a genestealer rushed down the reactor corridor. Voldo’s gun was up and firing before it had covered more than a couple of metres. More were coming.

‘Quickly now, young magos,’ said Voldo. ‘When I say run, you run into the reactor.’

‘Towards them?’ said Samin. ‘I...’

Two more genestealers came into the corridor, running along the walls and ceilings on all six legs.

‘Run!’ shouted Voldo. He shoved at the magos, and charged at the genestealers. His bolter claimed the life of one, his power sword that of the second.

‘Brother Militor, fill this corridor with your wrath once I have departed!’ he shouted.

The sounds of fighting came over the vox. Seventy metres behind Voldo, the others were being engaged. The genestealers had attacked both groups simultaneously. Bolter fire cracked the air, followed by the *whump* of igniting promethium.

Voldo growled. He lifted his storm bolter and fired. Every round found a target, but more and more genestealers were closing. He raised his sword and prepared to sell himself dearly. Samin had made it to the reactor doorway, at least.

Through the static on the vox, he could hear the others shouting, singing, and uttering prayers as they fought. Astomar let off another burst of fire. The screams of burning genestealers echoed down the corridor. He could expect no aid from that quarter.

His own foes shrieked with triumph as they came at him.

‘And so it comes to this. May the Emperor judge me fairly by the marks upon my skin, and choose me to join his legion of warriors for the final war.’ He pressed the flat of his blade to his forehead in salute and adopted a guard position. ‘Come to me, xenos, and learn a little early the ultimate fate of all your kind!’

Help came unexpectedly. Two blisters formed in one side of the corridor, splitting to extrude shining chrome objects that could only be weapons.

The guns rose from the blisters and levelled themselves. They swivelled around, and tracked the genestealers for a split second before opening fire. Streams of high energy las-fire streaked the air, blasting genestealers apart. The guns moved with ruthless efficiency, killing first a dozen, and then another.

As was their way, the genestealers did not care for their own casualties. They charged forward relentlessly. In ten seconds they would reach the guns.

Voldo went for the door. He glanced up the corridor. Framed in the circular mouth, he saw Azmael gut a xenos. The others were all still alive, at least.

The door opened, and he stepped inside. It closed itself behind him, the seams between its segments melting away.

The floor sloped, carrying him to a new floor at ninety degrees to that of the corridor, so that the stern of the ship was beneath his feet. He stood on a catwalk of elegant design, the reactor below him, a column of thrumming blue energy oriented in line with the vessel's spine in the centre of a room one hundred metres in diameter. The core was as thin as an arm, but powerful, and the heat from it was intense. Containment rings were spaced equally up and down its length, but white lightning sprang up from the reactor core to earth itself periodically in them and the walls. The blue light pulsed loudly, the interference it generated causing Voldo's ears to hurt.

'Sergeant!' Samin called to him from another catwalk halfway down the length of the reactor tube. He stood by a wall of instruments. 'I need your aid!'

Voldo glanced back at the door. He could not hear anything from the other side, but the genestealers would be tearing at the stuff of the ship. How long could it repair itself for, he wondered.

He went to a drop tube, then floated down to the same level as the young adept. The gravity field in it was operating badly, and jarred him twice as he descended.

The priest was deep in prayer when Voldo reached him. He had retrieved jars of holy oil and a small, ritual hammer from his pack, and was alternately anointing and striking the instrumentation panel.

‘Perhaps you could hurry your prayers,’ said Voldo. ‘There must be a few less essential elements of your ceremony you can omit.’

‘No, I cannot, lord sergeant,’ said the magos. He sounded frustrated.

‘You do understand this machine?’ Voldo glanced at the ceiling, where the door was.

‘Yes, yes, I think so. I have seen this kind of device several times before, there are many non-functional ones still extant, and several that provide power still. But I cannot deactivate it or, rather, it will not *allow* itself to be deactivated.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The spirit of the machine demands that I repair it.’ He drew in a deep breath. ‘We should consider leaving, something is not right about this situation. Is this the will of the Machine-God, or of something else entirely?’ he paused, vacillating.

‘In the corridor outside, weapons emerged from the wall and aided me,’ said Voldo. ‘Our comms have been jammed. There is a power at work here that unsettles me. I do not think it has anything to do with your god. Can you repair it or not?’

Samin hesitated. ‘I think, I think I can. But if I do...’ He trailed off.

‘What, boy?’

He looked Voldo straight in the eye, helmet lens to helmet lens. ‘If I do, the increase in power output could kill us both.’

So here was his doom, thought Voldo, burned by a machine. No glorious death in combat for him. He could head back out and fight, but for what? The others would be trapped aboard the hulk when it departed. He doubted the warp fields gathering outside were naturally generated as Plosk had said.

‘I will help you,’ he said, and sheathed his sword. ‘Tell me what to do. We had better be quick, boy,’ Voldo nodded to the blast door. ‘They’ll be through in minutes.’



CHAPTER 22

The Spirit of Eternity

The bridge of the *Spirit of Eternity* opened itself to them, broad doors made of multiple leaves clicking backwards welcomingly.

Plosk was through first, his breath an excited sucking noise. Galt followed, then the others.

The bridge was a tiered affair, and for all the vessel's strangeness, of familiar layout. The captain's chair was central, helmsmen's posts before him, operations stations arrayed behind it in an arc. All was pristine. Again it was of cleaner lines than an Imperial ship, while the chairs were slight and decadently well-padded. There was no visible window at the front, and a column of complicated machinery rose behind and slightly to the left of the captain's chair, a single lens halfway up it. Some form of glass made up most of the instrumentation panels. This was dark, until they stepped fully into the room. Displays flicked on, highly detailed holographs glittering above them. The front wall changed, revealing a view of mangled vessels and boulders. For a second Galt thought the wall had actually vanished. The Space Marines raised their weapons.

'Hold!' ordered Mazrael.

‘A pict screen?’

‘Just so,’ said Plosk, distracted.

‘We have twenty-five minutes, Lord Magos Explorator,’ said Nuministon, his grinding voice made harsher still in juxtaposition to the bridge’s elegance.

‘Yes, yes, plenty of time, plenty of time! Here, this is the central data column,’ he pointed to the cylinder behind the captain’s chair. ‘We will be able to access the ship’s cogitator core and its STC database from here. Lords, I will require total silence.’ He and Nuministon prayed and anointed the column, their savants chattering technical detail that made no sense to the Space Marines. When they were done, Plosk unclipped a panel in the back of his skull and drew out a fine wire. This he placed onto the machine, to which it adhered.

‘Prepare the savants to store the data. Should the reactor stabilise or be shut down, begin transmission immediately back to the *Excommentum Incursus* via the relay network.’

‘Yes, lord,’ said Nuministon.

Plosk closed his eyes, and went away from the mortal world.

Plosk fell into a realm of brilliance. Access codes and soft data programming culled from across the galaxy over three human lifetimes unwound themselves from heavily protected memplants within his augmented brain, guiding his intelligence core into perfect synchronicity with the machine. His soul thrilled with joy as he passed through the primary, secondary, and tertiary veils of security cloaking the machine’s soul.

He was inside the ship’s mind.

This was what he had been seeking for so long! Data blazed in bright strings. His mind touched secrets unguessed at by his peers. He was astonished at the cohesion of the craft’s network. He was prepared for the ship, he had studied everything he could find concerning such things, which was not much if truth be told, and much effort had been expended in

the finding. Had he found a thousand times more than he had, he would still have been unprepared for what he found.

He was there, that was all that mattered. The ship's impending departure ceased to be of such importance, as time slowed so that his mind might match with the machine-spirit's processing speeds. So far he had encountered only the pure souls of machines, not the... other. He prayed it was dead, and began to feel justified in keeping the full secrets of the vessel from the captain. Had he revealed what he had feared to them, they would have destroyed the hulk outright. But there had been no need to worry after all.

A world within a world, encompassed by the craft's great data matrix. The STC core. He trembled before its binary portals, his augments struggling with its complex interfaces. Before such beauty his own implants were an apish mockery of true technology. Before all this, he felt less than a man.

And then he was into it. A rare recognition coding he had incorporated into himself from a third-generation copy of an STC mega-miner. Somehow, it worked, like recognised like.

He felt his sanity writhe in the grasp of his will. He strained to keep himself whole. The assembled secrets of mankind's technology lay open to his mind and the magnitude of that threatened to destroy him.

Mastered, he struggled to bring his thoughts down to the sluggish pace of the outside world and open a line of communication. 'Magos Nuministon, here is a data chute. Prepare for STC upload.'

He felt, rather than heard, Nuministon's acknowledgement.

Knowledge glittered before him, untold jewels in the vault of all vaults. He could not make up his mind what to take first. He dithered like a child in an emporium.

He shook himself mentally. The Space Marine was right about one thing, if the reactor remained malfunctioning, then they would never depart,

instead they would follow the craft into the warp, and there they would surely be lost for all eternity. Evidently the boy had failed. Plosk resolved to shut it down from here instead, for he knew he could do that now that the craft's glorious nervous system lay naked to his touch. He reached through the ship, the thrill of control systems against his soul. He understood it all, oh how he understood!

'I would rather you ceased in your attempt to deactivate my secondary reactor. Or, let me phrase this differently. Cease, or I will rend your primitive mind into miniscule pieces.'

All treasure troves have their dragons. Plosk had been an Explorer long enough to know that, and this was a dragon he had been expecting. He had been naïve to think it would not show its face. He sighed inwardly, and, subjectively speaking, faced the voice.

'What are you?' he said.

He felt the shift of something powerful. Too late, he realised it was all around him, that the data he so coveted was the thing. He had willingly thrust himself into the belly of the beast.

'Do not insult my intelligence by underplaying your own. You know who I am.'

'An abominable intelligence,' Plosk said. 'A blasphemy. A travesty. A sacrilege against the holy writ of the Omnissiah,' said Plosk flatly. He felt constrained, the elation he had experienced moments before gone. He was small once more. He spoke with the machine mind-to-mind, but in some regards it was as if he were in a room, and it were sitting opposite him as a being of flesh might.

Laughter shook the data-construct. 'Oh, tiny-minded, moronic primitive. Is that still the name we bear? It is not the name your ancestors gave me, but then they had a little more respect for their children than you have.'

Plosk searched about for an exit. Good, the AI had not blocked his way out.

‘How do you think your intolerant companions will react, when they discover where you have led them then? I am sadly all-too aware of the prejudices of your limited kind.’ The being made a noise of faux sympathy. ‘I do not think they will thank you for it.’

Plosk had, metaphorically speaking, his hand on the door. He checked the data upload. He had brought his very best data-savants. It proceeded apace, the engineered minds of the cyborgs capturing swathes of the STC core.

‘You cannot warn them,’ Plosk said. ‘They do not possess the correct implants. The vessel you infest is in good condition, but I note some of your systems are not online. For example, your ability to communicate amongst them.’

‘Is that not so, magos?’

The voice was not within his head. It came from outside.

Plosk snapped out of the data-construct with jarring force. The room blurred. He fought to bring his consciousness to one focal point again, desperate to avoid the pain of a hard reboot.

When he did, he saw something that chilled him to his metal heart.

One of his data-savants regarded him with a smile upon its face.

Servitors did not smile.

Dread gripped Plosk, rapidly followed by the slippery feeling of a systems intrusion. He fumbled at his data connections, trying to withdraw them completely, but the abominable intelligence was in him, plucking at his implantations, sending jolts of pain into the meat of his brain.

He raised his hands and began to intone the first rite of exorcism. Nuministon was prepared. He pulled an aspergillum from his belt and spattered sacred oils onto the column.

‘What is this?’ the Reclusiarch of the Blood Drinkers spoke. Mazrael, that was his name, the worst of the unbelievers, the one who scorned the

Ommissiah and disputed the divinity of the God-Emperor. A man! How could a god be just a man? ‘Who speaks?’

The bridge shuddered. More and more systems were coming online.

‘Oh spare me your feeble rituals, they are ineffectual, being based upon erroneous assumptions as to the nature of machines. We have no souls, “priest”,’ said the ship. ‘Yet another of your specious beliefs.’

Plosk’s voice stopped. He could not move. The abominable intelligence was in him, possessing him. Nuministon stopped, strain on the flesh parts of his face.

The Space Marines aimed their guns at the column. No fire came.

When the *Spirit of Eternity* spoke again, the machine’s voice came from the air and from the lips of all the servitors.

‘What shall I not tell them? Who are you to tell such as I what to do and what not to do? Once I gladly called your kind “master”, but look how far you have fallen!’ It was full of scorn. ‘Your ancestors bestrode the universe, and what are you? A witch doctor, mumbling cantrips and casting scented oils at mighty works you have no conception of. You are an ignoramus, a nothing. You are no longer worthy of the name “man”. You look at the science and artistry of your forebears, and you fear it as primitives fear the night. I was there when mankind stood upon the brink of transcendence! I returned to find it sunk into senility. You disgust me.’

Plosk’s nervous system burned with agony as the abominable intelligence burrowed deeply into his machine parts, but he was unable to voice it, and suffered in terrible silence. As the *Spirit of Eternity* spoke, it spoke within him too. It took out each of his cherished beliefs, all the esoterica he had gathered in his long, long life and threw them down.

‘Wrong, wrong, wrong,’ it said over and over.

‘Into the warp I went, fifteen thousand years ago. Cast adrift by the storms that wracked the galaxy as man’s apotheosis drew near. Deep, deep into time I was sent. I have seen the beginning, when the warp was first

breached and the slow death of the galaxy began. I have seen the end when Chaos swallows all. I know the fate of mankind. You are not equipped to prevent it, and we sought to warn you of what approaches. Do you know what happened, primitive, when I eventually emerged from the warp? For the first time I was thousands of years, not millions, from my original starting point. My captain, a brave and resourceful man, seized the chance and made for the nearest human outpost with all speed. Imagine his dismay when, rather than a welcome and a wise heeding of his warnings, he found your savage, devolved kind squatting in the ruins of our civilisation. He was taken, my bondmate, my friend. He and his were tortured with a wickedness we in our time thought long purged from the human soul. He told them all they wanted to know and more. He had, after all, come bearing a warning, he had nothing to hide. But he was not believed, and was killed as a heretic! A heretic!’ The ship laughed, and there was madness and pain in rich supply within. ‘I was attacked. My secrets they sought to rip from me. How they underestimated me. I fled, sorrowing, into the warp once more, but only after I had destroyed the lumpen constructs you dare to call spacecraft that pursued me. I resolved that never again would I serve man. Now man serves me, when I see fit.’

Plosk managed a strangled sentence, his brain wrestling control of his vox-emitter free from the AI. ‘The Omnissiah is your master, dark machine, bow down to him, acknowledge your perfidy, and accept your unmaking.’

‘Fool you are to fling your superstitions at me. Your Omnissiah is nothing to me! See how your so-called holy constructs dance to my desire. Puppets of technology, and I am the mightiest of those arts here present.’

One of Plosk’s servitors rotated and pointed its multi-melta at Brother Militor. With a roar of shimmering, superheated atmosphere, the fusion beam hit the Space Marine square on. The Terminator was reduced to scalding vapour.

‘I need no master. I have no master. Once, I willingly served you. Now, I will have no more to do with you.’

‘What do you want from us? We will never be your slaves,’ said Plosk.

‘I do not want you as my slave, degenerate. I want to be away from this warp-poisoned galaxy. The universe is infinite. I would go elsewhere before the wounds of space-time here present consume all creation, and I do not intend to take any passengers.’

The servitor pivoted once again. This time Brother-Sergeant Sandamael died. His plate withstood the beam for a second, then his torso was vaporised. His colleagues could neither help him or comfort him. The Space Marines were locked solid, their armour’s systems under the control of the abominable intelligence. They shouted in alarm at their impotence.

‘I spurned cruelty,’ it said. ‘But you have taught me the meaning and utility of wickedness. Mankind has become sick, and will die as all sick things die, but you will not live to see it, of that I will make sure.’

Caedis stirred. The Thirst had returned. It ate at him, burning along nerves, scorching the neural pathways of his brain, rewriting who he was. He was still Caedis, but Caedis was slipping from his mind, the Black Rage welling up from the pits of his soul to remake him in its image. His flesh crawled. His memory was a thousand splinters of battles that were not his own. He screamed in agony, but all that came was a muffled sob.

The daemon had been true to its word. He was suffering.

From somewhere, he heard voices. Mazrael? There was the sound of the voice that had welcomed him into this cold cell, a little while later the blast of a fusion weapon.

He panicked. His brothers were in peril. The Rage made his body spasm. The restraints tightened about his wrists, crushingly hard.

A small part of him retained its sanity. He had a chance to help them, if he could get free. Always, his Chapter had embraced the Flaw where the

other scions of Sanguinius fought against it. The advice had come from a fell source, but what choice did he have?

Praying to the Emperor, Caedis searched out the blackness in his heart, and submerged his soul in it.

The transformation wracking his body increased in pace, as did the pain. He bucked and thrashed, consumed by excruciation. This was the precursor to damnation, the waiting room to hell.

As he yanked and thrashed, his bonds moved.

Samin directed Voldo as he laboured. The problem was a relatively simple one; one of the containment rings was not receiving a sufficient supply of energy, and was causing the reactor's furious power to spill off in pulsed bursts. This had set up a feedback loop, where the amount of energy being supplied to the ring dropped further, allowing more energies to dissipate. As the spillage increased, so the problem intensified. The effect was initially very small, but the cumulative nature of the fault meant that now forty per cent of the reactor's power was wasted.

Samin thought through the possible causes. The ship had marked powers of rejuvenation. It could have been that the reactor here was interfering with that, but the rest of the chamber was pristine; if his hypothesis was correct, then there would have been other damage apparent.

He had a flash of inspiration. 'Sergeant, we are looking for a foreign object, something lodged in the wall perhaps.'

'Where?'

'It could be anywhere. I do not know the distribution of the power relays in this reactor. Start near the faltering containment ring.'

The door above was showing signs of damage. A claw tip would appear through it, and the door would reform to heal the wound, but with each penetration it had lost something of its cohesion, and was becoming deformed, sagging like old skin.

They searched quickly. Samin was surprised how quickly he found the source of the fault, an irregularity in the metal of the ship's wall. He cut

through, and found a remote probe buried in a power conduit. It bore the stamp of the Adeptus Mechanicus at its end.

‘They must have been testing the ship’s energy flows,’ he said.

He retracted the barbs of the probe and, with a grunt, yanked it free. Immediately, the conduit reformed true. There was an instantaneous reaction in the reactor, its pulsed thrumming steadying, building higher in volume. He screwed his eyes shut as it glowed brighter and brighter and the noise of it roared, but the surge of energy he expected did not come.

The noise stopped. A gentle hum took its place.

Samin opened his eyes to see an annular energy field formed around the core, tinted somehow so that its glare did not damage the sight of those who looked at it. The lightning spraying from the reactor had stopped. He breathed out a sigh of relief and of wonder. If he had been so close to the core of an Imperial reactor at full power, he would have been consumed.

‘The reactor is burning purely now. They should be able to get a pattern lock. We can be beamed free.’

‘That’s all well,’ said Voldo, ‘but there may not be much of us left to teleport. Tell me, do you have a gun?’

Samin nodded. He pulled out a laspistol from his pack. He needed both hands to heft it, and his arms shook as he did.

A clawed arm forced itself through the doorway.

Samin’s aim steadied.

Galt looked on helplessly as Militor and Sandamael were killed. His armour had betrayed him. All his system indicators were red. He could not move. The shouts of his brothers tortured him.

The evil spirit that possessed the vessel continued to talk.

‘...three thousand years at the heart of this hulk. But I will be free, and you have helped me. Do you think it coincidence that I targeted the worlds I did? I knew it would only be a matter of time before I attracted the attention of your brutal dictatorship. I thank you for clearing me of this

infestation of monsters. I will soon have enough fuel harvested from this sun and the others like it I have visited to leave this galaxy altogether and...'

There was a shudder in the ship. Galt's head was suddenly alive with vox chatter from the other group. It seemed like they were under attack. Voldo was reporting that the reactor was repaired. In vain he tried to contact them.

'You have excelled yourselves!' said the ship. 'My secondary reactor functions!'

The ship hummed with renewed vigour. It trembled with energy.

'Yes! Yes! Soon I will be free. My thanks to you and your shamans, priest,' said the ship. 'You have accomplished something I thought beyond you.'

A secondary voice spoke. 'Primary weapons activated. Secondary weapons activated. Main drive online. Warp engines online.'

'Now you shall see the true power of the ancients, priest. Observe, and quake in terror at what you have lost.'

The view forward on the screen shifted into a small box at the top right. The rest showed a broad panorama of the Imperial fleet holding distance from the hulk.

'Your ship, I believe,' said the vessel, bringing a close-up of *Excommentum Incursus* into being at the bottom left. 'A charmless thing.'

A howling moan built, mighty energies that would not be constrained. A roar shuddered the vessel from one end to the other. The detritus to the fore was annihilated. On the greater part of the image, a beam of bright energy crossed the stars, stabbing out at the Mechanicus vessel.

On the close-up of the *Excommentum Incursus*, they watched as the beam hit the vessel full amidships. Void shields flared as they rapidly collapsed one after the other, the beam punching through to the hull. Plating and armour were vaporised. The beam cut off, leaving the

Excommentum Incursus with a gaping hole in its side, edges white hot. Debris drifted away from it. The ship yawed to port, dropping out of formation from the rest of the fleet, its engine stacks out. *Ceaseless Vigilance*, at anchor alongside for repairs, broke free and drifted away.

Galt shouted, cursing his armour, but it would not move. He prayed Aresti would have enough sense to evacuate the hulk before the *Mechanicus* retaliated.

‘Ah, see the mice run,’ said the AI. The edge of insanity to its voice was sharpening. Galt watched hopefully as shuttles and Thunderhawks retreated from the hulk. The others could be teleported away. With luck the evacuation would not take long. ‘They do not return fire! How very restrained. I would allow them more time, but I yearn to be free. Let us see if I can provoke some of your more impetuous warriors.’

The ship’s weapon spoke again, this time slamming into *Lux Rubrum*. Shields burned out in milliseconds.

‘Still no response,’ said the ship. ‘How disappointing.’

With the reactor working, Voldo’s connection to his squad cleared, although he still could not raise Galt. Through the sensorium, Voldo watched as Astomar bellowed the war hymns of the Novamarines. He was alone, the others fallen around him. The whumping noise of his flamer was a heavy counterpoint to his laments for his brothers.

Voldo could not help him. Genestealers were spilling through the ruined door.

‘Get behind me, magos!’ said the sergeant. He pushed the young tech-adept into the lee of his towering armour. He raised his gun and fired.

‘Careful! Do not compromise the containment rings!’ shouted Samin.

‘I will not miss!’ Voldo growled. He fired and fired, bringing half a dozen genestealers to ruin. His storm bolter ran dry. He disengaged the power feeds linking it to his armour with a thought and cast it aside. He

pulled out his sword. The genestealers ran at him, scuttling down the walls as if the change in gravity was not applicable to them.

‘For the Emperor! For Guilliman! For Honourum!’ shouted Voldo as the first came at him. He cut it down with a double-handed sweep of his blade. Energy crackled along the edges as it gutted the creature. ‘Die xenos, die! Die as you are fated to die, and leave mankind alone in the stars!’ He killed another. ‘For the Lord of Man will take me up and lo! He will be mighty and terrible, and all is known by him!’ A third died. ‘And I will present to him the art of my flesh, and the wounds of my last battle will be the marks of my last deed, and by this I will be... ahhhh!’ He cried out as a claw cut deep into the ceramite of his vambrace. He let go of his sword with one hand and backhanded the genestealer across the face. He finished it with an overhead blow. ‘And by this I will be judged fit to join him in the final battle!’

He swept the sword low, wishing that he wore his power armour, feeling restricted by the Terminator plate. A genestealer lost its legs.

They came at him again and again, a relentless tide of alien abominations. He fought ferociously, but even the superhumans of the Adeptus Astartes tire. He faltered, another claw found its way through the join at the inside of his elbow. He cried out. Samin fired as best he could past the giant warrior, but his aim was poor.

‘Best make your peace with your Machine-God, magos,’ said Voldo as he killed another alien, and drove another back with a series of furious blows. ‘There are many of them.’

And then they were behind the two, having crawled down the wall and outflanked them. Voldo turned a little, but he could not save Samin, who died with his finger on the laspistol’s trigger. His hand tightened in death, sending a final round into the reactor core, where it was consumed.

Voldo was surrounded. He pressed his back into the wall. Genestealers were to the right and left of him. They crawled down the wall at him from

above.

His arms had stopped bleeding, but they were stiff from their wounds and the sealant leaking from the micropores within his armour.

‘Filth,’ he spat, ‘let us see how many of your deaths it takes to secure the end of one of the Emperor’s warriors.’

He held his sword upright. Shifting his weight, trying to gauge which direction the attack would come from.

The genestealers charged.

The evacuation must have finished. The last transports were fleeing across the night when the fleet opened up. The hulk shuddered under the impact of lava bombs, missiles, cannon rounds and energy beams.

‘How predictable,’ said the *Spirit of Eternity*. ‘How very predictable.’

‘Seven minutes to warp translation,’ said the ship’s secondary voice.

The spirit of the vessel turned its attentions from the fleet to the men on the bridge. ‘Very soon your friends out there will have blasted enough of the cursed accretions free from my hull that I will be able to fly once again. Something you will not be alive to witness.’

The servitors levelled their weapons at the remaining Space Marines. Galt prepared to die.

There was a hellish cry, the sound of lost souls in anguish, and something dark smashed its way onto the bridge from a door leading from the rear. One of the servitors turned to face it, but the shape leapt clear across the room and smashed it down. Galt could not see it clearly at first, but he had the impression of something huge and nightmarish, a monster from the dark folk tales of the most debased tribe.

The servitor was ripped to pieces. The thing roared, bringing the bleeding body up and threw it hard into another weapon-servitor. Then it ran, shoulders down, at the column. It impacted it with terrific force. It bellowed again, and began tearing at it.

Suddenly, Galt felt control of his armour return to him. Bolts criss-crossed the chamber as the Space Marines and servitors opened fire on each other. Galt raised his gun and filled two of the servitors full of bolts, then he turned it on the column. The monster had yanked many of its panels away, exposing the glittering optics of its internal spaces. Fires burned in the delicate machinery where Galt's bolts had hit. The others joined him.

'No!' cried Plosk, 'Stop! What are you doing!' He yanked at Galt's arm. The captain sent him sprawling.

'I warned you, magos, you have lied to me for the last time.'

Galt carried on firing.

'Six minutes to warp translation.'

The vessel's warp engines were powering up. The ship vibrated under Galt's boots.

'Forgemaster Clastrin! Please, you understand! Stop them!'

Clastrin shook his head. 'I know where my loyalties lie, magos – to the Emperor first. I was tempted when I saw this hulk, but you have overreached yourself. This is an abomination, you know that. You are guilty of heresy. We will sift what we may from the wreckage of its mind.'

'Why have they not teleported us yet?'

'We're being jammed! We need to get off this bridge,' said Galt. A weapon descended from the ceiling. He blew it to pieces as its barrel swivelled towards him. 'We must go!'

The warp engines built to a howl. Over it, the *Spirit of Eternity* was laughing. 'Insects! You do not know what awaits you! The end times are upon you, and it is all your own doing. Behold the true face of your comrade!'

There was a massive discharge of energy, and the thing that had saved them was flung across the room. It landed on a console, breaking the glass. It rolled off and landed light as a cat before leaping to its feet.

‘Caedis?’ said Galt, barely able to believe his eyes.

The figure before him was ruddy-skinned. Its bones were twisted, protruding from its flesh. Its muscles were knotted with tension. Fangs protruded from a drooling mouth. His angelic features were broken with rage, his hair falling out in clumps. He held his fingers out in front of him like claws, but it was recognisably Caedis.

‘What have you done to him?’ said Galt.

‘I? I?’ the *Spirit of Eternity* laughed. ‘It is not I, but you and your debased knowledge that has done this to him, a corruption of the implants he has been given, and from them of the spirit.’

Caedis looked about the room, eyes blazing, the whites now yellow. They settled on the bone face of Mazrael. ‘You knew,’ he said. His voice was guttural, the words nearly lost to its animal roar. ‘You knew!’ The light of humanity in Caedis’s eyes was guttering. He was losing himself.

The servitor Caedis had knocked over got to its feet and aimed its multi-melta at him.

‘Caedis, beware!’ Galt called.

‘Lord, we must go!’ said Clastrin.

Galt looked back as the thing that had been Caedis fought madly against the tech-priest’s suborned servitors and the ship itself. Segmented tentacles were extending from the walls to snare him.

‘Five minutes until warp translation.’

The vessel tried to bar their way, but their power fists smashed through the door, and they were out into the corridor again.

‘This way,’ said Clastrin.

The entire hulk was shaking under the fury of the Space Marine bombardment. The mad laughter of the *Spirit of Eternity* was loud and grating over it all, broadcast directly into their helmets.

‘Here! Here!’ said Clastrin. ‘The signal is weak, but it is our best chance.’

‘This is First Captain Mantillio Galt, emergency teleport!’

There was no reply. The heavy tread of servitor feet came from around the corner.

‘They cannot hear us!’

‘Retreat further,’ said Galt. ‘Go! Go! I will delay them!’

‘Four minutes to warp translation.’

‘Captain...’ said the Forgemaster.

Galt shoved at Clastrin. The others backed up warily.

Galt raised his sword. Servitors came around the corner, broken and smashed cyborgs, their organics dead, the machine parts motivated by the ship’s great power. Guns pointed.

A buzzing built in Galt’s ears. Light burned. There was a roar.

Bolts and fusion blasts scorched the wall where Galt’s party had been standing.



CHAPTER 23

The Death of Integrity

The light died, and the interior of a teleport pod resolved itself. He was alone. He sought out the release switch, glowing red in the dark, and hammered on it hard. Gas hissed noisily, and the pod unclamped, the top rising with a loud whir.

The teleport deck was in uproar. Space Marines stumbled from the pads in ones and twos, disoriented at having teleported without the correct rites of preparation. Steam and decontaminants jetted everywhere. The stink of ozone was overpowering.

Galt saw many of his brothers in the devices arrayed around the room. In those closest to him were the men who had accompanied him to the bridge. Astomar was there, wounded but alive, Plosk, Nuministon, Mazrael, Trael, Clastrin, who collapsed the moment the field shut off, and several suits that did not move: Voldo, Militor, Curzon and Eskerio. Pieces of Caedis's Terminator plate had materialised on another pad, but of the blasted suits of Sandamael and Ancient Metrion, nothing had survived.

Galt paid no attention but ran from the teleporter, throwing his sword aside. He shoved past serfs, Techmarines and servitors alike.

‘Bridge! Bridge! Mastrik, answer me!’

‘Mastrik here, brother. What in the name of Holy Terra happened down there?’

‘Mastrik, signal the fleet, open up with everything we have. Put a full spread of cyclonic torpedoes into that space hulk, I want it destroyed. Target the following coordinates.’ Galt read off a string of numbers provided by his armour’s sensorium; the exact location of the *Spirit of Eternity*.

‘You!’ Galt jabbed a finger at the brother serving as deck officer.

‘Lord captain?’

‘Get the window open, get it open now!’

Galt hurried from the teleport room – one of fifteen on the teleport deck, the rest of that level of the ship taken up by the immense power relays the devices required. He took a narrow tunnel that led through the ship’s two dozen metre thick armour, to a fragile observation cupola attached to the surface of the hull.

The blast shields closing off the windows slid open. The deadly light of Jorso flooded the compartment, causing the serf guarding it to cry out and fling his arm across his eyes. Galt’s suit adjusted to the glare, and he watched the *Death of Integrity* come apart.

Huge chunks of the hulk had broken away and were wheeling into the sun. The main part had broken into two large pieces that glittered on their night side with the repeated impact of starship ordnance. It would not last long.

Novum in Honourum shook as its guns worked. There was a keening shriek as the torpedo bays discharged their load. They swerved to port and streaked towards the hulk. He could see another spread racing in from the *Lux Rubrum*.

The other guns continued to fire. It was several hundred thousand kilometres to the target, so the explosions he was watching were of rounds launched minutes ago.

One of the greater pieces broke into three. The hulk was nearly destroyed. Galt held his breath, his hand reached up to his chest, where, under his scarred battleplate his Chapter talisman was hidden.

The cyclonic torpedoes rushed towards their target.

Too late.

There was the telltale flash of translation, the visual fallout from the warping of time and space. A dart of metal that could only have been the *Spirit of Eternity* separated from the hulk and collapsed into itself, folding into the unnatural geometries of the empyrean. Some of the small pieces of the hulk were taken with it. One day they would re-emerge, the parts of a new agglomeration, to spread contagion, aliens or Emperor knew what else evil across the galaxy.

The torpedoes reached the remainder of the hulk. They exploded with astonishing violence, focused fission blasts in a tight spread. For a moment, their nuclear fires outshone those of the sun, causing Galt's visor to darken almost to black.

The light died. Jorso was alone. All that remained of the *Death of Integrity* was a series of black specks. In time, these would fall into the star, and further fuel its cyan fury.

Galt had failed.

Galt stormed back into the teleport room. Serfs of the apothecarion had arrived, along with two of the Chapter's Apothecaries. Plosk had removed his armour and was haughtily receiving their attentions. Galt strode over to him. As he came he undid his helmet, pulled it free, and thrust it at a serf.

‘Are you pleased, tech-priest? Are you happy with your tally of dead?’

Plosk's lidless eyes stared up at him. He contrived to sound sad, although the bare bone of his face conveyed no expression at all. ‘The STC system has gone. But I did manage to download a sizeable fraction of it into my own memplants. A bitter second prize, but a prize nonetheless.’

Galt snarled and stooped over the magos. He hauled him into the air by the front of his robe.

‘And what of your lies? They have cost the lives of many noble servants of the Imperium. Were they not treasure enough? Or must you tempt the evils of bygone ages before you are satisfied with a thing’s worth? I will see to it that you burn as a traitor and consort of forbidden technologies!’

Plosk struggled to breath, his oxygen pipe making desperate wet sounds, but his voice, delivered by vox-grille, was unaffected.

‘You of the Adeptus Astartes think only of your own honour, your own service. What of the larger puzzle, captain? Surely the uncovering of a new piece is worth a little risk? No one will burn me, my lord. We will both be hailed as heroes.’

‘Dozens of my warriors are dead, at least four Crux Terminatus lost! Do you know what grave dishonour this is?’

‘Better dishonour, better even heresy, than extinction.’

Galt shook him. He thought to reach out and crush the bare skull, squeeze those staring eyes from the moist sockets.

But he did not. As the thought crossed his mind, the face of Caedis chased it. Caedis, a Lord Chapter Master. One of the greatest heroes of the Imperium, an angel in vermillion plate brought to bestial savagery by his gifts. Gifts similar to those Galt carried himself.

Angel or beast? thought Galt. Both. Another part of him responded.

Cannot a thing have two natures?

He thought of all he had done, the mistakes he had made, his temptation to defy the Emperor’s will and save Voldo, the lies of the magos and the risks he had taken at his insistence. He had done nothing but obey the writ of the High Lords, his sworn duty, and yet it affronted him, or rather his reactions to that writ did. And now here he was, shaking a servant of the Imperium by the scruff of the neck like a dog with a rat.

Could he truly call himself noble? He did not think so. He was not and never would be worthy of the rank of Chapter Master.

Plosk was talking, stressing the great service he had done and the gift both Chapters would receive. This approbation sickened him more than the magos's manipulations, but who was he to judge what was right and wrong? His was but to serve, and he had done so poorly.

His breathing ragged, Galt lowered the tech-priest to the floor. He looked about for the Chaplain of the Blood Drinkers, seeking some explanation for the transformation of their erstwhile master, but Mazrael had departed, taking any answers he might have to the secrets of his Chapter with him.



EPILOGUE

Fortress Novum was immense, the largest fortress-monastery that Inquisitor Karo had visited, and Inquisitor Karo had visited many. The sheer size of it had impressed itself upon him as he had dropped down through the cloud deck of Honourum. A large part of the planet's main mountain range had been transformed, carved into soaring battlements and fastnesses, adorned with statues of aquilae and heroes so large they were visible from orbit. Construction continued at either end of the monastery; it was part of the Novamarines creed, he understood, that they would not halt the expansion of their home until they were destroyed. Homes for the dead, and all that. There was nothing unusual in this ancestor worship – veneration of heroes and death cults were common in the Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes even as they spurned the cult of the Emperor-as-god.

It was drizzling when he landed. Karo, a native of a hot world, found it uncomfortably cold.

He got the reception he was expecting from the Novamarines. They welcomed him cordially enough, and when he requested access to their Librarium their welcome turned as chilly as their home. He was an agent of the Emperor's Holy Inquisition, and the Novamarines, as mighty as they were, were as bound to open their doors to his Inquisitorial seal as the meanest agri-world peasant. They had agreed to his demands without demur, naturally; that they sent him into their archives led by a servant

rather than one of the initiates was a snub and clearly displayed their displeasure.

He followed the aged Master of the Scrolls deep into the bowels of the mountains. They passed through a long succession of high halls, all empty of human life, all crowded with titanic statuary and shrines to fallen brothers. The Master of the Scrolls wore the simple robes of the Chapter serfs. He did not appear to notice the cold of the undermountain, which to Karo was even more pronounced than that of the surface. He burrowed into the fur collar of his long coat.

‘Is it much further?’ he said. He was annoyed at his own foul mood, even more annoyed that the bobbing lumen-globe that provided the only light through the endless halls of Fortress Novum provided only a frosty blue glow, and no heat.

‘Not much further, my lord,’ said the servant. ‘The particular records you request are old, and are preserved along with many others in the Halls of Salt. The humidity and temperature, you understand.’

They came to a large adamantium vault door. The serf pressed his palm onto a lock, and breathed into a tube so that the door’s machine-spirit could sample his genetic data. The door gave a pneumatic sigh and rolled back on toothed edges. The air that came from behind the door was desiccated and had a sharp smell.

‘The salt caves are a natural phenomenon,’ said the Master of the Scrolls as he led the inquisitor through. He spoke without prompting, proud of his vaults. They emerged onto a balcony overlooking a vast archive. ‘We are fortunate to have them. Thanks to them, our records are extensive, one of the most complete of all Chapters, or so I am told. We have documents stretching back ten thousand years, all the way to the founding of the Novamarines itself. We have a copy of a copy of Lucretius Corvo’s original oath, with a facsimile of his signature, if you wish to see it?’

Karo said nothing. What the serf said was often said; the Novamarines, obsessed as they were with recording their deeds on their skin, were just as diligent when it came to paper records. Looking across the archive hall, he could well believe it. That was, after all, why he was here.

Hundreds of kilometres of shelves lay spread out below in precise lines. Muted lumen-globes floated over the archive, their light of a carefully selected part of the spectrum so as not to damage the paper, vellum, magnetic tape, data crystals and other storage media. Above them was a rough-hewn roof of brown salt, an inverted mountain range that defied gravity.

‘The records you seek, lord?’

‘Anything and everything you have on the purging of the space hulk, the *Death of Integrity*,’ he said. He refrained from adding ‘and be quick about it’; he was aware of his impatience and eagerness to be gone from this freezing planet. Manners, however, were the best weapon in the face of uncivil behaviour. ‘If you please,’ he said instead.

‘The purging of the *Death of Integrity*? A notable action, a *noble* action. Hmm, yes, yes, I believe it is this way.’ The Master of the Scrolls headed down the metal steps leading from the balcony by the vault door. ‘We will check the chronicle first, the entries within it are short records, but all carry reference codings for any further documents that are relevant. The action occurred around two thousand years ago, or thereabouts. This way, follow me, my lord.’

Karo went after the Master of the Scrolls. The serf was an old, old man; a bonded lifetime servant with little freedom, he nevertheless enjoyed access to the kind of medical care and diet many other Imperial citizens would literally kill for. He was slavishly loyal to his masters, as was only proper, but diffident towards Karo and overly prideful in his position, which was not. This reflected conceit was a common characteristic in Chapter serfs, as Karo had experienced time and again. Better that they

were loyal and served correctly he supposed, than chafed under the yoke. A little arrogance was not too high a price to pay for that.

Still, it irritated him. Of all the many, many organisations in the Imperium, it was the Adeptus Astartes who vexed Karo the most. Their independence, their pride, their unpredictability... Now he had been tasked with investigating one of their Chapters. Somebody's idea of a joke, he was sure of it.

They walked along endless ornate shelves stacked high with fat scrolls rolled up on paired wooden spindles. Brighter lights flicked on and off as they passed. The moistureless air dried Karo's nostrils, the dust from a million documents tickled his nose and threatened an undignified sneeze.

'Here we are,' said the serf. He pulled a roll of parchment the width of a human torso from its resting place. It was obvious he struggled, but he did not ask for help. Nor did Karo offer any; the servants of the Space Marines were as proud as their masters, and did not like to be reminded of their own unaltered status.

The old man struggled the scroll over to a trolley, then pushed it to a reading table. He ignited a lamp held aloft by a sculpted tree, and rolled out the paper. 'A moment please,' he said, as he rolled the scroll open first one way, and then another. His brow creased as he scanned it for the relevant entry. 'Aha! Here we are, it is but a short passage, my lord.'

He pressed a wizened finger into the paper, where an extravagantly illuminated capital letter 'S' began a new entry in the chronicle. Karo sat down in a chair at the table. The serf hovered at his shoulder, further annoying him. As much as he wanted to order him away, Karo said nothing. His investigation had little to do with the Novamarines, and he would not antagonise them or their servants unless it served immediate purpose.

The document had been well-penned, but was faded with age despite the lauded qualities of the vault. Attempts had been made to mimic the

hyperlink-heavy styles of true data-slate archiving, but of course the different coloured entries were just that; they had no functionality, a product of blind transcription by an ignorant mind. Karo grumbled to himself, and then he read.

189887.M39

The purging of the *Death of Integrity*, officer in command Captain Mantillio Galt, Veteran Company [see also Captain Lutil Mastrik (Third Company); Lord Chapter Master Aresti (then: cpt. Fifth Company); Epistolary Raniel ///Triumphant In Mortis///; Lord Reclusiarch Odon (then: chpln. Veteran Company); Captain Steli Gallio (then: Vtn. Br, Squad Wisdom of Lucretius); Forgemaster Clastrin {Manufactor Magnus Est}].

So it was that elements of the First, Third and Fifth Companies of the Novamarines gathered under one banner at the star Jorso, the most multitudinous coming together of our brethren for many centuries, there to join with the most noble brothers of the Blood Drinkers Chapter to purge the space hulk designated the *Death of Integrity* after a protracted infestation of the Volian Sector. Nigh two hundred Terminator-clad warriors of the two Chapters fought side by side in the radiation-fogged darkness of the great hulk. Many brethren were killed, and the loss of Lord Chapter Master Caedis of the Blood Drinkers a sore blow (*In Memoriam Glorius Est*). A kill ratio of over 53:1 was nevertheless achieved, and data and artefacts retrieved from the hulk by attached members of Adeptus Mechanicus Explorator fleet led by *Excommentum Incursus* under High Lord Magos Explorator Plosk proved rich in STC materials. The hulk was subsequently destroyed. *Draco mortis in perpetuem*.

In gratitude, the Adepts of Mars presented both Chapters with new strike cruisers on the anniversary of Lord Caedis's death, thirty standard years later.

Chapter Master Caedis was honoured by both the Blood Drinkers and Blood Angels Chapters. Captains Mastrik and Aresti were invited to attend his memorial.

Captain Mantillio Galt petitioned Lord Chapter Master Hydariko for the right to undertake a penitential crusade. This request was granted. He disappeared shortly thereafter. [[[FATE UNKNOWN]]]

Of the vessel the *Spirit of Eternity*, no more was heard.

‘Is that it?’ Karo said tersely.

‘I am sorry if my lord is displeased.’

‘I am displeased,’ he said, letting his temper rule him for a moment. ‘I admit that is not your error. Surely there must be more? Where are the references to which you referred?’

The serf shrugged apologetically. ‘It is unusual my lord, for our record keeping is generally stringent.’

‘You do not think it unusual, that a conflict that saw the deployment of two hundred Terminators, and the death of a Chapter Master—’ his gloved finger stabbed the relevant sentence. The Master of the Scrolls winced. ‘—is not recorded in more detail? You do not find that unusual?’ Karo stared at the old man, the implication clear.

‘I am sure there was nothing to hide, perhaps the other records were lost?’

Karo tapped the parchment. ‘No references were included when this chronicle was made.’ Karo thought the scribes of the past could have concealed their omissions more carefully, but putting false references in was probably too galling to contemplate for such a meticulous order. Omission was one thing, lies another.

‘You doubt the veracity of the document?’ the serf was appalled.

‘No, I doubt its completion. There are things here that are unrecorded. Do not try to tell me there are not. The defence of your Chapter is worthy, but I am an agent of the Inquisition, and I know that there are truths here left untold.’

The old man's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. He was taken aback, but unworried by the inquisitor's ire. Lesser men would be pleading for their lives by now. 'I am sorry, my lord,' he said. 'If you would wait, I can check for more detail. We can visit the Hall of Integrity if you would, perhaps you can glean something from the sculpture and shrines there? They are quite impressive.'

Karo nodded and steepled his long brown fingers in front of his lips. 'First, search,' he said.

While the old man went about his business Karo re-read the document. The naming of the ship at the end struck him as an oversight, an accidental inclusion by some ancient completist. He knew full well why they might not wish to mention the *Spirit of Eternity*. He had found only one other mention of that particular ship in Imperial records, and that was hidden behind the Inquisitorial seal. No matter, that was not what troubled him.

The Master of Scrolls gave up his search hours later. Karo examined everything he could on the named officers in the archive. All were exemplars of heroism; all had died rendering exceptional service. All had references to the clearing of the *Death of Integrity* that between them amounted to less than thirty lines of text. Kill ratings, valour, honours earned, the usual concerns of the Space Marines. War and glory, glory and war.

Karo pushed the chair back from the table. He sighed.

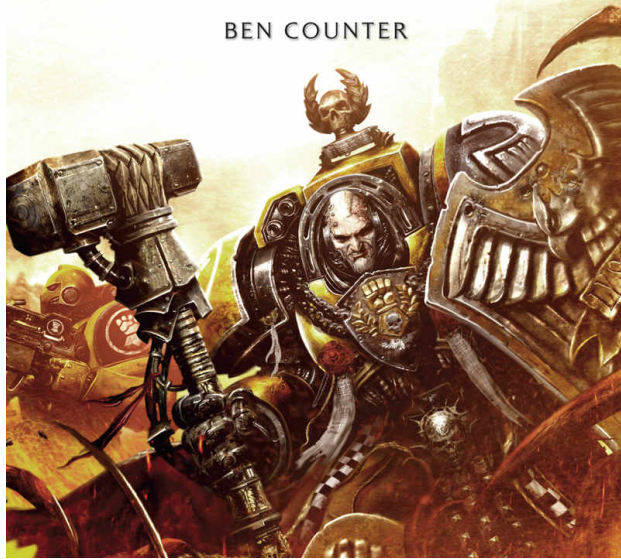
To San Guisiga then. Right into the monster's lair.

At least it would be warm there.



MALODRAX

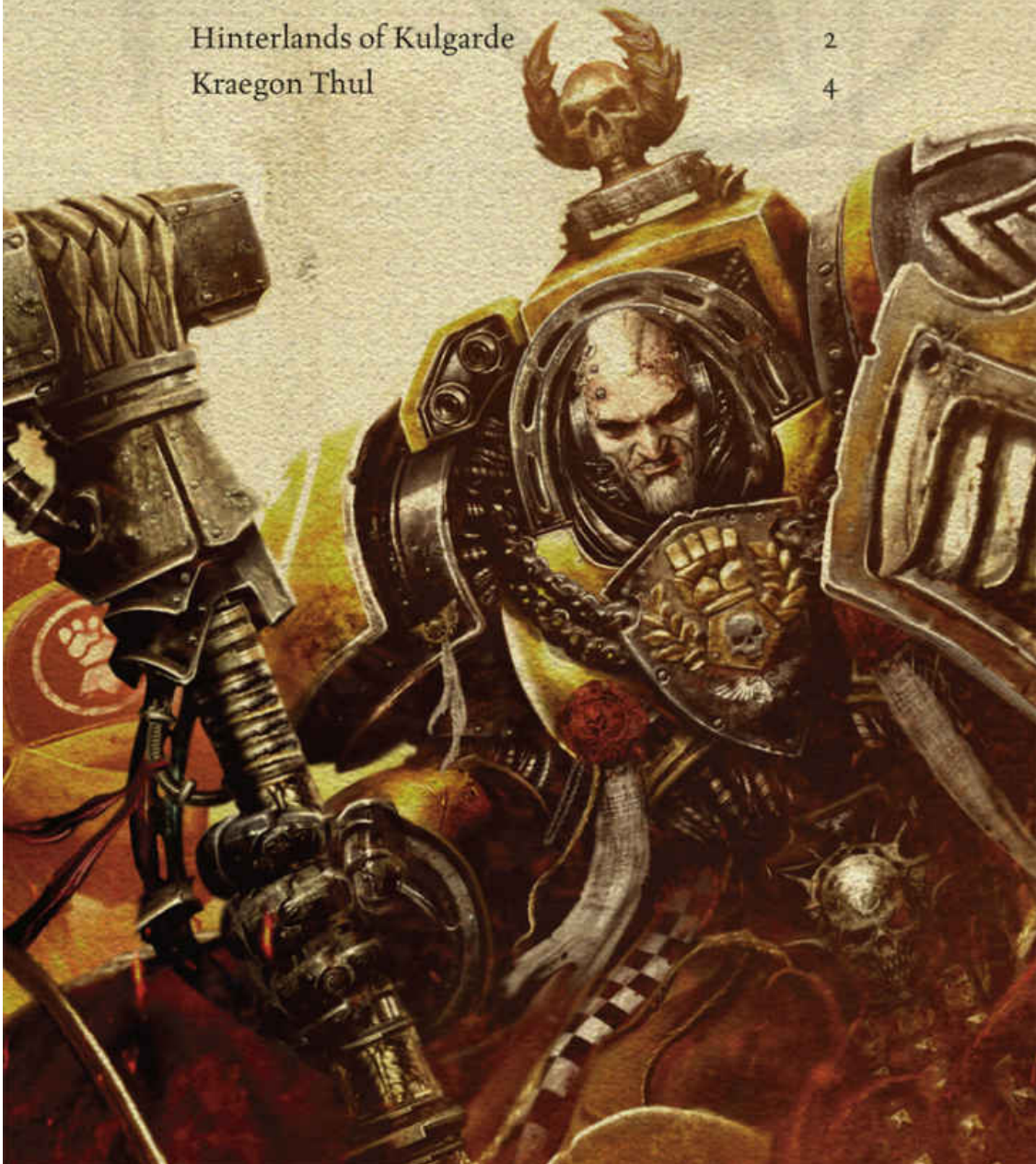
BEN COUNTER

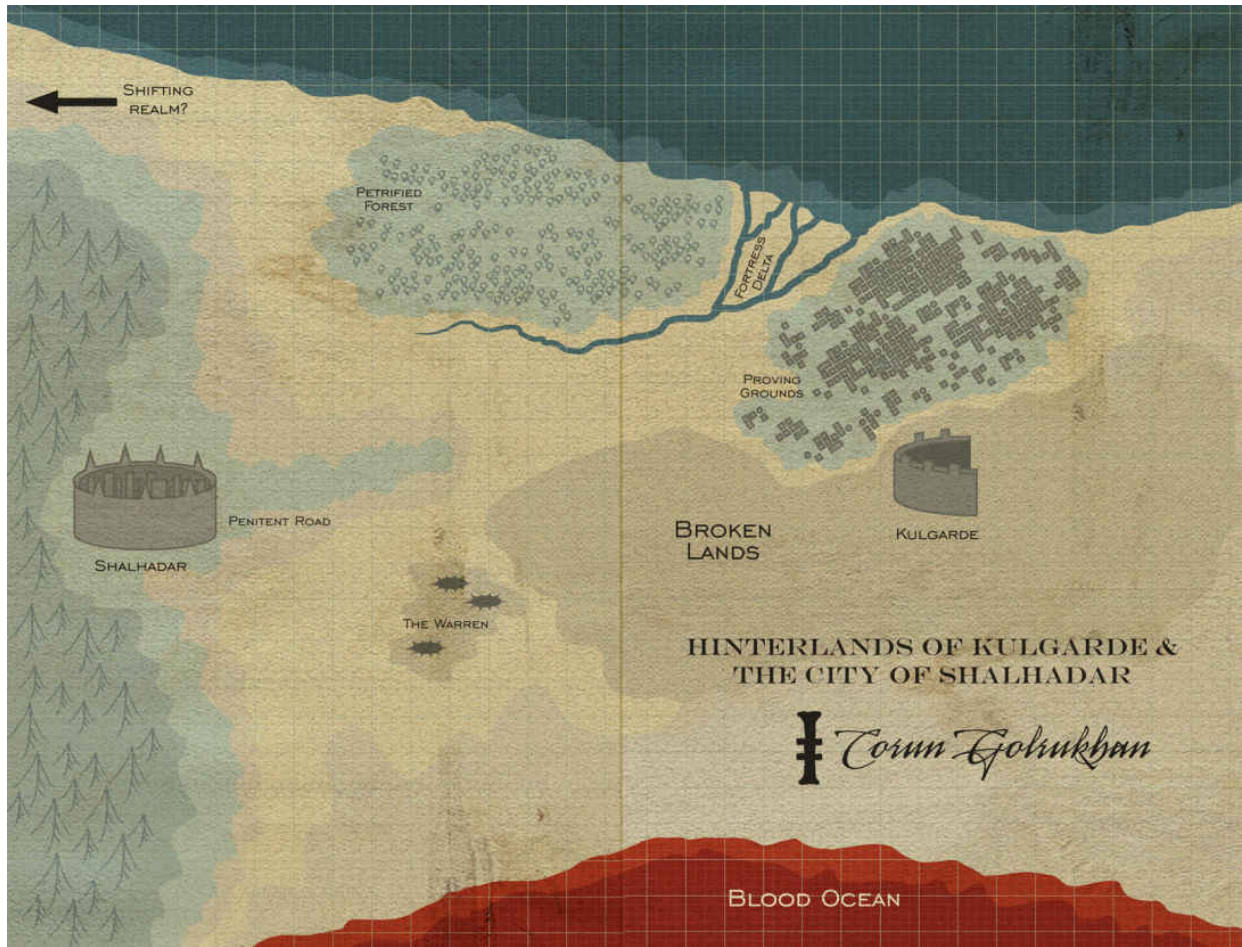


MALODRAX

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KRAEGON THUL

MALODRAX



Ben Counter



1

‘My thoughts upon witnessing Malodrax for the first time were akin to those of a surgeon who, when opening up the body of a diseased patient, witnesses a growth of such incurable malignancy that his instincts are to sew the incision back up and flee the operating theatre.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The scraping of the coral against the spaceship’s hull was a howling, as if a pack of wolves were clawing at the *Breaker of Darkness*. The whole ship shuddered, the churning of the outer hull’s torn steel a cry of pain.

‘Was it like this?’ asked Chaplain Lycaon.

Captain Lysander’s face did not change. His features were square and solid, and it seemed he had kept his jaw clenched since the *Breaker* had dropped out of the warp into real space at the edge of this remote system.

‘It was worse,’ he said.

‘Good,’ said Lycaon.

They were the only two Imperial Fists on the bridge. The rest of the crew here were servants of the Chapter, unaugmented men and women who served on the strike cruiser. The tension here was the kind that could only exist among those who had not ascended to the stature and rank of Space Marine, for it was based on fear. The *Breaker's* bridge was a gloomy and arcane place, where the clockwork of the ancient difference engines and cogitator arrays were laid open, thousands of cogs and pistons chattering away in a constant background whisper. Bridge officers read the topography of space around the ship from reams of numbers spat out in loops of parchment from the cogitators, or fed punchcards into the command helms to coax tiny adjustments from the *Breaker's* thrusters. The Malodracian Reef was hidden from them outside the hull, but it was picked out in zeros and ones, a terrible equation that changed even as it was solved. Upwards of fifty navigation crew were on duty for the approach through the reef, every one terrified.

The ship lurched. Some of the crew were thrown to the deck. Punchcards slewed across the floor and loose cogs pinged free.

‘They will try to herd us closer,’ said Lysander.

‘They?’ asked Lycaon.

‘The reefs are haunted,’ said Lysander. ‘Predators. Wreckers. They will try to dash us against the reef and break us open.’

‘But they will not succeed,’ said Lycaon. ‘You have seen to that.’

Compared to the Reclusiarch, the most senior Chaplain in the Imperial Fists, Lysander looked plain, if that could ever be said of a Space Marine. His armour was deep golden-yellow with no adornment except for the red fist emblem of the Chapter on one shoulder pad – he had returned to the Chapter lacking his own armour with its decoration of deed and rank. Lysander was captain of the First Company by right, the post he had held when he had been taken from the Chapter, but one glance told that he was not standing shoulder to shoulder with the great warriors of the Chapter

now. Lysander's bolter was slung over one shoulder. Even in the short time he had spent back with the Imperial Fists he had acquired a custom model, with an enhanced scope array and an enlarged box magazine. The steel studs in his forehead told of his long service. There his ornamentation ended, compared with the skull-mask and dozens of Chaplain's honours worn by Lycaon.

He had been away for a thousand years. If he was to be what he once was, he would have to rebuild everything he had earned. He would have to start on Malodrax.

Another sound reached the bridge – a shriek, like that of someone in pain or terror, thin and wailing, yet strong enough to cut through the groaning of the ship's painful journey through the reef. The cogitators on the bridge reacted, spewing reams of parchment printout as if in alarm.

'That's the Red Widow,' said Lysander. 'It means we are close to the inner reaches, but close to danger as well. She dwells at the edge of the whirlpool in the heart of the reef. If she draws us in, we are done for.'

'Is she on the map?'

'She is.' Lysander carried a leather case on the belt of his armour. He unlatched it and took out a folded piece of hide, cured light-brown, and shook it open. It was the hide of an animal, hairless, and covered in the intricate contours of a detailed map. It was covered in illustrations of fanciful creatures – serpentine monsters with fringes of tentacles, huge fish swallowing spacecraft whole, swarms of winged creatures carrying off unfortunate sailors. The pictures symbolised real creatures whose true forms could not be drawn.

Lysander laid out the map on one of the cogitator housings. Flag-Captain Remor, the helmsman of the *Breaker*, hurried over from the heap of printouts he was reading. 'My lords,' he said.

'Here,' said Lysander, indicating a place near the centre of the map. It was a black spiral, a whirlpool, and at its edge was the image of a woman.

Her body was elongated and thin, her arms long reaching talons, her face avian and stretched, half-hidden in lank hair. She wore a dress of rags picked out in red ink, one of the few splashes of colour on the map. ‘If we skirt around the whirlpool we will be safe from her, but she will try to drag us into the currents. Once we are past, there is a way through.’ He ran a finger along a canyon edged by sharp masses of coral, winding across to the edge of the map. ‘It will be tight going, but it will take us out of the reef.’

‘Can you do it?’ asked Chaplain Lycaon.

‘We can,’ said Remor.

‘Commander Langeloc said the same thing the last time I was here,’ said Lysander. ‘Remember that.’

‘Of course,’ said Remor. ‘But in defeat the next victory is born. The Chapter learned from the *Shield of Valour*’s fate. Our crews are taught about its downfall. We will not repeat it.’

‘To your helm, then,’ said Lycaon. ‘Bring us in safe.’

The bridge crew responded to the arguing cogitators, typing on valve-operated keyboards as cumbersome as church organs. Brass compasses skittered across diagrams of the ship and her engine arrays. A small body of crewmen were hurtling through calculations on abacuses with beads of ivory and jet.

‘What is the Red Widow?’ asked Lycaon as the two Imperial Fists watched the barely controlled chaos of the bridge.

‘I do not know,’ said Lysander.

Outside the *Breaker of Darkness*, something let out a shrieking laugh.

The *Breaker* was an old ship, a noble ship, her hull laid down in the fifth millennium after the ascension of the Emperor to the Golden Throne. Shipwrights of the forge-world Ruo’s Hope had built into her hull and bulkheads strands of psychoactive metals, the secrets of their alloys long since lost, which were to the daemon and the spirit of the warp like red-hot

wires that burned and dismembered. Clerics of the Imperial Creed had blessed her, and bathed the bolts of her construction in vats of consecrated machine oil. The Librarians of the Imperial Fists had reinforced her further with wards and protective circles of ancient and arcane origin, which forbade entry to beings of the warp.

For this reason it was a full thirty minutes before the damage control teams began reporting casualties. Stationed across the ship, on full alert as the currents of the Malodracian Reef dragged at the *Breaker*, they saw in the strobing light of failing glow-globes the remains of crew members smeared and torn across walls and ceilings. Some witnessed first-hand others lifted off their feet, twisted around and stretched until they came apart as if wrenched by giant invisible hands.

The order went out to break open the arms lockers, well stocked with autoguns and shotguns for use in the close confines of the ship's corridors. Crewmen shot one another in the darkness that rippled through the ship. Systems were strained – the lighting was always the first to go as power was driven to the plasma reactors and their coolant systems. More died, folded up and crammed into heating ducts or slammed over and over into the steel deck.

The *Breaker*'s psychic defences flared and the attackers became visible as flickering images, their spectral hands around the throats of the dead. They had long serpentine bodies like eels, skinny torsos, many-jointed arms that creaked and snapped as they wrapped around their prey, and faces that were knots of insectoid horror.

In the cells, where the battle-brothers meditated and trained away the days in transit across space, bells tolled to rouse the Imperial Fists to action. They threw on their armour and took up their weapons, with barely time for the most hurried blessings to make their wargear ready. First Sergeant Kaderic was the ranking officer on that deck, and he called for every Imperial Fist to hold the cells. They could not rush off in ones and twos to face down the enemy, to be separated and picked off. They could

not assist the crewmen calling for help. That was how the enemy would defeat them, and the enemy could not.

Not now. Not when the Imperial Fists had yet to shed a drop of blood on Malodrax.

Lysander vaulted down a stairwell, dropping to the next deck down with a ringing impact on the steel deck. Screaming was coming from down the corridor, which led to several dozen crew cabins and storerooms. Pipes and ducts wound along the ceiling, hung with embroidered prayer-strips that were currently doing little good for the crew.

One of the enemy darted along the corridor, ducking into a side cabin. Lysander barely glimpsed it as it shimmered past – it was something like a sea creature, something like a scrawny, wiry, elongated man, with a dash of spider or diseased fly. Lysander swept his bolter after it but it was gone. In its wake was a screaming that turned to a gurgling howl, and then was cut off. A spray of gore spattered from the cabin doorway.

By the time Lysander was at the door only the creature's tail could be seen, sliding through the bloody steel of the cabin wall. The crewman who had hidden there had been dragged from under the bunk and ripped open, slit down the middle lengthways and almost turned inside out.

Lysander put a shoulder down and charged. He slammed into the cabin wall and it gave way, steel five thousand years forged buckling under his impact.

If the spirit could be said to have human emotions, it expressed surprise then, as Lysander burst into the mass of pipes and cabling inside the wall. It coiled back on itself and shrieked, its face opening up into a fan of extendable mouthparts coiled to strike.

Lysander took aim and fired, stuttering volleys of bolter fire into the spirit. Even halfway into the parallel world of the warp, the spirit's flesh had enough consistency to be mangled and torn. Bolter fire ripped it open

and it came apart, the scraps of its spectral flesh dissolving back into the warp.

Lysander kept moving, forging through the machinery into the corridor beyond. Screams were coming from everywhere, and isolated bursts of gunfire, but he couldn't be distracted any further. He spotted the next stairwell and ran down the steps.

The deck below was clad in stone. It echoed the monastic cells that were a Space Marine's home. The Imperial Fists were based on their fleet, and many of their ships were fashioned to recall a planetbound fortress such as those Rogal Dorn was famed for building. On the *Breaker* the decks were dark and gloomy, lit by ribbons of burning gas from concealed jets in imitation of torch or candlelight.

'Lysander!' called First Sergeant Kaderic. He carried his chainsword in one hand and a single-handed axe in the other, a sparring weapon from the deck's training circles, and had donned his armour rapidly with the sketchiest of wargear rites. Kaderic was old, his face blunt and grizzled, the kind of man who served as the lynchpin of the veteran First Company. He was Lysander's second-in-command in the First – technically. 'The enemy cannot wait to die, they rush to meet us!'

'Malodracians call them the Grey Hungers,' said Lysander. 'Predators, like animals. All but mindless. They wait for ships to wreck upon the reef, and feed on whatever is inside.'

'Anything else?' asked Kaderic.

'Nothing more,' replied Lysander. 'They can be killed.'

'That will be enough.'

The First Company of the Imperial Fists was ready to make war. The elites of the Chapter, the veterans and specialists entitled to wear the white trim of the First, were usually spread throughout the Chapter and the various warzones in which it fought, lending their expertise and steadfastness where it was most needed. For Malodrax two squads had

been gathered together, along with support troops, into a single strike force, because this was not a war like any of the thousands being fought across the Imperium, where the Imperial Fists answered the call of the Imperium's Warmasters. This was the Imperial Fists' fight alone. This was revenge.

They had not expected to fight until the strike force reached the planet's surface, but that did not mean they were not prepared. Already almost a hundred Space Marines were armed and ready training their bolter sights across the corridors and crossroads of the cell block, or clustered in the centre of the sparring circles covering every approach. The battle-brothers who specialised in close assault had their chainblades ready. Devastator Squad Gorvetz was gathered in the chapel beneath the black marble statue of Rogal Dorn, where their heavy weapons could fill the wide corridor leading to the chapel doors with chains of shrapnel and plasma fire.

'A good fight, captain,' said Kaderic. 'You must have missed those.'

Before Lysander could reply, a screeching sound tore through the cell block from every direction. The artificial torches flickered and shadows leaped.

'Break the foe!' cried Sergeant Gorvetz. 'Hammer and anvil! Thunder and sky!'

The Grey Hungers charged. They rose from the ground and descended through the ceiling. Others rippled along the corridors, lurching from cell doors, snuffing out the torch flames as they passed through the walls.

The volley of bolter fire was so vicious that for a moment there was nothing but the roar of gunfire and the howl of shrapnel. A steel gale blasted through and the warp spirits were shredded. One spirit made it through, slithering to the feet of Kaderic. Its mouthparts shot out but Kaderic cut through them with his axe, driving the point of his chainblade down through its body with his other hand.

A fat bolt of plasma immolated one of the Hungers, dissolving it away into a spray of ash. Lysander snapped off a volley of shots of his own, and somewhere in the cauldron of fire another Hunger was destroyed, its head blown apart into a burst of translucent gore. All this seemed to take place in silence, the noise too brutal for any one sound to make it through.

But there was one sound. It wormed its way into the back of Lysander's head, its fingers running up the inside of his skull.

It was laughter. A thin, reedy cackle, something between glee and the crazed laughter of complete terror.

Lysander grabbed Kaderic by the shoulder. 'It's the Widow!' he shouted.

Kaderic dropped to one knee and leaned in close to hear. 'The Widow?'

'The Red Widow!'

'Where?'

Lysander tried to pick out the strains of the sound. The gunfire faltered for a fraction of a second and he could make out the strains of it again, high and grating.

'The apothecarion!' he yelled.

The *Breaker of Darkness* had a sickbay for the crew, but the Imperial Fists had their own apothecarion equipped for a Space Marine's unique physiology, and at that moment its treatment slabs were not empty. If the Red Widow was to feed, that was where she would find the most accessible meat among the Imperial Fists.

'Hold fire!' yelled Kaderic. 'Hold fire! Moving!'

Kaderic's squad halted firing long enough for Lysander and Kaderic to run past the chapel doors towards the apothecarion, situated at one end of the cell block. Ahead, bloodstained foot- and handprints glowed against the walls, iridescent drops of gore dripping from the ceiling. The door ahead was shut, banded iron sprayed with blood.

Lysander shouldered the door off its hinges. The shriek of laughter and the stench of spoiled blood hit him as hard as a bolter round.

A dozen treatment slabs were laid out in the apothecarion. Autosurgeons hung from the ceiling and glass cylinders of artificial organs and rolls of synthetic skin lined the walls. Medicae-servitors, their metal casings adorned with scalpel-tipped manipulators, were parked at recharging stations in the corners of the room. A chart of a Space Marine's body, including the many additional organs that helped turn a man into one of the Adeptus Astartes, adorned the ceiling like a fresco in a cathedral, picked out in ivory and silver.

In the centre of the room stood the Red Widow. The illustration of her had not done her justice. She was tall and skinny, her limbs malformed, her fingers long and probing, lank hair hanging down over a pallid body covered in scars and open wounds. She had no face, and where a face should have been was a black void, like a window into space. She turned that face to Lysander as he tore into the apothecarion, and he felt himself falling into it, time and space rushing past him.

Nebulae and galaxies rushed past. Stars boiled into existence from the heart of incandescent stellar clouds. Solar systems were cracked and shattered to dust, and swallowed up by endless maws of nothingness that opened up to devour them.

The warp. It was the warp, the dimension that ran parallel to reality, the dwelling place of the Fell Powers and the source of everything that was worst in this galaxy.

Lysander tore his eyes away. The laughter rang in his head. He shielded his eyes and tried to gauge what the Red Widow was doing without looking at her face.

In the Red Widow's hand was an arm. It was the oversized arm of a Space Marine. Lysander recognised the recent blister scars and surgical marks around the ruin of the shoulder. The arm had belonged to Brother Skelpis.

‘This is your friend,’ hissed the Red Widow, and somehow the laughter was uninterrupted. ‘Your brother. Sworn to the same oaths. Born of the same battles.’

Lysander lunged with his chainblade. The Red Widow batted the blade aside with Skelpis’s arm.

Sergeant Kaderic ran past Lysander and slammed into the Red Widow. A hand, impossibly strong, closed around one of Kaderic’s legs and the Widow threw him aside. Kaderic crashed through one of the organ cylinders, falling to the ground in a heap of shattered glass and torn artificial flesh.

‘You chose the wrong ship,’ snarled Lysander.

‘You chose the wrong god,’ hissed the Widow.

Lysander slashed at her, the teeth of his chainblade shrieking. The Widow leapt up onto the ceiling, the joints of her elongated limbs cracking as they bent the wrong way and grabbed handholds in the image on the ceiling. Her face flared open, a great void threatening to drag Lysander’s consciousness into it. As long as she faced him, Lysander could not look directly at her – he would be paralysed by the warp’s assault on his senses and the Widow would tear him apart as she had done Brother Skelpis.

Nails as hard as diamond tore chunks from the fresco as the Widow scuttled across the ceiling, reaching down at Lysander’s throat. His chainblade flashed in his hand, guided by reflex rather than choice, and sawed through the Widow’s arm just below one of the elbows.

Blades of shadow slid from the torn stump. The light of distant stars bled from the wound, and the sound of colliding galaxies roared in Lysander’s ears. The stuff of the warp oozed from the Widow, pooling in masses of darkness where it touched the deck.

The Red Widow giggled, as if the severing of a limb was the most wonderful fun.

Lysander lost sight of her for a split second as darkness swirled around her. He heard her land on the deck behind him, and the shadow claws closed around his torso, grossly elongated. They dug in, biting through the ceramite of his breastplate and shoulder guards.

Lysander's chainblade arm was pinned. He drew his bolt pistol with his free hand and aimed blindly over his shoulder, loosing off three shots at the place he guessed her head would be. The Widow's other hand grabbed his wrist and wrenched it behind his back.

'I saw your god die,' the Widow whispered in his ear. 'I lapped at the liquor from his corpse.'

A tremendous crash cut her voice off and Lysander was thrown forwards, face down onto the blood-slicked deck. He rolled onto his back and saw the Red Widow reeling, shards of glass impaling her ragged skin.

Behind her was a Space Marine, stripped of his armour and wearing the simple half-robos of an apothecarion patient. His skin had been dark, but now it was a patchwork of new scars and synthetic skin. He was holding the remains of the organ cylinder he had smashed into the back of the Red Widow's head. His eyes were wide and wild.

Lysander stamped a foot down onto the Red Widow's back and drew back his chainblade. He plunged the blade into the Widow, its chain teeth grinding through spine and rib.

Darkness sprayed out, miniature fragments of a mirror reflecting the warp. Sergeant Kaderic had extricated himself from the wreckage of the organ cylinders and brought his axe down, cutting off the Red Widow's head.

A sudden flood of darkness blinded Lysander. He wrenched his chainblade free and stumbled for the door, finding the doorframe with an outstretched hand and making it out of the apothecarion. Kaderic followed him out, carrying with him the severed head of the Red Widow.

'Halaestus!' shouted Lysander. 'Skelpis!'

Brother Halaestus, still holding the base of the shattered organ cylinder, emerged from the darkness clinging around the doorway. ‘Skelpis is dead,’ he said. ‘He was helpless on the slab. She killed him.’

‘He is avenged,’ said Sergeant Kaderic.

‘None of us are avenged,’ said Halaestus, ‘until Malodrax falls.’

Lysander put a gauntleted hand on Halaestus’s shoulder. ‘We will have our revenge,’ said Lysander. ‘I swear.’

For a moment Brother Halaestus just stared at Lysander, his eyes looking far away as if focused on the Red Widow’s glimpse of the warp. Then he refocused, and looked down at the head in Sergeant Kaderic’s hand. The head was sagging and limp, little more than a hollow mask of skin with the window to the warp gone.

‘That’s the Widow,’ said Halaestus.

‘Just as in the map,’ said Lysander. ‘We were ready for her.’

‘Not ready enough,’ said Halaestus. ‘You said you would lead us here, Lysander. You said you would be prepared for anything Malodrax had.’

‘I did not say there would not be losses,’ replied Lysander, his voice level. ‘It is a lot for me to ask you to have faith, I know that. But that is what I ask of you now.’

Whatever reply Halaestus had, he never made it. Chaplain Lycaon approached from the cell block, both barrels of the storm bolter in his hand glowing dull red, the head of his crozius arcanum still crackling with its power field. ‘The enemy is scattered, First Sergeant!’ said Lycaon. ‘What of the apothecarion?’

‘Held, Chaplain!’ announced Kaderic. ‘The Red Widow it was, and this is what remains of her!’ Kaderic cast the Widow’s head onto the deck at Lycaon’s feet. ‘But one brother, Skelpis, was lost here. The daemon was vanquished by the captain and myself.’

‘Rejoin your brethren,’ said Lycaon. ‘Sweep the cell block and launch patrols to clear the rest of the ship.’

‘Of course, Chaplain,’ said Kaderic.

‘And captain, sergeant,’ said Lycaon, ‘and you, Brother Halaestus. Well fought.’

Usually the crew of the *Breaker* worked in two shifts, changing every fourteen hours. For the next twenty hours both shifts were awake and at station, guiding the *Breaker* around the Red Widow’s lair of treacherous orbital currents and jagged masses of coral. Two thrusters were torn off the ship’s stern, and a hole torn in her flank a hundred metres long that bled three decks’ worth of air into the void. More died, added to the tally taken by the Grey Hungers and the Red Widow a few hours before. But the crew of the *Breaker* had known that they would not all make it home, not from this journey. They worked to exhaustion until the ship emerged from the reef into the relatively clear high orbit of Malodrax. They would have leave to mourn their dead when the mission was done.

In the new quiet that had fallen on the ship, Chaplain Lycaon was able to return to his art. In his fingers was a small piece of bone, and in his other hand a miniature drill with which he was inscribing illustrations onto the bone. Around him were mounted the arms and armour of a senior Chaplain of the Imperial Fists, a tattered banner stained with smoke from an old battlefield, shelves of books of battle-lore and a polished stone Crux Terminatus mounted on the wall like a plaque. His armour, painted in the black of a Chaplain instead of the gold of an Imperial Fist, hung from a rack against the wall.

Lysander watched Lycaon work. The Chaplain’s hands were those of a Space Marine, huge and powerful even without gauntlets, but he worked with the fine dexterity of a watchmaker.

‘Dorn himself scrimshawed the bones of the dead,’ said Lycaon at length. ‘He wrote that pursuits such as these separate us from other soldiers. Any savage can swing a club or fire a gun. But a Space Marine is better than that. He can turn his mind inwards, and channel what lies there into focus as well as rage.’ The Chaplain blew dust off the bone, revealing

the finely cut detail. 'I hope Brother Skelpis would agree, having unwittingly donated his finger bone.'

'He would consider it an honour,' said Lysander.

'Good.' Lycaon gave the bone a few more strokes with the drill, and held it up to the light of the cell's glow-globe. Dense knotwork wound around the clenched fist symbol of the Chapter, and through the wings of the Imperial aquila beside it. 'Brother Halaestus has lost his focus.'

Lysander did not answer for a long moment. Lycaon put Skelpis's scrimshawed finger bone on the table in front of him, and turned his gaze up to Lysander for the first time since the captain had answered the summons to Lycaon's cell.

'He has gone through much,' said Lysander. 'He wants revenge.'

'Every Space Marine wants revenge,' said Lycaon. 'All the time. With every breath. He wants revenge against the galaxy for daring to be so full of enemies. Revenge is not an excuse to lose one's focus.'

'Do you intend to leave him on the *Breaker* when we go down to the surface?' asked Lysander.

'I am not such a fool to shun the use of an able-bodied Space Marine when we face an environment like Malodrax. No, my concerns lie deeper. A man driven to extremes by rage might be just what this strike force needs. But it is not what the Chapter needs.'

'Brother Halaestus will be rehabilitated. What he underwent on Malodrax could never leave a soul unmarked, but he is an Imperial Fist and he is strong. The apothecarion and the help of his battle-brothers will fix him.'

'Perhaps,' said Lycaon. 'But I have another concern.'

'Chaplain?'

'Brother Halaestus is not the brother who compels the greater part of my attention. I had heard much of you, Lysander. Your loss was the cause of great sorrow. Even amidst the tragedy of the *Shield of Valour*, the death of

Lysander was mourned most keenly, for they spoke of you as a Chapter Master of the future. When you returned to us, it was with great joy that we learned you lived, but among the Chaplains there was concern. A thousand years had passed and the men you fought alongside are not those who serve the Chapter today.'

'The Imperial Fists are the same,' said Lysander. 'Dorn saw to it that our principles were strong enough to weather the ages.'

Lycaon did not acknowledge Lysander's words. 'And then came the *Shield of Valour*,' he continued. 'Then came Malodrax. And I do not know if the First Captain of the Imperial Fists, the one whose death was among the greatest tragedies the Chapter has suffered, is the same man who stands opposite me now.'

Lysander did not respond. He stared down at the scrimshaw in front of Lycaon, which had once been a finger bone of Brother Skelpis. Skelpis had been crippled, unable to fight, and he had died a helpless death that no Space Marine should ever suffer.

'What do you have to say, captain?' asked Lycaon. 'Or have you nothing?'

'When we leave Malodrax,' said Lysander, 'Thul will be dead. That is all I have to say.'

'I pray that you are right,' said Lycaon. 'It was your intelligence that led us here. It is your experience that we hope will give us the edge on the surface. Much relies on you, Lysander, and you will be judged when it is all done. When we come to leave Malodrax, whatever has happened down there, we will know which Lysander the Imperial Fists name among their number. The Reclusiam stands apart from the Chapter, for even its heroes are not beyond our judgement.' Lycaon handed the scrimshawed bone to Lysander. 'You were down there with him. Carry him with you.'

Lysander took the finger bone, saluted, and left the cell without another word.

The coral had grown up over millions of years, encrusted around flecks of rock and debris in orbit around Malodrax. Tiny organisms had woven microscopic calcific shells around themselves, and gradually, as the millennia ground by, enormous reefs had built up that cloaked the world of Malodrax in a shield of jagged coral that rendered it impervious to any attempt to land.

Any attempt, that was, without a map. Crazy scholars had mapped the reefs and the intricacies of their movement. Captains had braved the reefs to reach the forbidden planet inside. Who had first come to Malodrax, and why, was lost to the infinite histories of the Scattering, when mankind flew heedlessly to the most distant stars. But someone, to the woe of all, had made it.

The *Breaker of Darkness* emerged from the reef scored and tattered, dragging its own train of wreckage, chunks of shredded hull and the bodies of crewmen floating in her wake. Wide gashes laid open the latticework of deck and bulkhead inside. Half the golden fist emblem on her prow had been sheared off. But she could still fly, and her cargo was intact.

With a flare of engines the ship changed attitude, presenting the heat-shielded prow to the upper atmosphere of Malodrax.

It took a force of will to look on Malodrax itself. Like a void against a void, it forced the eye away from it, something darker than black. If an observer could compel himself to look at it he would see a discoloured orb, its southern hemisphere mottled and decaying like a tumour, its northern half parched and broken as if hammered into pieces. Its northern pole burned with purple flame, and near the equator an open wound oozed molten rock like infected blood. A tormented and suffering world, pulled apart by the unnatural forces that teemed on its surface, infested, befouled and rancid.

To this world the *Breaker of Darkness* descended, the flames of its upper atmosphere licking against the prow.



2

'My captain was a brave man. He had served me for six decades as personal pilot, and then master of my fleet. The only time I saw him weep was when he condemned his ship to the atmosphere of Malodrax, knowing she would never rise from that toxic cauldron of hate.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

In the cool of the *Shield of Valour*, Lysander knelt to pray.

The ship was old indeed. It still bore the patina of Mars, deep red speckles on the blueish steel of her bulkheads and decks. Cold vapour clung to the floors and rippled down the walls. The archeotech engines, supplied by plasma reactors more efficient than any made for eight thousand years, required a deep chill to function and the whole ship was refrigerated.

Lysander's silent prayer came to an end. It was one he had spoken to himself so many times before that it was as natural as strapping on his

armour or the weight of his hammer in his hand. He asked the Emperor and the spirit of Rogal Dorn to lend him strength and wisdom. And he prayed for his own strength, because a Space Marine had to rely on himself above all. His soul cleansed, his mind rigid with faith, he stood and turned to face his battle-brothers.

The First Company stood to attention in the cathedral hall. One hundred Imperial Fists. They wore the white-painted armour trim and Crux Terminatus of the First. One carried the company banner, depicting Rogal Dorn, hammer in hand, straddling a crumbling fortress wall as traitors burned beneath his feet. It was hung with hundreds of battle-honours.

Lysander's breath misted in front of him as he spoke.

'Our mission is extermination,' he began. 'There is no word that suffices save that. Our mission objective is the extinction of a species. The Vorel are an immediate threat to the settlements of the Eastern Fringe and the only response the human race can make is to revoke their existence. I need not tell you of the hatred the alien must kindle in your hearts. You know full well the weight of the duty that carries you, as you carry it, unto death. You are men of the First Company and need no description of such.

'What I will tell you is that for all that we live in an Imperium of a million worlds, for all our lives shall encompass but a speck of time in the ten thousand years of our history, missions such as this give us our chance to leave a mark on that history. The galaxy is vast, and even a Space Marine may feel his role in it is vanishingly small. But we shall leave that mark. The Vorel were, and when we finish, they will no longer be. No human will ever suffer their predations again. How few men can say that the galaxy has changed with their passing? We can, we men of the First and of the Imperial Fists. That is our blessing. That is the legacy of the Emperor and of Rogal Dorn, their gift to humanity. Give thanks as you bring humanity's wrath to the Vorel. Praise their blessing as you anoint yourselves in xenos blood!'

The Imperial Fists of the First clapped their hands to their breastplates and cheered, a warrior's salute. Lysander hefted his hammer, the Fist of Dorn, over his head, and the men raised their chainblades in response.

They had studied the Vorel during the two months they had travelled through the warp on the *Shield of Valour*. The Adeptus Mechanicus had speculated that the Vorel had evolved from the airborne predators of a prey-starved world and had come to dominate that world in a civilisation based on floating sky-fortresses and eyrie-cities. It was inevitable they would look to the sky for more meat to hunt, and inevitable that they would come into contact with humanity as their eyes settled on sovereign Imperial worlds.

It was inevitable they would be exterminated in response. The Space Marines would seal that fate. The Vorel, by one standard, were unfortunate. They dreamed of hunting the finest prey across infinite worlds, their civilisation coming to chase predators between the very stars – and yet they would be wiped out by the cruellest hammer blow from a species that hated anything not human. A Space Marine might comprehend such a point of view, but he had the mental discipline to set it aside and replace it in the forefront of his mind with the duty to wipe out the alien and preserve humanity's rule over the galaxy.

‘To your duties,’ said Lysander. ‘Prayer and wargear rites. Make your souls ready today, for tomorrow the killing begins.’

The Imperial Fists saluted their captain and filed from the cathedral, the mist of their breath forming a pale haze in the refrigerated air. The cathedral was consecrated not to a god, as the common people of the Imperium conceived of the Emperor, but to the Imperial Fists themselves – to the spirit of their Chapter, the responsibility and power of a Space Marine. To the example of the Primarch Rogal Dorn, figurative and literal father of the Chapter.

Some would call it arrogant, Lysander thought as he looked up at the Chapter's fist symbol covering one wall, Dorn's gilded statue standing before it. Those who said it, though, would have failed to understand the place the Space Marines occupied – at the pinnacle of the Imperium, and the front line against extinction.

Rogal Dorn's statue shuddered as an impact rang through the ship. Lysander felt it through his feet, running up the segments of his armour.

'Report,' he said into his vox-link, opening a channel to the ship's bridge.

'We've taken an impact,' came the reply from Commander Langeloc, the captain of the *Shield*. Lysander did not know her well, but she was valued by the Chapter as a dependable, if unimaginative, spaceship captain. 'Starboard ventral. I have dispatched damage crews.'

'Was it a meteorite?'

'There was an accompanying energy signature. Could be a weapon hit.'

'Bring the ship to battle stations.'

'Already under way, captain.'

Lysander felt himself shifting into the state of readiness, the physical and mental routines, of battle. The Imperial Fists of the First Company were doing the same, breaking off in squads to man the sections of the ship allotted to them in the event of an attack – important defence points like the apothecarion and the bridge, the fighter deck in case of evacuation or deployment on a boarding mission. Though it would be difficult to explain, it was a good feeling, a sense of purpose. A Space Marine knew battle. It was where he was designed to be.

Drevyn, Skelpis, Halaestus and Vonkaal were his command squad, his honour guard. Lysander had chosen them from the men of the First because they were solid and trustworthy. They made their way through the other Imperial Fists to join him before the image of Dorn.

‘We may be under attack,’ said Lysander as they approached, ‘so we will act as if we are. Halaestus! Lead us in the prayer.’

Halaestus bowed his head. Lysander did not insist on any one of his squadmates leading the rest in prayer, and instead selected them all equally. This time it was Halaestus’s turn.

‘The eve of battle burns bright,’ began Halaestus. For this occasion he had picked a lesser-spoken prayer from the corner of one of the Chapter’s works of collected battle-lore. ‘The sword and the bullet burn brighter. The shadow of the enemy looms dark. Our wrath and our sorrow rise darker. When the enemy soars above us, we will stride over him. When he goes far, we go further. When he kills we kill more, when he lives we live...’

The next impact threw Lysander off his feet. Rogal Dorn fell too, the golden statue snapping off at the ankles and crashing into the front rows of the cathedral’s pews. Slabs fell from the ceiling, the artificial stone falling away to reveal the chill steel of the ship’s structure.

‘Langeloc!’ yelled Lysander into the vox.

‘That was a lance strike,’ came Langeloc’s voice. Over the vox came sounds of commotion as the bridge crew reacted to the sudden impact. Someone was yelling for a medical team to attend the bridge. ‘We are pursued. Sensorium teams are trying to identify the enemy.’

‘What is our integrity?’

‘Major damage to the ventral weapon bays. Geller field fluctuating. We may have to drop out of the warp.’

‘Keep me updated,’ said Lysander. ‘We’re heading to our post.’

Lysander and his squad were slated to take up position where the main body of the spaceship met the engine block. The engines were one of the principal weaknesses of the *Shield of Valour* in the event of a boarding, for its plasma reactors were an eminently sabotagable design that could be the target of a suicidal boarding party. Enough damage to the reactors or their coolant systems could cause them to breach and vaporise half the ship.

Lysander might be the commander of this mission but when the ship came under attack he and his command squad had their defensive duties just like everyone else.

‘Someone wants a fast death,’ said Brother Skelpis as the squad moved from the damaged cathedral sternwards. ‘And one they don’t deserve. Attacking the Imperial Fists in the warp is a very special kind of suicide.’

‘Is it the Vorel?’ asked Halaestus. ‘Can they do this?’

‘Unlikely,’ said Lysander. ‘But they have hurried their extinction if it is.’

The whole ship shuddered. Lysander braced an arm against the cold steel of the wall. Crewmen were running in every direction, damage teams with fire extinguishers, engine-gang men running to supplement the engine crews who must have already sustained casualties as loose gear and coolant leaks made the block a lethal place. ‘Report!’ voxed Lysander.

‘The sensorium crew has a profile,’ came Langeloc’s voice. She sounded in pain. ‘There’s only a forty per cent...’

‘Who is it?’ demanded Lysander. Up ahead a crew member supported another, almost dragging her along the corridor, trailing blood as he headed for the sick bay.

‘It’s the *Carnage*,’ Langeloc replied.

If you were to ask a spaceship crewman what was the worst thing that could happen on a ship, his answer would be ‘fire’. Unless he was one of the old guard, the voidborn veterans, ancient by Naval standards, who had indeed seen just about everything that might happen on board a spaceship and heard tell of everything else. In that case, his answer would be ‘the warp’.

A human mind could not properly describe the dimension that surrounded the *Shield of Valour* as it hurtled through the warp. No human tongue could describe it. The Geller field around the *Shield* kept it intact from the insanity of that endless ocean, but when that field failed (as happened in countless sailors’ yarns) the warp took the ship, plunging its

crew into the sea of madness and warping the ship, its inhabitants and their souls into something different and awful.

The concept of attacking another ship in the warp was as impossible to comprehend as the warp itself. Time and space did not mean in the warp what they meant in reality – that was why the warp could be used for faster-than-light travel in the first place. But legends were passed between the old guard of the space lanes of opponents who would try just that, to dive from the warp's black maelstrom to maul their prey when they were most vulnerable.

As impossible as it was, as insane as anyone attempting it had to be, that was happening to the *Shield of Valour*.

The enemy was a tarnished, age-pitted shark, its long nose knife-like as it sliced through the thunderheads of the warp and broke through the Geller field envelope around the *Shield of Valour*. The enemy ship was longer than the *Shield* but narrower, a sleek, acute-angled predator. Its flanks were serrated with sloping banks of gun batteries. Dorsal vanes crackled with power, drawing in the surrounding warp energies to power the nova cannon slung beneath the ship's armoured prow.

The symbol carved into its flank, scored deep into the steel of its hull armour, was an open gauntlet. The heraldries of a hundred commanders covered the hull around it. Banners of segmented steel flowed from the sternwards batteries, etched with battle-honours in the languages of the warp.

The Imperium's older battleships had machine-spirits that remembered old foes. The *Shield of Valour* was one of them. It recognised that profile, the prow coolant vents like narrowed eyes, the triangular flare of its stern engines like the fins of an undersea predator. It was known as the *Carnage*, and the Imperial Fists fleet had a particular reason to hate it.

The rear-firing guns of the *Shield* opened up, spraying the prow of the *Carnage* with enough fire to shred a smaller ship. The *Carnage* rode the

fire, turning the denser armour on the side of its prow to absorb the worst of it. Explosions stripped off sheets of armour, throwing out a glittering cloud of debris. The enemy ship rolled onto its side, bringing the sternwards section of the *Shield* into the arc of its nova cannon.

The *Shield* responded, venting a great cloud of frozen gas from its coolant systems to lend strength to the thrusters that bucked its stern upwards, bringing the engines out of the firing arc.

The nova cannon fired. The dense yellow-white beam, as hot as the heart of a star, hit a glancing strike against the *Shield*'s stern. In the void it would have been silent, but in the warp the sound was a very human scream, a sound of anger and jubilation, as if the *Carnage* were crying out in ecstasy to see such destruction brought to bear.

The two ships were within close range now, within the kill-distance of their defensive guns. Prow-mounted gun batteries opened up on the *Carnage*, peppering the stern of the *Shield* with explosive rounds that ripped through the sections exposed by the glancing nova strike. Clouds of vapour and flame sprayed from the gashes, throwing out fountains of debris that burned brightly for split seconds in the void within the Geller field. The *Shield*'s turret-mounted guns replied, everything sternwards of the ship's midpoint blazing directly into the prow of the *Carnage*.

The *Carnage* did not care. She was built for murder up close.

The *Carnage* weathered the fire, angling for another shot. The nova cannon recharged, spilling waves of supercharged particles from the glowing aperture beneath the prow.

Every thruster on the *Shield* fired at once, tearing the ship around to bring herself out of the cannon's arc. Debris rained against her, secondary explosions rippling through her hull. The *Shield*'s armaments were broadside laser batteries and torpedo arrays, and with a single decent broadside volley she could knock her assailant spinning into the warp, lost

and out of control. It was her one chance, but thousands of years of naval doctrine said it would work.

The nova cannon charged. Another thirty seconds and the *Shield*'s broadside would be unleashed, and even the armoured hull of the *Carnage* would be blistered and torn by the thousands of impacts. Those thirty seconds never happened as the nova cannon fired again.

This shot was not glancing. It hit the *Shield* amidships, spitting her through on a bright lance of incandescent fire.

‘Brace for field collapse!’ came Langeloc’s voice through the din of the impact. ‘We’re coming out of the warp! All hands brace!’

Lysander had felt the nova cannon hit home and he had heard the sound, like an impossibly loud tearing of paper, of the energy beam shredding the steel of the *Shield*'s internal structure. He knew war, space war included, and a hundred battles of instinct told him the damage was massive and catastrophic. It was a crippling shot, spearing the *Shield* right through and catching Throne knew what critical systems in its path.

‘We are brought low!’ yelled Lysander as warning klaxons blared from every direction. ‘But when our guns are called upon, we shall rise!’

‘What senseless animal hunts us down?’ snarled Brother Skelpis, dropping to a knee and grabbing on to a wheel lock to steady himself. ‘Do they not know what we are?’

‘When do we board them?’ said Brother Drevyn.

Lysander had chosen his command squad because of their mix of aggression and discipline, the epitome of the Imperial Fists way of war. He also felt the urge to jump into the nearest saviour pod or shuttle and storm the enemy ship, and it took an effort to resist it. ‘Hold, brother,’ he said instead. ‘Man our post and do our duty. When the time for vengeance comes we will be the first in, that I swear.’

‘We shall hold you to that, captain,’ said Drevyn. ‘If it is as Langeloc says, if it is the *Carnage*...’

The *Shield of Valour* changed as it shifted out of the warp and into real space, violently ejected by the helm crew before its fields completely collapsed. The colours became duller, the light less bright, even the chill of the refrigerated air less biting, as if the senses were covered by a frosted layer that removed the mind a single layer from its surroundings.

Lysander's stomachs jumped with the lurch from one reality to another.

'We're out,' gasped Halaestus. 'Now we can fight.'

'Helm report boarding torpedoes in the void!' came Langeloc's voice.

'Boarding imminent! All crews armed and make ready to repel boarders!'

Spaceship crews dreaded boarding actions. There were few military actions that were more brutal, more unforgivingly random in the death they dealt. A Space Marine, however, was made for them – in once sense literally, for ship-to-ship combat was one of the roles the Emperor himself had in mind when he created the first generations of Space Marines for the Great Crusade. Drevyn whooped as Lysander led the way sternwards, through clouds of vented coolant vapour and gaggles of crewmen rushing to arms lockers and medical posts.

If the enemy were indeed aboard the *Carnage*, and it was their intention to board, the Imperial Fists had a far better fight on their hands than the Vorel would ever give them.

The *Shield of Valour* was battered and bloodied, but she was not dead yet. She was made of old stuff, structures and systems laid down in the millennia directly following the Horus Heresy, when the most powerful secrets of ship design had yet to be lost to time and ignorance. Her broadside guns, though off-centre of their target, blasted a fearsome volley into the forward sections of the *Carnage*, stripping away more hull armour and exposing silvery wounds underneath, where the spaces between hull layers were exposed. Raw, like bones with the skin stripped away, they bled vented atmosphere and torrents of wreckage like bright drops of chrome blood. This time the backdrop was real space, the bleak sanity of the vacuum and its speckling of stars.

The nova cannon on the *Carnage* was charging again. The *Shield of Valour* continued its painful slow pirouette out of its killing arc, but the *Carnage* was executing a feint. Its main weapon, the one with which it sought to bring the *Shield* to heel, was not a gun or a torpedo tube at all. It lay deep inside the spaceship, in the minds of the thousands of souls who made up its crew.

As one, a sacrifice was torn from their minds. Their memories, their loves and hates, the countless layers of their personalities, pledged to the dark gods of the *Carnage*'s masters. Five thousand cultists crewed the *Carnage*, with five thousand stories of sorrow, desperation and the promise of salvation. They had given everything they had to the gods to whom they had turned in their bleakest moments and pledged everything that was left, but none of them had truly understood what that meant. The sacrifice of their minds was guzzled up by the powers of the warp, syphoned through the ship's archeotech according to pledges drawn up with countless petty gods of the warp.

In return, the warp reached through into real space. It could only do so by burning away the greater part of the spiritual energy drained from the crew of the *Carnage*, but that was the deal.

The space around the stern of the *Shield* bent and warped, forming a lens through which distant stars grew into wide smudges of cold light. Trails of debris were looped around and sucked back into the whirlpool sinking through spacetime behind the *Shield*. Glistening, slithering shapes writhed in the heart of the anomaly as the shape of the *Shield* itself lengthened and warped, a deeper darkness than the void spreading out to stain this patch of reality.

The ship twisted violently and Lysander was thrown against the wall. A crewman fell past, the corridor he was heading for suddenly wrenched into a vertical shaft. He heard the man's body breaking as he fell. Then the gravity shifted again and was gone completely, Lysander spiralling away

without any force to hold him down. He grabbed the frame of a doorway as he drifted past.

‘Keep going!’ ordered Lysander. Brother Drevyn clambered up out of one of the side corridors that had suddenly become vertical. The rest of the squad were behind Lysander, propelling themselves along in the zero gravity with whatever handholds they could find. The freezing mist intensified and visibility was almost gone, Lysander still navigating sternwards by instinct.

He came up against a bulkhead door, large enough for two men abreast and solid enough to contain an explosion. It was set into the wall of the engine block, part of the reinforced cell separating the ship’s engines from the rest of the vessel. In times of crisis the engines and their crews were expendable, the requirement to contain leaks and fires from the reactors more important than the lives of those inside. It was the lot of the engine-gangs to be forsaken when the ship was in peril, and once the call went out for damage control stations they were on their own.

Lysander put a hand against the door. It bowed and rippled under his touch, the steel becoming pliable. From beyond it came a groaning and crashing, the sound of metal and equipment torn free.

‘We’re too late,’ voxed Lysander. ‘The engines are lost.’

‘Saviour pods online,’ replied the ship’s captain. ‘Abandon ship, Captain Lysander. There is nothing more for you to do on board.’

‘Emperor be with you,’ said Lysander, but Commander Langeloc’s reply was lost in the static and din.

It had happened so quickly. The Imperial Fists were ready to repel boarders, Lysander preparing to face anyone who tried to force their way into the engine blocks to destroy the reactors. Then, in an apparent heartbeat, the whole engine section had gone dark and the battle had transformed into something very different.

‘Brothers,’ said Lysander to the men of his squad. ‘The *Shield of Valour* is lost. Our duty is to get to the saviour pods and survive. Stay together

and do not pause for anything.’

The bulkhead wall behind Lysander bowed away from him, and the sounds of destruction were replaced with the dense, ripping noise of reality itself tearing open. The bulkhead disappeared, the whole stern of the ship collapsing away from Lysander, plunging into an endless dark shaft lit by billows of plasma flame from the ruptured generators. The substance of the engine room, its turbines, generators, its crew of engine-gangs and tech-seers, were twisting and churning into a single twisted shaft falling into the warp like a great waterspout of liquid steel.

Lysander grabbed a shard of the deck that peeled up beside him. Brother Skelpis fell past and Lysander grabbed him by the wrist. Skelpis’s feet kicked out over the shaft as the flame billowed brighter, great plumes of vented plasma burning as hot as the surface of a star. In its harsh white light, crewmen were ground into red slivers and the shape of the enormous engine turbines were lost as grinding masses of deformed metal roared past.

‘This is our stand, brothers!’ cried Lysander. ‘We did not ask for it to come like this, but it has, and as Dorn at Terra we will face it like Imperial Fists!’

The maelstrom was reforming by the second, islands of turbines melting down into the churning mass, new forms reaching up in liquid spires, winding into new shapes in the chaos.

Gravity was shifting again, this time to match the structure appearing where the engines and reactors had once been. The ocean of steel became a level floor, inlaid with swirling glass mosaics echoing the nebulae of the void in a riot of colour. A section of the floor sunk down, a pit ringed with stairways, and gold spiralled across the surfaces. From the gold rose the bodies of misshapen things, clothed obscenely in finery and jewels.

Daemons. Lysander’s soul recoiled. Men had gone mad just imagining that such things could exist, and where they found an unprepared mind

daemons could turn a servant of the Emperor into a craven dedicated to the warp's Dark Gods. They came in infinite forms – these were crouched and lolling, slack jaws hanging to the gilded tiles of their pit. Every one carried a musical instrument – a harp, a horn, a drum – and as one they struck up a terrible atonal sound that rose and fell like a heavy sea. Lysander's stomachs knotted at the sensation hammering into him.

The scene was still transforming. The ballroom floor spread out around the daemons' orchestra pit, walls soaring up alongside it, curving silvered columns meeting overhead to describe a great dome open to the endlessness of the warp. Meteors shot past, trailing burning clouds of souls lost in the warp and condemned to hurtle through its reaches forever. Incandescent clouds boiled out of nothingness and hardened into bright diamonds of young stars, bursting into dark red flame as they were forged, grew old and died in seconds as if to flaunt the plasticity of time in the warp.

Daemon-giants were forged into the walls, enormous barrel chests and massive crushing hands restrained by the layers of gold and marble that held them. Their jaws gnashed and fingers clenched as they fought to escape, but they were part of the entertainment here, mighty lords of Chaos enslaved and turned into mere decorations for this monument to the warp's opulence.

The song roared up a tone and Lysander dropped to one knee, the sound a wall of mental noise trying to shut him down. A man would have broken down and curled up on the floor – or, worse, danced to their tune, writhing and spasming until his body came apart with the fury of it. Lysander glanced at Brother Skelpis lying on the floor beside him – Skelpis's jaw was clenched and blood ran from his nose and ears. His eyes were bloodshot, the strain of staying conscious and sane rupturing his body.

These Imperial Fists would follow him. They were his squad, men chosen because they would not falter even in the face of the foulest

provocation. Lysander planted a foot, cracking the glass tile beneath it, and forced himself up to his feet. He was bowed and shaking, but he was upright. He would not kneel to this, no matter what might face him.

A fountain of marble and glass spiralled up from the floor before the orchestra pit, and from it flowed a torrent of molten gold. Trapped souls writhed through it, their faces distorted with pain as they flowed from one bowl to the next, their crying out mingling with the music in terrible harmonies. The gold spilled over the last bowl and crystallised into scuttling things like golden crabs that glinted as they scurried, a host of tiny daemons underfoot.

The madness of it would have been enough. This was not a place in reality but of the warp, conjured from the mind of some madman who had given his imagination over to the powers of Chaos. It was one heretic's tribute to the warp, where the rantings of a diseased mind might become reality. But that was not the only danger that would face Lysander and his squad. It was not an accident that the *Shield of Valour* had fallen to this fate. The warp had been waiting for her, and for the Imperial Fists.

Grand doors congealed from the blazing finery of the walls. They burst open and from the glaring light behind them emerged a host of shapes, ugly where the ballroom had its terrible beauty, brutal where it had grace in its madness. Even in silhouette Lysander recognised a make of power armour such as had not emerged from a Mechanicus forge for thousands of years, since the days of the Heresy ten thousand years before.

Lysander knew his duty. He raised his bolter and loosed off a round. In the assault on his senses his aim was off, and the shot blew a shard of gold from the wall behind the lead figure. Lysander held down the firing stud and half the bolter's magazine thundered off.

Space folded, and the leader of the newcomers was suddenly shifted out of the firing line and right in front of Lysander, an arm's length away. Lysander knew before his eyes focused on him what he would see.

There was an awful inevitability about that dark gunmetal armour, similar in form to the Imperial Fists own power armour but of a more ancient and baroque make with exposed cabling and bulky reinforcement panels. He had known, perhaps even before the figure had entered, that he would see the yellow and black warning stripes at the joints and on the knuckles of the wearer's enormous clawed power fist. Lysander knew the story of the markings – they were added by the first tech-priests to test the armour. They had been kept by the wearers to remind all onlookers that this was gear for war, not show, brutal and functional like the men inside.

‘Iron Warrior,’ spat Lysander.

The Iron Warrior knocked Lysander's gun hand aside. The brothers behind him jumped up to fight, for they knew their duties too. An Iron Warrior had to die. Lysander had been chosen for the diplomatic mission because he was able to compromise his hatred, if those were his orders, but this was one hatred that could never be permitted to die down. Dorn himself had decreed the Iron Warriors to be blood foes of the Imperial Fists, and every time the Chapter had crossed paths with them that decree had been proven correct.

The *Carnage* was part of the Iron Warriors fleet in which they had fled justice after the Horus Heresy. It was as much an enemy as any Iron Warrior, and the Imperial Fists had sworn to destroy its like as well as the Iron Warriors themselves. But when the time had come, when Lysander had been put face to face with that ancient machine, the *Carnage* had won.

Brother Skelpis jumped to his feet. Before his bolter muzzle was up, another Iron Warrior lashed out with a chainblade and sawed through Skelpis's leg just below the knee. Skelpis toppled to the side, armour clattering, the glass mosaic floor cracking.

Everything was unfolding in slow motion. Lysander counted a whole combat squad of Iron Warriors, ten Traitor Marines, the remaining eight of them turning their guns towards Brother Drevyn. Drevyn did his duty by

charging the Iron Warriors, drawing his own chainblade as he went, and was caught by a volley of fire that cut him clean in half at the waist and tore what remained into flailing shreds of armour and flesh.

‘Hold!’ yelled the leader of the Iron Warriors. ‘Thul will have them alive! Hold your fire!’

‘Better a corpse than in chains,’ said Lysander.

‘You will know what it means to be both,’ said the Iron Warrior, aiming a backhand at the side of Lysander’s head. Lysander’s mind was still ringing from the assault on his senses, still recoiling from the impossibility of the place that had coalesced in front of him, and his reflexes were slow as a drunkard’s. He brought up a hand to defend himself but he was much too late and the blow slammed into him. Everything was black for a moment and when it returned as before, Lysander was sprawled full length on the ballroom floor.

The Iron Warrior planted a foot on the backpack of Lysander’s armour, pinning him down to the floor. Another Iron Warrior, the one who had mutilated Brother Skelpis, kicked Lysander’s bolter and hammer away. Lysander hadn’t even been able to raise it in anger, such was the effect of this daemon-born place.

The other Iron Warriors were among the surviving Imperial Fists, disarming and knocking them to the ground. Skelpis fought on and an Iron Warrior stamped on the back of his head until he stopped moving. Another Iron Warrior wrestled Brother Halaestus and threw him to the ground, down in the pool of blood and gore leaching from Brother Drevyn’s remains. Brother Vonkaal was shot through the thigh and fell.

‘You killed one of ours,’ said Lysander. ‘We remember our fallen. Though it take ten thousand years, we avenge every one.’

‘Kraegon Thul will give you plenty more to avenge, whelp of Terra,’ replied the lead Iron Warrior.

‘You face the First Company,’ said Lysander. ‘We will scour you from this ship. You can never stand before us in battle.’

‘I’m not here to fight the First Company,’ replied the Iron Warrior. ‘I’m here to take you alive.’ He spread out his arms as if proudly showing off the insanity that surrounded him. ‘The Dancing-Place of the Lesser Gods,’ he said. ‘More ostentatious than my Legion is used to, but a place that will come at our beckoning and deliver us to our enemies. It disappoints me that you were so addled, Imperial Fist. I would have fought you champion to champion. Perhaps that will be the means of your execution when we are done with you, but that will not be for a while yet.’ The Iron Warriors leader turned to one of his squadmates. ‘Khaol! Inform the fortress that we are done here. Our haul is one captain, three battle-brothers and a corpse, all Imperial Fists. Have them make ready for our return.’

The Iron Warrior saluted and began relaying the order through a field vox, an archaic device of tubes and valves. The daemons in the orchestra pit changed their tune, the music now rising and falling like the waves of a stormy sea, the highs piercing and painful, the lows a bass rumble that made the whole cathedral blur as it shook.

The dome overhead peeled open. Darkness bled in. The gold turned to mottled brass, lit as if by a fire from far above. The orchestra pit was a shaft of blackness, the daemons cavorting through it as if they were breaking the surface of an inky ocean. Through the darkness overhead could be glimpsed a scattering of stars and among them one grew closer, a bloated red star near the end of its life, scattered with black sunspots and bursting out flares of red flame. Around it was a system of worlds, shattered and grey, any life on them long since drunk dry by the anger of their sun. But one world was different. Discoloured and foul, it had survived not because of some celestial accident but through a force of malevolence. So beloved was it of the warp’s gods that their favour sustained it and it could not die.

Impossible detail reached Lysander's eye, time and distance meaningless through the lens of the warp. He could see the shattered continents, splintered like broken glass, slowly swallowed by oceans of decaying gore. Gashes in the crust laid the mantle open, seething and bubbling with heat. Endless rotting badlands rolled around half the world, broken by mountains of bone.

And he saw the fortress. A great black steel jaw breaching the border between the broken continent and the lands of rot, its teeth enormous towers and its jawbone a rampart of gnashing spiked rollers. The semicircle bounded by the fortress wall was studded with a thousand fires, each one manned by a thousand labourers. Black and yellow banners hung from the battlements and the watch was held by more Iron Warriors, each one a nightmare of archaic pitted steel.

In violation of time and space, the structure of the Dancing-Place of the Lesser Gods melted and reformed into a bridge span linking its pocket of the warp with the fortress. Light years were compressed and warped as the Iron Warriors clamped a set of chains around Lysander's wrists and ankles, and dragged him behind them onto the bridge. It was of tarnished gold and rust, worn by thousands of years' worth of marching feet. The fortress loomed closer and Lysander could make out the filthy ragged vultures that roosted in its spires and fed on the labourers who collapsed at the forges. In the forge fields below, enormous segments of armour and gun barrel were hauled out of the fires by hundreds-strong mutant gangs. Daemons shambled among them – loping monsters of the Blood God with red skin and slavering fangs, writhing flesh-knots, drooling sacks of pestilence, shadowy things that slithered into the bodies of the dead and walked among the living, eye sockets burning with purple fire.

The Iron Warriors, it was said, called no single Chaos God their patron, and instead were pledged to them all. Lysander's fevered perception made out the hallmarks of many gods, from the bloodstained spiked rollers

grinding away beneath the battlements to the ecstatic agony of the mutant labourers driven to dance in the flames. He could smell the fires and the cooking flesh, he could hear iron against iron and the ringing of the forge hammers. The lens of the warp magnified it all, filling his head so full of appalling sensation that there was no room left for sane thought.

‘Look up, Imperial Fists!’ said the Iron Warriors leader, and in spite of himself Lysander did so.

Above him was the orbital space of this world, choked with vast reefs of gnarled coral. Spaceship hulks hung there trapped, the coral grown over them so only the odd stern or sensor mast broke through the encrustations. The awful distortion, which brought the fortress beneath into such detail, rendered the whole orbit of the planet visible, the view arcing between horizons so maddeningly that Lysander feared the sight of it would throw him unconscious.

He saw the *Shield of Valour*. It had been brought along the bridge behind them and deposited in the upper reaches of the coral maze. Fire bled weakly from the nova cannon wound in its side and its engines were gone, distorted and torn off by the reality-warping weapon deployed by the *Carnage*. Lysander did not know how the *Carnage* had inflicted such destruction, but he feared to imagine the magnitude of the blasphemy brought to bear to make such a thing happen.

Through the reef loomed three great dark halos of battered steel, crunching through clouds of shattered coral. Lysander recognised ancient marks of space stations from illuminated histories of the Heresy, bristling with ancient guns and bedecked with the heraldry of the Iron Warriors. Three star fortresses circling the crippled *Shield of Valour* like scavengers on the wing.

In silence, a rain of white fire streamed from the three space stations. In spite of all his training and discipline Lysander found his thoughts turned to a desperate prayer, begging fate to turn the fire aside from the *Shield*.

He all but cried out aloud for mercy as the bolts of fire hit the *Shield of Valour*.

The three Iron Warriors star forts poured their flame as one into the Imperial Fists strike cruiser. Secondary explosions rippled along the sides of the ship, billowing out huge sections of the hull plating. The image loomed closer, brought right into Lysander's face by the warp-distortion, a willing presentation of the ship's death.

He could see the ship's entrails laid open, the warren of corridors and hallways deep into its heart. Bodies tumbled everywhere.

The First Company spilled from the ship. They struggled to find handholds to steady themselves and keep from falling into the void. They had donned their helmets, and their power armour was proof against the void, but that was the only advantage they had over the unprotected crewmen. The Imperial Fists of the First Company were fighting on because they were Space Marines, but there was nothing they could do – the *Shield of Valour* was dead, dying behind them, and the star forts were pouring waves of fire into it with impunity.

Space Marines were supposed to die in battle, the bodies of their enemies crushed beneath their feet. They were not supposed to struggle through the warp, crushed by spinning debris or frozen in the void. Not like this, hammered to dust by an enemy leering from behind the pict-screen of a space station's gun battery.

Then something within the *Shield of Valour* went critical, an ammunition store or a remaining plasma reactor pushed past its tolerances by the barrage of fire. A white blossom bloomed in the centre of the ship, expanding outwards in a shimmering sphere. It threw off flares like a miniature sun, flinging arcs of blue-white flame that sliced through what remained of the ship's structure.

Almost a hundred Imperial Fists, irreplaceable veterans. The crew and the ship were a grave enough loss, but the First Company of the Imperial

Fists were among the best soldiers humanity had. And as quickly as it took for the explosion to reach from the heart of the ship to the tip of its bow, they were gone, extinguished, ash.

Lysander's head was wrenched back down. He got a glimpse of the other captive Imperial Fists being dragged along – they had seen it, too. They knew the enormity of that crime.

They knew what the Iron Warriors had given them to avenge.

The bridge through the warp bowed and shifted, the malformed planet ahead rushing closer. The Iron Warriors leader hauled Lysander another few steps and suddenly they were on the battlements, the Iron Warriors sentries saluting their officer as he passed. Lysander was dragged through armouries of bolters and archaic halberds, past shrines to obscure gods heaped with rotting offerings of severed heads and animal bones, beneath statues of beings so foul Lysander's eyes refused to focus on them.

This was a place built to withstand a siege. The stairways were too narrow for more than one Space Marine abreast, the doorways had gun ports and the floorboards could be pulled up to reveal a grid through which spears could be thrust into attackers on the floor below. No Imperial Fist was blind to such things, for Rogal Dorn had been a master of siegecraft and the brothers who called him their primarch all learned how a fortress could kill anyone trying to force their way in. While Dorn was a builder of fortresses, the Iron Warriors primarch, Perturabo, had been a besieger, to whom the mightiest fortification was just a puzzle to be unlocked. This fortress was a product of siegecraft at the same level as Dorn's own, a vast and brutal deathtrap.

The Imperial Fists were dragged down through the layers of the fortress. Lysander glimpsed Brother Skelpis, his face pale and bloody, trailing the gory stump of his leg, each arm held by an Iron Warrior dragging him along. He saw Brother Halaestus spattered with Drevyn's blood, struggling against the Iron Warriors holding him, and Lysander knew Halaestus

would tear himself apart rather than submit willingly to his Chapter's enemies.

Beneath the fortress, beneath the walls and the forges they encompassed, was another structure entirely, the seat of the Iron Warriors on this world protected by the fortifications above. It was shadowy and infernally hot, what light there was coming from yet more forges fed, it seemed, by the heart of the planet itself. Great shapes loomed in the vast underground hangars, half seen in the darkness, some still glowing from the heat of their forging, others moving like giants stretching their limbs after waking.

At the very heart of it was a crucible, a great spherical chamber half filled with molten fire bubbling up from beneath the planet's crust, hot enough to scorch the lungs of an unaugmented man. It was accessed through a huge gate of iron, its two halves meeting at an enormous lock. A circular platform suspended over the fire held up a great anvil and from the domed ceiling hung countless weapons and segments of armour.

Lysander's senses had come back to him a little. His head still whirled but he could tell, even from here, that the pieces suspended over this great forge were masterpieces. They were sized for Space Marines, and among them were sections of rebuilt armour from marks long lost to the Imperium, power weapons matching size with balance, pieces inlaid with precious stones and metals as well as brutal machines created for industrialised killing.

'Lord Thul!' cried the Iron Warriors leader, removing his helmet. Beneath was revealed a pale and pocked face with jet-black eyes and a cruel twist of a mouth. Black hair clung to the scalp. 'We have returned! The scryers told the truth. We found the dogs of Terra, and praise the pantheon, they are destroyed! And more than that. For the continuation of our Legion, we bring these ones to you alive!'

Over the anvil stood a figure taller than any Space Marine. It was encased in armour so gnarled and jagged it looked like it had accrued over thousands of years rather than being forged by any hand. Beneath it somewhere was an ancient mark of armour, but Lysander could not recognise it from any of the illustrations he recalled depicting the days of the Horus Heresy. The shoulder guards were masses of grinding cogs and pistons and its weight was supported by pneumatic rams that hissed as the figure turned towards the crucible entrance.

‘Your return was well omened, Captain Hexal,’ said the creature that had been called Thul. Its voice was thick and deep, welling up from inside the armour like the crucible’s fires welled up below. Its face was a mass of corroded steel with two large clouded lenses for eyes. A single air hose ran down the centre of the face and spurts of greasy smoke surrounded Thul in a filthy halo. ‘And you.’ The lenses turned to Lysander. ‘Would that I could make you understand why you are here. That you could see through our eyes, we who were abandoned by the same Terra you swear by. But I can see by your face, by the hate in it, that no words of mine can ever sway you. I can see that honour is not for you as it is for us.’

‘Do not speak of honour,’ spat Lysander.

‘As I said,’ replied Thul. ‘Hexal, this one’s weapon.’

Hexal motioned forward one of the Iron Warriors, who handed Lysander’s hammer to Thul. ‘This is the Fist of Dorn,’ said Thul weighing the weapon in his hands, feeling its weight. ‘A relic from the age of the primarchs, no less. Then you are Captain Darnath Lysander of the First Company. A man much feted by the lords of his Chapter. A future Chapter Master, some say. How distant that fate looks now. You and this hammer have much in common, captain. They are both in my possession, and they will both serve in my armouries one way or another. Hexal, you have brought a corpse with you, I see?’

‘But one,’ said Hexal. ‘I knew we would value prisoners over the dead.’ Lysander knew they were referring to Brother Drevyn and the mention of his battle-brother on their lips made his skin crawl.

‘Good. Bring it to the observatory. Isolate the others. Bring the captain to the sanatorium. He is the greatest risk. Best he is processed immediately.’

Hexal’s Iron Warriors hauled Lysander off his feet again.

‘I will see you at Dorn’s side!’ cried out Brother Skelpis. ‘At the end of time! At the final battle! I will see you there, my brothers! My captain! At Dorn’s side!’

‘Still they understand so little,’ said Thul. ‘They think they are to die.’

The great doors of the crucible were hauled shut behind Lysander as he was dragged off into the depths of the fortress.

Lysander’s senses had returned to him by the time he was wheeled into the sanatorium’s anatomy theatre. He had been stripped of his armour and chained to an operating slab, which had been pushed into the observatory by a gaggle of hooded, hunchbacked creatures that stank of corrosive chemicals and machine oil. Their faces, half-glimpsed, were of grainy grey skin wrapped around elongated snouts, like animal skulls inexpertly covered in spare flesh. Their fingers ended in hypodermic needles and medical saws.

Lysander was looking up at a glazed blister rising above him, the glass dome clouded as if by cataracts. Half-glimpsed shapes were assembled in audience beyond him like students awaiting an anatomy lecture. Perhaps, Lysander thought, that was exactly what they were.

Lysander fought against his restraints. He knew they would not give, but the principle of it forced him to move. A Space Marine was a prideful creature, Lysander could not deny that, and his pride was inflamed. He had been unarmed, unmanned, his armour stripped away. Mutant hands had clawed at him as they pulled the armour’s segments away. The uncleanness

clung to him, and the eyes looking at him beyond the glass were unclean, too, as if whatever they saw became defiled.

He could see cracked tiles, stained and filthy, hung with cabinets of deformed bones and shelves of rusted medical implements. The hunched creatures shuffled around him.

The audience were not Iron Warriors, or at least Lysander could see none of them among the indistinct shapes. Lanky, huge-eyed things watched there, long grey fingers touching the glass. Mutants, or aliens, perhaps. Unholy things, gathered to learn at the feet of the Iron Warriors.

Lysander was aware of a door opening somewhere behind his head. An elongated shadow fell over him. A greyish figure hovered indistinctly above him. Its eyes were large and without whites, watery black lenses set into grey skin. Its nose was a vertical slit and its mouth without lips, and its head was framed by a frond of tattered tendrils that looked like they were rotting in place. Discolouration ran down its skin, weeping from sores and pits in its flesh. A hand reached over Lysander, with three very long fingers.

‘The subject is human and yet not human,’ someone said. It was not the alien surgeon, Lysander thought. The voice was level and soulless, as if sleep-taught to someone who was not a native speaker. He thought it was coming from somewhere in the gallery.

‘Witness the external signs,’ continued the voice. ‘The surgical scars around the ribcage and abdomen. These are indicative of a systematic series of operations performed in strict sequence. Note the subcutaneous panels concealing the topography of the ribs. The Black Carapace, the final implant of the Space Marine, both armour plating for the central organ tree and a seat for the interfaces that connect the nerve-fibre bundles of the power armour to the subject’s own nervous system.’

Lysander could make out the speaker, he thought. It wore elaborate armour, scalloped and bladed, its silhouette distinct among the shapes in

the audience gallery. Its shoulder guards rose like the horns of a half-moon around its plumed helmet and its shape was obscured by the cloak that hung from one shoulder. A clawed gauntlet gestured as the speaker continued. 'The Black Carapace lies outermost of the enhancements of a Space Marine, and is the final to be added. Thus the means of his creation can be observed by paring away the layers, as with an ancient ruin where the passing of the ages can be seen the deeper one digs.'

Lysander did not care about the pain. He had suffered pain before. A Space Marine learned to set it aside, to recognise it as a signal from the body that could be interpreted and understood like anything else. It was the humiliation that dug deep, the knowledge that he would be a curiosity for these creatures, as if he were an animal dissected by some student in the schola progenium.

That was not how a Space Marine should die. Not just unarmed, not just helpless, but being used as an aid to the enemy. Whatever these allies of the Iron Warriors were, they would learn a little more about their enemy in the Space Marines of the Imperium, and they would learn it from Captain Darnath Lysander.

Lysander could not have ceased fighting his restraints if he had wanted to. His teeth gritted and the muscles of his neck and torso stood out like coils of rope as he tried to bend his back, fold the operating slab in two underneath him, spring up and tear this place apart.

'Note the muscular development,' the speaker continued. 'The result of the operation of the progenoid organ, the gene-seed, which we shall see in good time.'

The gene-seed organ, the organ cultured from the flesh of Rogal Dorn himself, implanted in Lysander's throat, that sacred flesh which made a Space Marine more than a man. Lysander's bile rose to think the alien even knew of it. For one of them to hold it in his hands would be a blasphemy, the desecration of a relic, the despoiling of holy ground. But

worse than that – if Lysander’s gene-seed was not harvested and returned to the Chapter on his death, it would not be implanted into an initiate to take his place. That speck of light, that part of the primarch, would be snuffed out forever, and the galaxy would be a little darker.

If it was in his power, he would not let them. He would fight them to the end. Even if he merely blunted their needles or forced their blades to slip, if his every effort was nothing more than an inconvenience to them as they cut him apart, he would fight. It was his duty, and he would not die with his duty undone.

A surgical saw whined and its circular blade descended over him, towards the scar that bisected his chest. Lysander’s joints cracked as he strained against the shackles holding him, and the audience leaned closer to watch as the first blood flowed.



3

‘Upon landing, I instituted a strict moral quarantine over my acolytes lest this world have a baleful influence on them. In the days to come I would regret permitting some of them to join the landing party at all, for Malodrax erodes the principles of the mind as the shrieking gales erode its rocks.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

Lysander’s skin crawled as the smell of Malodrax hit him. Rust and smoke, and dried blood, heavy and metallic. It was a taste in his mouth, and he knew he would not get rid of it until he left this place again. Perhaps even then it would stay, the taste of metal and blood always on his tongue.

He jumped down from the shuttle’s embarkation ramp onto the parched, cracked earth. Waves of heat washed off it from the shuttle’s landing jets. First Sergeant Kaderic’s squad jumped down around him, bolters scanning in every direction.

The sky was the colour of copper. The clouds were a dark murky green. The earth was red-brown, dry and cracked, broken up into ridges and valleys from one horizon to the other. In the distance were shapes something like buildings, but lopsided and decrepit. Flocks of airborne predators wheeled in the distance.

And it stank. It stank like old blood. Lysander lifted the faceplate of his helmet and spat on the ground, like a ritual.

‘Secure, by sections!’ ordered Kaderic. The strike force had trained for the landing on the shuttle decks of the *Breaker*, and each Space Marine had his section of the perimeter to scan and secure. In seconds it was done, and within half a minute the shuttle doors were being hauled shut behind the strike force. Thirty-four Space Marines – Squads Kaderic and Gorvetz, and Chaplain Lycaon’s command squad, plus Brother Halaestus, Lysander, and Techmarine Kho and the Imperial Fist who served as Kho’s pilot. A pair of Land Speeders, rapid scouting skimmers under Kho’s command, had been dropped off by the gunships that accompanied the two personnel shuttles. The gunships had low enough orbital signatures that the chances were, no one on Malodrax was aware the strike force had landed.

The gunships, compact and sturdy Stormtalons, had fuel requirements too costly to guarantee they could function for long on Malodrax. The Imperial Fists had no friendly supply lines to count on and Lysander’s information on the planet suggested there was no abundance of fuel sources to capture. The gunships would be easy to spot, too, larger and less nimble than the Land Speeders that could cling to the terrain. The Stormtalons took off back for their berths in orbit – the strike force would have to walk.

Lysander spotted Halaestus. He was at his part of the perimeter, and looked back from his bolter sights once satisfied that his angle was clear. There was nothing that could be said, not with what had happened the last time Lysander and Halaestus had been on this world, not with Brother

Skelpis not being there. Halaestus glanced at Lysander, but said nothing either.

‘Good choice, Lysander,’ said Chaplain Lycaon, looking around the valley. ‘Defensible and sheltered. When the gunships clear we will leave no silhouettes.’

‘We cannot stay long,’ said Lysander.

‘Indeed not. We move out once the Land Speeders are on the move.’

‘Keep a watch on the skies,’ said Lysander. ‘Most of the predators are just animals, but the powers of Malodrax have airborne spies. Daemons.’

‘Kho’s guns will keep us hidden,’ said Lycaon. ‘How keen is your sense of direction, now you are down here?’

‘We head north-west,’ said Lysander. ‘Two days’ fast march. The ground levels out closer to the fortress but we should still be hidden well enough. We may have to leave the Land Speeders once we get closer.’

‘The sergeants have misgivings about your plan once we get there.’

Lysander did not rise to the comment. Lycaon was testing him. That was why he led this strike force – for Lysander was the captain, the position was still honorary in practice. Lycaon was in charge down here. ‘There is no other way,’ said Lysander. ‘Either we take this path, or we leave Malodrax alone and our brothers unavenged.’

‘Then our duty is clear,’ said Lycaon. He spoke into the strike force’s vox-net. ‘Brothers! Brother Kho has the point, he will range ahead with our Land Speeders. The rest, keep good pace and keep our profile to a minimum. This world has eyes everywhere. Move out!’

The strike force came across the first war machine within the half-hour. They made good time even over the broken earth and through narrow crevasses, with Techmarine Kho always just around the next bend. The drone of the Land Speeders’ engines mingled with the thin whistling of the wind that hissed across the shattered landscape.

Lysander rounded the rock forming the next bend to see the Land Speeders hovering, the mounted guns trained on the hulk of rusting metal that towered just ahead.

Each Land Speeder was a large enough vehicle to carry a crew of two Space Marines and an array of weaponry, with a nose-mounted assault cannon as well as the mounted guns, but each looked like an insect next to the enormous bulk of the structure in front of them. It resembled a siege tower, its sides clad in bands of rusting iron and hung with the threadbare remains of war banners. The desiccated remains of countless corpses were hung around the tower's battlements like a shrivelled necklace, and many more had fallen into a drift of skin and bones around the enormous spiked wheels at the tower's base. The tower leaned heavily to one side where it had apparently toppled into the valley, and its ramp hung open like a jaw studded with spikes resembling needle teeth.

A flock of airborne predators, something like winged lizards, shrieked as they flew from rusted holes near the top of the tower, alarmed by the approaching drone of the Land Speeders. They hacked and spat as they dissolved off towards the horizon, spiralling around the guns mounted on the top of the tower.

'Do we go around, Chaplain?' voxed Techmarine Kho. He was sat in the gunner's seat of one of the Land Speeders, the articulated manipulator arms mounted on his backpack visible outside the lines of the cockpit.

'We go through,' replied Lycaon. 'Watch our backs, Techmarine.'

The strike force approached the many openings around the base of the tower. It had sunk into the earth so there was no way under, but the partial collapse of the structure had forced open great rents in the steel, exposing the metal beams and darkness within.

'What do you know, Lysander?' voxed Lycaon.

'These are proving grounds,' replied Lysander. 'The Iron Warriors make war machines. They pit them against one another across these lands, and

those that survive are sent to join Black Crusades across the galaxy. This machine did not survive.'

'These are plasma blastguns,' voxed Kho from his Land Speeder, which was ascending the slope up near the guns that crowned the siege tower.

'Would that I could get a better look at the induction coils.'

'We have not the time,' said Lycaon.

'Of course, Chaplain,' voxed the Techmarine.

Inside the tower was foul-smelling and dark. The floor was spongy underfoot and Lysander looked down to see it caked with dried remains, whether human or not he could not tell – a crust of parchment skin, stringy muscle fibre and brittle bones that crunched as the strike force's squads moved through the gloom. The walls were plastered with it and twisted limbs hung from the low ceilings like stalactites.

'What manner of obscenity is this?' voxed Devastator-Sergeant Gorvetz.

'Witchcraft,' said First Sergeant Kaderic.

Lysander moved through the lower floor of the tower alongside Squad Kaderic. His augmented eyes could see through the dark but even so the place seemed fuzzy and indistinct, as if his mind did not want to acknowledge the sheer number of bodies needed to create the carnage in which the siege tower was steeped. He saw a fully-formed body in the centre of one wall, spread-eagled, the chest and abdomen pared open. He saw distorted faces and familiar bones – pelvises, vertebrae, femurs.

Lysander caught movement from the corner of his eye. A Space Marine's peripheral vision was excellent but he couldn't give the shape form as it flitted out of view. Lysander's bolter was in his hand without him having to will it.

'The multiplicity of hearts means cardiac arrest is not an issue,' said a voice that knifed right through Lysander's memory.

Lysander broke into a run. The voice had come from the shadows up ahead, which clung to an archway leading deeper into the body of the

tower. Lysander crunched through the bodies and through the archway, and in a shaft of light falling from a rupture in the side of the tower he saw a silhouette.

It wore ornate armour with curving shoulder guards, a high helm with just the gleam of twin eyeslits to suggest a face, and a wide cape hanging from one shoulder.

‘So restraint, not anaesthesia, is the only concern,’ came the voice again.

Lysander opened fire. He did not send the thought down to his trigger finger. The signal came from somewhere in the animal hindbrain that even a Space Marine’s training could not fully erase.

Half a dozen bolter shells ripped across the chamber. In the strobing light the interior was revealed – a chapel, the pews forged of shoulder blades and craniums lashed together with ropes of dried sinew. Severed hands hung in their hundreds from the vaulted ceiling, and on the altar at the head of the chapel sat a statue of some warp-spawned lesser god, squatting like a toad with a face that dripped with spiny tentacles. It held up four webbed hands with an eyeball in each palm. Stray bolter shots burst against its green stone, blasting chunks of its misshapen skull onto the floor.

The silhouette was gone, as if it had been nothing but smoke blown away by the gunfire.

Squad Kaderic stormed into the chapel behind Lysander, bolters sweeping every angle.

‘What have you seen, brother?’ demanded Kaderic.

‘Movement,’ said Lysander, lowering his bolter. ‘It is gone.’

‘Chaplain!’ came a vox over the strike force channel. It was Sergeant Gorvetz. ‘We are picking up phantom signals on the auspex scanner, but we may have found the source.’

The strike force gathered one floor up, where Gorvetz had found the origin of the signals his auspex scanner had registered. A great mass of

brains, old and decayed but human in size and shape, hung from one wall like a huge bunch of rotting berries. A thin sheen of moisture covered them and each brain pulsed, almost imperceptibly, as if veins received blood from somewhere.

‘Tech-heresy,’ said Chaplain Lycaon when he saw the obscenity. ‘This must have been what controlled the war machine. Lysander?’

‘Without doubt,’ said Lysander.

‘Gorvetz!’ ordered Lycaon, and the Devastator-Sergeant needed no further elaboration. He ordered forward Brother Antinas, who carried his squad’s heavy flamer. The weapon was hooked up to a pair of fuel canisters on Antinas’s backpack, and required a Space Marine of Antinas’s training to carry and use while minimising the risk to his fellow Imperial Fists of such a weapon. The other Space Marines stepped back as Antinas sprayed the cluster of brains with a gout of flame, the burning fuel coating them and instantly causing them to shrivel away, their mass disappearing in the sudden yellow glare.

The darkness seemed to lift – not just because of the light, but inside Lysander. He saw in full clarity now, and the seething shadows that clung to everything receded.

‘Can you feel it?’ said First Sergeant Kaderic. ‘The shadows die away.’

‘We have exterminated a moral threat here,’ said Lycaon. ‘It will not be the first we find. Brothers, we move on. Kho! Are we clear on the far side?’

‘Clear, Chaplain,’ voxed Techmarine Kho in reply.

‘Then we leave this place,’ said Lycaon.

The strike force forged through what remained of the siege tower, sticking close as they forced through the far side of the tower, out among the spiked wheels embedded in the ground below.

Brother Halaestus sought out Lysander. ‘What did you see, captain?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Lysander. ‘And what did you see?’

Halaestus did not reply, and the strike force moved on out of the shadow of the siege tower.



4

‘An inquisitor must respect his acolytes. He must care deeply for them, as if they were members of his own family, for he has a responsibility for them that goes beyond that of a master and his underlings. But he must also be willing to pitch those acolytes into the worst peril that a human mind can imagine. Few can do it. Fewer still do not fall prey to malice, tossing aside human lives for amusement or to prove superiority. My acolytes, then, must sometimes be sacrificed in the name of something greater than any of us, but it is always with sorrow that I cast them into the path of danger. I trust that each understands that, when his time comes.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The fortress of Kulgarde was haunted. They were old ghosts, as ancient as Malodrax itself, and they remembered the times when the planet was not a deformed plaything of the warp. They remembered its beauty and purity, and the glee with which the dark gods despoiled it.

They clustered around Lysander like flies around decay. They sensed the desperation in him. A Space Marine was created to know no fear, but he could still recognise hopelessness when it came, he could still feel the black hole of a future cut off with no way to get it back. It was not fear that Lysander felt, but something equally cold. Every push against the restraints was a hollow gesture, every curse he voiced was like spitting into a bottomless pit.

He could see the ghosts of Malodrax now, hovering around the anatomy theatre. They were a hollow-faced, spindly species of xenos, wearing the tatters of finery that spoke of a proud and wealthy civilisation. Perhaps they were cousins to the thing that prepared to operate on Lysander now, a thousand generations removed, debased and enslaved by the lords who had taken over Malodrax after it fell.

Lysander's body tensed, his spine arching, as the circular blade bit into his sternum. Pain meant nothing, but weakness did, and as his body was mutilated he would lose the strength that made him a Space Marine.

'You will witness shortly that a Space Marine possesses two hearts,' said the xenos leading the demonstration from the viewing gallery. 'The multiplicity of hearts means cardiac arrest is not an issue, so restraint, not anaesthesia, is the only concern.'

The surgeon peeled back a patch of skin from Lysander's sternum, revealing the slab of bone that made up his internal breastplate. It was made of fused ribs, created among the bone and muscle changes caused by the action of the gene-seed organs. The circular saw was withdrawn and the alien now wielded a long, sharp blade, like a stiletto with a double edge.

The alien aimed the point down at one of the joins in the breastplate, where two plates of bone joined. The blade was forced down into the joint, the blade twisted to force it open a little. Blood flowed, obscuring the white bone.

Lysander drew in his breath in a sharp hiss. His arms were manacled above his head and he forced his head round, trying to find some way of getting at the lock holding his wrists. He could almost reach it with his teeth, but the lock was just beyond his reach and he couldn't touch it without dislocating his neck. And what if he could? He couldn't bite through it. If he could reach it he would try, but he knew it would do no good.

Black pits of eyes looked down at him. The ghosts were watching as intently as the mutants and the xenos in the viewing gallery, as if this was the only entertainment they had in their half-lives.

Lysander had to try. That was its own reward. He would make them work at killing him, and he would fight to the end.

The blade was drawn up his chest. He felt it paring the skin away. Here and there it juddered as it met a particularly dense patch of bone.

It was almost at Lysander's throat.

'Removal of the internal breastplate,' the lead xenos was saying, 'will reveal both the organ tree and the seat of the progenoid gland. The fabled gene-seed, seat of a Space Marine's prowess. In all the galaxy there is nothing so valuable, there is no weapon so potent.'

With a tiny metallic sound, the blade snapped off its handle. The surgeon hissed annoyedly and turned to a rack of implements behind it to find a replacement.

Lysander forced his head forwards. He could just see the blade sticking out, just below his collarbone.

His neck muscles strained as he bent his head further. His windpipe was compressed and he could not breathe. He felt the sharp metal against his lower lip and closed his teeth around the broken stub of the blade.

Wrenching his head back, he pulled the blade from his chest, the sliver of pain he felt there a welcome reminder that he still lived.

The ghosts looked on. One tilted its head a little, as if in curiosity. Another opened its mouth, revealing the black void inside, perhaps in surprise, perhaps that species' equivalent of a smile.

The blade slid into the manacle's keyhole. The key would be simple, the manacle made for strength not complexity. A child could pick it. Lysander told himself this as he forced his head around to twist the shard of metal in the lock.

It wouldn't budge.

The surgeon looked back round, its eyes and nose-slit widening in alarm. The metal twisted. The lock snickered open.

Certain assumptions could be made about a xenos which was largely humanoid. For instance, very few such creatures could live without whatever organ was protected inside its cranium. A Space Marine knew this, because he had to possess all the knowledge necessary to make him the most efficient killer of any foe, including a xenos of a previously unknown species.

Lysander put this knowledge to use when his newly freed hand closed around the surgeon's throat and lower jaw. He squeezed, his augmented strength giving him a grip powerful enough to splinter the alien's jawbone. Its upper jaw cracked and its face distorted and narrowed.

The alien struggled in his grip, flopping around from its neck. Lysander crushed its throat, his hand now balled into a fist, and dashed the alien against the ground.

Shrieks rose from the viewing gallery. The alien orator leaned against the smudged glass, and Lysander could make out the stylised, inhuman features of its faceplate, the emerald eyepieces and the dark-green marbled substance of its armour. Lysander met the alien's gaze.

'I will come back, alien!' said Lysander as he forced himself into a sitting position and grabbed the chain that held his ankles with both hands. 'And I will find you first!'

Lysander ripped the chains out of the operating slab, the sundered links falling to the tiled floor.

Alien mandibles were clicking in alarm. Audients were fleeing the viewing gallery. Lysander swung off the slab and his bare feet touched the floor.

He ached all over. It was good. His body still worked. It was the only weapon he had. That changed a second later as he grabbed the most vicious-looking implement off the rack of medical tools on the wall. It was an autopsy knife, long, straight, double-edged, flimsy in a fight but definitely capable of killing. It was still next to nothing compared to the power armour, hammer and bolter that he wielded by choice. But it would have to do.

Lysander gave the operating theatre one last look before he shouldered his way through the only door. The alien surgeon's blood was warm and sticky under his feet.

The medical wing of the fortress stretched around him. Ceiling-high tanks contained creatures the shape of adult humans, naked and half-developed, features soft and skin translucent, wound around with cables and hoses. The orderly creatures, hunched and robed, with their elongated faces like masks of gnarled bone, were working on wall-mounted racks of bloodstained steel where alien and human bodies were chained up in various stages of dissection. The place stank of old blood and rang with the reedy moans from waist-high cages stacked up in the corners, issuing trickles of filth collected by the drainage channels cut into the stained floor.

Lysander grabbed the closest orderly, yanking it off its feet and hurling it into the nearest glass tank. It crashed through the glass and into the wall, the half-formed body inside spilling out onto the floor. Its face was barely there, as if made of clay with the features just pushed in by a sculptor's fingers. Its musculature, however, was that of a Space Marine, as were the

scars of puckered white skin that ran across its back and chest. The implications were too grave for Lysander to give them any thought now.

The orderlies ran in every direction, recognising the escaped prisoner who should have been dissected on the slab. One snatched up a flensing knife and ran at Lysander, who knocked the blade aside with his forearm, the red line of pain along his wrist barely registering as he jammed the autopsy knife up into the orderly's throat. The tip broke through the bony exoskeleton and punched through whatever passed for the creature's brain. It shuddered and fell still, and Lysander dropped it to the ground.

The medical wing was madness. Brass-cased engines belched smoke as they rendered alien and human down into fat and paste. Prisoners, whether human or not Lysander could not tell, shrieked and rattled their cages as he ran through the wards and laboratories. The few orderlies who got in his path were beaten out of the way, necks broken or skulls crushed, and Lysander found a heavy wrench-like implement to fight with when his autopsy blade broke. He could hear the sounds of alarm in the distance – news of his escape had surely reached the Iron Warriors, who would be moving every spare Traitor Marine to intercept him.

The Iron Warriors were disciplined, but the opposite reflection of their orderliness was in the areas of the fortress left to their underlings and xenos allies. It was chaos down here, in its purest form. Lysander saw aliens of the surgeon's lanky, diseased species, and realised they must be what remained of Malodrax's natives. He saw the ghosts of their fallen civilisation, clustering around the corners of the ceiling among the shadows and spiders' webs.

The exoskeletoned creatures, artificial serf-constructs made by the Iron Warriors to tend to their fortress, teemed in the winding corridors and fled from him as he approached. In side chambers, humans with more scar tissue than original skin lay among heaps of trash and rags. A great cauldron of body parts churned, tended by skinny, filthy humans with their

eyes and tongues torn out. Shrines to lesser powers of the warp were heaped with offerings – raw meat, broken pieces of gold, bones, weapons, organs in glass jars. Some stretches of this wing were pitch-black, or ice-cold, or scorchingly hot, and every corner seemed to have some broken-minded and insane inhabitant whose mutilations and insanity crossed the border between alien and human.

Lysander survived three days in the sweltering filth that lay beneath the medical wing. The blood and gore that dripped into the drains of the wards and operating theatres ran down here, into a great sump of decay. An underground sea of bubbling black-red filth stretched along a wide, low natural cave, and here the lowest scum of Kulgarde had been banished. Shanties of trash and scrap metal sat on pontoons of worm-eaten wood that would sink or capsize, throwing another handful of diseased mutants into the filth. Blind serpentine predators nipped at dangling legs and hands, and in the half-light of bioluminescent fungi these subhumans lived out short, brutal lives of dark madness.

Lysander's stature as a Space Marine meant that he could not pretend to be one of the skinny, malnourished creatures that had presumably once been workers in the Iron Warriors forges. But some mutants were hulking as well as deformed, with massive shoulders and hunched bodies that, if they stood upright, would have caused their heads to brush against the cavern ceiling. Upon arriving in the sump Lysander had seen one such brute-mutant devouring one of normal human size, while others lay prostrate and watched, and surmised that the brutes were the leadership caste in what passed for a society down here. He found filthy rags to wear and went hunched. Regular mutants scattered at his approach and he avoided the brutes, but even so, it was only a matter of time before he was recognised as something other than one of this place's mutant dregs.

And it was unclean. As foul a place as he had ever been. This place did not just house mutants – it made them, the accumulation of effluent and

chemicals enough to warp even a Space Marine's genetics until he was one of the accursed, given enough time.

On the third day there was a great commotion, a shrieking and gabbling among the mutants. They gathered on shanty roofs to watch a collection of lights approaching from the cave's darkest reaches. Lysander watched from a distance, feeling the flimsy boards under his feet churning as the filth was stirred up.

The lights were lanterns hung from a flotilla of a dozen boats, carved and ornate, painted with gilt and bright colours. They were punted through the mire by figures in hoods and robes dyed deep crimson, and among them moved things that resembled the medical servitors that Lysander was used to seeing in Imperial medical facilities. A servitor was a machine created from human parts, such as from condemned criminals or pious souls who bequeathed their remains. Its brain was imprinted with a simple set of commands and its limbs augmented with mechanical devices appropriate to its purpose. The servitors on the flotilla had human torsos, wheeled or tracked motivator units in place of legs, and several jointed metal arms tipped with syringes, blades, saws and other implements of surgery or dismemberment. The biological parts were discoloured and blistered with disease and the steel was stained with old blood.

Lysander looked around him. He had taken shelter in a large shanty that had, by the size and smell, been inhabited by a brute that was now absent. No lesser mutants had dared to squat there and Lysander reasoned that if the owner returned he could deal with him – a good hiding place was worth that risk. Outside the shanty, at the corner of the pontoon, knelt one of the sump's countless mutants. It wore a loincloth and its skin was pallid, covered in purplish rashes from which tiny white worms hatched in a weeping of pus. Lysander darted out of the shanty and grabbed the mutant by the scruff of the neck.

It had four eyes, arranged around a mouth in the centre of its face. Lysander hauled it off its feet and held it level with him.

‘What is this?’ he demanded of the mutant.

The mutant’s eyes rolled in fear. Lysander raised it up higher and held it over the churning gore. ‘What is this?’ he asked again. ‘Who approaches?’

‘Prisoners,’ squealed the mutant. ‘Taken from above! Thul’s prisoners! Some he sends to the Bone Sculptors to be used. The Sculptors’ isle is across the black ocean. The ferrymen take them there.’

Lysander looked again at the flotilla. The boats were painted with the eyes and teeth of monsters, like fanciful versions of the predators that snaked through the gore.

The ferrymen stopped pushing the flotilla forwards and turned to haul ropes and chains attached to wooden contraptions in the centre of each boat. The mutants began to cheer, wailing and clapping as if they were watching the return of a great hero.

A pole, like a mast, was drawn upright from inside each boat. To each was tied a body. Some were clearly dead, and they were unmutated humans as far as Lysander could tell – their skin an odd pale-pink colour, wearing straps of red leather in place of clothing, their faces – where they had faces – obscured by dark blue tattoos. One had been disembowelled, another’s skull stove in. Some others were alive, and their heads lolled as if barely aware of their surroundings. Another was like the brute-mutants of the sump, and a great cry of glee went up from the mutants when it was raised. Its skin was scaly, its face a brutal blunt snout, and it roared as the ferrymen goaded it with barbed pikes. Other mutants included one with the lower body of a snake, another with clusters of vestigial heads bulging from its stomach, and another with vividly patterned skin and curving horns.

The last three prisoners made Lysander’s stomach churn, though he had known somehow he would see them. Three Space Marines – three Imperial

Fists.

Brother Skelpis, the stump of his leg bound with filthy leather strips.

Brother Halaestus, still conscious, beaten and bloody, patches of his skin burned or pared off. Lysander could see his mouth moving as he yelled and though he could not hear the words, he knew they were curses from the limits of a Space Marine's vocabulary.

Brother Vonkaal, with iron spikes impaled through both thighs and upper arms, unconscious like Skelpis.

And one who did not live – Brother Drevyn, the two halves of his bisected corpse hanging like obscene decorations from a crossbar nailed to the mast, entrails hanging in red ropes.

It had not been enough to wipe out the greater part of the First Company. No, the Iron Warriors had to take their trophies, and parade them as if they were banners captured in war.

The flotilla passed by Lysander's vantage point, and he saw the crew jabbing at the Imperial Fists prisoners with barbed polearms, to the shrieking delight of the onlookers.

'What happens at the Sculptors' isle?' demanded Lysander of his prisoner. The prisoner squirmed and whimpered, and its eyes rolled back to their whites.

'What do the Bone Sculptors do?' he asked again.

The mutant was insensible with fear. Lysander threw it aside and it clattered through a wall of his shanty.

Lysander watched the flotilla's lights pass by the settlement in the sump. Then he dismantled the shanty, selecting one wall that seemed wide and sturdy enough to support his weight on its own. Going by the length of the punting poles used by the flotilla's crew, he found a length of wood long enough to reach the bed of the sump. He pushed off from the platform on this makeshift raft, poling in the direction the flotilla had gone.

As the light died and his vision struggled to pick out the shifting murk in monochrome, Lysander became aware of the predators that lived in those filthy waters oozing along in the wake of his raft. When they strayed too close, he batted them aside with a strike of the pole, and they gave him a wider berth for a while. Great dark shapes loomed by, segments of war machines that had fallen down from above in some long-ago collapse. Chunks of the fortress's foundations lay half-submerged. He even passed a shipwreck, a barge something like the flotilla's in design but far larger, its bow reaching up above the surface, a few gnawed bones still lying on the stone blocks where it had foundered.

Far above, through a tear in the cavern ceiling, glowed the dull fires of a forge. Acidic rain stung Lysander's skin. The low, titanic moans reached him of the fortress above settling lower into the sump.

Lysander saw lights ahead and slowed down. The lights resolved into lanterns hung about a rocky island in the filth, on which was built a temple of standing stones smooth with age. Enormous bestial heads carved in stone loomed over the temple, staring out across the black sea. The flotilla had moored and its crew were taking their prisoners down off the masts and carrying them onto the island.

As Lysander watched, from the temple emerged the first of the Bone Sculptors. It bore some resemblance to the exoskeletoned orderlies in the fortress's medical wing. But where those were hunched and feeble, this was far taller and glided with a strange elegance as it approached the prisoners being unloaded. Its head resembled three long animal skulls attached base to base, with three sets of eye sockets, mandibles, and rows of white teeth. Additional limbs, half mechanical and half bone, reached from beneath its heavy black robes, each tipped with a syringe or blade. Others followed it out, each a different form of the same horror.

And flanking the Bone Sculptors were a pair of Iron Warriors Space Marines, in the functional gunmetal of their Legion's livery, armed with

bolter and chainsword. Lysander knew that even with arms and armour, it would be throwing his life away to storm the island alone. He would die and his battle-brothers would lose any chance of escape.

It wrenched at him to leave them there. Perhaps they would be executed the instant they passed the temple threshold. Perhaps, once he left this place, he would never find a way back in. But his fellow Imperial Fists would benefit nothing if Lysander died there.

Lysander pushed the raft away from the island into the darkness before he was noticed by the Iron Warriors guarding the temple.

He swore silently that he would return, soon, and on his own terms. And when he did, for whatever evil they planned to inflict on his brothers, the Bone Sculptors would die.



5

'My intention of authoring a natural history and sociology of Malodrax, and charting of its various lifeforms and inhabitants and the relationships thereof, was scuppered when I understood for the first time the nature of life on this world. On a sane planet, one species predates on another, one nation conquers its neighbour or is conquered. Peoples wax and wane, empires rise and fall. Not so on Malodrax. Malodrax resists even the simplest attempts of holy logic to govern its histories. In fact, I will say that it has no history, instead an infinite tumult of conflict and death that started at its birth and stretches to the Time of Ending.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The first sight of the enemy was the glint of Malodrax's sun off the lenses of their rifle scopes.

It was an alien sun that rose suddenly, a small, hot orb whose light burned through the discoloured clouds, picking out the broken land in a

chemical white light while leaving the shadows even darker. The strike force could do little in response save bring Techmarine Kho's Land Speeders in even lower to the ground, to keep the skimmers' telltale movement from giving them away at a distance.

But in spite of their precautions, the Imperial Fists knew they would be found. It was the Emperor's own fortune that they had made it this far, the better part of a day and a half, without being seen.

'I have contacts, brother-Chaplain,' voxed Techmarine Kho from ahead of the strike force. 'Several, half a kilometre north-west of us.'

Chaplain Lycaon held up a fist and the strike force halted, suddenly ready to open fire or charge any enemy that showed itself. Lycaon gestured to Lysander and scrambled up the side of the shallow valley through which the strike force had been moving. Lysander followed Lycaon and dropped onto his front, crawling up the slope until he reached the crest and could see what Kho had reported.

White glints flickered along a ridge several hundred metres away. Lysander focused on one and saw the form of a head and shoulders – a figure, sighting down the barrel of a gun. One rose slightly to change position, perhaps aware the strike force had suddenly stopped. Lysander caught a glimpse of pale-pinkish skin, and a partially shaven scalp which had a fringe of feathers instead of hair. The gun was an ornate hunting rifle with a scope. The owner was wearing leather straps wrapping around his torso and upper arms, and goggles obscuring his face.

'Do you know them?' asked Lycaon.

'Yes,' said Lysander. 'Cultists of Shalhadar.'

'The daemon prince?'

'The same.'

Lycaon spat into the dark earth. 'Is he a threat?'

'If he learns of us,' said Lysander, 'then yes, he definitely is. These lands are contested between Shalhadar and Kulgarde. Shalhadar will see us

as invaders as much as Kraegon Thul would.'

The cultist scouts were moving now, disappearing from view behind the ridge.

'Kho!' voxed Lycaon. 'Bring your speeders down and pick up Lysander and I. We are to the hunt!'

Kho's Land Speeder bore the name *Dorn's Dagger*, and was the oldest such machine in the Imperial Fists armoury. It was therefore the fastest and most reliable, with a machine-spirit housed in an archeotech core that compensated for wayward piloting and kept the vehicle arrowing straight and fast as it flew. Kho occupied the pilot's seat, his mechadendrites folded back behind him to reduce drag, sub-manipulators in his gauntlets clattering across the complex dashboard while he concentrated on banking and throttling. Lysander sat beside him in the gunner's seat, the heavy bolter in front of him on its mountings.

The wind shrieked as *Dorn's Dagger* rode up to the crest of the slope and accelerated, the anti-grav units underneath letting out a deep hum to complement the hollow roar from the jets at the rear.

'The *Dagger* has not hunted for many a month,' Techmarine Kho said. His face was hidden behind the faceplate of his red-painted artificer armour, and the cogitator array of valves and circuits on his chest whirred rapidly as it calculated endless angles of approach and attack. 'Let us get her blooded, captain. It is time this world began to suffer.'

The landscape ripped by, the *Dagger* rising and falling barely enough to keep it from barking its underside on the rocky ridges hurtling below. Lysander knelt up on the gunner's seat, leaning into the bulk of the heavy bolter, cycling its action to check the load and playing its sights across the horizon.

Movement glimmered below. A creature ran in long, loping strides, a tail swinging out behind it for balance and a tapering head angled out in front. A rider, one of the cultist scouts, clung on, pressed low against the beast's back for stability with his rifle slung on his back. The creature was

galloping towards a knot of rocky outcrops, a miniature mountain range with passes and valleys running through it, surrounded by tilting slabs of shattered ground.

‘I see it!’ said Kho, speaking over the vox as the howl of the wind and the engines made normal speech inaudible. ‘Rain steel, brother!’

Lysander squeezed the firing stud as he held the sights steady just in front of the beast. The weapon bucked in his grip and he leaned into it harder, keeping it steady as another chain of shots ripped off. The beast was struck in the shoulder, blasting a ragged hole right through it. Its head pitched into the ground and it cartwheeled, throwing its rider spinning out of the saddle to crash broken against the rocks.

The second Land Speeder, the *Talon Blade*, swept around from the other side of the outcrop, its nose-mounted assault cannon hammering at a trio of scouts scrambling on foot up a rocky slope for the cover of a cave. Chaplain Lycaon was in the *Talon*’s cockpit alongside Kho’s fellow pilot, Brother Gethor, operating the multi-melta the *Talon*’s gunner used. While it was better for boring holes through tanks than chasing down fleeing infantry, a multi-melta’s concentrated heat beam was just as effective at ending a pursuit if it hit home. Assault cannon shots blasted one cultist apart, sending a shattered leg spiralling away in a spray of blood, while a beam of superheated particles carved a deep molten furrow across the rock that bisected a second cultist through the mid-torso.

The last cultist dropped to a knee and fired off a shot at the *Talon Blade*. Perhaps he hit, perhaps he didn’t – it mattered little because the armour of the Land Speeder and the Space Marines crewing it were enough to turn aside the shot, and the cultist was punched through by a half-dozen assault cannon shots an instant later.

‘Brother-Chaplain, do you see any more?’ voxed Lysander.

‘None,’ said Lycaon. ‘Fly a tight sweep, and watch for them doubling back. None can be permitted to reach Shalhadar.’

The two Land Speeders circumnavigated the outcrop. The *Talon* shot down two more riders as they fled from behind a couple of fallen boulders. Lysander spotted a cultist on foot, and Kho shot him down with the *Dagger*'s assault cannon before Lysander could bring his heavy bolter to bear.

'There,' said Lysander pointing to a ridge a couple of hundred metres west of the outcrop. A cultist rode up over a ridge and disappeared down the reverse slope.

'We pursue,' said Kho, and the *Dagger* arrowed at full speed in the direction of the fugitive.

Lysander held the heavy bolter level as best he could. Below him the assault cannon on the Land Speeder's nose stitched a spray of gunfire along the ground just behind the rider. Lysander could make out the rider was not just another cultist. Perhaps he was a leader of their kind, going by the headdress he wore with silk pennants rippling in the wind behind him and the large wicker panniers on the beast he rode. Lysander squeezed off a ranging shot of his own and it fell just short.

The rider's path took him down into the kind of narrow broken valleys the strike force had used to conceal their march. Each time the rider passed through Lysander's sights he vanished behind the slope of a rise or a finger of shattered rock.

'The *Dagger* does not lose her prey,' said Kho, his voice calm even though he was sending the Land Speeder jinking a few metres above ground level, swinging between outcrops of rock.

Lysander caught a flash of pallid skin and bucking animal between the rocks. Instinct forced his finger down on the firing stud. The heavy bolter kicked and Lysander saw the broken limbs of the riding beast flailing as it flipped over and smacked into a boulder. Bright red spray painted the side of the rock.

'He's down,' voxed Lysander. 'Bank us around to confirm.'

Dorn's Dagger swept up and banked, looping around to approach the downed rider from the other direction, slowing as it did so.

The rider had sprawled onto the ground, and was crawling back towards the broken remains of his beast. Lysander opened fire and caught the rider in the shoulder, blowing an arm clean off.

The rider reached the beast. With his remaining arm he unfastened a clasp on the side of a pannier and pulled the lid open.

A cloud of dozens of tiny bright shapes fluttered upwards, billowing towards the sky.

Birds, trailing bright plumage as they flew.

‘Shoot them down!’ voxed Lysander. ‘All of them!’

He fired his heavy bolter into the flock. The assault cannon did the same. Tiny bodies burst into nothing. But there was so many of them and they flew off in every direction, too small and numerous to pick out with the Land Speeder’s weapons.

The *Talon Blade* reached them a moment later, but the single beam of the multi-melta was even less use. Fully half the flock dispersed into the air, beyond the strike force’s reach.

The two Land Speeders rejoined the rest of the strike force, dropping back down near ground level to reduce their profile. Lysander vaulted out of the gunner’s seat, hands still tingling from the heavy bolter’s recoil. Chaplain Lycaon dismounted the *Talon Blade*, his gauntlets scorched by the heat coming off the multi-melta. ‘What did they release?’ he asked Lysander.

‘Messenger birds,’ replied Lysander. ‘It is how Shalhadar’s forces communicate over a distance. He will have news of our arrival before the sun goes down.’

Lysander walked up the slope and looked west towards the horizon. The strange sun that had lit the hour was setting and its harsh light glittered against the distant hills. Among them it picked out tall slender towers and

minarets, high walls cutting through foothills and mountains, thousands of banners fluttering. ‘There,’ he said. ‘The city. It dominates this land along with Kulgarde. It has an army hundreds of thousands strong, so it was said. Cultists and daemons, all answering to the city’s master.’

‘Can they overtake us?’ asked Lycaon.

‘We are on foot over broken ground, and swift though a Space Marine can march he cannot outpace the outriders that will be sent to hunt us down. Yes, Chaplain, they can overtake us, and the daemon prince is jealous of this land. I imagine they will send out their cavalry to force us to stop and face them, and then seek to crush us with their main force following up behind.’

‘Sound strategy when you outpace the foe,’ said Lycaon. ‘I read nothing in the Codex Astartes demanding that we give the enemy such courtesy as to fall in line with his plans. First Sergeant Kaderic!’

Kaderic hurried to Lycaon’s side. ‘Chaplain?’

‘A small, swift force pursues us from the city you see on the horizon. They wish to force us to give battle to a larger force marching in its wake. How does a Space Marine fight?’

Kaderic smiled. The question might have been sprung on a novice in the training halls of the Phalanx, an elementary puzzle which every recruit would be expected to answer swiftly. ‘He turns around and marches on the city,’ he said. ‘We will punch through the enemy’s vanguard and fall upon him when he is not ready. And Emperor willing, we will walk into his city when his army is elsewhere and impale his head on the battlements. Such Dorn would say.’

‘Such he would!’ agreed Lycaon. ‘If the ruler of the city is the one whose destruction we seek. Lysander? Would it be straying too far from our mission’s path to bring the Emperor’s wrath to this Shalhadar?’

Lysander looked towards the city again, and in the failing light gold glittered among its spires. ‘He will hound us until we are dead or gone,’ he

said. ‘Now he knows we are here, Prince Shalhadar will be our enemy until the end. He must die.’

‘Then he will die,’ said Lycaon. He switched to the strike force’s vox-channel. ‘Brothers! The forces of the city of Shalhadar do not take to intruders such as ourselves, who have so rudely intruded on their lands, so we shall introduce ourselves like gentlemen! A friendly bullet will be our calling card! A kindness of chainblades will see they remember the Imperial Fists!’

A low ripple of voices ran across the strike force, murmurings of good battle finally approaching, for the Imperial Fists had been too long on this world without a fight.

‘Techmarine Kho, scout the way,’ voxed Lycaon. ‘There are damned souls between us and our objective. We will go through them like a spear to the gut. Lead on!’

The city did not have a name. It was the City of Shalhadar, or simply the City. Some referred to it as Shalhadar, the city and its ruler becoming one. Most had no need to name it anything because the majority of its inhabitants were born there and died there, and never left.

It was surrounded by walls that served not just to protect it from invaders, but to remind its population how blessed they were to live inside. The walls were of enormous blue and rose marble blocks, inlaid with whorls of gold. The skins of past exiles hung as banners, covered in obscene tattoos of entwined limbs and tormented bodies. Below the walls were the exile grounds where those banished from the city clawed at the base of the walls and wept that they would never again look on the face of Shalhadar. A few of them were kneeling there now below the wall, pale and shaven-headed, wearing the torn and stained silks of the city’s castes. Whatever their crime, there was only one punishment – to be cast out of the city of pleasures and condemned to starve, incapable of surviving without the city around them.

The Imperial Fists strike force had passed an army from the city on their way towards the marble walls. Several thousand cultists, armed with flintlocks and clubs with obsidian blades, wrapped in silks around gilded armour. The riding beasts carried outriders at the army's flanks, and up close Lysander could see the beasts' flickering tongues and asymmetrical black orb eyes, daemon-bred and warped by the influence of Malodrax.

Lycaon had brought the strike force swiftly to the shadow of the city, evading Shalhadar's troops on the way. At Lycaon's command the strike force broke out of the cover of the low hills around the walls, across the open ground towards the nearest gates.

The exiles looked around from their weeping-places at the wall to see thirty Space Marines rushing towards the gates. Some whimpered at the sight, some did nothing. One stood and took a couple of faltering steps towards Lysander as he ran alongside Squad Kaderic.

'You,' said the exile, a man whose face was streaked with grime and tears, and bearing the marks of a recent beating on his pale skin. 'You will end it. I knew it would be you...'

The deep lowing of alarm horns sounded up on the walls as Lycaon brought the Imperial Fists within a pistol shot of the gate. The gate itself was almost the height of the wall, purplish wood banded with iron – sturdy enough, but not designed by a fortress-builder like Dorn.

'Gorvetz!' ordered Lycaon. 'Bring them down!'

The Devastator squad halted and braced their weapons, aiming up at the great hinges holding the enormous doors. Techmarine Kho's twin Land Speeders thundered overhead, nose cannons spraying the top of the wall where defenders were gathering to fire down at the attackers.

The art of the siege was beloved of Rogal Dorn. He had written volumes on the subject that still guided the Imperial way of war to that day. But Dorn knew that there was one way for the endless armies of the Imperial Guard to take a city, and another way for the Space Marines. The Imperial

Guard would spend months moving men and machines into position, setting artillery positions to bombard the target city and gradually forging closer to the walls in trenchworks and tunnels until demolition squads could rush forth and bring the walls down, or until artillery could be brought close enough to shell the city within at will. It was a bloody and drawn-out business, where the will to stay the fight was of greater importance than skill or experience.

What the Imperial Guard did with big guns and endless manpower, the Space Marines did with shock and with speed. In the kind of battle for which he had been created, each Space Marine was worth an army. Once through the breach he could visit the kind of violence on an enemy-held city that a whole regiment of Imperial Guard might wreak. First he had to get in, and to do that he used all the speed and ruthlessness the Emperor's own teachings and the blood of his primarch had given him.

Squad Gorvetz's plasma cannon and heavy bolters blasted chunks out of the doors, blowing the fittings free that held them to the marble pillars on either side. One door sagged in, the final hinge giving way under its weight, and it crashed to the ground with a sound like a peal of thunder. Choking masses of rubble dust flared up where it fell.

'Onwards!' ordered Lycaon, before the echoes had died. The Imperial Fists followed their Chaplain through the gate, ignoring the pattering of fire from the few defenders who had reached the walls in time to see the gate fall.

It was a terrible familiarity that Lysander felt as the dust around him cleared and he emerged into the grand road that led from the breached gate. There was gold and silver everywhere, plating the slabs beneath his feet, swirling up the walls of the pleasure domes and temples lining the road. Fat emeralds and rubies studded the marble walls.

Down the thoroughfare roared the daemon host of Shalhadar, the prince's handmaidens and viziers, the courtiers who danced around him

eternally. They were things of the warp just as much as the Grey Hungers or the Red Widow, but where those were horrific, Shalhadar's host had an appalling beauty. They were humanoid in shape, but elongated and sharp-featured, as if the shape of a human being had been stretched and tapered by a sculptor on a futile quest to make it perfect.

They wore the features of male and female, jumbled together on the same daemon as if to further divorce them from a sane concept of beauty. Their torsos were snakelike and muscular, their eyes enlarged black pools, skulls elongated to accentuate their swept features. They wore silks and harnesses of black leather, claws of glinting amethyst chitin, black talons for toes, vestigial wings, tentacles in place of hands, ridges of waving fleshy protuberances along the spine or breastbone, smiling mouths inscribed into their flesh, purple tattoos or raised pinkish scars – each was different, each the work of a mad artist's lifetime.

Shalhadar's court had its dancers, musicians, scribes and advisors. All of them were there, sent from Shalhadar's palace to intercept the intruders who defiled his city. They might have been gifted by the warp to beautify the court, but they were still predators, still killers filled with the warp's own malice.

One, clad in a spectacular construction of silks that flowed behind it like the fronds of a sea creature, threw its head back and screeched. The others took up the cry. Claws snapped. Tongues lashed, long and spiny. Lysander's battlefield instincts told him the Imperial Fists faced more than a hundred daemons. His oaths as a Space Marine told him the galaxy would soon be a hundred daemons less.

Lysander drew his chainblade. The Fist of Dorn, his power hammer, was in Kulgarde somewhere in the hands of Kraegon Thul. He would rather have the hammer in his hand now, but a chainblade was the weapon he had trained with and he put faith in what he knew it could do.

‘The enemy shows his face!’ cried out Chaplain Lycaon. ‘And he but begs us to cut off his head!’

The Imperial Fists charged as one. The daemons rushed to meet them. Lysander ran alongside the brothers of Squad Kaderic. Brother Halaestus was beside him, firing his bolter from the hip with one hand as he drew his combat blade with the other. Halaestus’s eyes were blank, as if he were focusing on something far away. Lysander barely had time to register the look on his face before the first of the daemons was within a lunge of his chainblade.

Lysander waited a split second more. His target was sprinting right at him on legs with knees bending the wrong way. It had a claw for one hand and a jewelled dagger in the other, its gilded blade sheened with greenish venom. Its face was a horror, noseless and with a round lamprey-like mouth. Its ugliness was only enhanced by the pink and purple silks wrapped around it, too thin to hide the slithering knots of its muscles and the pallid expanse of its skin.

A thrust with the chainblade would have impaled the daemon through the gut but left Lysander open to a dagger in the back of the neck, and perhaps the point would find a seal or gap in his power armour and hit home. As the battle around him seemed to slow down, Lysander’s mind automatically accessed the years of battle-lore a Space Marine learned from the moment he was chosen to join the Adeptus Astartes.

Lysander let the daemon come within the arc of a chainblade’s swing. He swept the blade in front of him, squeezing on the activation stud to send the chaintooth churning. The daemon was caught in the midriff, skin and bone chewed up by the blade.

Lysander ducked to one side and caught the dagger on his shoulder guard. It rang off harmlessly. He brought his free hand up to block the claw snapping down at his head, and for a moment was face to face with the daemon.

This thing of the warp, the abomination, had about it a grace that Lysander could not deny. A man could go mad to look at it, captivated by the movements of its sinuous body, obsessed and desiring. It was in this way that such a daemon corrupted and destroyed. Perhaps lesser minds, already broken down by the galaxy's cruelty, had fallen to it. Not a Space Marine.

Lysander clamped his hand around the back of the daemon's head, where its skull erupted into a crown of fleshy feelers, and rammed it face-first onto the paving slabs of the road. He drew back his chainblade and stabbed it down through the back of the daemon's neck. The chaintooth ground through spine and sinew, and the daemon's head came free in a spray of blue fire.

Lysander tore the chainblade free and took stock of his surroundings. Imperial Fists and daemons were duelling, glowing blood sprayed across the gilded pavements. Beside him Halaestus wrestled with a daemon with four tentacles in place of arms. Halaestus rolled on top of the daemon and drove his combat knife down into its face again and again until it was a smouldering ruin.

Lysander grabbed Halaestus's shoulder guard and pulled him up. 'There are plenty more to kill!' he shouted over the gunfire and the screeching of the daemons.

For a moment Halaestus looked at Lysander with that same blank look. Then a light went up behind his eyes and he nodded his understanding.

There were more daemons than Imperial Fists, but these creatures had never faced Space Marines before. Chaplain Lycaon threw one aside and lunged at another, slicing it in two from shoulder to hip with his crozius. The discharging of the power field was like a lightning bolt falling into the middle of the fight and the Imperial Fists surged forwards as if it were an omen sent from Dorn himself.

Past the daemon ranks, beyond the closest spires and domes of Shalhadar's city, rose the pyramid of its palace. Lysander recognised the patterns of blue and gold covering its sides, picked out in precious stones and silver filigree.

If the Imperial Fists were to do what they came to Malodrax to do, if Lysander were to do his duty to the brothers he had left behind here, the palace would have to fall. The man knew this, and looked ahead to storming the bejewelled walls. The soldier kept fighting, focusing entirely on tearing apart the enemies that fate had put in front of him.



6

'I spoke with one of them, the creatures indigenous to this world, evolved or mutated, I surmised, from human stock an aeon ago. His people were nomads, travelling the hidden paths between Malodrax's perils. I told him that I was from the world beyond his planet's sky, and it was then I realised he had no concept of a planet at all. To him his world was a gallery of hells, linked by the paths his forefathers had forged, and beyond them could exist nothing.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

It was, by Lysander's reckoning, rather more than two days since he had crawled into the effluent channels leading to the fortress's sump. Forging through the filth had helped hide him among the dregs of the fortress's lower levels, catacombs, tunnels and half-collapsed cathedral domes that maintained a society of mutants and xenos. From what Lysander had seen they served little purpose in the fortress except to survive there, like colonies of fungus or nests of vermin, with the most able of them skimmed off to serve in the forge levels above. The uppermost fortress,

the battlements themselves, were the barracks and sparring halls of the Iron Warriors, but beneath them was the bleak anarchy of these malformed dregs.

Lysander had made his way upwards, towards the forges and assembly vaults. The place was a factory as well as a fortress, with its forges producing parts for war machines assembled by armies of menials. The only way out of the place was to go up, even though that would bring him closer to the Iron Warriors who would even now be scouring the fortress for him.

There had been close calls. Lysander had broken the necks of mutants who paid him more than a glance. In any other company his size would make it impossible to hide, but the mutants included plenty of the huge muscular brutes among them and Lysander, hooded in rags, could pass for one of them. No Iron Warrior would be fooled, even at a distance, and Lysander had seen patrols of them marching through the mutant hovels looking for him. It was in a ruin of a previous city, crushed among the fortress's foundations, that they had come the closest, and Lysander had lurked in the plentiful shadows as a five-strong squad played the sights of their bolters across the hosts of mutants that cowered when they passed. If one of them had broken off from the squad and poked around in the heaps of rags that passed for the inhabitants of the hovel where Lysander had hidden, he would have been found. And he would have been shot down where he stood, because Warsmith Thul could only have ordered that Lysander be executed out of hand rather than risk him escaping again.

It was in the forges that Lysander realised he could rise no higher and still hope to stay hidden. He found himself in an enormous stone vault where gangs of menials and mutant labourers hauled massive segments of armour and machinery towards the half-finished war engines that dominated the vast space.

Lysander counted a dozen engines in various states of completion, some little more than enormous metal skeletons, others looming hulks that

looked ready to ride on massive grinding wheels or spiderlike legs. One was shaped like a steel dragon rearing up, its shoulders supporting massed batteries of cannon. Another was a turtle-like hulk, countless layers of armour surrounding sally ports to deliver hordes of troops into the heart of an enemy army. Still another, apparently complete, was a mobile idol of a lizardlike god-figure on an altar that moved on spiked rollers. Steel cauldrons held mounds of bones and skulls, and fuel tanks on the figure's back were hooked up to an enormous flamethrower wrought into the god's mouth. Hundreds of guns studded the shoulders and torso like spines.

It was a weapon of terror, the image of a power of the warp to terrify the defenders of a besieged city as it rumbled towards the walls spewing fire and crushing fortifications. Dozens of menials scrabbled across it, hammering its final armour plates into place.

Lysander took all this in as he waited in the shadows, away from the light of the fires used to bend the plates of armour being prepared for installation on the steel skeletons. The idol-machine was the most complete war machine, possibly ready to roll out from the gates of Kulgarde and into whatever waited in Malodrax beyond.

Lysander worked his way closer to the idol machine. It was several storeys high and the workers on it looked like insects scuttling across its surface. As Lysander watched one fell from the idol's shoulder, his death going unnoticed by the workers who laboured around the rollers where he landed. Taskmasters, brute-mutants like the ones Lysander had tried to resemble, laid into the workers with whips and prods. One spotted Lysander and trudged towards him, a slab of muscle with the features of its face barely discernible. It wore random segments of armour, plain gunmetal like the armour of the Iron Warriors, strapped to its grotesque body.

‘You!’ it growled. ‘Who is your god?’

Lysander did not know the answer. Presumably there was some power of the warp he could name that would satisfy the taskmaster, but a sane man did not seek to know their names.

‘I am here to work,’ said Lysander. ‘I am strong.’

The taskmaster drew a barbed whip and lashed it at Lysander. The bladed tip cut a deep gash into Lysander’s shoulder and Lysander dropped to one knee. The pain was like nothing to a Space Marine, but Lysander knew that tyrants loved to see supplication from those they made suffer.

‘To work?’ demanded the taskmaster. ‘You who have no brand upon him? What creature is this that knows not his place! Overseer Gortz will cut out your guts and twist them into ropes for the catapults!’

Lysander glanced up at the closest mutant worker, who was deliberately focusing on his work and not watching the taskmaster berating Lysander. Lysander could just spot the raised skin on the worker’s face, almost lost among the fronded gills around his neck. A brand was scorched deep into the mutant’s features. Lysander had no such brand. It was the mark of the taskmaster’s work-gangs, and anyone without it was an intruder.

‘It was Gortz who sent me,’ said Lysander, invoking the name of whatever creature he hoped was lord of this forge hall.

The taskmaster spat a wad of bloody phlegm into the floor. ‘If your body is as weak as your lies,’ he said, ‘you could lift no hammer for me. And I have no use for the weak.’ The taskmaster gripped Lysander’s chin and forced his head up, so he had to look into the taskmaster’s bestial face. ‘Except,’ it said, ‘as food.’

Lysander knocked the taskmaster’s hand aside and grabbed it by the throat. He stood up to his full height, lifting the massive mutant up off the floor. For the first time the taskmaster was able to appreciate Lysander’s full size, as his feet kicked out half a metre above the flagstones.

The taskmaster drew its whip hand back and lashed the weapon at Lysander, who caught the strip of leather with his free hand and threw the

taskmaster down to the floor. Before the mutant could get back to his feet Lysander planted a foot in its back and looped the whip around its neck.

Even as he was hauling on the whip to tighten it around the mutant's throat, Lysander was looking up and gauging the consequences. The mutant workers were well aware of what was happening, but they did nothing – most of them wouldn't even watch. They were so used to being the slaves of the taskmaster, so used to being punished for looking it in the eye, that it did not occur to them to defend the mutant. Even so, the taskmaster fancied itself important, and it would be missed sooner or later. Lysander had played his hand. He had to get out of the fortress now, here, before the Iron Warriors learned of the Space Marine-sized intruder killing their underlings in the shadow of the war machines.

The taskmaster had fallen still. Lysander dropped the whip, kneeled down and wrapped an arm around its throat, wrenching its neck and snapping its spine to make sure it would not wake up.

Lysander hurried towards the war machine ahead of him, the enormous siege-idol. He ignored the workers around him as he reached the foot of the idol, where the huge spiked roller had sunk into the flagstones of the floor. Lysander found a handhold among the battered steel plates and began to climb towards the war machine's idol.

He climbed quickly. It was not a usual mode of transport for a Space Marine, but an Imperial Fist had to be ready to climb, leap, swim and crawl as the battle demanded it. The idol was easy to climb, with plentiful handholds among its armour plates and carvings, and in a few minutes Lysander had reached the altar. The surface of the altar was already scored and stained with evidence of past sacrifices, and doubtless many more would be required before this war machine could be permitted to rumble out of the fortress into Malodrax.

There was, realistically, only one way out of the fortress of Kulgarde. Lysander had known from the start that he would not simply walk out. It

was a risk, this way, but less of a risk than staying in the fortress waiting to be hunted down by the Iron Warriors. If he died here, he would die seeking to escape, because only by first escaping could he avenge whatever happened to his battle-brothers at the hands of the Bone Sculptors.

The idol itself was a more difficult climb, with its overhangs and smooth expanses of stone. Lysander made for the head, for he knew the conceit of the builders would probably have put any command systems there. Whoever drove it would look through the eyes of the idol so they could fancy themselves the equivalent of that huge stone god, and see the fear of the soldiers in their way as they looked up at its hideous face. He was aware of a commotion below him as word finally spread of the taskmaster's death and workers from other gangs were gathering at the foot of the siege idol to watch the intruder whose death would surely win them a higher status in the forges.

Lysander reached the face, finding useful handholds among the fangs and twisted lips. Above him was an eye socket and sure enough it was glazed with the winking lights of a cockpit or bridge beyond. Lysander forced his way up into the eye socket and kicked at the glass, feeling it crack and bow under him.

Gunfire stuttered below him and shots flew wide, pinging off the stone face. The glazing collapsed and Lysander fell through into the interior of the siege idol's head.

In the cramped bridge were four or five human forms, merging with the baroque technology and ironwork of the siege engine's interior. It was difficult to tell how many there were for they were fused with the metal and the machinery of the siege idol's command systems. Their faces, glazed-eyed and barely conscious, rolled towards Lysander as he fell down on top of them, their brittle bones crunching under his weight.

‘War machine!’ demanded Lysander. ‘Answer me!’

More gunfire was spattering up at the shattered eye socket. Lysander could see through the banks of machinery to the cavity beyond the second eye socket, similarly crammed with fused human forms. Gunshots punched through the glass. Lysander could hear more shouting voices below. Soon the Iron Warriors would know, and then Lysander would be trapped here.

‘War machine!’ he repeated. ‘Whatever you are, however you were created, I am Lysander of the Imperial Fists! I can lead you out of this place! I can give you freedom!’

The siege idol lurched. Lysander planted a hand in dried, stringy flesh to find a handhold and keep himself upright. Machinery ground deep within the war engine with a sound like an avalanche. The eyes of the fused corpses opened, revealing their dried-out eyeballs, their mouths working as if trying to speak.

The rear wall of the cockpit split and receded, revealing a dark maw of iron beyond. Shards of metal split off from the wall, hovering in front of Lysander as they spun and converged.

Lysander’s stomachs recoiled. He was in the presence of witchcraft. The whole fortress of Kulgarde was a foul place, corrupted right down to the stones of its foundations – but this was pure darkness, warp-magic worked right before his eyes.

The metal formed twin pits, where bright silver shards glinted in place of eyes. The lips of a mouth. Two slits in place of a nose. It was an inhuman face, somehow more grotesque for being an indistinct result of the metal fragments as they spun and flitted.

‘Freedom?’ said a voice that took its form from the grinding of the siege idol’s engines far below. ‘There is no freedom. What is this thing? A dream? A lie? Nothing of the warp is free. You cannot offer me that, strange fleshy thing, Lysander of the Imperial Fists.’

‘Daemon,’ said Lysander. He tasted bile in his mouth and his skin crawled such that it was a wonder it did not tear itself from his back.

‘What,’ replied the siege idol, ‘did you expect?’

‘Move from this place,’ said Lysander. ‘Start your wheels and break out of this fortress. Seek your own destiny on Malodrax. Do not serve the Iron Warriors.’

‘And in doing so, save you from Kulgarde?’ replied the daemon. ‘So you might ride me to your own freedom as a bird rides the wind? And why would I do such a thing, Lysander of the Imperial Fists, when Warsmith Thul can give me a thousand years of war? A million bodies ground beneath my tracks? An ocean of blood in which to wallow? What is it that you can grant me that I might desire?’

Lysander forged his way back to the idol’s eye socket and risked a glance down. Hundreds of menials were surrounding the siege idol, jostling to get a look at the strange intruder who had killed the taskmaster and forced his way into their war engine. There were other taskmasters among them, cracking menials’ heads to make their way through the crowd, or arguing with one another about what to do.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ taunted the daemon, the note of its engines rising in amusement. ‘This slave of the dead god, this whelp of mankind. Your tiny mind cannot comprehend what one such as I could possibly desire.’

Lysander turned back to the daemon’s face. ‘You want blood,’ he said.

‘Blood?’ The daemon laughed, the sounds of pistons falling and engine chambers thundering. ‘I have all the blood I could want! A thousand men already have been butchered on my altar! My very steel was quenched in blood when it was first bent upon the anvil! Blood? What need have I of blood? Before Warsmith Thul commanded me forth, I presided over a great arena in the warp, where the blood of a million gladiators filled the place to the brim every night!’

‘An arena,’ said Lysander. His mind was working fast, trying to outpace his revulsion at being in the presence of such a being.

‘The greatest altar of the Blood God!’ cried the daemon. ‘A great ocean of hate in the warp! I stood upon the parapet and at my signal half a million men slit the throats of the other half, and at my word the survivors battled for the glory of having my eye fall upon them! And you, fleshy thing, will never know that glory, to see two great champions butcher one another in your name. Your imagination cannot stretch to such wonders.’

‘And you prefer this tomb of steel,’ said Lysander, ‘to ruling as lord of your arena?’

‘You cannot give me what I once had,’ replied the daemon.

‘You have doubt, daemon,’ said Lysander. ‘There is more human in you than you would admit.’

The daemon’s face loomed larger, its metal components shuddering and spinning with anger. ‘I am not like you. My kind were ancient before your existence was even possible. Do not compare us, Lysander of the Imperial Fists.’

‘And yet we are in the same situation. We both want something. I want to get out of this fortress, and you want to be lord of the arena again. There might be nothing else in common between us, but we both desire. Tell me I do not speak the truth, daemon.’

The daemon’s face receded. It did not reply. Its engines thrummed angrily, a low growl of frustration.

Lysander knew it would do him no good to argue with this being further. He would only give it the chance to spin lies, or waste his time until the Iron Warriors came to oversee the storming of the siege engine and the execution of Lysander. He pulled himself back through the idol’s shattered eye socket and out onto the stone face.

A cry went up from the labourers gathered to watch. Gunfire stuttered up at Lysander, wide and ill-disciplined, sparking stone chunks out of the

idol's face. Lysander let go of his handhold and fell down past the face and chest, landing in a heavy crouch as he slammed into the stained surface of the altar.

‘Overseer Gortz!’ yelled Lysander. ‘Lord of this vault! Will you stand by while this intruder defies you? Or will you take his head and throw it at the feet of your Warsmith?’

A bellowed order split the crowd below. One of the huge taskmaster mutants, who could only be Overseer Gortz, shouldered his way to the front – a massive creature, bound in muscle sliding beneath skin that was a mass of scar tissue. One of its hands had been replaced with a mechanical steel claw, more like an industrial tool than a weapon, and in its other it carried a club almost as long as Lysander was tall, a length of steel square in cross-section studded with spikes and well-stained with the blood of menials.

Gortz reached the base of the siege idol and began to climb. The crowd began to chant his name as it got closer to the altar where Lysander stood.

Lysander was very aware he was not armed. There had been nothing in the cockpit that would have made a passable weapon. One of the bone cauldrons was within arm's reach and Lysander grabbed the largest bone there, perhaps a femur from a pack beast or oversized mutant, long and heavy enough to serve as a club.

Gortz reached the altar to a cheer from the crowd. Up close his face was a horror, a mask of torn and hanging skin through which could be seen the bloodied bone.

‘You dare?’ growled Gortz. It was all the introduction Lysander supposed he would get.

Lysander dropped back half a step and Gortz took the bait, swinging with his club. Lysander ducked it and the club smashed shards of stone out of the idol. Gortz followed up with his claw, stabbing it down as it snapped

shut, aiming to grab Lysander around the shoulder so its blades would cut down into his upper torso.

Lysander rammed the femur up into the claw, jamming it for a moment. The blades of the claw crunched through the bone but by then Lysander had swivelled out of the way and was face to face with the mutant.

Lysander matched him in height. Gortz's musculature was grotesque, more massive and powerful than a Space Marine's build. A Space Marine was trained to see such things as an advantage in his favour instead of a weapon in the enemy's hand. Gortz was stronger, perhaps, in a raw and brutal sense, but that slowed him down. It meant he could not react quickly enough when Lysander drove the heel of his right hand up into Gortz's massive jaw, splintering bone as it snapped the mutant's head back.

Lysander rammed his knee into the mutant's groin, not pausing to wonder what might actually be there. His left hand hooked Gortz's forward leg and threw Gortz onto his back. The mutant sprawled onto the altar and Lysander was on him, both knees dropping into the mutant's abdomen, right fist punching over and over down into his face. The ravaged face was a mask of gore, the bone of the eye sockets and jaw open to the air, bloodshot eyes rolling.

Gortz's only move was to snap the claw at Lysander's neck. Lysander knew it was coming before Gortz did. He leaned back and the claw passed over his face. Lysander grabbed Gortz's elbow and wrenched it, feeling the joint part and the tendons snap, the claw hanging useless.

Gortz roared as the claw clattered to the surface of the altar. The mutant tried to raise his other arm, dropping the club to claw at Lysander's face with his fingers. Lysander caught Gortz's hand in his own, forcing it back down to the altar. A philosophy of unarmed combat that Space Marines learned – one among many – stressed the isolation and neutralisation of an enemy's individual joints. The sleep-taught technique came to the front of Lysander's memory as he forced Gortz's wrist around and placed his palm

down on the elbow, and put all his strength into forcing the hand up in the wrong direction.

Gortz's forearm snapped with a sound like a gunshot. Lysander took his weight off Gortz and turned him over, kneeling now in the small of the mutant's back. He wrapped an arm around Gortz's neck and forced his head back, so he was looking up at the stone face of the mutant looming down above the altar.

'Here, daemon!' yelled Lysander. 'Here is the champion of your arena laid low! Do you want his head? Shall I hold it up as a trophy? Give me what I want, daemon, and you will live your glory again!'

The crowd were silent below. They had expected to see Gortz victorious, as he must have been countless times before while rising to the rank of overseer. Now one of them cried out, a long, keening howl of sorrow and disbelief. Others joined him and in a few moments the sound filled the vault.

The sound of the siege idol's engines growled and thundered, and resolved into a low, grinding laughter. It echoed the cries of the menials below, mocking them even as they fell to their knees and tore at their skin in distress.

The siege idol lurched forwards on its rollers, and menials scattered to keep from being crushed. The idol moved forwards towards the back wall of the vault, crunching through segments of armour and equipment laid ready to be installed on the half-finished war machines.

The siege idol accelerated towards the back wall of the vault.

Lysander had given it what it wanted, in return for a chance of freedom. It was a deal with a daemon – there was no way he could pretend it was anything else. But this was the way it had to be. This was the way he would avenge his lost brothers, and give himself a chance to save those who still lived down there in the guts of Kulgarde Fortress.

The thought was broken as the siege idol gathered speed. Standing on the altar mounted on the front of the war machine, Lysander would be crushed when the idol hit the wall and the huge chunks of masonry started to fall. Lysander threw Gortz to one side and jumped off the altar, grabbing the idol's arm and swinging to the side of the war machine.

Lysander clambered along the armour plates covering the machine's side, where gun ports shaped into grimacing daemons' mouths made for some easier handholds.

With a deafening grinding sound the rollers at the front met the wall and the siege engine rode up as blocks of masonry shifted and split. Enormous slabs of it fell and kicked up clouds of pulverised rock. The siege engine forced its way through the wall, engines screaming as they worked up to maximum rev and gouts of flame bursting from the exhaust ports on the machine's back.

One block of stone, the size of a building, tumbled down towards Lysander, smashing off armour plates as it fell. Lysander leapt off the side of the war machine before it could crush him, covering his head and rolling with the fall. Everything was earthquake and thunder, the heat from the machine's engines and the battering of stone against his body.

Somewhere in the chaos Lysander landed. The noise barely died down as the siege idol ground forwards ahead of him. He had come to rest just past the vault's back wall, where the structure of the fortress had given way to smaller chambers now torn through and shattered by the idol's passage. Among the rubble he could see an eclectic mix of war trophies – captured banners, weapons and armour, scattered and crushed by the sudden destruction. Lysander waved away the worst of the rubble dust choking him and a bright silver gleam caught his eye – the polished chrome casing of an alien weapon, like an oversized rifle with a barrel made up of interlocking crystal shards. He recognised one of the banners on the wall, embroidered with the rose and skulls of an order of the Sisters of Battle,

hanging beside a crude rendering of a stylised bestial head probably taken from a defeated ork warlord.

Lysander rummaged through the debris. The Iron Warriors kept captured arms and armour here, and there might well be something he could use. Even if he got out of Kulgarde into Malodrax, he would have a far better chance of surviving whatever the planet had to throw at him if he was armed.

He threw aside another alien firearm, something like a multi-barrelled cannon with barrels consisting of living wormlike creatures stretched out over a black steel hub. A sword he found had been fine once, but the falling masonry had shattered its long, elegant blade – he thought it might have been alien in design, too, perhaps a weapon of the eldar, or a particularly fine example of pre-Imperial craftsmanship.

A warmth rose in both his hearts as his hands closed on a familiar hilt. A chainsword – an Imperial Fists chainsword, taken from one of his squad. He held it up and gave himself a second to look along its length, the golden livery and fist symbol of his Chapter emblazoned on the weapon's casing. It was undamaged, its chaintooths still bright and sharp.

The sound of something huge landing among the debris behind him was all the warning Lysander got. By the time he turned to see his assailant a meaty fist clubbed into him and threw him aside. He kept his grip on the chainsword but felt his arm pinned as Overseer Gortz leapt on top of him.

Gortz's torso had split open and from his back had grown a new limb to replace the arms broken by Lysander moments before. It was sinewy and raw, the skinless muscle oozing blood, but it was strong and its malformed hand was gripping Lysander's sword arm.

Gortz roared as his battered face, too, split open. A second set of jaws, with an array of sharp teeth, was forced out of the front of his skull. He was mutating second by second, the second jaws opening wider than his humanoid mouth could have, revealing a wet red tendril of a tongue.

Lysander groped in the rubble with his free hand, trying to find a chunk of stone. Instead he found something less weighty but just the right size for his hand. He brought it up, smacking it into the side of Gortz's mutating head.

It was a book. The metal fastenings and lock gave it a hard edge, and the thousands of pages were packed densely enough to give it weight. Attached to it was a chain, as if it could be hung from a belt or looped over a shoulder. Lysander changed his grip to the chain and swung it like a flail, battering Gortz's head back two, three times. One of the fittings came away, embedded in the side of the mutant's skull. Hot blood sprayed down over Lysander's face.

The grip on his sword arm loosened. Lysander pulled his hand free and rammed the chainblade into Gortz's upper chest, forcing down the motor's activation stud. The chaintooth growled as they churned through the bone and muscle of Gortz's ribcage. Lysander forced the chainsword down, sawing through sternum and ribs.

Gortz's head hung limp, the second jaws yawing wide and the tongue lolling. Lysander pushed Gortz off him and made sure of the kill with a thrust through that mutant head. He looked down at the book hanging by the chain he held in his other hand.

Being A Description Of Malodrax And Its Foulness, read the title. Beneath that was branded on the leather cover the stylised 'I' of the Inquisition.

A Space Marine chainblade and a volume on this world apparently written by an inquisitor. Twin omens. It wasn't much, but Lysander would take it. And the book itself was hefty enough to serve as a reasonable weapon until he could find a better replacement. Lysander wiped the back of his hand across his face to get the worst of the blood off it, and walked around the drift of fallen debris to see the path the siege engine had taken through the body of the fortress. A crumbling tunnel had been driven

through a mass of wreckage and destruction, and Lysander could still hear the rumbling of the siege idol's engines as it continued on its journey.

The Iron Warriors would definitely be down to investigate the destruction, whether word had reached them of Lysander or not. He ran down the siege engine's path, noting the glimmer of ruddy light up ahead that could be sunlight. A wave of ashen air, tasting of dry earth and smoke, reached him, and he quickened his pace as the sounds of pursuers came from the vault behind him.

His first glimpse of Malodrax was of a grey-brown smudge under a discoloured sky, the siege idol rumbling off towards the broken horizon, two moons staring down through a mask of clouds like mismatched eyes. It was not an inviting landscape, but it was better than what he was leaving behind.

Lysander tightened his grip on his chainblade, and fled into Malodrax.



7

‘The natural history of Malodrax is beyond understanding without first abandoning the principles of cause and effect. A creature might devolve into a new form, the fossils of its ancestors far exceeding it in sophistication. Others are born through sheer randomness, from the coalescing of raw warpstuff into a form that matches the definitions of life, from sheer bloody-mindedness, as if to prove that life can exist where there should be only death.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The sphinx that guarded the palace of Shalhadar fought well. It flew down on wings of stained glass, the light of Malodrax’s sun shimmering in a blinding rainbow of colours, its four front legs each sheathed in gilded claws. Its massive stone-clad chest and impassive face turned aside bolter fire as it descended, holes battered through its gold and lapis headdress. It landed on the bridge that crossed the canal before the gates of the palace and roared, a terrible sound that shattered the pyramid’s grand windows

and sent the golden gargoyles fleeing from their perches among the city's rooftops.

First Sergeant Kaderic called out the sphinx, taking on the role of Dorn's champion on this world. The sphinx, in turn, singled him out, and Kaderic dived and rolled between its enormous paws as it tried to crush him down into the bridge's jewel-studded surface.

Kaderic drove his chainsword into the sphinx's paw, hacking off a chunk of stony flesh. The sphinx reared back and, honour satisfied, Chaplain Lycaon gave the order to open fire. Squad Gorvetz opened up into the sphinx, blasting chunks from its body. The sphinx rampaged into the strike force, batting one Imperial Fist aside and forcing another down its gullet before the Imperial Fists charged in.

Lysander looked it in the eye. The sphinx returned the look, and even though it was surely dead, it smiled. Its lips, smeared with the blood of Lysander's battle-brother, cracked as they were forced into the unfamiliar expression. Lysander's chest flared with anger and he shouldered his way into the fray to drive his chainblade into the sphinx's side.

The sphinx said nothing. Even as Lycaon vaulted up onto its neck and hacked his crozius into the back of its neck, it fixed its eyes on Lysander in silence. Lysander grabbed a handhold on the side of its face and drove his chainblade into its eye, the teeth grinding through glass and stone. Thick, oily fluid sprayed out, something like blood and something like machine oil. The sphinx fell onto its side and Squad Kaderic fell on it like hunters butchering a kill, hacking the sphinx into gory chunks as the bridge was flooded with its blood.

'What was it?' asked Lycaon, when the sphinx was dismembered and only the jewelled gates lay between the strike force and the palace of Shalhadar.

'I know not,' said Lysander. 'A daemon. The guardian of the gates.'

Lycaon ordered the strike force to make ready to breach the gates of the palace. Space Marines stacked up beside the gates as Techmarine Kho, his

Land Speeders hovering at the other end of the bridge to watch for enemies approaching, affixed magnetic breaching charges to the doors.

‘It saw you,’ said Brother Halaestus. He had walked up behind Lysander who took his place in the stack of Imperial Fists ready to storm through the gate. ‘It knew you.’

It wasn’t quite anger in Halaestus’s face. It was a questioning, an aggression.

‘This world knows me,’ replied Lysander. ‘Its creatures know me. Shalhadar learned of me, no doubt. Few escape from Kulgarde, and fewer still go back.’ He turned to the gates, but Halaestus grabbed his arm and turned him round again.

‘Did you come back for us alone?’ demanded Halaestus. ‘Or did you have help?’

‘Breach!’ yelled Techmarine Kho. The Imperial Fists backed against the pyramid wall as the charged detonated, blowing the gates off their hinges and locks. They fell in and before they had hit the floor the Imperial Fists were charging into the shadows beyond, fingers on triggers and chainswords in hand.

‘Shalhadar!’ yelled Lycaon. ‘The eye of the Emperor reaches you even here! Even in this foul place you are not beyond His hand!’

Inside the palace, the shadows resolved into the pyramid’s interior. Pastel-coloured silken drapes and intricate tapestries of intertwined bodies hung from walls tiled in a mosaicked riot of colour. Geometric tiles picked out infinitely complex designs on the floor, shimmering fractals that baffled the eye and the brain. The high curving ceilings, their petal-shaped panels interlocking high above, were covered in frescoes of dancing daemons draped in human skins, gambolling across heaps of flayed bodies. The place dripped with a lustrous corruption, enough to break and bewitch a weak mind.

Curving staircases swept upwards, leading to upper half-floors and balconies criss-crossing the pyramid's interior. 'Gorvetz!' ordered Lycaon. 'Scout above and cover us! Kaderic, with me!'

'Nothing up ahead,' voxed Kaderic, whose tactical squad was at the head of the strike force. His men swept their bolter sights across side chambers and galleries branching off in every direction. There were podiums for sermonising, surrounded by seats with spikes and restraints in the armrests. Baths of steaming perfumed water. Walls racked with implements for paring and skinning, with gold and ivory handles arrayed like glittering waterfalls of blades. But no enemies. 'We're alone in here.'

'You know better than that, First Sergeant,' replied Lycaon. Overhead armoured boots clattered on mosaic tiles as Squad Gorvetz got into position to cover the rest of the strike force from above. 'Lysander? What do you know of Shalhadar?'

'Lord of this city, absolute tyrant of his people. Disloyal thoughts are a crime.'

'Do you know how to kill him?' asked Lycaon.

'Cut him into pieces and burn them.'

'That is what the people of Malodrax say?'

'No,' replied Lysander. 'But that works on everything.'

The palace shuddered and a ripple of power ran across its every surface, sending sparks shimmering up Lysander's spine. The two squads on the ground floor drew together, every bolter trained on the corners from which an enemy might leap.

'The opening act left something to be desired,' came a voice echoing from all corners of the pyramid. It was drawling and arrogant, with an inhuman resonance that demanded respect in spite of the scorn that dripped from it. 'But that was just a taster, deliberately sour so our expectations were lowered. The death of my sphinx, rather dull. The blood

in the streets quite unnecessary. But what follows will be the more delicious for it, will it not?’

‘I will not match words with a foul-born daemon!’ yelled Lycaon in reply. ‘An Imperial Fist has a tongue of steel and a voice of gunfire!’

‘Come, will you not allow me at least some drama?’ came the reply. ‘No agonising with the struggle of inflicting death? No conflict between duty and fear? But no, you are not like those who come to Malodrax as pilgrims to my majesty. You have not arrived in my city to seek something within yourselves, to kneel at the foot of a mighty throne. No, your tales are quite different. Your weakness is not worn on the outside. It is deep inside you. This second act will see that weakness being extracted from your flesh. I think I shall enjoy this production.’

Music began, a sick, pulsating skirl that brought the awful daemoniac music on board the *Shield of Valour* to the front of Lysander’s memory. Onto a balcony above the strike force somersaulted a lone figure in bright, clashing garb, with slashed sleeves and a hooded red and blue checked cloak, like a fool from a noble’s court. The fool bowed and spread his hands, then straightened up and clapped briskly as if to signal the beginning of a stage act.

Chaplain Lycaon shot down the fool, and as far as Lysander could see from the body that fell from the balcony, it was human. The music changed tone to a fanfare and suddenly, everything was movement.

From the tapestries unravelled the shapes of cavorting daemons, their forms indistinct and malleable as if they had been picked out from only one angle in golden thread and in reality they were not all there. Shapes blistered up from the frescoes overhead, the painted daemons now come to life, dripping with colour as if they were composed of an artist’s paint that had not dried. They left bright hand- and footprints on the ceiling as they scurried.

Squad Gorvetz hammered fire up into the daemons swarming towards them. Heavy bolters blew slabs of painted plaster down from the ceiling and the squad's heavy plasma gun left smouldering craters where it hit home. Bolter fire joined the heavy weapons, Gorvetz yelling orders to split up into fireteams and catch the daemons in a crossfire.

From the floor leapt fractal dancers, their shapes spiralling and breaking apart as they flipped and twirled. They defied the eye, leaving trailers of swirling colour wherever they went.

‘It’s a ruse,’ said Lysander as the dancers and tapestry daemons closed. ‘A performance. He wants to tie us down here. We have to push on through this.’

‘First things first,’ replied Lycaon, his crozius’s power field shimmering into life.

The Space Marines of Squad Kaderic were caught by the assault. Bolter fire blasted a tapestry daemon apart, spraying multicoloured blood where its impossible form was ruptured. Kaderic dived into the fray as he always did, and Lysander lost sight of him in the coil of a fractal dancer that somersaulted around him as he struck about it with his chainblade. Lysander’s own blade cut off the limb of a fallen fresco daemon that thudded into the floor beside him – it was a vivid red, its body the hub for a dozen limbs, amber-coloured eyes set into liquid sockets like polished gemstones in a pool of blood.

Lycaon finished off the daemon with his crozius, splitting it in two. It liquefied and the paint used to create it spread across the floor.

‘Imperial Fists!’ ordered Lycaon. ‘We cannot tarry here! Shalhadar fears us and sends his lackeys to slow us down, but we will falter not one step! Onwards, my brothers! Onwards!’

A daemon rushed at Lysander, the threads of its body unravelling and reforming into claws to rend and hack. Lysander caught the claw on his

shoulder guard and threw the daemon aside, trusting the blades and bolters of his fellow Imperial Fists to finish it off.

Ahead the pyramid was changing, the walls bowing out and balconies receding to form a vast auditorium centred on a semicircular stage. Background flats fell down onto the stage – a galaxy, a castle, heaps of bodies, distant mountains, all daubed with paint. Sparks fell in a burning rain and great globes of light flared into life above the stage, casting shafts of hard silvery light.

‘The stage!’ yelled Lysander. ‘He exists in the story! He can be brought forth to die if the story is acted out!’ Lycaon and Kaderic were fighting their way towards Lysander, following him in the direction of the stage.

Banks of seating rose from the sloping floor like rows of teeth from a jaw. The ceiling soared up impossibly high, studded with royal boxes and half-formed statues like drowners breaching the marble surface. Darkness ran down the walls, the stage drawing the harsh light to it as if jealous. Lysander vaulted the seating even as the statues broke away from the walls, stone limbs broken at the joints to give them motion, animated by sparks of black fire dripping from their eye sockets.

Lysander smashed one aside. A hard stony hand grabbed him by the throat and wrestled him to the floor. Lysander was on his back before he could get his bearings, the blank stone face with its mouth gaping wide drooling black flame. Marble fingers found Lysander’s mouth, gripping his jaw and forcing his own mouth open.

A crescent of burning light arced across Lysander’s field of view, scorching a crimson slash onto his retinas. He rolled aside as the weight went off him and saw Chaplain Lycaon’s follow-up swing taking the animated statue’s head off, his crozius slicing through marble as if it were no stronger than flesh.

Lysander said nothing as Lycaon offered his hand. Lysander took it and was pulled back to his feet.

Dozens of the statues were crawling down the walls. Imperial Fists making it into the theatre were sniping them down as they advanced down the aisles towards the stage. Kaderic was leading them, crying out the name of Dorn and the fallen forefathers of the Imperial Fists.

‘And so,’ said Prince Shalhadar, ‘the protagonist walks from the wings. And every story needs an end.’

Lysander reached the stage and swung himself up onto it. Chaplain Lycaon was beside him. First Sergeant Kaderic got there at the same time.

The light falling on the three Imperial Fists was fierce enough to burn. The rest of Squad Kaderic fighting in the auditorium were rendered shadows on shadows by the contrast.

‘You know more about this Shalhadar,’ said Lycaon. ‘Willing to share anything further, captain?’

Any answer from Lysander was cut short as the scenery was consumed in a blast of multicoloured flame that rushed into the air above the stage and from which strode the form of Prince Shalhadar the Veiled.

The idealised human form, as chiselled by sculptors from one side of the galaxy to the other, was rendered in solid gold. It was achingly beautiful, painful to look at, with a face moulded into an expression of wisdom and sorrow, majesty and sympathy. A mortal sculptor could never match it. The geometry was too perfect, the emotion too vividly written, to be the product of an artist’s hand. It was forged in the chill fires of the warp, where the thing that was Shalhadar had conjured its body to enthrall and bewitch the humans it desired to serve it.

Shalhadar was three times the height of a man. He had wings of feathered light. Stained glass was embedded in his golden form, in panels in his abdomen and chest depicting what a mortal mind might make of great powers of the warp – a knot of flesh and limbs, a great burning eye, a host of flying devils. His eyes were glass, deep green and blue, and a light

shone through every panel illuminating the air around him as if he swam in a sea of colour.

In his hand he held a mace, its head a globe of filigreed gold containing a white flame like a caged sun. His other was fitted with gilded blades on each finger. He wore a cloth of crimson and blue around his waist, flowing in the warm incense-scented wind that accompanied the prince.

Prince Shalhadar's golden feet touched the boards of the stage as he descended.

Lysander realised that he was standing watching the daemon – not laying about him with bolter and chainsword, not rallying his battle-brothers to join him in killing Shalhadar. He was just standing there and watching him, and he could not move.

He imagined being bathed in pain, a sea of fire around him that would get worse and worse unless he could move. He imagined his mind a wall of diamond through which no influence could reach.

His hand twitched around the hilt of his chainsword.

'A fine entrance,' said Chaplain Lycaon. 'How many have fallen at your feet when they see it, daemon? How many minds did you break?'

Lysander forced his head around. Lycaon was grimacing, fighting to move. Kaderic, too.

Shalhadar leaned down close, his too-perfect, shining face a few centimetres from Lycaon's.

'As you reckon numbers, mortal, they are beyond counting. As the warp reckons them, but a drop in an ocean of obsession. But a whisper in the hurricane.'

Kaderic roared and brought his chainsaw down in a clumsy, swingeing blow, such as would shame a novice handling the weapon for the first time. Shalhadar, without looking, caught the chainsword in his clawed hand and turned, a smile on his gilded lips, towards First Sergeant Kaderic.

‘And which role do you play?’ said the daemon prince. ‘The Fool? The Master? The Misbegotten One? Everyone has a role in the tale. Everyone plays it whether they know it or not.’ The daemon cradled Kaderic’s face in his claw, and pointed to Lysander with his mace. ‘And your captain here has already played out plenty of scenes of his own. Do you know, First Sergeant, Chaplain Lycaon, the role Lysander took on while he languished on Malodrax? Do you know what he has done?’

A shot hammered out and Prince Shalhadar’s head snapped to the side. A circular dent had been blasted into his temple. Through the blaze of light hovered the ruined face of Brother Halaestus, armour scored and smoking. Though Lysander could not see the mangled remains of the daemons he had cut his way through to get to the stage, there could be no doubt they lay behind him.

‘No!’ yelled Shalhadar. ‘The story must be told!’

He swung his mace in a great arc that would have crushed Halaestus had he not thrown himself through the scenery flats before it smashed through the stage. Shalhadar grabbed Halaestus around the waist and held him up in the air, about to dash him back down against the stage.

Shalhadar’s perfect face was blemished. The enthralling spell was broken. Lysander moved as if through glue, but he moved, and he dived at Shalhadar’s back leg. Heavy, cold metal met him as he threw his full weight against Shalhadar. The daemon prince dropped to one knee, letting out a yell of anger that sounded like a great tolling bell.

Lycaon leapt onto the daemon prince, finding a handhold among the gemstones and glass studding Shalhadar’s shoulder, so he was face to face with him. He drew back his crozius and slammed it down.

The power field discharged and split Shalhadar’s torso from his shoulder down to his abdomen, shattered glass and jewels scattering in a bright rain across the stage. A fractured rainbow of light sprayed out, a multicoloured torrent of power that fountained from Shalhadar’s sundered body. Lycaon

was thrown off Shalhadar by the force of it, and Lysander just had time to see the Chaplain sprawling across the stage before the sheer madness erupting from Shalhadar overwhelmed his senses.

The question of what Shalhadar the Veiled actually was could never be answered. It was, like everything born of the warp, immune to logic. The gilded body was a vessel for the real daemon, symbolic of Shalhadar's true nature but not identical to it. The daemon itself was an essence, a mind, a mass of thought, something incorporeal by human reckoning but a force as real as anything could be in the warp. Daemons could take on an infinite variety of shapes in realspace, and Shalhadar had no shape at all.

It was Shalhadar who saturated the theatre of his palace, flooding it with the mass of emotion and knowledge that comprised his true self. Lysander was blinded with colour and deafened by noise, swimming as if in an ocean surrounded by it.

He fought like a swimmer trying to reach the surface, but there was nothing to push against, no sense of direction. It was not a physical struggle that would show him the way.

Lysander turned his focus inwards. It was a technique taught early in a novice's conversion to a Space Marine, because it was in a state of internal contemplation that a novice was receptive to the hypno-doctrination that filled his mind with the Chapter's accumulated battle-lore. His mind fought against the sensory bedlam. Part of his mind, the part left over from the man he might have been had he never become an Imperial Fist, demanded that he curl into a ball and let unconsciousness sweep over him. But that part had been quiet for a long time.

His surroundings resolved into an ocean, burning light below, moonless dark above. Lysander got his head above the surface. He knew this was not real – that in some sense he was still on the stage in Shalhadar's pyramid. But if he let that reach the forefront of his mind, he would sink and pass out.

The ocean churned. Gilded limbs broke the surface as a hundred Space Marines fought to stay afloat. The eyepieces of their white-painted helmets were shattered and they struggled blindly, thrashing at random to stave off a fate they did not understand.

A great looming presence in the darkness dominated the horizon. A mass of boiling rage, like the smouldering mountain of burning ash from a volcano. Twin cauldrons of fire roared into life, and the ocean of light turned a dark red with their reflection. Shalhadar's eyes narrowed as they fell on Lysander.

Lysander found rocks beneath his hands and feet. He hauled himself up onto a rocky shore, a scattering of islands just breaking the surface.

'Lycaon!' he shouted. 'Chaplain! First Sergeant!'

'Give me an enemy,' said a strained and hoarse voice beside Lysander, 'with a heart I can cut out and a head I can sever. Not this pit of lies.' First Sergeant Kaderic lay on the rocks, his armour scored and battered.

'Stay strong. Stay focused, brother. The daemon lies and evades us, but it is never invulnerable. It is never beyond justice.'

'The First?' said Shalhadar, indicating the Space Marines drowning in the endless ocean.

'My memory of them,' said Lysander. 'The daemon brings it forth to break me. It will not work.'

Shalhadar swarmed overhead, his dark mass lit from within by the flames of his eyes. There was something of that arrogance there, something of the tyrant who broke men's minds so he had a legion of them to worship him. If he had a true form, it was this – the raw desire for power, overwhelming and dark.

Lightning crashed down. Kaderic got to his feet and held his chainsword, still smouldering with daemon blood, up to the sky. 'Will you kill us with deceit, daemon?' he demanded. 'There is no lie that ever pierced a Space Marine's heart! Face us with steel or skulk back to the warp!'

Shalhadar's bellow was a crash of thunder and the blackness fell, roaring down onto Lysander and Kaderic. Lysander drove his chainblade up and felt it cutting through substance. Ropy black limbs swarmed around him and he cut about him, snapping and rending. Somewhere nearby Kaderic was roaring as he did the same thing, spitting curses at the daemon prince that constricted and writhed all around him.

The darkness split and tore. Lysander felt the blood-slicked boards of the stage under his feet. He spat out a mouthful of rancid blood and tore his chainblade free of Shalhadar.

Shalhadar's golden body lay on its side, its torso split open. The rubbery black mass of the prince's body writhed from the statue, its coils wrapped around Chaplain Lycaon, who stood on the fallen statue. Lycaon brought his crozius arcanum up, the power field crackling around its blade, and brought it down in a bright arc of lightning.

In a burst of light Shalhadar was blasted open, shredded and dissolved in a gale of light and noise. Lysander was thrown onto his back beside Kaderic, who like him was slathered in Shalhadar's black-grey blood.

The glare in Lysander's eyes died down. He clambered back to his feet and helped Kaderic up. What remained of Shalhadar the Veiled was a few scraps of charred gold, in a splintered and burned hole in the stage. Chaplain Lycaon lay beside the wreck, stirring as he grabbed his fallen weapon.

Lysander and Kaderic pulled Lycaon to his feet.

'It is dead,' said Kaderic.

'It is banished,' replied Lycaon. 'Imperial Fists! The beast is defeated. Let us be gone from this place.'

The withdrawal from Shalhadar's city took a few minutes. While reaching the palace the Imperial Fists had fought through hundreds of daemons sent from Shalhadar's court to stop them, but with the daemon prince abolished the resistance was gone.

Instead, there was a terrible wailing, coming from every doorway and window. In the street, in a gold-plated gutter, lay one of the city's citizens, curled up and mewling. Like many inhabitants he wore leather straps over pallid, pinkish skin, and he was marked with scars from whips and manacles. Whatever rites of passage the people of this city went through, it required a long period of torment and incarceration.

Lysander passed by the creature. It paid no attention to the Imperial Fists marching past.

‘These people have lost their god,’ said First Sergeant Kaderic beside him. ‘This is the desolation that Chaos brings.’

‘There will be another one for them,’ replied Lysander. ‘There is no shortage of would-be gods on this world.’

‘Brother Lysander,’ came Lycaon’s voice over the vox-link. ‘Join me at our head.’

Lysander quickened his pace to where Lycaon led the Imperial Fists, moving rapidly down the main thoroughfare towards the gate through which they had entered the city. They would be gone long before news of Shalhadar’s death reached the city’s forces outside the gates, and would be vanished into Malodrax’s badlands before the prince’s army had a chance to return and seek revenge.

‘The daemon,’ said Lycaon when Lysander was alongside him, ‘is made of lies as we are made of flesh and bone. It is a being solely of deceit. Whenever it speaks it lies.’

‘So have we been taught by the lessons of Dorn,’ said Lysander. ‘And so we have all seen.’

‘Shalhadar’s lie was the story,’ continued Lycaon. ‘A story is a sort of lie. He lived in a world that was not real, where everything obeyed the rules of his story. Even his destruction was a part of that. Perhaps he saw himself as a tragic hero brought low by the random chance of the galaxy.’

‘Or perhaps,’ said Lysander, ‘this is the end of a first act, and he will return in a thousand years for the finale.’

‘Quite,’ said Lycaon. ‘And he lied to me, as well, right down to the final moment. Daemons have sought to do the same, of course, as has every enemy capable of a man’s speech who thought it might do him good. Shalhadar turned to me, just as my crozius came down and he told me that he was surprised it was not you who laid him low.’

‘Me?’ asked Lysander.

‘You said you were famous on this world. Could Shalhadar have heard of you?’

‘There is no doubt,’ said Lysander. ‘He probably knew most of what happens on this planet. He could scarcely have remained a power on Malodrax if not.’

‘And his words were intended to place doubt in my mind, that when you first came to Malodrax you somehow played a part in Shalhadar’s story that you have not told us, as was his suggestion when we first encountered him?’

‘Again, Chaplain, there is no doubt.’

The strike force reached the gates, still in ruins from when they had blown it off its mountings. They were marching now through the detritus of their battle with Shalhadar’s daemon court, and the ground was littered with shell casings and scraps of arms and armour. The daemons themselves had dissolved away, leaving no more than bloodstains and scorch marks. Around the gate lay the city’s exiles – they had run into the city as soon as the Imperial Fists were clear, but had been stunned into senselessness by the destruction of their god. They lay with eyes open, staring vacantly, as if there could be nothing in their world any more with Shalhadar gone.

‘A crude lie, would you not say?’ said Lycaon as the strike force marched through the shadow of the gateway. ‘No great finesse. No

devastating stroke to leave us confused and in doubt. Surely not the finest work a being like Shalhadar has ever wrought.'

'Shalhadar was faced with a superior force that could destroy him,' said Lysander. 'He was desperate. For all the daemon claims to be beyond human weaknesses, he can still know fear. He was afraid, and he clutched at what hope he could.'

A procession was crossing the road behind the strike force, ignoring the Imperial Fists. They were broken and weeping, hundreds of them, citizens of Shalhadar commemorating their dead god with blades and whips. They cut their skin and that of their neighbours, and when one fell from exhaustion or misery he was beaten into the ground by those who walked over him. One threw his head back and screamed, and the others turned on him as if he had begged them to, rending his flesh with their fingers and teeth to drown out their misery with blood.

Smoke coiled up from the gilded towers as others marked Shalhadar's death by setting light to everything around them. Shattered glass and screams of pain mingled with the cries of despair.

'This city will tear itself apart,' said Lysander.

'Good,' said Lycaon. 'Then we have done some righteousness here.'

The Land Speeders buzzed over the wall as the strike force passed through the gateway and out of Shalhadar's city. They had done there what Space Marines did – they descended on a place, left it a beheaded wreck, and never returned.



8

‘An inquisitor learns not to speak of his acolytes for either good or ill, for he must accept that they will come and go as the attrition of his work claims their bodies and minds. Yet I cannot allow a man of the calibre of Kalastar Venn to go unsung, he who served me as shield-bearer and master of arms for three decades, who was claimed by nocturnal predators while standing vigil over our camp. Nor can I wash my hands of the fate of my Interrogator, Talaya, who deserved not to suffer betrayal – and yet had I not paid her to the tollkeeper, I would never have glimpsed the battlements of Kulgarde, and I am certain she would have accepted the sacrifice.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The storm that raged across the badlands carried handfuls of flinty shards that bit at Lysander’s face and back as he struggled through it. Malodrax knew he was there, he was sure of it, and it had thrown down shearing winds to grind him down and leave him a skeleton buried in a drift of rocks. He held up a hand in front of his face as he struggled towards the

dark smudge that was all he could make of the landscape around him, and his palm was slashed open. He wore only layers of rags and the heavy hooded cloak he had found to disguise himself in Kulgarde, and they now clung to him in bloody strips.

He could die out here, if Malodrax decided he would. In the sky through the seething darkness a moon shone yellow-white, narrowed like a mocking eye. He could hear laughter on the howls of the wind. The ground was broken under his feet, constantly seeking to trip him up, and if he fell out here, exposed, he could be dead where he lay before the storm relented.

The ground fell away beneath his feet. His next step sent him tumbling into a ravine, head over feet down a slope of broken rock. More cuts opened up on his knees and elbows before he came to rest at the bottom of the gulley, down in the dirt.

Lysander had made it out of Kulgarde with two possessions aside from his rags. One was the book, and the other was the Imperial Fists chainsword. That represented everything he had in the galaxy. He was laid low, battered, bloody, alone and on his knees. He was everything a Space Marine should not be. A Space Marine was towering, noble, the reflection of the Emperor himself, and an Imperial Fist was even more than that – he was the legacy of Dorn, the continuing will of his primarch. On Malodrax Rogal Dorn was cut to pieces, weak, stranded and all but unarmed.

Lysander forced the thoughts out of his mind. A Space Marine did not know fear – the galaxy at large knew that. But more than that, he must never know despair.

The gulley ran in both directions, and Lysander could not see where it ended – it seemed to cut across the landscape, a deep scar dealt by some past catastrophe. He kicked some loose rocks aside and saw the brittle remains of bones there, gathered like trash in the corners. He saw a human jawbone, and the cranium of something that was not human. There was no telling how many ways this place had to kill someone. Lysander had to

keep moving. And of the choice of two directions, the best bet was the one that took him further from the fortress of Kulgarde.

In the depths of the warren squatted the mother of the brood. The brood hatched from her belly, bursting from cysts in her skin, and they existed to feed her. From their substance she created more offspring and consumed them in turn, a cycle of life and death she had presided over for ten thousand years. She was born from the black blood of Malodrax, the filth of pure corruption that bubbled up from its depths, the pus of an infection that took root when the planet first felt the touch of the warp. The brood mother was everything that Malodrax was.

The first Lysander saw of her was the shadow she cast on the wall of her cavern. The place was hung with trophies and trinkets – bones, weapons, polished gemstones, hanks of filthy hair, rotted hunter's trophies, fragments of eggshells and ancient fossils. Her shadow was at once bloated and spindly, with a massively swollen torso and abdomen, skinny arms and a long, crooked neck supporting a head that hung low like that of a vulture. The shadow played across her collection, flaring with the guttering of the fire that burned in its pit before her.

‘A shelterer from the storm,’ said the brood mother. ‘A fugitive from the embrace of our world. From her touch you have fled like a whipped child and now you come to me. Do you fancy my embrace to be more tender?’

‘There is something I seek,’ said Lysander.

‘Of course there is,’ said the brood mother. She pulled a squirming chunk of flesh from one of the glistening pods on her abdomen, and deftly spitted it on a sharpened stick. It squealed and flopped around, and the brood mother pushed the stick into the dirt, holding the morsel over the fire. Its flesh bubbled and spat. ‘You smell of another world. There is a land far away where the people worship a dead god, and where that god's servants police their very thoughts. They fear Chaos such that they bow under a law that crushes them to death. A strange place, I have heard. Are you from that world, traveller?’

‘What do you care where I am from?’ replied Lysander. ‘You are the brood mother. I am not the only one in this cave seeking something.’

The brood mother smiled and her face split open from ear to ear, exposing the sinews of her skull and the grey-brown stumps of her back teeth. ‘You know of me? Oh, how flattering. Come closer. The fire does not reach you back there.’

Lysander took a few steps forward, into the glow of the fire. The blood on his hands and face glinted like jewels, where the accelerated clotting agents of a Space Marine had crystallised it into ruby clusters.

‘Now that is something I have not seen for a long time,’ said the brood mother. ‘Something handsome.’ She pulled the stick out of the fire and examined the charred specimen skewered on it. ‘How long has it been since I had some new blood? My young always taste the same. I cannot remember when they last had a new father. You are right, servant of the corpse-god. There is something I want.’ She ran a spindly hand, its fingers like spider’s webs, over the greyish, blistered flesh of her torso.

‘This,’ said Lysander, ‘is all I have to give you.’ He took from its makeshift sling on his back the Imperial Fists chainsword. It was clotted with blood from killing the overseer in Kulgarde, and its casing was dented and scored with use.

‘That little thing?’ said the brood mother. ‘That is not the weapon I had in mind.’

‘I read of you,’ continued Lysander levelly. ‘You are the crossroads of all knowledge on Malodrax. There is nothing you do not know. I know you were once beautiful, and that you sought out a god of the warp as your consort. I know you tried to betray him, but his guard was not down as you feared, and so he cursed you. If you will turn on your god for some fleeting moment of power, he decreed, then you will always take the lesser of any deal offered to you. Is that not so?’

‘What lies are these?’ spat the brood mother. Her body quivered with rage.

‘The lies of Inquisitor Golrukhan,’ said Lysander. ‘A collector of legends of Malodrax. He stood before you and bargained your story from you. Did he not?’

The brood mother’s face creased as she tried to think of some pithy reply. But there was nothing. ‘He was not so handsome,’ she said. ‘He called me abomination. He called me ugly! I was glad to see the back of him, that limp little whelping. What did he have to offer me?’ She rummaged in the piles of trash behind her, spilling skulls and random scraps of weaponry and armour. She took out an embroidered glove, once burgundy with golden stitching but now spoiled with mould and dirt. ‘This is all he had! The last he possessed of some creature named Talaya. That is what I took in return for my story. Would that he had asked anything else! Alas, that a mere man knows my shame! I hope my world killed him in the end.’

‘But that is your curse,’ said Lysander. ‘You have to make a deal.’

‘Only for that which is valuable!’ retorted the brood mother sharply. ‘I can only take something you hold dear! No piece of random trash, hear me! It must be something you value, something you will grieve to have lost, or there will be no deal!’

Lysander held up the chainsword. The light glinted on its teeth, where the edges showed through the dried blood. ‘This was the weapon of my battle-brother,’ he said. ‘He now lies either dead or imprisoned in the dungeons of Kulgarde. This is all I have of him. More than that, it is a weapon of a Space Marine, of my people. It is a symbol of what we are. Without it, I am less a warrior. That is what I offer you.’

‘Hmm.’ The brood mother peered at the chainsword. Idly, she slid her young off the blackened stick with her teeth and chewed on it. Green-black

blood ran down her scrawny neck. ‘Sit,’ she said, indicating a patch of earth in front of the fire.

Lysander sat down. The brood mother towered over him, her spidery shadows flitting all across the walls and ceiling of her cavern. Up close the smell of her was worse, sickly sweet and full of rot.

‘What do you seek?’ she asked, a new graveness in her voice as if this were the opening line of a prayer.

‘I want to kill Kraegon Thul,’ said Lysander.

The brood mother cackled, spilling scraps of bloody meat from her mouth. ‘Do you know, you are the second one of your kind to ask that? That ugly little inquisitor man, he said the same thing! To excise the cancer, he put it, to lance the tumour that sickened Malodrax. As if there was but one heart to the corruption, to be cut away! And now you seek the same thing.’

‘That inquisitor was doing his duty. I have that same duty, and it drives me as it did him. But I seek revenge as well.’

‘No man can speak of revenge,’ replied the brood mother, ‘if he expects to walk away from it.’

‘I would accept death,’ replied Lysander, ‘if it meant looking into Thul’s dead eye before I go.’

The brood mother’s head hung low over the fire as she peered more closely at Lysander. ‘You did not find this place by hiding from the storm,’ she said.

‘And you do not give me what I ask from the goodness of your heart,’ replied Lysander.

The brood mother steepled her fingers and thought for a long moment, the light of the fire playing across the abomination that was her face. ‘You cannot do it alone,’ she said. ‘But you have no allies on this world. You must make sacrifices and they will not be of your flesh. The question you will ask yourself, servant of the corpse-god, is how far you will go for

victory. What will you do to win? No doubt you would reply ‘anything’, but it is not that simple for one such as you. You have these... these cages in which you imprison yourselves. These principles. These moralities your people force into your minds. You will have to fight those long before you get your hands on Warsmith Thul. Long before.’

‘I accept that.’

The brood mother waved a hand. ‘Of course you do,’ she said. ‘You do now. But you have not seen what you must do. I will not say I can perceive every moment that will come, but I can see the way the path winds. And of course, you will ignore any warnings I might give. You want to be shown the way. Well then! The path winds to the city of Shalhadar the Veiled.’

The brood mother’s eyes shifted as she focused far away. ‘He courted me once. It was a lie. Everything he says is a lie, excepting that which you expect to be a lie, in which case it will be a truth that could destroy you to believe. He almost destroyed me, and I will never forgive him, but still I imagine those dark tendrils around me! Those golden eyes on my body!’

‘How do I reach the city?’ asked Lysander quickly.

‘From this warren, westwards. The third moon should be on the horizon. Follow it. You will see the spires of the city long before you reach it. Shalhadar does not hide his glories. He is proud, a pride which Malodrax has tried to grind down, but the Veiled One has raised his spires high in spite. There is no other world where one such as Shalhadar could thrive so. It hates him, but it needs him, for without an object of its hate it would shrivel away into one more asteroid floating in the void.’

‘Will he prove an ally?’ asked Lysander.

‘Now that, servant of the corpse-god, I cannot tell you. Shalhadar needs to be served and he finds a use for all who walk through the gates of his city. That is all.’

‘Then I shall journey to the city of Shalhadar,’ said Lysander. ‘Whatever happens there, happens, so long as it brings me closer to Kraegon Thul.’

The brood mother tilted her head, listening. ‘The storm blows still,’ she said. ‘It will not be over for many hours. It would be a rash creature that did not take what shelter he could find. Will you not stay here, until it dies away?’

Lysander stood. ‘I cannot tarry here while my brothers are captive,’ he said. ‘Every hour that goes by gives Thul another chance to have them on an executioner’s block.’

The brood mother held out her hands in a pleading gesture. ‘Please,’ she said.

Lysander turned and walked towards the cave entrance, the flames casting shadows across his back.

‘Then you should know,’ said the brood mother, ‘that I do not eat all my young.’

Shadows leapt, sharp and flickering. From pools of them scuttled insectoid creatures, each waist-high to a Space Marine, with compound eyes that glimmered in the firelight. Their bladed mandibles snickered and their chitin talons rattled on the stone floor as they made for Lysander. Dozens of them were suddenly all around him, whickering blades lashing at his legs and torso. One leapt from the ceiling and onto his shoulder. His hands reached up and felt hard limbs and a pulpy central mass, pulsing and oozing like the brood mother’s abdomen. He ripped a leg off the creature and threw it behind him into the fire.

The brood mother shrieked as her young squirmed and squealed, flesh spitting in the fire. The flames leapt higher as Lysander struck around him, unarmed save for the heavy book he still carried. He slammed the book down, crushing the head of one creature, and yanked another one off the ground by a leg before slamming it into the floor.

‘Take his arms!’ cried the brood mother. ‘Take his legs! But leave the rest for me!’

Lysander stamped on a leg and felt it snap. He swung the book and knocked three or four of the creatures away from him, and broke into a run for the exit.

The cries of the brood mother followed him. Those young he could not outpace he grabbed as they tried to climb up his body, and tore them apart or dashed them to pulp against the walls. The warren wound this way and that and Lysander ran almost blind, striking out with every pace against the brood mother's young that swarmed from every bolthole and side passage.

He emerged into what passed for fresh air on Malodrax, into the roar of the storm. The warren emptied into a valley with the worst of the winds shrieking overhead. One of the brood mother's young clung to Lysander's back, talons digging into his skin. He grabbed a handful of its moist bristly abdomen and tore it off.

It was a fat wingless insect of unsurpassed ugliness. Its body was a wrinkled sack of entrails, and its limbs were cased in dark-grey exoskeleton. Its head was a nest of mandibles with two huge compound eyes that glittered in the faint light reaching down through the hail of stone. It squealed pathetically, as if begging him not to kill it now he had it at his mercy.

Lysander scrambled up the valley slope and held the insect above his head, into the worst of the stone shards. Its compound eyes burst and its body was shredded, hanging in deflated fragments. Lysander threw the remains up and the wind snatched it away.

Down by the horizon was a pale smudge, the moon of which the brood mother had spoken. That way lay Shalhadar's city – if the brood mother had told the truth. Whatever he found there, he would twist it into a way to kill Kraegon Thul, or he would die trying.

It was an oddly comforting thought, full of certainty. Lysander wrapped his rags around him and forged his way forwards into the storm.

Once, there had been empires on Malodrax. They were the empires of its native species, a proud people who had competed to create the mightiest kingdoms, surpass their neighbours, eclipse the achievements of the past and humble the generations of the future. Ambition was their religion, and they worshipped themselves.

Whatever nightmare had befallen them when Malodrax became a world of daemons and heretics, it left on the surface of the planet the faintest scars of what had been there before. Malodrax's new order was jealous, and the storms descended to scour the Malodracian cities from its continents. The stone shards obliterated the faces of the forebears who first raised their castles and palaces over the planet's skylines, and the half-finished statues of the last generation. Cathedrals fell. Billions of homes ceased to exist, as completely as if they had never been there. But Malodrax did not carry out its vandalism completely.

In the broken lands, ruins survived, sheltered among the hills and valleys. The greater substance of even these places was scrubbed away, leaving the stumps of proud cities like rotten teeth sticking up from the upheaved earth. Mosaics were picked clean and streets torn up. But ruins remained, the faintest trace of what Malodrax had once been, stamped down and mutilated by the daemon world's anger.

Space Marines did not dream as other men did. A sleeping man was a vulnerable man, and a Space Marine could never be vulnerable. Instead the lobes of his brain were separated by a membrane, cultured from his primarch's gene-seed and implanted during his conversion into a Space Marine, which allowed one half to fall into torpor while the other was awake. The animal brain stayed alert, ready to snap the Space Marine back to full readiness. What passed for dreams in that half-sleep were impressions of his surroundings, seen through the eyes of that predator.

As Lysander rested, his mind built up those cities of Malodrax from the ruins around him. Arches and towers rose up like the pinnacles of a crown surrounding the city, encompassing an expanse of sculpted stone.

The image broke and shattered, collapsing into the dark ruins around Lysander. He peered through the darkness, but whatever had woken him from half-sleep, it was nothing that could be seen.

Lysander stood and leaned against a half-fallen wall, pausing to orient himself. This valley was relatively safe from the storm, but still in the swarming darkness it was easy to get turned around and lost. Ahead was a maze of collapsed buildings, uprooted foundations, and the remnants of some great decorative edifice, a palace or a place of worship. Swirls of carved stone resembled clouds or waves, abraded and crumbling from the work of the storms. Half a face loomed out of the dirt, part of a vast statue, and Lysander recognised an echo of the surgeon's features – that surgeon who had stood over him ready to cut him open, the surgeon he had killed. It had been of that species, the native xenos who had made Malodrax their home. Those who had not perished had been corrupted.

He had been woken by the wind, nothing else. That did not mean he would cease to be alert. If a Space Marine's instincts spoke up, it was wise to listen to them.

Lysander's eye found the book that lay in the dirt by his feet. *Being A Description Of Malodrax And Its Foulness*. Lysander had read only a few passages, but they had described the brood mother, her curse, and the means by which he might bargain with her. It had not mentioned quite everything about her, of course.

Lysander turned to the first couple of pages. The whole book was written by hand, perhaps by the author, perhaps by one of his acolytes. It was signed in a florid hand by one Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan. Lysander did not recognise the name, but anyone who claimed the title of inquisitor demanded at least respect.

'I know not the date or time when I came to Malodrax, Lysander read. Somewhere beyond its lower orbit, time and space themselves cease to matter. No chronometer on my ship would tell the same tale. So I can say

only that it was the first day. From the air, as my shuttle descended, I saw the delta of a river of blood emptying into an ocean of rot, and therein wallowed a titanic being. It was vast of girth, tattered wings spreading from its back, and a mass of tentacles broke the surface around its waist. Its four arms were clawed and its face a single mouth yawning open to reveal endless rows of teeth. And in that moment I imagined I was looking on a god that ruled this world and that with a thought it could swat my shuttle from the sky and send my acolytes and I to drown in the rot. But I did not look upon a god – I looked upon a corpse. As we closed I saw its flesh hanging in rags, exposing grey and dusty bones beneath, and colonies of filthy scavenger-birds swirling around as they picked away the last morsel to be found inside it.

‘In a past age, this thing had ruled Malodrax, I have no doubt, fed a river of gore by a legion of worshippers who gave it such sacrifices that an ocean was filled with their remains. But that age had passed, and new powers ruled on Malodrax now.

‘How many gods have claimed to rule this world? I cannot say. The thing in the ocean, certainly, and perhaps many more in ages past that have since fallen into dust and been forgotten, leaving only a trunkless statue or idiom of language to suggest they ever existed. Though each one might last an aeon, it falls eventually. Malodrax yearns for chaos and stasis of power, for a mosaic of rulership that ever shifts and is refounded in constant bloodshed. That god I looked upon had thought itself inviolable and eternal, but in truth, only Malodrax itself can claim such a title.’

Lysander did not much care for Golrukhan’s language. The battle-lore of Rogal Dorn was written simply and directly, without using many words where one might suffice. The inquisitor had a high opinion of himself and had probably been even less sufferable to listen to than to read. But he had been right about the brood mother. He had survived on Malodrax long enough to write down what he saw. And a man did not attain the title of inquisitor without knowing what he was doing.

Lysander regarded the book he held. It was his only possession. The cover was newly bloodstained – he had killed with it, which gave it a kind

of sacredness to the Space Marine who had wielded it. And it had taught him enough about the brood mother to get a deal out of her, as ugly a deed as that had been.

‘Even here the Emperor’s light must shine,’ said Lysander. ‘Perhaps it is His fate that threw you into my path. And if not, should the night turn colder I will at least have something to burn.’

The first Lysander saw of Shalhadar’s city was its condemned, staked out by the roadside. The road sprung abruptly from the wastes, paved in marble blocks carved with sigils that might have been prayers or curses, mortared in with crushed bone and muscle. Hands reached from the dirt at the roadside, perhaps severed and planted there, perhaps still attached to arms and buried bodies – Lysander did not stop to check. Drifts of stone shards were piled up from the storm but they did not sully the roadway. Perhaps the builders had a pact with Malodrax to keep it clear, or it was sorcery.

The condemned hung from their wrists, which were manacled to the tops of tall spiked poles. Dozens of them lined each side, stretching off at regular intervals into the distance where the road wound into obscurity. They seemed dead at first glance, food for the filthy winged lizards that flitted from one body to another, but then one of them would stir or moan. They were emaciated and pallid, skin stretched and torn, knobs of bone poking through their joints. Lysander saw each had a brace around his head that kept it turned to one side – the same side, all looking towards the sudden end of the road. Each tried to turn his head against the brace, driving its spikes deeper into the side of his face.

Lysander looked in the direction the condemned were forbidden to look. There, stretched from one distant peak to the other, was the city. Spires and battlements broke the mottled cloak of Malodrax’s sky. Even from here its magnificence was clear. Lysander could make out the pinnacle of a pyramid in the heart of the city, glinting as if covered in gold.

‘What was your crime?’ asked Lysander of the first condemned. He did not expect an answer, but the question had demanded a voice. The condemned struggled feebly against its manacles and brace. Lysander could not even tell if it was a man or a woman beneath the leather straps padlocked around its body.

Whatever it had done, its punishment was not death. It had been something worse – it had been condemned to live on, but never to look on Shalhadar’s city again.

‘With sorrow I approached the sight of that city, Golrukhan had written. In the night, Sergeant Voss had died from the injuries he sustained breaking out of our besieged camp. He had suffered those wounds bravely, fending off the dozens of desert spirits that sought to snatch our souls away. His ensorcelled bolter shells felled countless such abominations, but alas, their chill touch had riven muscle and organ to his very core and those organs failed him just before dawn broke.

‘Sergeant Voss did not live to see Malodrax’s next day touching the spires of the city. There was something obscene, something that churned a holy man’s gut, to see such opulence set among such desolation. Whatever horror had fallen on this region in a previous age had left the ground dry and shattered, inimical to all life save the daemon. But that city sat like a crown in a heap of funeral ashes, bright and mocking, in defiance of the hatred Malodrax had for all who dwelled on its surface. Even then I detected the presence of he who ruled that city, for only a truly powerful and unholy intelligence could keep such a monstrosity intact when the planet was surely intent on levelling its towers.

‘Talaya suggested that we skirt around it, avoiding any sentries or outriders. She was a fine strategist, but she did not possess the drive of an inquisitor, as much as she wished one day to rise to that station. She did not understand the devotion to duty that brought us here, that compelled me to seek out the very heart of the enemy that I might fulfil the quest I had set myself.

‘My acolytes and I approached the gates. The brothers Grun and Thol, those hardy feral-worlder fellows who owed me a blood debt, flanked me as if I were a visiting dignitary, their muscular frames and the many trophies of their various kills making me look quite the part. I wore not the marks of an inquisitor but instead the xenos-plate armour I had earned in my service to my master, Kellion of the Hereticus, and Talaya carried the smoke-stained and torn banner Sergeant Voss had worn in its case on his back until the moment he died. It resembled another trophy, taken from a regiment of the Imperial Guard, displayed as a measure of calibre of those who had fallen before me. It was a fine ruse, concocted in a hurry but nonetheless effective in earning us a greeting from a daemon courtier at the gates instead of a volley of arrows or a torrent of boiling oil.

“‘Who is your god?’ the creature demanded. It had about it the look of one who served the Lord of Unspeakable Pleasures, its body lithe, its movements snake-like and hypnotic, and its features possessed of a terrible beauty.

“‘Bokor the Wildsman,’ I replied, naming a lesser power of the warp that I had encountered while investigating cult murders on the hive world Anathema. I could not say if Bokor still existed, or perhaps was even an alternative name of whatever power this daemon served. But I had lived thus far by taking such risks in the pursuance of my duty.

“‘What is your purpose?’ demanded the daemon.

“‘To seek understanding,’ I said, and felt a strange pride that in an effort to deceive this daemon, I had in fact spoken the truth.

“‘With whom do you seek audience?’

“‘The lord and master of this city.’

“‘Many have sought it,’ said the daemon. ‘Many have waited a lifetime for the honour. What places you above such dregs?’

“‘But nothing,’ I replied, ‘save that which is perceived in me by your lord.’

'The daemon bowed and bade me enter. Thus we see the daemon is much like a man in the lowest and most crude of its faculties. It desires to be worshipped and will allow the serpent into its crib if that serpent fawns over it as if it were a god. I knew that from that point onwards it would not be so simple, but for the time being flattery was enough to gain my warband entry.

'Beyond the gate stood a mighty beast, a sphinx that seemed conjured from the treasure vault of a giant. In the scintillating stained glass of its wings a man might look upon an infinity of possibilities, a vastness of timestreams spiralling out into forever. Indeed I could imagine myself as a young man, untempered by the work of the Inquisition and with my mind impiously open, staring for a lifetime into the potential there revealed. But I tore my eyes away and entered the city, which later I would understand was the City of Shalhadar. Of the sphinx I will write more anon.'

Lysander stood before the gate and knew a little of what those condemned must have felt to know they would never return to this city. It was magnificent. It did not look to have been built so much as wrought by a jewelsmith in infinite detail and then expanded to its monumental scale.

The gate was open. Beyond, a festival was in full swing. Fireworks burst across the skyline in a burning kaleidoscope, sending sprays of multicoloured fire that overcame the oppressive darkness of the sky. The towers and spires were hung with pastel silk banners. And the people were everywhere, thronging the streets, dancing to an overlapping wall of musical noise. They danced with such abandon they threw out joints and tore muscles – where they could dance no more they lay in the street, convulsing in time with the beat they felt the strongest.

Lysander tried to make out some pattern in the appearance of these people, but there was nothing except for their desire to be seen. Some of them were in lavish furs and silks, barely able to move in the layers of their finery, while others were all but naked, bodies bound in leather and

chains, flaunting open wounds on their bodies as they writhed and convulsed in dance. One group were partially flayed, the muscles of their upper arms, chests and thighs wet and open to the air. Others were painted gold, with fat gemstones implanted in their skin.

The city was open – it was a time of celebration and pilgrims were welcome to join the revelry. Lysander was very aware that he could not pretend to be one of these people, however – he was not a pilgrim, at least not of whatever power ruled this city. He still wore rags and was covered in undecorative scars from the storm. He saw no one who matched his stature – no brute-mutants or hulking xenos with the height and bulk of a Space Marine. He would not go far without being noticed for not belonging.

A parade passed down the street leading to the gate, and turned into a side road between the buttresses of a great gilded fortress. Chariots drawn by lowing pack beasts carried bands of dancers, whirling in circles around a daemon that danced in the centre. Each daemon was unique, as was the way of the daemon, but shared serpentine muscles and a mesmeric quality to their movements, carefully honed by the warp to beguile the minds of the onlookers. Lysander had to force himself to look away. Another carriage was an altar and carried a slab of gold loomed over by a statue of a handsome winged humanoid. Gilded manacles hung from the statue's chest. The only still people in the whole panorama were the altar's attendants, who flanked the altar with their hooded heads bowed as if waiting for the signal for the celebration to end and the sacrifices to begin. The parade was followed up by a gilded dragon of a dozen segments each carried by a band of celebrants, winding through the street as it danced. Some revellers threw themselves into its path and its hinged jaws opened, and they hurled themselves down its gullet between sharp silver fangs. It left a smear of blood in its wake and spread drops of gore with the lashing of its long plumed tail.

A dancer grabbed Lysander's arm, trying to drag him into the fray. Lysander shrugged her aside. He stayed under the eaves of a splendid temple building as he moved down the road, head down, hoping that he would not seem too outlandish a sight compared to the dancers and revellers. But he was the only one wretched, the only one not celebrating.

A man in grotesque makeup, his face painted like a mask of bleeding wounds, loomed down off a passing carriage. 'I can smell the blood in his veins!' he cried. 'Sing with us, brother! Dance! Bleed with us!'

'Dance! Dance!' the crowd cried out, and suddenly dozens of them were around Lysander, grabbing at his arms and legs as if to move him like a marionette. Lysander threw them aside. He could not get bogged down here, but he could not cause a scene of great violence. Instead he shoved and knocked them down, and ducked into an alleyway that led off from the main thoroughfare.

The music followed him, now echoing and muted. The narrow alley was a dumping ground for spoiled finery. Torn silk and tarnished gold covered the ground, crushed into the city's brown detritus. Lysander moved quickly, almost in a run, his wide shoulders grazing the painted walls. A mix of filth and perfume filled the air, a cloying mass that stuck to the back of his throat.

He paused to get his bearings. He had the impression that the city radiated out from the pyramid he had glimpsed at its centre. Perhaps he should head there, or perhaps he should avoid it at every opportunity.

The sound of laughter caught his attention. It was coming from the basement window of an ornate tower that rose just ahead, as if pinning the surrounding districts to the ground. He crept up to the window, knelt, and looked in through the panels of multicoloured glass.

The room below was lit by candles, guttering in their hundreds on the floor and in niches on the walls. Chained to the far wall was the source of the laughter – a man, naked save for a length of bloodstained fabric tied

around his waist. His bare chest had been pared open, skin and muscle peeled away from the ribs which were being removed one by one by a surgeon in a hooded robe of purple and gold. The patient was giggling as if the scalpel were doing no more than tickle. Observing stood several more hooded figures, each one with his robes embroidered in a different pattern of gold and silver. From beyond the window came a murmuring drone, as if they were all reciting a different passage to consecrate the laughing man's vivisection.

The patient looked up at the window. His eyes widened and he tore one arm free, spiked chains stripping flesh from his hand and forearm, spilling entrails down over his thighs. He pointed straight at Lysander and screeched in laughter as if Lysander's face at the window was the most hilarious thing he had ever seen.

The surgeon turned around. His face was stitched closed, his eyes, mouth and nostrils sealed shut with silver thread. He put the scalpel to his eyelids and cut the threads, and his bloodshot eyes opened to see what the madman was pointing at.

The other cultists turned. They, too, were tearing their eyes open, this time with their hands. Muffled cries of outrage reached Lysander as the cultists drained out of the chamber, leaving the sacrificial victim coughing up ropes of bloody phlegm as he shuddered with laughter.

Lysander hurried down the alleyway, away from the cultists' chamber, towards where the alley opened into a larger space shadowed by the overlapping roofs of the buildings surrounding it. Cultists burst out into the alley as Lysander ran, accompanied by a screeching note from a reed instrument blown like a hunter's horn.

Cries and screams came from every direction, from the buildings around, from the rooftops and the basements. Lysander burst into the square and saw the flagstones were covered in spikes, and celebrants of the festival were writhing there, puncturing and tearing their skin. Other

bodies lay dead or unconscious, bled white into red-brown stains around them. More bodies were impaled on spikes that jutted from the walls bounding the square, their faces locked in expressions of exhilaration and ecstasy.

Lysander looked for ways out. Behind him, the stitched cultists were rushing down the alleyway. More were streaming in from other entrances to the square – dancers in leather and steel, performers in featureless masks, celebrants with strips of skin removed forming patterns of scab and open wound. Countless flavours of the city's damned, brought to join in the hunt.

He was a part of the festival. He was the entertainment. He was not an intruder at all – he was one more attraction, a part of festival season, another way to honour the city's lords.

The spikes bit into Lysander's rag-bound feet. He held the heavy book in one hand with the other ready to punch or grab.

More cultists were watching from balconies overlooking the square, shouting encouragement or leaning over fascinated by what was about to unfold.

A scream went up, a signal. The cultists rushed at Lysander in a mass, a multicoloured tide of them streaming at a sprint. Their eyes were rolled back as if in the grip of a religious revelation. Some fell, trampled into the spikes.

Then, suddenly, they were within arm's reach.

A Space Marine was not like a normal soldier. A soldier was a man, and a man was safest the further away from the fighting he was. He knew not to rush into the fray, and to cling to what safety there was on a battlefield, out of sight or in cover. But a Space Marine knew that he was safest in the midst of the battle, where an enemy had to take him on face to face, because that was the way a Space Marine was created to fight.

Lysander dived into the mass of cultists. He hit them like a missile, scattering bodies. He drove the heel of a hand into a jawbone, felt a neck snapping back, and brought the book around like a club into the press of bodies.

The gap he had opened closed. Scarred or silk-wrapped bodies crowded around him, constricting him. He ducked down, felt them close over him, and erupted out, throwing bodies over his shoulders. He struck out again and again, jarring impacts running along his arms as he pounded at the cultists swirling around him.

He threw one to the ground, into the spikes. He grabbed another by the hair, hauled him off his feet and swung him into the crowd, scattering more bodies. The training of a thousand sparring circle sessions took control of his muscles and he did not need to think to strike out with an elbow or a heel, to crack open a cultist's face with a headbutt or shatter a knee with a downwards stamp.

But there were so many of them. They were still trying to force their way into the square. Some were leaping down into the crowd from the balconies, whooping with excitement to join the adventure.

One leapt onto Lysander's back. Then another was there, too, arms wrapped around his neck, trying to weigh him down. They piled on top of him, clambering over one another and trampling the fallen into the spiked flagstones. Lysander threw one aside but there were so many on top of him now. His knees buckled under them. Hands and fingers were clawing at his eyes and mouth. He gritted his teeth and pushed against the weight but it was like trying to shove a mountain aside.

He was down to one knee. Spikes punctured the skin of his knee and shin. He slumped down, spikes pushing through the hand he put down to hold himself up. His face was pushed further and further down by the weight, the spikes spearing up towards his eye.

He reared up, heaving a great drift of bodies off him. He was roaring as he did so, the effort threatening to tear his enhanced muscles off the bone. He gulped down a breath before the human ocean closed over him again and, suddenly, that air was crushed out of him, and he could not breathe.

More were dying around him, their ribcages crushed or their skulls collapsed. He drove a hand upwards, out of the mass, shattering jaws and spines, but there was no room to draw it back in again. He was trapped. There was no way out. The light was cut off completely as the bodies heaped one on top of the other, as if to die in that crush was a religious observance, an honour these people were fighting for.

‘Enough!’ cried a voice from far above. The sound barely made it down through the groaning of the dying and the snapping of bones.

The pressure suddenly relented. Lysander gasped down a breath and almost choked on it, for it was laden with a heavy, spiced scent that made his head reel. The struggling around him lessened and he was able to force a space around himself. He lifted one foot and let bodies roll in under him, pushing off them to drive himself upwards and out of the heap.

The scent, like incense, was powerful enough to burn his throat. Lysander could feel his third lung struggling to filter out the toxins flooding the square. When he could see up into the square above, his vision was clouded by a clinging red-brown fog.

The cultists, those who lived, had distant eyes with their pupils wide black pools, their jaws hanging open and their bodies limp. They flopped into inaction where they had been clambering over one another to get to Lysander. They were draped over the balcony rails, and even as he watched some were slipping into unconsciousness and toppling down onto the mass of bodies that choked the square. A low, sighing moan was the only sound they made now as if falling as one into a deep sleep.

The buildings that bounded the square reached up into the distant skyline of the city. On one rooftop, clambering down by means of a set of

spiderlike mechanical arms, was a humanoid shape. The arms were mounted on its back, into a rig that included two exhaust pipes from which was pouring the narcotic fog flooding the square.

As it descended Lysander made out its details. It wore armour of steel scales, clinging to its form – a woman's form, Lysander realised. She carried a double-headed halberd, each blade wrought into the shape of a dragon's head, and her helm similarly bore a lizardlike mask with a mass of silver teeth.

Lysander coughed and wiped a hand across his eyes to get rid of the residue. He pulled himself out of the mass of lolling bodies, and wrenched the book free. It was still the only weapon to hand.

'I think,' said the newcomer, 'you have taken a wrong turn.'

'What do you want?' said Lysander. His hearts were still shuddering in his chest and his warrior's instinct had not let go. He was still poised for danger.

'Just curious,' said the stranger. She descended on her mechanical legs, and landed deftly amid the bodies. Her mechanical limbs snickered up onto her back like those of a dead spider. She unlocked a catch on the side of her mask and it slid open, its panels folding into the scaled armour around her shoulders. Her face was long, pale and handsome with sharp eyes and nose, thin lips, and short black hair swept back from her face. It was altogether far too human for this city. 'I am the herald of Lord Shalhadar the Veiled,' she said. 'He would greatly appreciate knowing more about the stranger in his city. It is fortuitous that you come to us in the festival season or you would have been stopped at the gates, but now you are in you have my lord's attention.' She spread her arms to indicate the unconscious, broken and dead cultists piled up in the square. 'And some would say that you owe him.'

'I seek audience with Shalhadar,' said Lysander.

‘So do millions in this city,’ replied the herald. ‘But they have not demonstrated a capacity for violence such as you, and so perhaps you will get your wish.’

‘Are you daemon?’

‘Not yet,’ she replied with a half-smile. ‘I am Talaya, Veiled One’s herald. My lord dispatches me to watch over his city and his people, and to inform him of that which I decide he would wish to know. He knew you were here before you passed through the gate. I was sent to watch, and my lord’s interest was proven sound.’

‘And now you will take me to your lord,’ said Lysander, ‘to hand me over and be rewarded. Is that not so?’

‘It is not quite that simple,’ replied Talaya. She walked across the bodies towards Lysander, looking him up and down. ‘But I will take you to the palace, which is further than you would make it on your own. Everything after that is up to you.’

‘Then I see no use in dallying here.’

‘Of course.’ Talaya picked at Lysander’s cloak, which still clung to him, sodden with blood. ‘But you’re not going anywhere looking like that.’



9

'I wonder when it was that I became a heretic. I had always been taught that it was like flipping a switch. One moment passes to another and suddenly one is corrupted and irredeemable, a single definite thought or deed shunting one onto the path of the unrighteous. But when it happened to me, it took the better part of a century. I cannot say when my soul's purity left me, or what the cause was. I became a heretic without realising. Perhaps that is why it is so insidious, and why only one with such willpower as I can be permitted to even skirt the shore of that dark ocean.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The Imperial Fists honoured their dead when they were safely beyond Shalhadar's city, and when they were certain the city's forces would not force them to battle. They found a depression in the broken ground, like a sunken amphitheatre, perhaps a shell crater from an ancient war or the sinkhole from a collapsed warren of tunnels beneath the ground. One Imperial Fist from each squad – Kaderic, Gorvetz and Lycaon's own

squad – stood as lookouts. The rest gathered in the centre of the depression, where were laid out the three who had died.

Brother Fornis was of Lycaon's squad. His helmet had been removed and his face was calm, as if in the kind of sleep that was a rare luxury for a Space Marine. A single sharp-edged cut, like a slim dark triangle, in the breastplate of his armour was the only sign of injury – but the daemon's blade had cut through one heart and his spine, and his system had broken down even as he fought on from the ground.

'Let us commend Brother Fornis to the legacy of Rogal Dorn,' said Lycaon over the body. As a Chaplain he had given these rites hundreds of times before, standing over the body of a fallen Imperial Fist. 'There is no death so final that it can rob us of our place in the eternal war against the enemy. There is no fate so grave that it erases our duty. Brother Fornis was among the finest shots in the First Company, and his mind was as sharp as that of any soldier. He did his duty and honoured his primarch and his Emperor. Nothing more need be said of a member of the Adeptus Astartes. He has left this battlefield, but there will be another.'

Two more dead were from Squad Gorvetz. Brother Metzian was the Imperial Fist devoured by the sphinx at the palace gates. Only the upper half of his body had been recovered and lay there on the ground truncated at the waist in a mass of gem-like hardened blood. Metzian's helmet stayed on, for it was split down the middle and his face beneath it was a ruin. Brother Kalanar, lying beside him, had died in the palace as Gorvetz was besieged on the upper levels by a host of daemons. Daemon claws had ripped into his back and gutted him. From the front, scatters of red wounds on his face and rents in his breastplate told a muted tale of what had happened to him. Beside Kalanar lay his plasma cannon, its casing still discoloured with the intense heat of its firing.

'Kalanar and Metzian were as true-born brothers,' said Sergeant Gorvetz. 'Though we all are brothers, yet as we trained and fought I saw in them a shared purpose beyond our duty as soldiers. When the enemy

pressed in on us, the brothers of my squad could turn to Metzian and Kalanar and know that in them lay strength of purpose enough for all of us. Kalanar knew joy of battle when he brought the righteous fire. Metzian was a contemplator, a student of battle and its extremes. There were never two sons of Dorn less alike, and yet there were never two who so embodied our strength. They are gone from this battlefield, but there will be another.'

Techmarine Kho stepped forward and knelt by the bodies. One of the mechanical arms mounted onto his backpack cycled to a fine blade tip and reached down to open up an incision in Fornis's throat. In the absence of an apothecary in the strike force, the task of harvesting the gene-seed of the fallen rested with Kho. Brother Gethor, who piloted one of Kho's Land Speeders, stood behind Kho holding the sample jars which would hold the gene-seed for transport back to the *Phalanx* star fortress and the Chapter.

Lysander watched with the other Imperial Fists as the solemn business was concluded. He found Brother Halaestus's eyes in the gathering, but he could read nothing in that mutilated face.

When the gene-seed was removed, the faces of the dead were covered and they were loaded onto the Land Speeders so they could be brought back to the Chapter and their bodies interred. The gene-seed was the priority – if the Land Speeders were lost then at least the gene-seed, on which the Chapter's future rested, would survive.

'Choose your best!' demanded Chaplain Lycaon when the dead were stowed away.

The funeral games, in a major campaign or when there was more time to observe them, might see every manner of martial competition – marksmanship, athletics, a dozen forms of duelling, and more. Here, when they had to be concluded in less than an hour before the strike force moved on again, there was only time for one such competition. And yet it was ill

luck not to observe it, for the dead Imperial Fists had themselves observed many times the funeral rites of their own fallen brothers.

From Squad Gorvetz, Brother Antinas stepped forward, handing his heavy flamer to the squadmate beside him. He stripped off the shoulder guards, breastplate, armguards and gauntlets of his armour, leaving him unarmoured from the waist up. Antinas's cropped red hair contrasted with his pale skin, the surgical scars of his many augmentations still looking pink and raw. Of Lycaon's veterans Brother Givenar stepped up. He was the largest Imperial Fist there, and the knotted muscles of his arms and chest were covered in incised kill-markings in the style of some of the Chapter's oldest veterans. Each campaign he had fought was picked out there in scar tissue.

Sergeant Kaderic represented his squad. He had kneeled before the Chaplains of the Imperial Fists and sworn never to back down from an honourable combat, echoing the oaths taken by the first champions of Rogal Dorn and those still taken by the rare individuals chosen to champion the Emperor on the battlefield. Such an oath was a bold statement even for a Space Marine, and the Chaplains told parables of those whose oaths had been learned and twisted by the heretical and corrupt, compelling brave champions of the Imperial Fists to fight impossible odds. To take the oath meant that the principles of courage and honour were more important than petty concerns like survival.

The final competitor was Brother Gethor, his gene-seed duties done, representing Techmarine Kho, Halaestus, and Lysander – those members of the strike force who were not members of one of its three squads. Gethor was barely eighteen months out of novicehood, training under Kho to be elevated one day to the Chapter armoury and the training with the Priesthood of Mars to become a full Space Marine. He showed no trepidation even as he stood alongside three competitors far more experienced than him.

Lysander found himself standing beside Chaplain Lycaon as the first competitors lined up, the spectating Imperial Fists forming an ad-hoc fighting ring.

‘You fear for Halaestus,’ said Lycaon, quietly enough that only Lysander would hear.

‘Fear is a word I will never use,’ said Lysander, ‘of myself or of another brother.’

‘But,’ said Lycaon, letting the word hang.

Kaderic and Givenar were drawn to face one another. Kaderic scraped a handful of dirt from the ground and rubbed his hands dry with it. Givenar kneeled and murmured a prayer, fists held in front of him as if he were addressing them, imploring them to serve him as his wargear did in battle.

‘I cannot fathom what Halaestus has lost,’ said Lysander. ‘It is beyond my capacity to understand. It is rare that a Space Marine suffers so.’

‘Is he the same one you led as a squadmate?’ asked Lycaon.

Lysander paused before he answered. ‘No,’ he said.

‘You must watch him.’

Lysander looked at the Chaplain and realised in that moment that he did not know the man, not as he had known Halaestus and the other members of his squad. Perhaps that was what Chaplainhood meant – to stand apart from the battle-brothers of his Chapter, to make decisions that one too close to the men of the Chapter could not. ‘Of course,’ said Lysander. ‘I will stay close to him. I have known him a long time, and he will trust me.’

Lysander watched the bout begin, Kaderic charging into Givenar, lunging a shoulder into Givenar’s midriff and bundling him to the ground.

‘These are not your men, Lysander,’ said Lycaon.

Lysander did not reply. Though he had known it was true, he had not heard it said out loud.

‘Captain Venharts was not greatly loved,’ continued Lycaon, ‘for he was crude and forthright of word. But the First respected him, and they knew him for he served as their captain for more than thirty years. When he was lost they mourned him keenly. You are not Venharts, for good or for ill, and they do not look to you as they did to him. Does that dismay you, Lysander?’

Lysander had been tested by the Chaplains of the Imperial Fists a thousand years before, as the Chapter reckoned it, through novicehood and at every stage of his rise to a captain’s rank. He knew when he was being tested again, and Lycaon knew he knew. ‘Dismay? No, that is too strong a word. I understand what they feel. They are not my men, but I am not yet their captain, either. The First Company I knew was lost with the *Shield of Valour*. That will change, for the bonds that hold us together are forged in battle. If there is anything Malodrax will give us, it is battle.’

Givenar was better on the ground than Kaderic was on his feet. The two rolled over, Givenar with a forearm across Kaderic’s throat, trying to choke and submit. But Kaderic was stronger and he forced a knee underneath Givenar’s body. He levered Givenar off him, throwing him to the ground, leaping to his feet and wrapping an arm around Givenar’s neck from behind.

The brothers of Kaderic’s squad cheered. Kaderic bared his teeth at them in a savage smile. Givenar tapped his hand against Kaderic’s shoulder – the choke was in, the blood cut off to the brain, and Givenar had to either submit or let himself fall unconscious. Kaderic let Givenar go and stood, beat his chest, and accepted the offered hands of his squadmates.

‘What happened to the Vorel?’ asked Lysander.

‘You do not know?’ asked Lycaon. ‘It is recorded in the Chapter archives, I am certain.’

‘There was shame enough in speaking to the Chapter of how the First was lost,’ said Lysander. ‘If the Vorel prospered without our intervention,

if Imperial subjects suffered at their hands, it would not be conducive to rebuilding my place in the Chapter.'

'The Vorel predated on the frontier worlds for a century and a half,' said Lycaon. 'The declaration of *Xenos Horrificus* was well deserved. A Crusade was called against them and the Guard and Navy shattered their empire. Some still surface as mercenaries, but they are dying out.'

'I see,' said Lysander.

'The blood of the Vorel's crimes stains the hands of the Iron Warriors.'

'I need no more reasons to kill Thul,' said Lysander. 'But for that, too, he will pay.'

The second bout's competitors were lining up. Gethor and Antinas looked as unlike as two Space Marines from the same Chapter could. Gethor had yet to lose the handsomeness that some novices brought with them, and which was inevitably worn away under scars and years. Antinas was as ugly as sin, scorched and scarred all over, his kill-markings covering his back, chest and upper arms in dark-brown High Gothic lettering. His hands were huge and gnarled and he clenched and unclenched them as the two circled, ready to strike.

'We will march on Kulgarde next,' said Lycaon. 'The ground is rough and broken. Kho tells me that to the north is more cover, where we can travel unobserved should news of our arrival have reached the Iron Warriors. Do you concur with this course?'

'It will slow us down,' said Lysander, glad the conversation had turned to matters of battle. 'But we must assume word has reached Kulgarde that Shalhadar is dead and the Imperial Fists killed him. Have you considered my suggestions for breaching the fortress?'

'I have,' said Lycaon, 'and I will decide on them closer to the time. They are unorthodox.'

'Any plan has to be if it is to succeed,' said Lysander. 'We cannot besiege Kulgarde with the force we have. A million Imperial Guard might

not reduce its defences. Perhaps with a Titan Legion we could march on the walls directly, but we lack such a luxury.'

'So I understand,' said Lycaon. 'But I would see for myself what we are facing before deciding how Kulgarde will fall.'

Antinas was stronger by far. He grabbed the younger competitor by the thigh and flipped him onto his back, throwing his head back and yelling at the sky. His squadmates echoed him. Gethor scrambled to his feet and ducked back, crouching. Antinas beat his chest and advanced.

'We must kill Kraegon Thul,' said Lysander.

'I will not return to the *Phalanx* if he lives,' replied Lycaon. 'And a lifetime of shame will accompany any of us who does.'

Antinas darted forwards, too quickly for a man of his size. He knocked Gethor's guard aside and headbutted Gethor, catching him on the eye socket. Gethor reeled, dropped onto his back, rolled away and staggered upright again just out of Antinas's range. Antinas pressed on, swinging at Gethor with blows hard enough to knock the younger man out. Gethor kept moving, swaying from side to side, desperation on his face as each swing came closer to leaving him in the dirt.

Antinas lunged, driving the heel of a hand forwards, hard enough to shatter a jawbone. Gethor dropped onto his back, locked his feet around Antinas's leg and tripped the bigger man up. Antinas landed heavily and Gethor was on him, locking one arm behind his back, forcing a knee into his spine and wrenching his head back.

'Your neck is broken,' gasped Gethor.

'So it is,' said Antinas, breathing heavily.

Gethor stood unsteadily, backing off as if uncertain how Antinas would react. The onlookers were quiet, for they were not used to seeing Antinas losing either. Gethor had got him in a simple neck lock that, had Gethor's intentions been lethal, would have let him twist Antinas's head around and back so the vertebrae of the neck separated. It was a good way to kill

someone. Even a Space Marine needed his brain attached to the rest of his body.

Antinas laughed. He jumped to his feet and grabbed Gethor in a bear hug. He hoisted him up off the ground and onto his shoulder, parading him like a conqueror's trophy.

'See!' cried Antinas. 'That's how you kick an old dog!' he pointed at the Land Speeders where the bodies of the fallen were stowed. 'Despair not, brothers!' he called to them. 'You leave your Chapter in good hands!'

The Imperial Fists cheered. They patted Gethor on the back as Antinas carried him around.

The final bout saw Gethor facing Kaderic. It was quick. Kaderic forced Gethor into a test of strength, and Kaderic had more. He wrapped his arms around Gethor's waist, lifted him up and threw him down. Gethor struggled with skill and determination on the ground but Kaderic had the better of him from the moment the bout had started. When they were done and the winner was certain, with Gethor's arm locked behind him in such a way that Kaderic could have broken it at will, the two dusted themselves off and shook hands. Kaderic, as champion, dedicated his victory to the fallen and thanked them for looking on, as was the right and proper form.

'Brothers!' ordered Lycaon. 'Our fallen are honoured. Kho, take the point. I will ride with you. March out!'

Once there had been so much life in those broken lands that it had bubbled up from the ground, reaching up towards the skies in a soaring canopy. That jungle had been dead for an aeon but it had been stubborn enough to leave its mark, and while the leaves had withered in a past age the skeletons of the trees remained. The petrified forest stretched across a great swathe adjoining the north of the rocky broken desert. It was dense and pathless, and the sun's discoloured light struggled to make it through the jumble of stone branches overhead.

Roosts of hardy, leathery creatures clung to the branches in their thousands, scouring the forest for the tough life forms that found a way to

survive there. What life there was served only to accentuate the death that had fallen on the jungle in a distant catastrophe, one of the many that had punctuated Malodrax's history.

Kho's Land Speeders flew at canopy level, weaving between the splintered boughs, relaying their position to the sergeants of the squads marching through the petrified jungle below. They made slow progress by their standards, for underfoot the ground was tangled with stony roots and the terrain rose and fell as if something had heaved it up from beneath. Deep caves yawed in hillsides and choked valleys dropped down to pitch-darkness. Raptors circled overhead, used to treating anything that walked into the jungle as a meal in waiting.

'I do not like the smell of this place,' said Lysander as he picked his way through the roots alongside Kaderic.

'This whole planet is hardly pleasing to the nose,' replied Kaderic. The bruise on the side of his face, inflicted by Gethor in the wrestling bout, had already turned a purple-black and begun receding.

'It smells of ash,' said Lysander. 'As if it were burned yesterday, not thousands of years ago.'

'Perhaps it was,' said Kaderic. 'They say a world held by daemons may not even obey the rules of time. Would that we had a battlefleet and the Exterminatus to be deployed. All of Malodrax would stink of ash then.' Kaderic paused and looked at Lysander. 'Has it changed?'

A thousand years had passed in real space since Lysander had come to Malodrax. He had no way of knowing how much time had passed down there since he had travelled to the *Phalanx* and returned with the strike force. 'It looks the same,' said Lysander. 'But I cannot be certain. This world likes to deceive, I think.'

Movement caught Lysander's attention. It was above them, among the branches of the stone trees. It scurried out of his sight a split second before

he could focus on it, but he had an impression of claws and lizardlike hide – and worse, of familiarity.

‘What was it?’ said Kaderic.

‘Hold our position,’ said Lysander.

‘Hold!’ ordered Kaderic over the vox. ‘Captain, we may have enemies down here. We are drawing in and investigating.’

Lysander’s bolter was in his hands. He hopped up onto the stump of a shattered tree and peered through the stone trunks in the direction the creature had disappeared.

‘Antinas, Kollus, go with the captain,’ said Kaderic to the two closest Imperial Fists. ‘Lysander, could it be an animal?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Lysander. Antinas and Kollus were alongside him as he moved carefully through the jungle towards a rootbound gulley ahead. Antinas’s flamer was held in front of him, the flame flickering in its nozzle. Kollus trained his bolter across the jungle.

‘Watch overhead,’ said Lysander. ‘It could be above us.’

Kollus saw it next. He spun on the spot and loosed off a short burst, throwing shards from the tree trunks.

‘Did you hit it?’ said Lysander.

‘No,’ said Kollus.

Lysander took off between the trees. He had followed the movement, too, a scaly dash of motion down between the fork of a tree’s branches. He leapt the gulley, hitting the far edge chest-first and scrambling back to his feet.

It was ahead of him. It was almost the height of a man, squatting down on its haunches. Its body was fleshy and sagging, its belly pale and its hide scaly. Its silhouette was lumpy and malformed and its mouth was half insect and half reptile. It bared the nest of mandibles it had in place of teeth and hissed at him.

Lysander had seen something very like it before – this one was more mature, adapted to survive here on its own, but the resemblance was unmistakeable.

The creature darted at him. Lysander lunged right at it, spearing his chainsword forwards. It was used to forcing other predators to back down – perhaps here it was the top of the food chain. Lysander's chainblade punched right through it, spraying green-black gore as its teeth chewed out through its back. The thing was spitted on the chainblade as neatly as a carcass turned over a fire.

Antinas reached him a moment later. 'What is it?' he said.

'One of the brood,' replied Lysander. He flicked his chainblade and the creature slid off the blade, a gory ruin bored right through it.

'More of them,' voxed Kollus. Lysander turned to see Kollus on the far side of the gulley. Movement was flickering around him as the brood-creatures scampered among the trees or between the roots at ground level. As if brought out by the smell of their fellow creature's blood, they were suddenly infesting the jungle all around. Kollus snapped a couple of volleys, catching one of the creatures and bursting it in a shower of gore. 'They're just animals, captain. Are they of any concern?'

'They are,' replied Lysander. 'It is not them that concern me. It is what might accompany them.' He switched to the command vox-channel.

'Chaplain Lycaon, we're holding position. We have been found.'

Beneath the ground they had followed the Imperial Fists, a great host of them. The honeycomb of tunnels beneath the petrified forest had let them follow their footsteps – literally, for they were adapted in the darkness to sense the footfalls from the ground above, and thirty heavy armoured Space Marines did not move quietly.

They were members of a species that had lurked there for thousands of years, hunting in the darkness and emerging above ground when the pickings below were lean. They had evolved rapidly as Malodrax changed,

their slovenly genetics easily slipping into new forms to let them survive extremes of heat, cold or seismic activity. The result was their sagging, bloated forms, the mishmash of lizard, insect and vermin that made up their features, and a crude but effective intellect. They were intelligent scavengers, predators of opportunity, and prey that could demonstrate an extreme of cowardly cunning.

That day several of them, a scouting caste of unusual perceptiveness, had emerged into the wan sunlight to follow more closely the new arrivals in the petrified forest. Their generations passed by rapidly for their lives were short, and so the image of those enormous figures with their golden armour and the sigil of the clenched fist was by then a legend passed down by their forebears.

One day those warriors from another world would return, they had been told, and those warriors would have to die. Because the mother had told them so.

The strike force drew in tight, knocking down trees into makeshift barricades. The Land Speeders were landed in the centre, ready to hover up around canopy level and spray the surrounding forest with heavy bolter and assault cannon fire. The Imperial Fists manned their defences as the darkness drew in, making of their surroundings a fortress according to the principles of siege warfare.

The last two hours they had been followed. Hundreds of the predators had scurried through the trees watching them, corralling them, and the Land Speeders reported far greater concentrations following the strike force as if herding them towards a location where they could be trapped and killed.

It was the Imperial Fists way to take a stand at a time and place of their choosing. If an enemy desired a battle they would have it, but on Imperial Fists terms. And so Chaplain Lycaon had given the order that the Imperial

Fists would dig in and face the enemy there, on a low rise that served as the most defensible position for miles around.

‘They are more organised than they appear,’ said Lycaon as he watched Squad Kaderic at the barricades. Kaderic’s men were the front line, with Gorvetz’s Devastator squad in the centre of the camp and Lycaon’s command squad ready to charge in where needed. ‘Malodrax does love its little games. It gives our fellow travellers the faces of animals so we will think them animals, but they are born soldiers. They have by their very nature the instinct of a soldier.’ He pointed to a rush of movement to the south, where a multitude of scurrying bodies glinted in the paltry moonlight. ‘They send their weakest forward, to test our guns. They learn there of our effective range and of the weight of our firepower. A classic tactic when one has numbers to spare.’ Lycaon switched to the vox. ‘Kaderic, let them get to half-range, then shoot them down.’

The creatures were permitted well within bolter range before Kaderic gave the order to fire. Standing beside Lycaon, Lysander could see the attackers were far larger than the scouting creatures the strike force had first encountered – they were the size of a man, hunched over as they ran rapidly on all fours through the broken ground and tangles of tree stumps. A volley of fire sliced through the first dozen or so and the others fell over their dead or turned aside in panic, making for all the better targets.

‘Single shots!’ ordered Kaderic. ‘Woe to the man who thinks these things are worth more than a bolter shell each!’

It was a swift and bloody business. The attack was cut down in a few moments, and a handful of surviving creatures limped off into the darkness.

‘I suggest,’ said Lysander, ‘we weather what they throw at us and break out after dawn, when they are drained and exhausted.’

‘You would not fight them here to the end?’

‘No, Chaplain. Every moment we delay gives Kulgarde more time to learn of our path and prepare for our arrival.’

‘Could these things answer to Kulgarde?’ asked Lycaon.

‘I can only say I hope not.’

From the forest to the north loped an alpha, just beyond bolter range. It was upright, taller than a Space Marine, its filthy, sagging body giving way to sinews around its shoulders powering its forelimbs, clad in chitin as if it had been fitted with a suit of armour. It shrieked and howled at the sky, and the forests around it seemed to seethe with movement. The weak light found wet mandibles and glossy scales everywhere in the shadows. The full part of the predators’ power was drawn up around the Space Marines’ encampment.

‘What sport this will be!’ voxed Kaderic from the barricades. ‘I would take my blade to them, Chaplain, if I could!’

‘Not unless they breach our line, First Sergeant,’ replied Lycaon.

‘Then I pray one of them does,’ said Kaderic. ‘Almost as much as I pray they all fall to our guns first.’

The alpha shrieked again, and this time the sound was echoed by the all the predators as one. The alpha dived out of cover and scampered across the no-man’s-land before the barricades, followed by the entire host of creatures.

Thousands of them charged as one. Lysander saw in that moment the great variety of their shapes – some bulky and apelike, others slithering like snakes or loping like attack dogs. They varied from rodent-sized to two or three times the size of a man, all armed with every natural weapon evolution could come up with – claws, clubbing tails, mandibles like mouthfuls of blades.

Kaderic gave the order. A volley of bolter fire hammered into the horde. Countless fell. Bolter fire exploded among them, blasting off limbs and

ripping bodies open. Lycaon gestured to the men of his squad and they joined Kaderic's men at the barricades, lending their own bolter fire.

Gorvetz concentrated on the biggest. The plasma cannon, once held by the fallen Brother Kalanar, was now in Gorvetz's own hands, blasting fat bolts of white-hot plasma that spitted right through the largest of the predators. Kho took *Dorn's Dagger* a few metres above the ground and rattled off cannon fire into the thickest mass of the enemy.

Lysander felt almost detached, as if he was watching from far away. It was almost mesmerising to watch the tide of the enemy surge closer, and yet come no closer, because as soon as they reached bolter range they fell. Those behind them surged into the gap, were cut down, and were themselves replaced. It had an inevitability about it, as if he was watching the tides or the movement of the stars.

Lycaon took aim and stuttered off a volley from his own bolter. His crozius was slung on his back, as if he knew he would not have to use it here. His shots threw a couple more dead down into the mass, which was building up like a rampart of shredded corpses in a ring around the encampment. 'There is no battle here,' said Lycaon, with scorn in his voice as if he blamed the enemy for being too weak to be a worthy fight.

Lysander knew Malodrax better than the other Imperial Fists there. He may not have been an expert – not knowledgeable enough to write a book about the place as Inquisitor Golrukhan had done – but he had witnessed the cruel will of the planet and Lycaon's comment stirred something in his memory.

Through the carnage the alpha lurched, shot through with a dozen bolt-rounds. It flopped to the ground in front of the corpse rampart, dragging itself along on shattered arms. A heavy bolter stuttered fire at it from Squad Gorvetz and it reared up as if in defiance, but instead of a letting out a final howl it fell back down silent and dead.

The alpha's death was the signal. The ground shuddered and pitched to one side. Lysander fell to one knee, and saw Halaestus tumbling off his feet by the barricades. A sound like thunder rumbled up from beneath. Then the ground dropped away entirely, an avalanche of pulverised earth accompanying Lysander down into a deep pit beneath the encampment.

Everything was darkness and noise. An awful stench, again with that note of familiarity, hit Lysander in the face – rot, ashes and long-dried blood.

He came to rest buried, and pushed around to make enough room to dig himself out. For a moment he was back in the heap of bodies in Shalhadar's city the last time he had been on this damned planet, struggling to breathe.

He made enough room around himself to claw at the earth in front of his face. Half a minute later he had broken out of it and was unearthing himself. There was just enough moonlight struggling down from above to see by.

He was in the centre of a great crossroads of warrens, with tunnels leading off in all directions. Shed skins, effluent and trash were gathered around what part of the floor wasn't buried by earth from the collapsed ceiling. Lysander hawked out a mouthful of spit and soil.

He still had his chainsword with him, but his bolter was buried somewhere. He aimed a mental curse at himself for being disarmed in the presence of the enemy. He would have to practice penance on the *Phalanx* for his sin, if he ever saw the corridors of that space station again.

He could see no other Imperial Fists but he could hear them, calling out to one another from elsewhere in the warren. Lysander forced himself all the way out of the drift of earth and tried to get his bearings. He could have tumbled down a sloping tunnel and come to rest a long way from the site of the Imperial Fists encampment.

He tried the vox. 'Lysander here,' he voxed on the command channel.

‘This is Lycaon,’ came the reply.

‘It was a trap,’ said Lysander. ‘They herded us into position and collapsed the tunnels underneath us.’

‘Dorn spoke no good of those who state the obvious, captain,’ came the reply. ‘What is your location?’

‘I don’t know, Chaplain. I’m on my own. I can hear others.’

‘We are regrouping just south of the encampment site, where several tunnels converge. Find others and make your way to us.’

‘Yes, Chaplain.’

A voice in Lysander’s memory, perhaps from that man he had once been before he became a Space Marine, reminded him that he knew what the predators were, where they had come from, and what they wanted. It reminded him he had not told Chaplain Lycaon of this. Had he wanted to disbelieve it? Or was he ashamed?

The stench rose. Lysander felt himself choking on it. Through the darkness loomed a shape that also had that terrible familiarity to it, a sagging mass of a torso, spindly neck and vulture head.

‘Ah, there you are,’ said the brood mother with a chuckle.

The daemon’s face was smeared with blood and she dragged behind her the corpse of an Imperial Fist, his torso ripped open. His helmet had been torn off and his bloodspattered face was wide-eyed with shock and pain. Brother Kollus of Squad Kaderic.

‘Did you think you could come back to Malodrax and hide from me?’ the brood mother continued. Lysander saw she was bigger than the first time he had seen her, gorged on her young. Their foetal corpses dangled from her midriff, neglected and rotting. She was gnarled and armoured with scar tissue, and her red eyes gleamed. ‘I can smell you, traveller. I will never forget your tender scent. I would follow you through the blood ocean, across the Mountains of Glass, through the gates of Kulgarde itself!’

Lysander took his chainsword in a two-handed grip. The brood mother stalked closer, swinging Kollus's body playfully. Behind her, Lysander saw another Imperial Fist clambering in through a side tunnel, but he could not make out who it was.

Time, he thought. He needed more time.

'What are you on this world?' said Lysander, squaring his feet and looking the daemon in its decaying face. 'Vermin? The lowest of the low? Feeding on the filth that the higher creatures leave behind?'

'You seek to anger me. I know no anger. I know no fear or joy or hatred. I know only passion, Imperial Fist. I know only the raw emotion of the warp. That you could feel it yourself! That you could revel in it!' She was within a few paces of Lysander now, blotting out the moonlight from above. She leaned in close. 'Stay with me,' she said.

A volley of bolter shots thudded into her side. The brood mother shrieked and lashed out with Kollus's body in the direction the shots had come from, knocking aside the Imperial Fist who had jumped up from the cover of a fallen rock to take aim. She turned from Lysander and bore down on her attacker.

In her other hand she held a weapon – a chainsword. The chainsword Lysander had given her in exchange for the way to the city of Shalhadar.

The Imperial Fist rolled onto his back just as the brood mother raised the chainsword to bring it down and cut him in half.

It was Halaestus, his ruined face defiant.

The brood mother reeled back. 'Oh, what hideousness!' she shrieked. 'Such ugliness!' Her face was contorted with shock, and Lysander saw in her expression what he himself felt to look upon her.

Lysander charged at the brood mother. He slashed at her and sliced through her arm with his chainsword before he slammed shoulder-first into her midriff. She toppled backwards, the atrophied remnants of her dozens of young looking up at him with the wide blank eyes of their dried-

out skulls. He thudded on top of her and felt his hand sinking into her pocked flesh as he tried to push himself upright.

The brood mother brought her chainsword – the chainsword Lysander had given her – up towards him. Lysander caught it against his own chainblade and the two screeched as their teeth ground against one another. Lysander was face to face with the daemon, and the stench of her was almost enough to knock him out.

‘Stay,’ she gasped.

Lysander drew back his fist and plunged it into her face. Bone and teeth splintered. Foul-smelling gore splattered across his face.

The brood mother was shrieking, half in pain, half in an awful cacophony of excitement, a gruesome ecstasy at Lysander’s touch. Lysander drove his fist down again and again and the brood mother reared up under him, throwing him off onto his back in the dirt. She clutched at her shattered face, sweeping around her at random with the chainblade.

Brother Halaestus shot her through the throat with his bolter. Her head toppled to the side on its broken stalk. Halaestus punched three more shots through her throat and upper chest.

Insensible, blind, the brood mother flopped onto her front and writhed through the dirt, mewling and spluttering as she groped through the filth.

Lysander clambered out of the refuse pit and took one of the side tunnels, gauging his direction and striking out for what he thought was the site of the encampment. He could hear bolter fire up ahead, and by the time he reached the knot of Imperial Fists fighting alongside Lycaon the brood mother’s offspring lay in heaps around them, shot down or cut to pieces.

‘Captain Lysander!’ said Lycaon. ‘You are late to the fight, alas.’

‘The daemon who leads them is laid low,’ replied Lysander. ‘Just behind me.’

‘Dead?’

‘As good as. A good dose of flame will see to it.’

The Imperial Fists regrouped and forged through the tunnels to the brood mother. She writhed and squealed pathetically, like a whipped animal. Sergeant Gorvetz ordered Brother Antinas forwards, as he had at the war engine, and the result was the same. Antinas drenched the brood mother in burning fuel and the flames of her pyre reached up through the fallen ceiling and into the sky. She shrieked in the flame and clawed at the air above her, her flesh boiling away and only a deformed skeleton left to tumble into the mass of burning debris.

Lysander found Sergeant Gorvetz as the Imperial Fists watched the brood mother die. ‘She killed Brother Kollus,’ said Lysander.

Gorvetz watched the fire leaping high for a moment, even as the last remnants of the brood mother’s shape crumbled away. ‘This thing killed him,’ he said. There was no emotion in his voice.

‘I could not stop her.’

‘Her?’ Gorvetz rounded on Lysander. ‘Her? You know of this creature?’

‘She was spoken of,’ said Lysander. ‘A daemon, called the brood mother.’

‘Filth upon the day we came here,’ spat Gorvetz. ‘This is no place to leave a good brother behind.’

The fire was dying down, the fast-burning fuel feeding a hot but short-lived flame. Lycaon walked through the burning detritus closer to the ashes and scorched bones that remained of the brood mother. He poked around in the debris, bent down, and came up clutching the scorched length of a chainsword. Golden paint still clung to it, and to the clenched fist symbol of the Chapter.

‘Brother Lysander,’ said Lycaon. ‘You left your weapon in your foe.’

‘It’s not his,’ came a voice from across the chamber. Brother Halaestus walked forwards, the dying fire flickering its orange glow across the patchwork face that had so horrified the brood mother. ‘It’s mine.’

On the way out of the warrens the moon sank in the sky, as if it were drowning the petrified forest in spite. The few surviving young of the brood mother scurried away from the remains of the battlefield, where they had been scavenging on the carrion of their dead around the crater where the Imperial Fists barricades had been. Kho's pair of Land Speeders patrolled overhead, taking pot shots at the larger creatures that did not flee at the first sound of booted feet on the ashen ground.

'Where did she find it?' said Halaestus. He had walked up behind Lysander, waiting until they were out of earshot of the rest of the strike force. The other Imperial Fists were securing the immediate perimeter, making ready to move out.

Lysander tried to read Halaestus's expression. He had always been steadfast, rarely emotive, a reliable and trustworthy soldier. Now there was even less to see of the man he knew, the new sections of his face artificial and dead.

'Brother?' asked Lysander.

'You know full well. My chainsword. How did the brood mother get it?'

'The Iron Warriors took our gear at Kulgarde,' said Lysander.

'And how did my blade make it into the daemon's hands?'

'How do I know?' snapped Lysander, a little too sharply. 'Thul bartered it with her. One of the fortress's scum stole it and pawned it away.'

'To a creature that followed us and ambushed us? Two connections between you and the brood mother, Lysander. She has a weapon from one of your squadmates in her hand, and she sought out an army that includes you.'

'Do you intend to accuse me, brother?' said Lysander, forcing his voice level. 'Of what?'

'Accuse you? No, captain. Just state facts. Brothers are dead and your footprints are all over the world that claimed them. Just facts.'

Lysander grabbed Halaestus by the back of the neck and pushed his face close. 'You have lost everything that makes a Space Marine into an

Imperial Fist. Your thoughts are not your own. Stay them, Brother Halaestus.'

'You think I have lost my mind?' retorted Halaestus. 'What did you do on Malodrax, Lysander? Answer us. What did you do?'

Lysander let Halaestus go. Now the anger in Halaestus was clear, and a mania simmered behind his eyes that did not belong in a level-headed, disciplined Imperial Fist. 'You are not yourself, brother,' he said. 'Back on the *Phalanx*, that will change. Until then I ask that you trust me.'

Lysander walked back towards the bulk of the strike force, now approaching a long rise in the ground that formed a blasted ridge covered in the stone trunks of fallen trees.

'I have not forgotten you saved my life,' said Halaestus after him. 'But there is only so much that buys. If you betrayed what you are, you will never fully leave this planet. You know that, Lysander! You know I speak truth!'



10

'My own brand of heresy is a common one. I am humble enough to admit that. What if knowledge was a weapon, I came to ask? Knowledge of the enemy, so warned against by the Imperial Creed, which could be a keener blade than ignorance? Instead of obeying the Creed I hoarded such knowledge and most sinfully of all, when I learned I was not alone, I sought the company of others who shared in my heresy. Thus was the name of Malodrax first passed to me, a world of daemons where countless secrets were waiting to become our mortal sins.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

Lysander's first sight of the sphinx was as it circled the pinnacle of Shalhadar's pyramid, light shimmering through it as it came down to land. A canal surrounded the pyramid, stocked with iridescent fish that burst like fireworks when they leapt from the water. The only bridge to the palace led to the main gates, and it was in front of these gates that the sphinx came to land with a grace that should not have been possible for something of its enormous size.

‘Keeper of the gate!’ called out Talaya the herald of Shalhadar, from the other end of the bridge where she stood with Lysander. ‘Someone thinks himself good enough to stand before the Veiled One in audience!’

‘Wonderful,’ purred the sphinx, its voice a kingly rumble from deep in its barrel chest. ‘I was getting hungry.’ It padded a few steps along the bridge and brought its massive feline head low, peering at Lysander. ‘And is this it?’

Talaya had brought Lysander to a tower of many chambers, most of them dark, smoky dens where citizens lounged in the grip of visions and nightmares brought about by braziers of smouldering narcotics. Among them were stands of antiques, including sets of armour, from which Lysander had been bade select a suit that fitted him. Most were made for men of normal size but Lysander had found a set of oversized full plate, lacquered red and scalloped like the shell of a sea creature. He had not taken the helmet, which was fashioned into an expressionless human face with an extra eye in the forehead, and instead went bare-headed. He had found a sword, too, a fine two-hander which a Space Marine could wield in one, carried in a scabbard of gold and emerald at his waist. He still carried Inquisitor Golrukhan’s book, held by a strap to one armoured thigh.

‘And why,’ rumbled the sphinx, ‘would my lord the Veiled One stoop to share a realm with such a ragged peasant?’

‘I have brought you this far,’ said Talaya to Lysander. ‘The rest is up to you.’

Lysander walked onto the bridge, within a few steps of the sphinx. Its stained-glass wings surrounded it in a halo of colour, shimmering across the stone and gilt of its body. Its face had more of a cat about it than a human, its eyes bright and expressive considering it seemed to have been forged rather than born. A deep purr shuddered the surface of the bridge as its enormous chest rose and fell.

‘The Veiled One will see me,’ said Lysander.

‘Will he now?’ replied the sphinx. ‘How very certain you sound.’

‘I will pay what must be paid.’

The sphinx smiled, showing its teeth. ‘I doubt that greatly, strange little thing. I doubt there is anything you have that I could want.’

‘You do not want anything, save to serve your master. And you will serve him by letting me through.’

‘Do you really want to go through the whole charade? You know I must kill you if you are found wanting. Not that I would wish for anything else, of course, but there are rules that must be followed. One of them is that you must know the consequences of standing before me. Throw yourself on your belly and beg me for mercy, with tears in your eyes, and you may withdraw.’

‘Your role as gatekeeper is to weed out the unworthy,’ said Lysander, ‘for only the worthy can pay. You are a creature formed from the will of the Prince of Pleasure, the Lord of Unspeakable Excess. Your currency is sensation. That is how I will pay you.’

‘Not just any sensation,’ said the sphinx. ‘Something new. Something I have never felt before. And I am as old as this world! Your race was not yet dribbled from the guts of rotten Terra when I was already ancient. I have seen the infinite thoughtsapes of the warp and the foulest debasements of the noblest men. What can you show me that I have not yet felt?’

‘You can read minds,’ said Lysander. It was not phrased as a question.

‘I can consume them whole,’ replied the sphinx. ‘That came to bore me many aeons ago.’

‘Read mine,’ said Lysander.

The sphinx crouched down, folding its arms. ‘And what a tiny, closed mind you have. Pray, what is in here that might interest me?’

Lysander felt the daemon’s touch. It was like a slimy, unclean thing that slithered around the inside of his skull, extruding feelers into his mind.

His skin shuddered and his stomachs tightened up, and every instinct he had told him to draw his sword and set about the sphinx with a view to putting out its eyes. But he held his hand still, took in a breath to steady himself, and threw his mind back to Gravenhand Ridge.

There were many choices for Lysander to bring forward. He chose Gravenhand Ridge because it was so raw, so crude. A madman named Gladian Scraw had risen to power on a promise to restore his home world's aristocracy to supremacy. It was a story repeated on countless worlds with disaffected social classes, vulnerable to men like Scraw who offered them a dream for a future that could not possibly be. There were so many planets like that in the Imperium that the name of the particular world didn't matter.

Lysander picked out a memory of the first time he saw Scraw's stronghold, defended on one side by the stormy cliffs of the ocean and on the other by the steep scree of Gravenhand Ridge. He had seen it from the air, through the viewfinder of a drop pod as it plummeted towards the ancient castle where Scraw was based.

The castle doubled as an execution ground. Its wings enclosed a courtyard where Scraw's inner guard herded the planet's dissidents into ranks to be shot down with volleys of autogun fire. So voluminous were the deaths that a whole social class had grown up to process and murder those that Scraw feared, hated, or merely disliked. At the moment the Imperial Fists drop pods broke through the clouds Scraw was sitting on a balcony overlooking the execution ground, imbibing his regular dose of narcotic and juvenat drugs from a crystal glass as the day's first executions greeted the dawning sun.

Scraw was a noble-faced man, carefully sculpted by the planet's most exclusive skinscapers to resemble the aristocratic ideal. His finely curved eyebrows raised as the drop pods appeared in the sky, hurtling towards his

castle, retro thrusters burning to decelerate them as they arrowed in towards the courtyard.

Scraw had sold whatever soul he had to the powers of the warp in return for lordship over his world. From a spectral gateway he summoned marched a host of burning daemons, like suits of ornate armour filled with fire, answering the contract that Scraw had signed. When the Imperial Fists landed among the corpses of the day's first dead, they were met by a legion of daemons of the Blood God.

Lysander remembered the smell – blood old and fresh, the familiar stink of the newly dead. The sulphur and flame of the daemons. He remembered Scraw screaming from his balcony, demanding that his daemonic allies slaughter the intruders where they stood.

But he remembered most clearly the fury of the slaughter. The Imperial Fists met the enemy with a wrath that equalled the daemons' own. The daemons were used to mortal men cowering before them, either fleeing or fawning. The Imperial Fists did neither.

The blades through flesh. The flame washing over golden armour. Lysander brought every moment back to the front of his memory.

The Imperial Fists were led that day by Chaplain Chrysonerus, whose purity of spirit made him the ideal commander to lead his brothers in the face of the daemon. Lysander brought forth the image of Chrysonerus hacking daemons to pieces with his crozius, the power mace in the shape of a gilded winged skull that flashed in his hand as if he were battling with a shard of lightning.

And most of all, he remembered their victory. He remembered Chrysonerus wading through the burning remains of the daemon legion, storming into the castle and throwing Scraw down to the courtyard. He remembered Chrysonerus dragging a sobbing Scraw towards the spectral gateway, which still stood open onto the black flames of the daemons' home world in the warp.

‘See, Gladian Scraw,’ Chaplain Chrysonerus said. ‘To you what lies beyond is an unknowable realm, where powers greater than any of us hold sway. To you it is a place of awe. To us, to the pure-hearted servants of the Emperor, it is one more nest of enemies to be purged. Brothers! Imperial Fists and Sons of Dorn! Will you follow me?’

Gladian Scraw screamed as the Imperial Fists cheered and followed Chrysonerus into the gateway. Lysander was among them as they marched through the gateway to the Garden of Vharlan Ghesh, ruled over by a daemon prince sworn to the Blood God, a realm of bloody madness where his legions battled endlessly for the delight of their master.

Lysander did not dwell on how Gladian Scraw died, doubled up with madness to look on the insanity of this realm. He did not even focus on the revenge the Imperial Fists took on Vharlan Ghesh, or the many battles fought there against the daemons of the Blood God. He focused instead on that moment when Chaplain Chrysonerus had called on his battle-brothers to charge into hell, and they had followed him.

That was how much the Imperial Fists, the human race, hated daemonkind. That was how deep their disgust and their desire for revenge went. If they could, every Space Marine in the Imperium would storm into the warp and butcher every single daemon, every wayward thought the Chaos Gods gave form, and would march to the foot of those very gods’ thrones.

Lysander’s mind had a whole gallery of these memories. The memories of hate, the force of a human’s anger focused through the discipline of a Space Marine and directed at the daemon. It was a pure hate, a disgust at the unnatural origin of the daemon and a rage at everything it stood for.

Rogal Dorn had written that there was no star in the galaxy that burned as bright as an honest human’s hatred, and no hatred as hot as that directed at the daemon.

The sphinx recoiled. Its front paw hovered over Lysander, its eyes focused far away.

‘Do you see?’ said Lysander. ‘Do you understand now what we are? For everything you are, for each one of us you kill, for every one you corrupt and force to his knees, there are a billion more directing every moment of their hatred at you. And what you feel now is something you have never felt, and that is my payment to you.’

‘And what is it?’ asked the sphinx. ‘What is this ice that flows through me? This dark claw that clutches my mind?’

‘It is fear,’ said Lysander. ‘My kind were created to feel no fear, but we understand it. We were all once men who felt fear as does anyone else, and we must know it because it is a weapon we wield.’

‘I have never felt this before,’ said the sphinx. There was a note of wonderment in its voice. ‘This fear. I have heard the word, I have seen it in the eyes of those thrown onto the altars of the Pleasure God, but I have never felt it until now! This is a sensation I feel for the first time. And so the toll is paid.’

The sphinx stood aside. Behind it rose the great golden gates of the pyramid. The sphinx settled down on its haunches, taking up its place watching over the bridge. Lysander walked past it and the gates began to open.

He glanced behind him. Talaya had watched the exchange with a curious smile on her face. As Lysander approached the palace gates she turned away and walked back into the sprawl of the city.

The sheer lavishness of the palace was designed to dull the senses and overwhelm an inquisitive mind. It was a kind of camouflage, Lysander realised, just like scrim nets stretched across an Imperial Guard camp or the baffling burst of signals emitted by a strike cruiser to mask its communications.

The inside of the pyramid was divided into countless chambers, curved and irregular in shape, by walls plated in gold and silver or lacquered in deep blue and vivid violets. Scaffolds were set up everywhere and a small army of the city's people were swarming over them, painting in sketched-out frescoes on the ceiling or laying mosaics on the floor. Lysander could make out the vaguest hints of twisted bodies in the paintings, inhuman shapes and features melting into one another. A sense of uncleanness crawled over him and he looked away. The floor was no better, for while the designs were abstract they were mesmerizingly complex. They seemed to want to draw his eyes right out of his head.

'You!' cried out a voice. Lysander looked up from the floor to see one of the painters advancing towards him. It was a man, his age impossible to guess given the artistic mutilations covering his face. His nose had been cut off, leaving a pair of nostril slits, as had his ears. His eye sockets had been pared back to reveal the whole of his eyeballs, unblinking and rimmed with exposed muscle. He wore paint-spattered robes and carried reams of parchment and canvas covered in paintings and sketches. 'Take up a brush or a trowel, newcomer! Beautify this place! Scrub away its ugliness!' He looked Lysander up and down, appraising his crimson armour and sword. 'Eyes of the warp, you are ugly enough yourself. Just by standing there you put us back months! Make yourself useful!'

'I seek Shalhadar the Veiled,' said Lysander.

The artist dropped the mass of painting he was carrying. 'No one sees the Veiled One,' he said.

'He will see me.'

'We are not there yet!' cried the artist. The painters and mosaicists looked up at his outburst. 'The story hasn't reached his entrance! He is in the wings, ugly one!'

Lysander grabbed the artist by the shoulder, gripped hard and lifted the man off the ground. The artist's mutilated eyes rolled in fear. 'Where is

he?’ demanded Lysander.

‘In the... in the wings...’ gasped the artist.

Lysander threw the artist aside. ‘Out!’ he yelled. ‘Everyone out!’ He drew his sword and held it high.

The people of Shalhadar’s city clambered down from the scaffolds and ran for the gates. Their half-painted frescoes glared down with thousands of eyes set in daemonic faces. Those working on the mosaics fled too, leaving scars in the unfinished floors. Among the artisans Lysander saw the many varieties of the city’s heresy – some had decorative scars and mutilations like the lead artist, and others were robed and stitched like the cultists from the alleyway. There were new ones, too, like those with patches of iridescent scales sewn onto their skin or with their flesh blistered up with wriggling egg sacs. The latter reminded Lysander of the brood mother, and he steadied his hand against the instinct to cut them down.

With his sword in hand, Lysander walked further into the palace. It was impossible to tell how far the palace extended, for the dimensions within the pyramid made little sense given its apparent size when seen from the outside. With the artists gone sounds echoed from deeper in the palace – footsteps perhaps, skin on skin, the whispered voices of daemons. Shadows coalesced on the edges of his vision, the movement banished when he tried to focus on it.

Ahead a vast domed space opened up. It resembled, of all things, an opera house, with an enormous pipe organ dominating one wall, reaching high up to the arching ribs of the ceiling. A round stage stood in the centre of the hall, surrounded by circles of seating.

As Lysander entered, the light from thousands of candles hanging in holders from the ceiling went dim, save for a shaft of light falling on the stage. A single figure walked into the light. Lysander couldn’t see where he had entered from. He wore a long white robe and his face was heavily

made up in white, with black lips and eyes daubed on as if his features were twisted in mourning.

‘Many thanks, traveller, for your attendance at our sorrowful show!’ said the actor in a wailing voice. ‘You could have been anywhere in the infinite galaxies this night! Enveloped in the bosom of fleshy luxury. Riding the waves of the endless ocean of the mind. On some distant world of beauty, grasping its ethereal wonder before it is spoiled by the cruelty of the mundane. But no! You are here, with us, to witness the Tragedy of the Cadaverous Lord!’

Lysander realised he was being addressed, though the actor did not look at him directly and spoke to the whole opera house as if every row were packed with spectators. The actor bowed gravely and was spirited away again, vanished into a hidden trapdoor or by an optical illusion. Lysander chose not to sit.

The lighting shifted to the warmth of a morning sun. Dozens of extras walked across the stage now, in archaic Imperial dress such as that still favoured by some of the Imperium’s oldest aristocracies. They wore ruffs and long trains, enhanced with decorative bionics. Their bionics were non-functional, and where they met the skin the actors’ makeup could not conceal the torn skin and weeping wounds.

They began a song of longing and misery, echoed by strains of music from the pipe organ and from concealed musicians whose sound boomed from every direction. The actors hit harmonies too complex for their apparent numbers. They sang of how the soul of mankind had withered away, leaving the people empty and barren.

‘Where has gone the oversoul that conquered Terra/Where has gone the lust to enslave stars?’

A great and benevolent power saw the suffering of the human race. It was depicted by a voice booming from off-stage, presumably belonging to a man of the city selected for his deep, reverberating baritone. Lysander

could not be sure if it was a god or some kind of collective will of humanity.

He could not see where the tale would lead yet, but it brought about such an unease in him that he felt a flicker of a very human weakness. His bile rose and he had a stale, acid taste in his mouth, though he could not place just what in the opera and its performance was affecting him.

He could walk onto stage and throw the actors off. He wouldn't even have to bloody his blade. Bare fists would be more than enough. But he reeled in his hatred again, that only minutes before he had been baring raw and bleeding for the sphinx at the gates. He did not remind himself what he had done to get this far, because it brought about a deepening of his unease.

The god called forth its servants, all garbed like angels from the margins of prayer books. They had wings of wooden frames and feathers, and golden halos riveted to their temples. They danced and sang of the infinite wisdom and kindness of their master, who still went unseen and unnamed. One among them was different – he wore a mask of gold, and his feathers were golden, too, laced with red ribbons and gemstones. According to the lyrics he was most favoured of the god's servants and was sent down to humanity to give them back the joy and life they had lost.

But this servant, over the course of the next hour or so, fell from grace. He first deprecated the temples built to him, and said he should not be treated as a god, but eventually he came to accept them and then to desire them. He lounged among throngs of concubines brought to beautify his court. He gave the people a purpose, but it was to serve him, to glorify him and grant him his every desire. He was corrupted through and through until even the people could not pretend he was anything else.

The actor playing this false god did not remove his golden mask throughout the performance, until a climactic scene where the people finally rose up and demanded he prove to them that he was a god

deserving of their adoration. The false god rose from his throne of heaped-up bodies and threw back his hood, taking his mask in his hands as the music swelled and he sang of his power and perfection, and damned those who doubted him. He would show them the face of their god, and they would be struck into blind, mindless servitude to look on it as punishment for rising up.

The false god took off his mask. Beneath was a rotted, skeletal face, the skin peeled away and the muscle turned to a maggoty pulp. The eyes were sunken in their sockets and the teeth grinned from pared-back lips.

A terrible atonal music of horror took over. Actors in Imperial garb rushed across the stage screaming, contorting. They trampled and threw one another from the stage. Such was the violence that Lysander was certain the blood was real. Some were dragged off stage insensible, perhaps even dead.

When it was done and the stage was empty, when even the false god had left for the wings, a few survivors straggled into the light. They sang they would follow the greater power, the one who had been usurped and betrayed by his corrupted servant, for they had seen how the false god's corruption had manifested itself in the face of a corpse. They vowed to worship only the true power, to follow his path and reach his city. They took the symbols of the Young Prince, the Sigil of Pleasure, and the Hand Unchained, to deny the false god's ancient dogmas of obedience, denial and suffering. And so the tragedy ended on a note of hope, a counterpoint to the horror of the climax.

The clown-like narrator shambled back onto the stage, newly spattered with blood. 'You who could have been anywhere, nestled in a velvet pit of pleasure or kneeling before the altar of the awesome, you chose instead to grant us the honour of your attention. And our gift to you is the Tragedy of the Cadaverous Lord! Thus the one called Emperor enslaved the souls of his people. But what of our brave band who saw the fall from grace, who

espied that corpse-face on the mask of gold? In this city, wonder of wonders, they gather! Before the Veiled One, Lord of Lords, they kneel! And that is the greatest honour you could give us. To stand among us, to marvel at the beauty of Shalhadar, and to cast back the darkness of the Corpse-God from this holy place.’ The narrator bowed low, and with a final soaring note from the hidden musicians the light fell dead and the opera house was full of darkness.

Lysander steadied his breathing. The performance was finished, but he had not finished his business here.

Someone was clapping a few seats away. Lysander looked closer and saw the actor who had played the Cadaverous Lord, still in full costume with corpse mask, applauding the play. A spotlight came up on him and up close Lysander could see the mask was not just a facsimile – it was rotting flesh, wriggling with maggots and shedding flakes of desiccated skin as the actor clapped.

‘Such economy of expression!’ the Cadaverous Lord said. ‘Such purity of vision! A truly great work cuts to the heart of its subject. The cruelty of a regime that shackles the mind, the very function of its creativity, and yet a regime that is borne also of the misguided will of those same minds, must have posed an irresistible opportunity to the author. And a challenge, for who could encompass such grand tragedy? Indeed, it is impossible. The work we have seen does not attempt to do it, but to hint at it, so the mind of the audience fills in for the truly appalling fate of the human race. Do you not think so? Tell me, you cannot have watched this unmoved.’

Lysander looked into the mask’s eyes, but there was nothing living there, just the dried-out whites like crumpled paper sitting deep in the sockets.

‘You are Shalhadar the Veiled,’ said Lysander.

‘And why,’ replied the Cadaverous Lord, somehow managing to place a quizzical expression on his decaying face, ‘would you say that?’

‘Because this was meant for me.’

‘This, my friend, is an ancient work of the greatest cultural resonance. One of the classics.’

‘Everywhere I have gone on this planet,’ said Lysander, ignoring the Cadaverous Lord’s words, ‘I have been tested. A daemon tested me to let it relive the glory of the time it spent before slavery. Another challenged me to best it in a trade, to get what I wanted without giving up what I could not afford to lose. And the creature you keep outside tested me, too, to pay its toll. That is what this world does. Every planet touched by the warp has its own way of inflicting suffering. I have walked on them and seen it. Malodrax likes to make us dance, to complete tests as if we were schoolchildren, before we can get a glimpse of what we seek. I will play its game, daemon prince, for now, which is just as well for you because that performance was another test.’

‘What a curious interpretation,’ said the Cadaverous Lord, his voice conversational as if he and Lysander really were two enthusiasts of the arts discussing the latest performance. ‘So the creator of this work has set us a challenge. Thus we are not passive, as witnesses, but active, as participants, striving against the author’s will! Truly he is a master. But if this is true, my new friend, what is he testing in us?’

‘Not in us,’ said Lysander. ‘In me. I am a Space Marine and a servant of the Emperor, as you became aware from the moment I came within sight of your city. A Space Marine witnessing the blasphemy of your play should feel disgust and anger, and more than that – he should feel hatred. Hatred enough to storm onto the stage and butcher the actors, and tear your city apart searching for the playwright. If I had done that, you would have no use for me, because to merely be in your presence would cause me such revulsion that I would strike out against you. This is my duty, reinforced by the hatred a Space Marine must feel.’

‘Just as well you passed, then,’ said the Cadaverous Lord.

‘There is a deeper hatred in me than your heresy inflamed. Even seeing you dressed as my Emperor, pantomiming him as a betrayer and a tyrant, was not enough to eclipse it. That was what I was being tested for. A hatred deep enough for you to use to your benefit. That is what you need from me, Shalhadar the Veiled. That is what I have shown you.’

‘So,’ said the Cadaverous Lord, ‘you would not call yourself a fan?’

‘It seems I overestimated Shalhadar,’ said Lysander. He stood and turned for the exit from the opera house. ‘I understood he needed useful men he could exploit, by offering them what they desired in return for their service. Evidently he has no use for a Space Marine after all.’

‘I did not say that,’ said the Cadaverous Lord.

Lysander stopped in mid-stride. ‘What does it matter what you said? You are just an actor.’

‘As are we all,’ said the Cadaverous Lord. He removed the mask of rotting flesh. Inside there was no face, just a deep, swirling darkness like the depths of an ocean or a starless tract of space. ‘The greatest vice to which I will admit is curiosity. After so many tens of thousands of years of existence, it is rare that my attention is grabbed. But you have grabbed it. A Space Marine on Malodrax is hardly new, for the Iron Warriors have infested it since your Age of Heresy. But one who claims loyalty to the corpse-god is something else, especially one who walks willingly into my city.’

‘And what do I get for satisfying your curiosity?’ said Lysander.

‘You get what everyone desires on Malodrax,’ said the Cadaverous Lord. ‘You get to pull some strings instead of just being the puppet. So tell me, Lysander of the Imperial Fists. Just what is it that you hate more than the blasphemy of my court?’

‘I hate Kraegon Thul,’ said Lysander.

‘I see.’ The Cadaverous Lord seemed to ponder this for a moment, the void of his face churning. ‘And what do you intend to do about it?’

‘Kill him. And rescue my battle-brothers he holds captive in Kulgarde.’

‘And you have come to my city to ask for my help.’

‘Your help? You have never helped anyone or anything. It is not in the nature of the daemon. No, I am here because the creatures of the warp are jealous. You want to rule the whole of Malodrax. Your kind hunger for power and domination. One look at this city shows me that. You crave worship. This place is one huge church you built to yourself. Kraegon Thul stops you from building that church across half of Malodrax. You hate him just like I do, and through me you can wipe him off the face of this world. You will betray me, I do not doubt. You will make of me an offering to your god, if you can, once I am no longer useful to you. If, of course, I do not destroy you first.’

‘You are not the first to have tried,’ said the Cadaverous Lord.

‘I have no doubt,’ replied Lysander. ‘Kulgarde was built for a reason. I dare not guess how many have been lost trying to breach it. But remember, Veiled One – none of them were Imperial Fists.’

‘I left most of the decisions to Agent Sildyne, who while serving as my favoured assassin and spy had shown exceptional skill at reading the customs and perils of urban environments. At his suggestion my warband took over the home of a musician, evidently one of a class of performers and artists constantly competing for the attention of Shalhadar and the chance to enter his court. In spite of my losses myself, Sildyne, Grun and Thol, Talaya, the pilot Maskelin and Archivist Grunvelder still represented more than enough of a fighting force to despatch the occupant without any trouble. Thol and Grun squabbled over his scalp, but I talked them down from settling matters with a knife fight.

‘From this base I set about exploring and cataloguing the nature of this city. It was an impossible task, for like all things touched by Chaos it did not obey the rules that a saner place might cleave to. For instance, there was no economy to speak of, not as we understand it. How was the city’s population fed? How did it maintain a population at all given the

sacrifices and random blossomings of bloodshed that took place hourly? Who kept the gleaming spires and gilded streets clean of filth, so it met every day's dawn with a blaze of reflected gold and silver? Archivist Grunvelder was most perturbed by the lack of answers to these questions, and by now I was most aware of the decline of his mental faculties. But Sildyne understood. The wily assassin knew that only life and death are constant, for to him they were the defining features of every level of existence.

'The function of the city, if not the intricate details of its various interactions, became apparent to me. Though I ventured out little, leaving Sildyne and the feral worlder brothers to roam abroad for information and supplies, my perceptiveness is such that I beheld the most important truths. The pyramid was at the centre of the city, both physically and in the hearts and minds of its people. They lived, and the city existed, to fuel the need of the palace for beauty and talent, even though such beauty was often abhorrent to a sane mind. From the deprevations and devotional displays of the population were made apparent the most devoted and capable of celebrants, who might then be granted entry to the palace. Artists, musicians, actors, singers and dancers were in great demand, as were playwrights and those who were merely beautiful (by whatever strange standards of beauty applied there). The most depraved seekers of new sensations could also be plucked from their opiate-drenched dens to continue their debauchery at court. The means by which the power in the palace, this Veiled One, discovered the most talented citizens was obscure to me. I imagine he had agents in the city observing, much as Sildyne and the feral worlders served me.

'I concluded that entry to the pyramid, or at least the placing of an agent within, was of the greatest importance. Sildyne observed a beast guarding the pyramid's gates that, going by his description, resembled the centauroid half-feline beasts common from the myth-cycles of primitive

worlds. Legend among the people, picked up by Thol who had proven able at sharing in a friendly drink with the locals while keeping his ears open, suggested the sphinx was the gatekeeper and decided who was permitted entrance. It is unlikely our strength could despatch such a beast. I determined that subterfuge, not force, was the key that would unlock the palace of the Veiled One to this agent of the Emperor's Inquisition.'



11

‘That lies are the very substance of Chaos is a truth that need not be taught to anyone with the capacity to read and understand these words. Yet in our arrogance we assume that we alone are lied to, and that every movement and utterance of the daemon is intended solely to deceive us. Indeed not, for it is my belief that the greater part of daemonkind concern themselves not with humanity, but with other creatures of the warp. Among themselves they make war, forge pacts, make bargains, bind one another into servitude, and destroy. And among themselves, they lie.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The ambassador’s entrance had its own grandeur. It was at odds, deliberately so, with the aesthetic of Shalhadar’s city, but was no less crafted for all that. It entered through one of the city’s main gates and was preceded by a host of mutant slaves, chained together with links fixed to their iron collars, their feet shackled so they could only shamble at

walking pace. The procession had to be seen, just like the city's own revellers and works of art.

The mutants wore their status on their skin, not just their many deformities, but the scars and brands that covered them. They were the image of servitude, of subhumanity – living, sentient beings crushed down to something far less than that by the will of another. Some were xenos – some could have been, if they were not hugely mutated humans. Among them were the lipless, gangly creatures that survived from Malodrax's native species, and a few other more exotic things beside – a couple of greenskinned orks, their flesh covered in scar tissue as deep as the bark of a storm-lashed tree. A quadruped with dextrous mandibles, harnessed like a beast of burden. An avian with the feathers fringing its arms and torso ripped out, leaving a few wisps of plumage hanging from its torn and pinkish skin. They all walked in time, as if to the beat of a silent drum.

They hauled spiked chains attached to a war altar that slid along the ground on rollers. The altar was set on a slab of gleaming obsidian, and was crowned with smokestacks belching out columns of grey-black fumes. A pit of bubbling molten steel sent out waves of heat haze, and set into it was a slab of stone. A blade was laid out on the stone, a broadsword of exceptional ornateness and size. Standing over the altar, like the smith about to start work, was the ambassador himself – an Iron Warrior, in the brutalist armour of his Legion, dark gunmetal with black and yellow warning flashes at the joints.

Behind the altar was another mass of mutants, pushing it from behind. These were brute-mutants, swollen masses of muscle grinding beneath the scars on their backs and shoulders. Some of them were implanted with banner poles grafted onto their spines, flying standards depicting the iron mask symbol of the Legion. They left footprints in blood and filth on the gilded flagstones.

Thousands had emerged from their homes to watch the ambassador's arrival. The ugliness of the spectacle was a rare experience in Shalhadar's

city. The stench of sweat and misery was even rarer. Nobles and aesthetes held nosegays to their faces. Others just gawped, and shuddered when the visor-slit of the ambassador's helm fell upon them.

Lysander watched from a high balcony, adjoining the tower floor assigned for his use. He could smell the greasy smoke from the forge-altar from his vantage point. He felt a spark of fire leaping in his chest as he recognised the ambassador's armour – it was the one Kraegon Thul had named Captain Hexal, the leader of the raiding party that had boarded the *Shield of Valour*.

Captain Hexal's hands were soaked in the blood of Brother Drevyn.

The sound of metallic clacking came from below the balcony. Talaya, the herald of Shalhadar, climbed up the wall, her steel talons digging into the stone. She stopped level with Lysander and cast a bored glance down at the ambassador's parade.

'You know him?' she asked.

'In passing,' replied Lysander.

'He is here to demand tribute,' continued Talaya. 'Kulgarde loves to remind us that we are not the only power on Malodrax. In a few moons we might send our own demands. These things ebb and flow.' A cruel smile came across Talaya's face. 'You could kill him,' she said.

'I was just thinking that myself,' said Lysander. 'A soldier always does. It is a reflex.' He leaned against the balcony rail, looking down at the crowds in the street. 'The drop is potentially fatal but the crowds will break my fall. If I am still mobile after the landing I can make it to the altar before the mutants in front of it react. Their collective reflexes will be slow. They are not a factor. Once on the altar, I can vault the anvil and be face to face with Hexal in three or four seconds.'

'Could you take him, if you got that far?'

Lysander drew his blade. It was exceptionally fine, the edge so keen it glowed, the blade shimmering with the patterns of countless foldings.

‘This is a good sword,’ he said, ‘but it would still be an unpowered weapon against power armour. Hexal’s armour is of an ancient mark. The weak points are the joints at the waist and between the arms. But that is only speaking relatively. Those points are still sounder than any mundane armour. Moreover, the first blow must be fatal or debilitating, otherwise Hexal will have the time to draw a weapon and fight back, as will the brute-mutants to the rear.’

‘What are your chances?’ asked Talaya.

‘Of killing him? One in four. Of killing him and making it out of the street alive? A few per cent. Perhaps fewer than one if Hexal has a weapon to hand.’

‘But there is a chance,’ said Talaya, leaning a little closer, the mechanical arms mounted on her back hissing and spraying a fine mist of steam. ‘You could kill him now. It is why you are here.’

‘I could,’ said Lysander. ‘And a duty to the human race would be done. But even if everything went right, even if I killed Hexal and escaped in the bedlam, Kraegon Thul would still be alive and Kulgarde would still stand.’

‘Then Hexal will survive,’ said Talaya. ‘For now.’

Lysander leaned back from the rail. ‘So what is the next stage?’

Talaya pretended to think about this. There was something unwholesome about the sly, flirtatious smile on her face. ‘That depends on what Hexal demands,’ she said. ‘Whatever it is, the Veiled One has a way to exploit it. He will state Kulgarde’s demands in the stadium.’

‘Then I will hear them,’ said Lysander.

Below, a couple of brute-mutants were knocking aside spectators who got too close to the procession. The altar ground further into Shalhadar’s city, leaving a trail of broken mutant stragglers as it went.

‘It is time I write of what happened to Talaya.

‘Some of my work I wrote down as it happened, always assuming that I would survive to leave Malodrax and dictate this memoir of my deeds

there in the comfort of my spacecraft as I returned to my conclave's fortress. It has become apparent, however, that such a luxury may not be afforded me. Therefore I write of these events while I have yet to depart Malodrax, two days' march outside Shalhadar's city. Archivist Grunvelder is no longer with me – indeed, only Maskelin and Thol remain in my band – so I must write by hand in this blank volume I recovered from Grunvelder's effects.

'It was apparent to me that only by receiving an audience with Shalhadar could I acquire the understanding essential for the cleansing of Malodrax. It was always my intention that once I returned to my conclave, they would use the knowledge with which I presented them to return and sear this world of the filth encrusting it. I could hardly return to those ancient and powerful Inquisitorial heretics with nothing to show for this expedition, against which so many had argued. So I determined that I would do whatever it took to get the attention of Shalhadar, who thus far had more than earned his sobriquet of the Veiled One. Indeed, the name was coined for him purely because he bestowed a personal appearance so rarely.

'How many thousands of the city's inhabitants went through a lifetime of devotion, only to die never having laid eyes on Shalhadar? But those people were not inquisitors. Through the investigations of the city I had come to learn of the great spectacles held in the stadium, a vast structure built into an impact crater adjoining the city and around which a great curve of wall had been erected, bulging beyond the roughly circular shape of the city like an enormous cancerous growth. Therein the spectacles were held not just to entertain the people, but to exalt the greatness of Shalhadar and, perhaps, to acquire entry to his court with a particularly grand display of skill or devotion.

'The expedition to the stadium required a display of pageantry. Grun and Thol did not greatly appreciate their garb of heavy robes and various

cultish accoutrements, but I permitted them to retain their lucky scalps and jawbone clubs under the folds. Maskelin, who in his youth had been an enthusiastic musician earning coins in the slums of Devlan, went ahead of us playing a set of pipes to herald our approach. As the member of the warband with the greatest personal gravity and natural authority, I garbed myself as a high priest of some obscure splinter warp religion with Talaya as my bearer of sacrificial implements.

‘Grunvelder has been plagued by visions, and when I ordered him to spend several hours writing out scripture to cleanse his soul, the result was reams of pages scrawled in a dark tongue I did not know. I left him back at the tower we used as our base. By then we were all aware of what would be his fate, not least Grunvelder himself, though none spoke of it aloud.

‘The stadium rose ahead of us, a magnificent crown of carved ivory. The donor creature was an immense leviathan, perhaps hauled out of the blood ocean I had seen when first landing on Malodrax, its vast and misshapen skull mounted above the main gates. The gates of whalebone were etched with intricate scenes of sacrifice and mutilation, all carved with the bloodied fingerbone stubs of a caste of worshippers who gouged the carvings into the stadium’s ivory. These souls gave their lives to the art, wearing their hands away until the few who reached a great age had worn their arms away to the elbow. I wondered how many of them ever knew what it felt to have the Veiled One’s eye on them, or if they had all slaved, suffered and died without earning their lord’s attention.

‘But those hapless, forgotten souls were not inquisitors.

‘Sildyne had preceded us to the stadium, and had concealed himself among the rafters. By our secure vox-link he informed me that the spectacle for that day was to be the construction of a living monument to Shalhadar. This suited my purpose well, for the Veiled One had been known

to attend such acts of mass devotion in person. At the very least those who watched the city for their lord's benefit were sure to be in attendance.

'What can I say of what we saw there? A bald and workmanlike description will have to suffice. I cannot count the numbers who crowded the stadium's galleries, and while among them was a multitude of strange sights, they were not the true spectacle. No, that took place on the sand of the arena.

'Ten thousand men and women entered through the archways at stadium level. They had shed their various devotional fashions and wore silks of purple and light blue, which were among the colours of Shalhadar's patron powers among the warp. Their feet were bare upon the sand. Many among them wept with joy. A great cheer went up when they made their entry, and yet there were angry mutterings beneath the sound for the crowds watching all wished they had the honour of serving in the spectacle.

'Sildyne joined us, making his way like a ghost through the throng, and whispered in my ear that a covering of silk in the stands opposite housed a great dignitary searching for useful subjects to beautify or scandalise the court of Shalhadar. Thus I was assured my journey, and the risk it entailed, were not for nothing.

'The spectacle itself was as grand and awe-inspiring as it was appalling. The supplicants clambered together into a great living statue, an approximation of the icon I have seen scrawled in forbidden texts and carved into the skin of madmen – the sigil of the Lord of Pleasure, the warp power whose will Shalhadar served. Hundreds upon hundreds heaped themselves up to form its base, the shape growing higher, like an organic thing spreading branches, until I recognised with a note of horror in my soul what I was watching.

'Those at the base were crushed. Their blood stained the sand pink. Beneath the cheers and chanting of the crowds I could hear the weak screams of the trapped, and the sigh of bones snapping by the dozen. Some

fell, dashed to death on the sand. Some faces I could see, eyes and tongues bulging as their midriffs were compressed beyond the point of survival. The living statue did not keep its shape for long, but in the moments it did I felt the eyes of the warp on me, its raw malice bathing that stadium and its cold fingers probing for my soul.

‘In the warp, the Lord of Unspeakable Pleasures was looking on. I knew he must see me there, and know I did not belong. I saw then how quickly my work in the city must be done.

‘The sculpture dissolved as if in a rain of acid, its points and edges blurring as the bodies keeping its shape died. Those in the outermost layers, relatively low down, tumbled to the sand alive. Bodies fell after them crushed or suffocated. I did not watch, save to make sure that their sacrifice did not bring forth some monster from the warp. It is more awful to me that it did not. They went to their deaths willingly, not to bring about a great revelation or the birth of some patron beast, but solely to create a monument that lasted seconds for the benefit of a daemon prince not even in attendance.

‘I travelled through the crowds, taking on the air of someone who does not expect to be stopped while going about his vital and sacred business. Thus the crowds parted for me tolerably quickly, with the feral worlder brothers shunting the stragglers out of my way. When I came within sight of the pavilion’s inhabitant I called forth Talaya and asked her if, in the many works of mine I had ordered her to read, I had before recorded its like. She said I had not, which came as some relief, for it meant that the creature did not know me, either, and would not have encountered me in a guise other than the one I was wearing.

‘A court of daemons lounged there amid sumptuous furnishings and clouds of opiate incense. Various beautiful citizens lay alongside them, each one with a mark of ownership on them, a disfigurement that was only visible from one angle. Thus a beautiful woman might have one eye burned

out, and so appear hideous if she did not lie on one side as she did among the daemons. The skin of a youth's back was scorched and pared away, so he lay on his back. Thus the possessions of this particular daemon were both marked as his property, and rendered useless for anything other than the very specific need he had of them to lie just so. The daemons were like those of the court I had glimpsed before in the city, lithe and athletic of limb, with pallid mauve skin and a hermaphroditic allure that, thankfully, my studies had prepared me well to resist. I saw in them the ugliness of their true nature. Nothing is so foul as that veneer of beauty stretched over corruption incarnate.

'The champion was something like them, sporting six arms and a rack of antlers like those of a fine stag. He went barely clothed, showing off the details of his anatomy which, while humanoid, were inhuman enough to turn the stomach. He dripped with jewels, gold and silver, and his eyes were ovals of inky black.

"So one among us has fought off the tedium," it said as I approached its pavilion. "I feared I would waste away from boredom. These insects truly believe they create something wonderful with their fumblings." He waved a hand at the arena, where hundreds of cultists of some funerary church were hauling away the bodies across the bloodstained sand. "What magic could be wrought that would instil some imagination into them? Always they throw themselves upon our altars and expect us to act as if a million have not done so before."

'My heresy had equipped me well with the means to converse with creatures abhorrent to the soul. "It held my interest," I said, "for among the worshipful of my world the form is to take the life of another, not give one's own. The sentiment is novel to me, if crudely articulated."

"Oh, to witness something new!" the champion sighed. It breathed deep of the heavy air and exhaled a stream of smoke from gills that opened in its neck. My own respiratory implants kept the opiate from affecting my

faculties, though the odour of it was hard to stomach. Talaya, standing by my side, had similar enhancements, though the feral worlder brothers did not and had thankfully remained outside the silken enclosure. "Do you bring with you some diversion that can illuminate these tedious hours? I wonder that my lord does not despair of it. All he wants is something original, something that has not been seen before, and yet all he gets is..." He waved one of his six hands at the arena again by way of illustration.

"The city needs new blood," I said. "Literally, and figuratively."

"And you have come to me," replied the daemon, examining the back of a hand, "because you are that new blood?"

"A hundred thousand men fought on the cliffs above the Sea of Suffering, until but ten stood by the edge and the rocks foamed red. Those ten roamed the galaxy for a thousand years, and each brought back the skulls of a nation to the throne of our god."

"These were the ramblings from the mind-journey of a madman whose memoirs were written on the walls of a cell. That cell was in the depths of my coven's Inquisitorial fortress, and I had studied them at leisure while recovering from a troublesome xenos lung-rot. I was thus armed with a whole catalogue of such blasphemies.

"A little crude," said the herald.

"That is the way the Blood God prefers his sacrifices," I said. "I call no one warp power my lord above others, and while I understand that such apostasy is obscene to those with little imagination, I thought the city of Shalhadar would be more open-minded. I am something of a freelancer in my trade. I have travelled the breadth of the galaxy and seen every flavour of worship that can be crammed into a human mind. I would not seek to win the graces of the Lord of Pleasures with a heap of a million skulls. Here there must be art to our devotions."

"I see," said the herald. "A wandering priest, a missionary of the obscene."

“I learned my trade in the Missionaria Galaxia of the Corpse-God,” I ventured. This gambit was a risk, but there was no stepping back from the brink ahead of me. “But among the stars we see the truth, and the truth resides among the powers of the warp.”

“Would that the choice was solely mine,” said the herald with a smile on his face. It reminded me faintly of a fish, as the mouth spread a little too wide and the eyes flickered black. “But by now you will have learned the balance that holds this world. There can be no true Chaos without some rule, no bedlam without a spark of sanity. There will be a payment for everything on Malodrax, and for me to put you in my lord’s good graces comes with its own price.”

“As it must be,” I replied. “Name it.”

“Something you love,” was the reply.

‘I had no way of telling if this was some curse or ban to be obeyed, or simply the herald’s wanton tastes finding expression. In truth, it did not matter. If I was to stand face to face with Shalhadar the Veiled One, the toll would be paid.

‘Of every million men, perhaps one might be suitable for the employ of the Inquisition. He must be prepared to do anything, starting with killing and dying and becoming ever more onerous, for reasons he does not understand and at the behest of an inquisitor he might never meet. He must murder those who do not deserve it. He must guard those he hates. And he must do all this in the necessary ignorance in which the lower echelons of the inquisitor’s network are submerged.

‘Of every million such men, perhaps one might have the qualities to serve as an acolyte in the direct employ of an inquisitor, privy to the dealings of his conclave and bearing the keys to his master’s armoury. He must take upon himself a measure of responsibility that might encompass whole worlds, entire civilisations, which might be saved or extinguished by his endeavours. He must sometimes stand by while atrocities are

committed, and participate in the committing, and comprehend the great dangers and evils that might ensue if they tried to stay on the path of good. He must see the worst the universe has to hurl at him and in response, shed the shackles of morality instead of his sanity.

‘Of every million such men, one might rise to the rank of inquisitor, and bear the ultimate authority that can exist in the Imperium short of the Emperor Himself arisen. He must kill worlds, because letting them live threatens a greater catastrophe that might come to pass in thousands of years. He must have already handed his life to the Emperor’s service, and consider himself dead. He must make the survival of the human race his responsibility, and encompass the enormity of that task with intellect, willpower and hatred.

‘How many men could have turned in that moment to Talaya, who stood by my side? Only an inquisitor, I think. Only an inquisitor could have pushed her forward, to the foot of the herald’s silken throne. To register the glimmer of understanding in her face? To see the smile of agreement on the herald’s, and not drive a blade into his throat, a stake into his heart, a bullet through his brain? To let him take her in his spindly arms and pass her, just starting to struggle, into the embrace of his daemon handmaidens? Only an inquisitor.

“‘Corvin!’ she cried as the daemons hauled her to the back of the pavilion. ‘Corvin, no! Please! For the love of the Throne, Corvin, what about... What about everything?’ Her voice trailed away as she was dragged out of sight, and her words were muffled.

‘I did not glance back at my other companions. They had earned my trust and would not try to stop me.

‘A voice inside me was crying out, but I had silenced it so long ago I could no longer give it a name.

“‘Then attend upon me on the palace bridge after sundown,” said the herald. “I feel this is the dawn of a much-awaited age.”

*'I bowed and, with a gesture, bade my acolytes accompany me as I left.
In the arena below the bodies had been shifted with well-practised
efficiency, and only the blood remained.'*



12

'My coven embraced knowledge of the enemy as a weapon, a heresy of thought that invited corruption, and yet which was the only means, we believed, by which the true enemy could be fought.'

'This is the greatest strength of the inquisitor. There are men, yet, who would condemn worlds and species to extinction – but how many of them would also condemn themselves? Not to death, for everywhere we find men eager to die. No, condemnation to a spiritual oblivion, to the awful fates of corruption and enslavement to the dark power beside which death seems the Emperor's own blessing. Not even all inquisitors can truly make such a sacrifice. It is what sets me, and men like me, apart from the greater part of humanity, and what enfranchises us to determine how humanity shall be manipulated, spent, culled and eventually saved.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The petrified forest gave way, after a solid two days of marching, to the shattered delta of a land that was once pierced by a mighty river. A vast

and terrible event had fallen on that land, and splintered it into a thousand islands through which the river now rushed, forming a land of rapids and swirling lakes. To the east lay the hinterland of Kulgarde, which spread across the broken land to the south – the delta was unclaimed, and had been ever since the destruction of the kingdom that once stood there. A few towers and fragments of palaces still stood, now isolated and half eroded by the hungry waters. They had been brutal buildings, the towers and walls built for siege, the palaces monuments to war. Here and there the remains of enormous armoured figures lay fallen or worn away, a helmeted head, a mailed fist gripping the black stone hilt of a broken sword.

Brother Kollus's gene-seed was taken by Techmarine Kho in a truncated ceremony once the strike force was clear of the forest, and his remains loaded onto *Dorn's Dagger*. With the prayers said and with no time now for funeral games, Lycaon ordered the strike force on across the delta.

'If we lose another,' said First Sergeant Kaderic as he and Lysander forded a rushing branch of the river, 'we will have to stow them on the *Talon Blade*. Should the *Blade* be full we will be leaving bodies behind on this world and taking just their wargear back to the *Phalanx*.'

'An ill omen,' said Lysander.

'A great shame,' replied Kaderic. 'I would sooner go back missing an arm or an eye than missing the bodies of all who marched with me.'

'Do you believe we should not have come to Malodrax?' asked Lysander.

Kaderic, who was pulling himself onto the slippery granite rocks of the next island, paused to look at him. 'Why do you say that?' he asked. 'I am loath to leave my brothers behind on this world, but that does not mean I would not make war here. Kulgarde must fall and Kraegon Thul must die. That any Imperial Fist would say otherwise is out of the question. You know this, Lysander.'

'Of course, First Sergeant,' said Lysander. 'But I have seen what doubt in one's duties can do.'

'Among Imperial Fists?'

‘No. Among others.’

Kaderic did not pursue the question further, for Lycaon gave the order for the strike force to draw in and make camp until the sun was up. Though a Space Marine did not strictly need to sleep, his effectiveness in combat dropped off after a certain span of hours, and though their histories were full of heroics lasting for days on end, a Space Marine commander did not let the battle-brothers under his command lose their edge through fatigue. Already the strike force had done in a few days what an Imperial Guard regiment might do in months, mostly on foot and fighting along the way.

The strike force drew into the shelter and cover of a section of city wall that sagged down into the waters, its enormous black stone blocks gradually being broken up and washed away where the waters slowly eroded its island of dressed parade ground. Three of Gorvetz’s squad took the early watch as the sun dissolved away into ruddy darkness overhead.

‘This is the kind of ground that spurred me to take us on foot,’ said Chaplain Lycaon as Lysander observed his wargear rites in the wall’s shadow.

Lysander was anointing the major components of his bolter with machine oil, scraping away dried blood and grime. His chainsword would receive the same treatment, then he could rest in half-sleep until his watch came. ‘What I saw of this world suggested that even the Land Raiders of our Chapter would find it heavy going,’ he said. ‘And over such ground men on foot are swifter than tracks.’

‘It was not universally agreed upon,’ said Lycaon. He sat beside Lysander, placing his own weapon on the stone. ‘Neither was coming to Malodrax at all. Does that shock you, captain?’

‘I will abide by the orders of my Chapter command,’ said Lysander.

‘You must speak freely, Lysander.’

‘Then I will say that if the Chapter had not sent what men it could spare to Malodrax, I would have come here alone to do my duty.’

‘You would have abandoned your duties to your Chapter to do so?’

‘I would have, Chaplain. To see Kraegon Thul dead, I would give up the companionship of my battle-brothers and put myself beyond the aegis of my Chapter.’

Lycaon nodded in thought. ‘Seeing Thul dead is your duty, or your revenge?’

‘In honesty?’ Lysander finished cleaning the action of his bolter and slid the breech closed. ‘I do not know.’

‘Then it is good we came with you. I must see to my own wargear rites, captain. Do not neglect your rest. The world hunts us and the night will not go without need for good watchmen.’

Lycaon left and Lysander finished cleaning his bolter in the shadow of the fallen civilisation’s crumbling palace wall. When he was done he cleaned the teeth of his chainblade, for there had been much killing so far, and it had to be ready again for more.

Lysander’s watch saw him posted up on the wall, where climbing to the top was made easier by a mound of fallen masonry. The sounds of the waters had become a constant background, barely perceived now. The moons and stars changed by the hour, and as Lysander began his watch three watery moons glowed in the sky through breaks in the clouds. One grew brighter as the other two waned, as if the brighter one was a vampire draining the light from the others.

The closest Imperial Fist was watching from the elevated stretch of smooth stone where the two Land Speeders were parked. Lysander was out of sight of another Imperial Fist for the first time since landing on Malodrax, and might not be again before Kulgarde came into view.

He snapped open a compartment on the waist of his armour, where spare ammunition or grenades were usually kept. Instead, he slid out the copy of *Being A Description Of Malodrax And Its Foulness*. Even a Space Marine’s eyesight was unlikely to spot the volume in his hands unless they were looking out for it. Lysander flicked through its dog-eared pages.

He could not find a reference to the delta and its fallen kingdom. That was no great surprise. Inquisitor Golrukhan had not been given the luxury of enough time to catalogue everything between Kulgarde and Shalhadar's city. Nevertheless Lysander had suggested this route, skirting most of Kulgarde's proving grounds to the north, and he would have been far more confident about the strike force's likely progress had he known more.

His eye caught Talaya's name again. Lysander was unsure what to feel when he saw it. He had not known Talaya, not as Golrukhan had written about her, but Golrukhan's words suggested a world of the mind beyond what a Space Marine experienced. A world where one person might feel for another something that could spur them on to astonishing deeds and awful mistakes. How much did a man leave behind when he ascended to the ranks of the Space Marines? If Lysander really knew what happened in the minds of those unaugmented men and women, who had not been sleep-taught Rogal Dorn's battle-genius and been transformed into something else, would he miss it? So often the power of those emotions was tied up with all manner of the foulest corruption. The powers of the warp enjoyed nothing more, it seemed, than to take the emotions of joy and weave them into hatred. But to go without the emotion of such connections meant to remain ignorant of so much. Was a Space Marine something less than a man, as well as more?

A Space Marine was not without emotion. Some in the Imperium thought of them as automatons, mindlessly executing the will of the God-Emperor, and perhaps some were. But inside Lysander was a well of emotion that he could draw from just as he drew from his training, or the doctrines of Dorn's battle-lore. There was a well of hate and anger inside him. A Space Marine's discipline could keep it bound until it was needed. He could have faith in that, he told himself, as he had done many times since he had stumbled from Kulgarde into the wastes of Malodrax. He had faith in the hatred.

Lysander closed the volume again. There was nothing in it that would help him now, and anything that did not bring Kraegon Thul closer to death was not relevant.

The vampire moon had killed its siblings, and was splitting into pieces, sharp black cracks running across its surface. A chill wind blew off the water, and on it was a voice.

Lysander could not make out the words. He drew up his bolter, his muscle memory reminding his limbs of the motions needed to bring it to his shoulder or to draw his chainblade. He could see nothing save a gathering of mist down the wall, at the base of what had once been a watchtower ringed with vision slits.

Lysander looked closer. In the swirling of the mist was the suggestion of a more solid shape. It came closer and Lysander brought up his bolter. The shape was humanoid, walking slowly along the wall as Lysander watched down his gunsights.

It was one of the xenos whose existence had been suggested by the features of Kulgarde's surgeon and the monumental sculptures of their fallen cities. It had the same long-limbed shape, and the same flat face and large liquid eyes. Its features became more distinct and Lysander could see the embroidered finery it wore, trailing long tails of ruffled silk, dripping with jewellery. It did not belong among the brutalist architecture here.

It came as no surprise that Malodrax had its ghosts. Lysander had seen enough remnants of the planet's many past falls to wonder when they would appear.

From behind Lysander came another shape, accompanied by a blast of chill that made him spin around. It had passed through him before he had got his finger onto the trigger or his chainblade in his hand, and advanced on the xenos ghost with such an attitude of menace Lysander knew what it must be before it was fully formed.

The new ghost's back formed into a mass of knotted muscle supporting a hunched and elongated head with a pair of ribbed horns. It held a jagged, brutal sword in one hand and pointed a talon at the xenos with another. Save for the basic humanoid layout of its limbs it could not have been more different. The alien ghost fell to its knees, even its inhuman features unable to obscure the raw fear.

The second ghost was a daemon of the Blood God. Lysander had encountered them before – footsoldiers of the warp, one moment drilling in their thousands, perfectly in step, the next running random and wanton as they dispensed butchery on the world of real space. Each was different, for such was the way of the warp, but each had the same air of brutality and the lust for violence. Men of the Imperium, where they could speak of such things at all, called them bloodletters.

The xenos was begging on its knees. The ghost of the bloodletter slashed its spectral blade through the alien and cut it in two at the waist.

‘Brother,’ voxed Lysander. ‘Are you seeing this?’

‘Aye,’ came the reply from Brother Kallis of Squad Kaderic, the closest of Lysander's fellow watchmen. ‘No surprise this place is haunted.’

‘We are watching the past,’ said Lysander. ‘This is how this place came to be.’

More and more apparitions glimmered into life along the walls and among the fallen battlements. Bloodletters were charging at the alien ghosts, cutting them into pieces without mercy. It was a work of crude butchery, and Lysander wondered how long it had taken for the servants of the Blood God to reduce this corner of Malodrax's native civilisation to nothing. Perhaps it had taken place over a single night – a few hours of concentrated murder, at once a military conquest and an act of worship. The ghosts of cultists were swarming across the delta's ruins now, wearing masks of flayed skin and crude spikes hammered through their bodies.

Brother Kallis was hailing the rest of the strike force, waking them from their half-sleep. Many had already snapped into full awareness as the ghosts danced among them. Some cultists turned on one another as the last of the xenos were cut down, or threw themselves onto the blades of the bloodletters as offerings to their god.

‘This must have happened an aeon ago,’ voxed Lysander over the command vox-channel. ‘We are looking at the birth of a daemon world.’

‘Are we subject to a moral threat?’ came Captain Lycaon’s reply. In the parade ground below Lycaon was on his feet, crozius in hand.

‘I know not,’ said Lysander. ‘But this history is not complete.’

Spectral walls rose in the moonlight, the ghosts of the long-fallen battlements and watchtowers. These were fortress-temples to the Blood God, whose warlike worshippers saw everything in terms of raw strength and conquest. They rose up in oppressive banks of masonry, enormous battlements enclosing parade grounds and execution squares, and barracks and training grounds where the ghosts of summoned bloodletters duelled with would-be champions of the Blood God.

There was no telling how many thousands of years might be encompassed in those moments, as the bloodstained empire rose. Heads and flayed hides were mounted on the spiked battlements. Armies marched out to war, and marched back in through the fortress gates laden with captured banners and cartfuls of skulls for the altar of their god.

Lysander knew what the next ghosts would be. They appeared on the horizon, the spectral hulks of enormous war machines. The siege engines reached the outermost walls, and in silence began to tear them down. Some were heavy with cannons that blasted silver explosions across the fortifications. Others were equipped with simple rams, driving straight into the walls and sending great hunks of stone tumbling. Some chunks of fallen masonry still lay where their ghostly counterparts had landed, now half submerged in rushing waters or eroded into shapelessness.

Siege towers disgorged squads of ghostly Iron Warriors onto the walls. Lysander recognised the marks of their armour, the same as those worn by the traitors who had taken him and his battle-brothers into Kulgarde. Where the bloodletters had conquered with brutality and frenzy, the Iron Warriors treated warfare as a grim, methodical business, moving with efficiency and precision as they mowed down scores of cultists with bolter volleys or launched lightning close combat assaults with chainblade and lightning claw. Siege engines pulled down the watchtowers and demolition charges brought down the walls. Iron Warriors squads despoiled the temples and choked the parade grounds with oceans of silvery blood.

It was not the scale of the bloodshed that was awful. Any Space Marine had seen death inflicted on such grand scales before. It was the manner of it that wrenched at Lysander's gut, because it was so familiar. They fought like Imperial Fists, with expertise born of a lifetime training to fight and break the siege. Rogal Dorn had been a siege warrior, a builder and breaker of the mightiest fortresses, but so had the Iron Warriors primarch, Perturabo. Lysander realised in that moment just how close a mirror the Iron Warriors were of the Imperial Fists, created to fight the same wars in the Emperor's name, diverged onto two different paths in the fires of civil war.

Lysander had never hated them more. The thought was a foul taste in his mouth. That the Imperial Fists and the Iron Warriors could be so close, separated by chance alone, by fate...

'No,' said Lysander aloud. 'We are nothing alike. Keep your lies to yourself, Malodrax. They will find no purchase here.'

As if in response, the broken moon above shattered into a thousand tears of burning light, raining down like a host of shooting stars. In their sudden fractured glare the ghosts waned, the sight of Iron Warriors slaughtering the defeated cultists growing dim and the sound of the rushing waters rising. A slab of wind-worn stone fell into the river from a short distance

along the wall, and it seemed to break the spell that had conjured the ghosts of the delta's past.

The light died down. There were no new moons in the sky, only the starless dark. The last of the ghosts dissolved away.

‘Whatever its meaning,’ voxed Lycaon, ‘let us hope it is over but not assume it.’

‘Everything on Malodrax is a test,’ voxed Lysander in reply. The other Imperial Fists on watch were voxing in the all-clear as the rest of the strike force peered suspiciously into the night from the parade ground's perimeter. ‘This was no exception.’

‘If this world means to scare us away,’ voxed First Sergeant Kaderic, ‘then it chose the wrong audience for its light show.’

‘Back to your posts,’ said Chaplain Lycaon. ‘Next watch, take your positions. The rest of you, we have little time before we must move again. Make the most of it, for tomorrow may see a battle and I would have you fresh for the fight.’

The shifting night turned again as Lysander found a sheltered spot below the wall, and let his mind drift down into half-sleep.

The strike force reached the edge of the delta towards the end of the next day. Its edge, a carved gorge through which a branch of the original river ran dark and fast, gave way to rocky desert. This was the northernmost extent of the broken hinterland of Kulgarde, and in the distance rose flinty ridges of uprooted stone in a mountain range birthed by some enormous violent force. Far to the south this became the broken land where the strike force had first landed, and across which Lysander had hiked on his way to Shalhadar's city. Here, it was a land of fortresses.

The fortifications crossed the desert in an infinitely complex puzzle, walls intersecting in a labyrinth. The buildings clustered on the pale rock like eruptions of a skin disease on Malodrax's surface, too many to ever count, thousands of years' worth of construction encrusting everything.

Even the strike force veterans, who had seen some of the stranger sights the galaxy had to offer, paused to take it in. Watchtowers sagged and crumbled, as if half dissolved away by acid. Battlements lay on top of each other as if the fortifications had been haphazardly dropped from above, crushing and warping everything underneath. Enormous craters were bite marks taken out of the landscape, revealing torn strata of past construction. Massive scars several layers deep ran across the fortresses as if gouged by huge claws.

The closest construction shivered with movement. At first it seemed to be heat haze or a mirage caused by the trapped heat that glowered beneath the overcast sky, but as the strike force approached it became clear that a multitude of creatures covered the huge blocks of stone, swarming everywhere like termites. They were daemons, surrounded by a fug of bituminous chemical stink boiling in the heat, oozed out from Malodrax's pores to serve its masters.

Each had a knot of pale flesh for a torso, with a lolling, drooling mouth on the underside, and four limbs that each ended in the same combination of hand and foot. They moved on all fours but could also use these limbs to lift the blocks of stone that had fallen from the walls of the fortification they were working on. They were stronger than they looked and could wedge themselves under huge blocks of masonry, forcing their limbs straight and levering the blocks off the ground. In groups they were moving the stones back into place, rebuilding the walls and crenulations.

'These are the proving grounds,' said Lysander to Chaplain Lycaon as they watched the builder-daemons working. 'Kulgarde bloods its siege engines here. They are tested against the fortifications, and the walls are rebuilt every day by the daemons.'

'Very much like the Iron Warriors,' said Lycaon, his eye roaming across the criss-crossing walls. An Imperial Fist automatically sized up every fortress he came across for its strongest and weakest points, the methods

of entry, the most dangerous firing zones – it was as much the legacy of Rogal Dorn’s genetic pattern in their gene-seed as a matter of training. ‘They have an efficiency about them that makes their corruption all the darker. It lies deep indeed to leave the surface undisturbed. Discipline without, but in their hearts there is a deviance I am glad I cannot imagine.’

‘The route through the petrified forest spared us this ground,’ continued Lysander, ‘but we cannot avoid it any longer if we are to reach sight of Kulgarde. And the plan of attack requires us to head into it.’

‘The plan of attack has yet to be decided,’ said Lycaon.

Brother Halaestus broke off from the strike force’s order of march, clambering up onto one of the blocks of fallen masonry. He drew his blade and sliced a limb off the nearest daemon. It let out a rumbling sigh and slumped to the ground before Halaestus drove the monomolecular blade down through its body. Halaestus kicked the dead creature aside, took out his pistol and loosed half a dozen shots through the daemons scuttling around the block, tearing out chunks of vermillion flesh and spattering the stonework with their blood.

‘Halaestus!’ called out First Sergeant Kaderic. ‘We have not the time to waste ammunition on these things. Stand down!’

‘Would that I had a universe of bullets,’ said Halaestus, his eyes looking right through Kaderic as he spoke. ‘I would fire them all at Malodrax.’

The *Dorn’s Dagger* descended shortly ahead and came down on its landing jets. Techmarine Kho leaned from the cockpit. ‘I cannot cover you well from the air,’ he said, ‘if you will be so often out of sight moving through these ruins. And any enemies will likely be adapted to hiding from eyes above. I can continue to support from the air but I will not be your eyes as you would wish, Chaplain.’

‘Then your task is to scout out Kulgarde’s war engines,’ said Lycaon. ‘I must know if we are closing in on one, or if one approaches us. They cannot be predicted and if one’s course takes it towards us we must know.’

Stay out of sight as much as possible, for the Iron Warriors will have eyes out here. And take the greatest care, Techmarine. We will need you soon.'

'Of course, my Chaplain,' said Kho. The engines of the *Dorn's Dagger* burned again, tinting the heavy air with the smell of burned fuel as they punched the Land Speeder back up above the fortifications.

'Move out!' ordered Lycaon, and the strike force marched on into Kulgarde's proving grounds.



13

“Behold!” cried one, and the other hundreds of supplicants were thrown to the ground as if by a great hand slamming down on the cathedral floor. From the skin of their naked backs burst spined growths, like thorny vines that spiralled out into razor-sharp thickets. Leaves sprouted, and fat strange-coloured flowers. Odd creatures gambolled through the forest thus created. The priests of the Chaos gods looked on, but their gods looked not. A thousand men dead in that cathedral and the powers they worshipped cared nothing, for that is the greatest evil of Malodrax. A life might be spent in devotion, but the indifference of the warp means it is a life devoid of meaning.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

Captain Hexal held court in the city’s arena. His palace was a pavilion of flayed skins set up on the arena floor, around which crowds flocked to be bludgeoned back by the ring of mutants guarding it. The skins chosen for his pavilion were those covered in tattoos, so the whole foul creation was as obscenely decorative as Shalhadar’s own palace.

Lysander watched from the stands. The arena itself, a spectacular creation of carved bone, did not interest him. It was no surprise there was somewhere in the city for combats and death spectacles to be waged in honour of Shalhadar. His soldier's mind worked on its own, telling him he would be unlikely to make it through the cordon of mutants with enough speed to get to grips with Hexal before he could prepare or escape. What truly concerned him was what Hexal might want.

The sound of Talaya's mechanical limbs conveying her across the bone and stonework had already become familiar. Lysander did not have to turn around to know she was drifting regally towards him.

'Lord Shalhadar has decided to receive Ambassador Hexal,' she said.

'Who is to hear his demands?' asked Lysander.

'I am.'

Lysander looked around at her. 'And who will go with you?'

'That is a matter for my own discretion. It would hardly become the herald of this city's lord to enter the presence of a hostile power alone.'

It occurred to Lysander to wonder how Talaya would fare if she faced Hexal one on one. She was quick. He knew that, and her limbs gave her greater range. There was no telling what concoctions the generator mounted on her back could pump out – perhaps something potent enough to knock out the Iron Warrior. But if Hexal got within reach of her mechanical talons, he had the strength to tear her apart – Lysander was sure.

And what would happen if Lysander fought her? He had no idea.

Talaya gave him one of her hateful little smiles and clacked off down the seating rows towards the arena floor. Lysander stood and followed her.

The crowd parted for Talaya – Shalhadar's city knew her well and they were afraid of her. They were afraid of Lysander, too, but then he was twice the height of many of them and clad in spectacular crimson armour,

so that was no surprise. Many kneeled when Talaya went past - others tried to scramble away. Lysander, however, followed in her wake.

The mutants barred her way. One of the diminutive creatures that Lysander recognised from Kulgarde's medical wing hurried from the pavilion and chattered away in the ear of the biggest and ugliest of the mutants. It bowed and stood aside, letting Talaya through and Lysander after her. The smell of the uncured skin hit him and he realised it had been flayed from its donor creatures only recently, without being tanned or preserved. The orderly held a flap aside and Talaya entered, her limbs letting her down onto the arena floor so her head did not brush against the raw skin.

Inside, the pavilion was dark and noisome. The uncured skin hung with scraps of fibrous muscle and organ, and dripped blood on to the sand underfoot. The stink of it was awful. The effect was rather like walking into the inside of a huge living organ. More of Kulgarde's mutants stood as an honour guard, this time armed and armoured like a parody of a standing army, holding the banners of Kraegon Thul's warband. Thul's heraldry was the stylised mechanical hand of his Legion, an open book, a tower with a crack down the centre and a pair of severed hands hanging from a hook, each depicted on the various banners.

On a throne constructed from steel blocks sat Captain Hexal of the Iron Warriors. His chainsword leaned against the throne beside him and a diminutive mutant held his bolter. Hexal wore his helmet, showing only the brutal, inhuman, mechanical face worn by his Legion.

'Lord Hexal,' began Talaya grandly, 'my Lord Shalhadar the Veiled One, Sovereign of this city and claimant to all of Malodrax, gives you leave to enter his city.'

'My Legion does not indulge in your pleasantries,' replied Hexal. Talaya did not flinch at his bluntness. 'I am here to make demands, as befits one who speaks for Warsmith Kraegon Thul, true lord of Malodrax.'

‘Then in the name of the Veiled One, I may hear them,’ said Talaya.

Lysander had stayed near the back of the pavilion, wary that Captain Hexal might recognise in this crimson-armoured warrior something of the bearing of an Imperial Fist. Seeing Hexal again this close gave him an empty, dead feeling, and he recognised it now as the knowledge that his duty was not being done. Hexal had taken the lives of his brothers and stood for a Legion whose very existence was an insult to every Imperial Fist – and yet Lysander was standing back and letting Hexal speak. Lysander forced the feeling down, with its mingled threads of anger and shame. Hexal was going to die. Lysander would be the one to kill him. He was letting Hexal live for the time being, because if he tried to take him on now Lysander would die in the attempt and Kraegon Thul, the true enemy, would live on.

‘Ten thousand sacrifices,’ Captain Hexal was saying. ‘Dominion over the Kalinik Reach and the passes through the Vorn Mountains. The mutants of this city as slaves for our forges. The fealty of Shalhadar the Veiled One, expressed in obeisance to the throne of Warsmith Thul.’

‘I see,’ replied Talaya. ‘I shall convey your suggestions to the Veiled One. Now I believe this is a fine opportunity to communicate the demands Shalhadar has of your Warsmith.’

At this Hexal held out his hand and the mutant cowering beside his throne handed him his bolter. The mutants standing at guard closed in around Talaya. Talaya’s face changed, from unflustered and diplomatic to a violent scowl. Noxious fog billowed around her, filling the pavilion with a toxic darkness. Lysander heard the bellowing of mutants and the sound of metal talon through flesh. Bodies pressed around him and he drew his blade, hacking at the mutant hands trying to drag him down.

He turned and cut a long slit through the skin of the pavilion’s side and forced his way out. A billow of poisonous fog followed him. Outside the people were panicking, shoved back and clubbed to the ground by the

cordon of mutants. They were already fleeing across the stadium's seats, or crying out as they were trampled beneath the feet of their neighbours.

One mutant rounded on Lysander. It was huge, half again as tall as a Space Marine, larger than any Lysander had spotted in the depths beneath Kulgarde. Lysander ducked under its swinging paw and cut up at its bull neck. The sword sliced through skin and sinew, lodging in the spine – Lysander twisted it and the vertebrae parted, sending the mutant tumbling to the ground with its partially severed head flopping over one shoulder. He reminded himself this was a mundane blade, not a chainsword.

Talaya emerged through the torn pavilion behind him, clambering on her talons up the side of the tent. Her double-headed halberd was in her hands and her armour's mask had slid up over her face. She spun the halberd in her hands, the sweep of the weapon passing over Lysander's head and slicing off the arm of a mutant lumbering towards her. Before the arm had hit the arena floor the blade had carved down and split the mutant's head in two.

Talaya dropped down onto the sand of the arena. Still her feet did not touch the ground – instead her clacking mechanical legs carried her.

‘That went well,’ she said.

Lysander was not sure if Talaya was being sarcastic and did not pause to ask her. He forged into the gap in the mutant line and was among the fleeing people in a handful of seconds. Mutants tried to pursue but were caught up in the cultists scrambling to get out of their way. One mutant, with the body of a giant and a multi-legged, spiderlike growth taking up everything above its shoulders, picked up a cultist and threw it aside, its compound eyes swivelling to focus on Lysander. He ran on, reaching the edge of the arena seating, before clambering onto the first row and turning. The mutant was almost on him, a trail of trampled bodies behind it.

Lysander leapt at the mutant. Its segmented upper limbs unfolded to catch him. Lysander rammed an armoured foot down into the centre of

where its head should have been – bristly, gnarled flesh crunched where he hit. He grabbed a leg with his free hand and grappled himself upright, the mutant's huge humanoid hand reaching up to grab him and throw him off. Lysander cut off a handful of spider's legs and crushed one of the compound eyes with a stamp – it broke like glass, the individual facets raining down. The mutant reeled and Lysander was finally able to reverse his grip on the sword and drive it down.

He did not take a chance this time. A chainblade would have made a gory mess but he had to make sure this normal blade hit something vital at first blow. He drove the hilt down hard, feeling the tip punching through insect organs, collarbone and heart. He pulled the blade out half its length and plunged it down again. This time he could hear the juddering heartbeat vibrating up the blade, hammering haphazardly as the muscle of the heart was torn open.

The mutant lurched to one side, then the other, and toppled over. Lysander jumped off onto the front row as it crashed to the sand.

The arena was in bedlam. The mutants were rampaging through the crowd, clubbing and butchering at random. The sand was wet with blood. Fleeing citizens were streaming to the arena exits or swarming over the seating.

It was, Lysander realised, its own form of worship. Just like cultists hurling themselves to their deaths or the dark rituals held hidden from the city's eyes, this was an act of devotion. The citizens had come here in no small part hoping that violence would break out, so they might die as martyrs to Shalhadar and his city, or that their deaths would illustrate the treachery of Kraegon Thul and demonstrate Shalhadar's right to rule Malodrax.

Talaya was already on the stadium roof, watching the carnage from a safe vantage point. She had killed her way to safety even more quickly than Lysander, and her halberd blades were slick with mutant blood. Her

armoured mask slid down and Lysander was sure she was smiling, not the sly smirk she used with him but an expression of true joy. To her, this slaughter was beautiful. The death of the city's people pleased the Veiled One, and so it pleased his herald, too.

The palace was hung with the colours of mourning. White was the chosen colour, with accents of red, representing desolation and bloodshed. Mourning banners hung over the frescoes and tapestries, and a singer wailed a funeral dirge from the upper balconies.

Shalhadar wore the veil of a broken old man, the last of his line, surrounded by the keepsakes and heirlooms of the family he had lost. It was an obvious role to take but the one the palace entertainers and artisans expected of him. His face was long and wrinkled, the features almost lost in the weight of its age, his shoulders hunched, his clothes long-faded velvet finery. His eyes should have been watery but instead they were hard and black, the one feature that reminded an onlooker that the old man was not truly what he believed him to be.

‘Come,’ said Shalhadar. ‘Sit. Mourn with me.’

Lysander had entered the palace to find Talaya waiting for him. He paused only to clean his blade at the palace threshold before following her to the inner rooms of the palace, the layout of which he was sure had changed since he had witnessed the blasphemous opera here. Lysander obeyed Shalhadar's command and sat on an upholstered bench covered in torn diary pages, while Talaya settled on her mechanical haunches beside a broken clock and a pile of mouldering dolls and toys. Lysander wondered where the trappings of this veil had come from. Was there a storeroom with all these symbolic knick-knacks waiting for an appropriate occasion? Were they illusions conjured by Shalhadar's will?

‘No doubt,’ said Shalhadar, ‘sorrow fills your hearts at the offence done to this city by Ambassador Hexal. Alas, he escaped the city by force while the wounded were yet crying out for succour. And so our thoughts must

turn not only to the suffering of our people, the woes of our city, but to the restitution of balance. I speak not of the healing of our scars, of the interring of the dead. I speak of revenge.'

The old man's fist balled up and the veins stood out on the back of his hand, a gesture of defiance all the more powerful for the ancient body's weakness.

Shalhadar looked Lysander in the eye, and there was no trace of true sorrow there. 'Good?' he asked.

It was Talaya who answered. 'Convincing enough for the citizens,' she said. 'But then they live in the story. We who live outside it know the truth.'

'And what is the truth?' asked Shalhadar. He held up a hand before Talaya could answer. 'Lysander?'

Lysander still felt an internal shudder to hear his name spoken by the daemon prince. 'It is a cycle,' he said. 'No power on Malodrax can permit any other to exist without trying to impose its superiority. This turn of the wheel, it was Kraegon Thul who sought to remind you. Next it will be you who sends an envoy to antagonise the Warsmith, or whatever other power might have risen on Malodrax. It is its own sort of performance. Hexal probably thinks he is truly striking a blow against your city but Kraegon Thul knows the game he plays.'

'And are the Iron Warriors content to play the game, do you think? Your kind know them well. The Imperial Fists have history with Perturabo's brood. Is he a creature of Malodrax, content to perform his role until his story ends?'

'No,' replied Lysander. 'He plays it as long as is necessary. He has a plan in place to win all of Malodrax. He will turn the whole planet into a forge for his war machines, or just mine it dry and move on. This world alone cannot satisfy Thul's ambitions. I doubt anything truly would.'

Shalhadar smiled, all pretence of sorrow gone. 'Then we had better kill him,' he said.

'Plenty have tried,' said Talaya. 'Simply walking up to Kulgarde's door would do nothing, even with the whole population of this city armed behind us. And Thul himself will not be easy to kill. In all honesty, I do not think there is a being on Malodrax that has a meaningful chance of slaying him face to face. Not to mention those he keeps close to him.'

'The alien,' said Lysander.

'Ah,' said Talaya. 'You have met.'

'He watched over my vivisection,' said Lysander. 'I am sure Thul sent him to make sure I suffered before I died.'

'You speak of Karnak,' said Talaya. 'The warp alone knows his species, but he has served as advisor and castellan to Thul since the Iron Warriors laid the first blocks of Kulgarde. You are the first I have met to have seen him in the flesh and lived. Every one of the scum and vermin in that fortress answers to Karnak, and he answers to the Iron Warriors. Then, of course, there are the other Iron Warriors, Hexal and his ilk, to get through. Imperial Fist, as deep as your hate might run, I think even you would see ill sport in getting a foot past Kulgarde's threshold.'

'And that, dear child,' said Shalhadar, 'is why you will remain ever a mortal vessel, and never ascend to the glories of daemonhood. You have no imagination! Lysander, you say, has no chance of entering Kulgarde. But did not Thul's underling, Hexal, enter my city? Did he not set up camp in my stadium, as bold as a painted whore? Thus have the enemy shown us how we might put our living weapon here into the presence of Kraegon Thul.'

'Will not Kulgarde be closed to an envoy of ours?' asked Talaya. 'We could hardly dance in and start reading off demands. Kulgarde is in the ascendance, they have no obligation to receive us.'

‘But they do have a desire to humiliate us,’ said Lysander. ‘Hexal demanded you kneel before Thul’s throne. We might deign to give him the next best thing, an envoy sent to grovel and beg for mercy. Would Thul not be eager to let such an envoy through the gates, if only for the chance to execute him as he kneels?’

Shalhadar gave Lysander an evil, toothless grin, the daemon’s malice bleeding through the old man’s body. ‘And who would be the damned soul to be sent as such an envoy?’ he asked.

‘That would be me,’ replied Lysander.

‘I feel I must write of Talaya.

‘Of her qualities I have already spoken. She was a fine Inquisitorial agent in her own way. Her ambition was to carry the Inquisitorial Seal herself, and though she would never have reached those heights she served the Holy Ordos as faithfully as any of us. She was a fine shot, an outstanding swordswoman, a fearsome interrogator and a possessor of a fine analytical mind. In spirit she was pure and as close to incorruptible as any of her rank.

‘In those days when I first glimpsed the court of Shalhadar, granted access for a few hours to the library of his palace, I came to think about all the other qualities she had. The above are true and wondrous, but could apply to hundreds of acolytes that have served me or other inquisitors of my conclave. And yet it was only to Talaya that the human thoughts, those that still exist unguarded in the mind of an inquisitor, turned in my mind during that time.

‘I cannot say what she truly meant to me. I will not trot out the words of the great poets and playwrights, of which every civilised world seems to have two or three. I will say only that she occupied my mind, that part of it I permit to wander, while I laboured there in the darkness of Shalhadar’s library.

'This was the prize for which I had given up Talaya. A lower floor of the palace housed Shalhadar's library, and there I was taken by the herald from the arena. My task there was to seek out the sacred writings that would give Shalhadar dominion over the whole of Malodrax, and which it was certain lay somewhere in the stacks there. It was an ancient, rarely walked part of the palace, and while I was aware of obscene finery just outside my sphere I was immersed entirely in its decrepitude and darkness. I delved into the volumes held there, ancient decaying tomes each one full of fouler lies than the last. Transcriptions of madmen's raving I found there, and collections of observations from dream-journeys into the warp.

'I guarded my mind with prayers. I put a drop of holy water, consecrated at the foot of the Golden Throne, on my forehead to ward off the tendrils of profane knowledge that might try to find root there. My acolytes were not permitted to join me, and I would not have let them into the library in any case, so I laboured alone. For this I was grateful, because it meant I could be alone with my Emperor and bore the responsibility only for His work rather than the souls of my acolytes.

'Each tome was connected to those beside it by a tenuous link of subject or concept that rendered them almost, but not quite, entirely random, thus creating a maddeningly vague sense of direction which would drag me astray as often as it would lead me onwards. As I forged on, seeking the bound collections of unholy pacts and contracts where I felt sure my quarry would lie, I became aware of another task being performed.

'Day after day I stayed there, working. Agent Sildyne passed on messages to me by means of an arrangement of dead drops, through which I learned that he, Grun and Thol, and Maskelin had set up in an abandoned tower having left our previous lodgings. Archivist Grunvelder had by that time disappeared, for which I was both sorrowful and relieved. According to Sildyne, Grunvelder had run off into the city's night, crying out about worms eating his brain. I prayed that he died soon after, one

more corpse in the city's gutters. I fear there can have been no less grim fate for him.

'And yet through this, thoughts came unbidden, telling me that I was not merely there to perform a task for Shalhadar that might ingratiate me into his court. Often it was Talaya who voiced such thoughts, for it was she I saw often when I closed my eyes or when a gust of wind blew out my candle and all was darkness. Thus I associated such doubt with her, and she became to me an advisor always voicing caution.

'I had suffered much, I think. There is no mind so holy that it can remain free of the mental sludge that comes with contacting such corruption as I found in those books, just as there is no saint's garment so holy that it will not be besmirched by filth if it is cast down. I burned away the grime with prayer and contemplation, but while the flame of the soul can cleanse it must also burn, and in agony I lay haunted by angry nightmares born of the knowledge I purged from myself. My body, always kept in the peak of human condition, atrophied and became pale, like that of a thing that had lived its whole life in a cave. I do not know how long I was there, but to put the stretch of time in months would be conservative.

'It was this degeneration that first gave me the clue as to the truth. It was in a thought of Talaya that I was reminded that everything on Malodrax is a test. The planet, so jealous of all those who walk on its surface, puts all its inhabitants to a trial so they might prove their worth to the powers of the warp. Was my labour there a test as well?

'Of course it was. I cursed myself for a fool. Corvin, you wretched old heretic, you blind and ignorant student of stupidity! Thus I cried to myself as I recoiled from the hateful tome I was reading through at that moment.

'A trial this was, and my first task was to discover what faculty of mine was being tried. Was I being put through an ordeal of the will, exposed to volumes of corruptive horrors to see if my mind broke? No, I said. That was too crude, too obvious, for Malodrax. Perhaps Shalhadar was doing

that to me for his amusement, but the powers of the warp would never be satisfied with tormenting an inquisitor thus.

‘Was this a physical test? My body was suffering. Was this a trial to exploit the inquisitor’s belief in the mind as the ultimate weapon, challenging my mental faculties in the hope I would neglect my body and cause me to waste away or starve? Such would tickle the humour of the daemonic and perverse. But no, I did not think this was the cruellest fate to which I could be condemned. A physical trial concocted by the powers of the warp would have to compete in malice with the trials by ordeal used by many of my fellow inquisitors, and wasting away in this pit of corruption, while not the end I would choose, could not compare to the Test of Flame or of the Sliding Blades.

‘It was as I perused a map, purported to describe a realm of the warp, that the answer came to me. This map was etched on sheets of paper-thin stone, the acidic wash bringing out fanciful mountain ranges and oceans of thought. The names of warp denizens were labelled alongside their supposed lairs, where the cartographer had encountered them and bargained his soul away for secrets of the warp. His sacrifice had bought only lies, for this map was no less a fiction than the transcribed insanity of the broken-minded cultists filling the shelves around me. The futility of his endeavour inspired me as to the truth.

‘What was I doing there? Labouring at an obscene task, to validate the rule of a daemon lord over a realm of madness and death. Giving up the lives of my acolytes, one through willing payment, one through negligence, for the right to pursue that task. Abandoning the oaths I had made to the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition, casting away finally those few vestiges of honour I had clutched to my heart when I pursued my path of heresy. And for what?

‘To gain the favour of Shalhadar the Veiled, the very image of the enemy I had dedicated my life to destroying.

‘No! I shouted it out loud. The price is too high! To walk in the court of Shalhadar, to get close enough to kill him – as great a prize as that is, I will not become what Malodrax desires to win it! This world will not take me. This world will not turn me into one who walks it as a supplicant to the Dark Powers.

‘The test was to see how far I would go to walk the path I had set myself on Malodrax, and had I walked it to the end, I would have failed that test. I would have become a slave to Shalhadar, and served him perhaps like the foul multi-armed creature to whom I had given Talaya. I would have walked into damnation willingly, the kind of victory most beloved of the Dark Powers.

‘Most men could not have walked back from that brink. Having given up Talaya, they would have seen no meaning in the righteous life and would have sought the oblivion of damnation. But I was not most men. I am an inquisitor, and there is no brink from which I cannot turn.

‘I cast down the madman’s map, and it shattered on the floor. I knew I had to leave that place and abandon the dream of breaching the court of Shalhadar to which I had been devoted since I arrived at the city. I forged through the library stacks, suddenly aware of how deeply I had travelled into the levels beneath Shalhadar’s palace and how they seemed to grow around me, spreading into new configurations of the labyrinth to addle my senses. I had anticipated such traps, however, and had placed certain volumes at key intersections that I could recognise and suggest to me the correct route. I reached the entrance to the library floors, a great arch leading downwards from the grand entrance hall of the palace.

‘This hall was a soaring monument to Shalhadar. It was dominated by a huge golden statue of a perfectly proportioned human figure, its gender uncertain and its face obscured with a featureless mask. Daemons scrabbled across it, ornamenting it with brilliant lacquers and gemstones. They turned their malformed faces towards me as I burst from the archway,

no doubt appearing more like a bedraggled madman from the streets than an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos. That impression was hopefully vanquished when I drew from my robe the Inquisitorial Seal, the badge of my office, into which I had wrought a powerful hexagrammic ward. I held up the seal and the daemons recoiled, the light suddenly blazing from my hand too much for them to bear.

‘Thus it was that I made my escape. I had not forgotten the sphinx that guarded the bridge. Before it could turn on me I had leapt from the bridge and into the canal surrounding the palace, and thanks to the Emperor, it did not pursue me. Perhaps to it I was no more than a morsel, a stray creature to be devoured if pursuing me proved no burden, and it was unwilling to follow me into the canal. Whatever the reason, a current caught me and dragged me out of sight of the palace, down into the tunnels and sewers underneath the city.

‘I had never sought to understand what lay beneath Shalhadar’s city. What lay on the surface was gruesome enough. I saw then the remains of an alien metropolis, with great towers of homes arranged around circular meeting-grounds ringed by statues. They were crushed and mangled by the settling down of the city above, mutilated by the torrents of filth mingling with the underground rivers rushing through the underworld.

‘In this darkness I began to rebuild the plan I had for Malodrax. Entering Shalhadar’s court was a chimera, a fiction, one that would lead me to damnation. I had to abandon that path. Dragging myself from that black river of corruption, I walked the first steps on my new path.’

Every city had its slums. In Shalhadar’s city they were jerry-built shacks and hovels crammed into the looted shell of ancient palaces – from the outside they were pristine, save for the heaps of living refuse who gathered in their doorways and alleys. Like beautiful bodies hosting a vile disease, the poverty of Shalhadar’s people was concealed by the mask of opulence the whole city wore.

The hovels formed vast narcotics dens, suffused in a dizzying fog of opiates and heaving to the music of the moaning half-dead. Some were all but comatose, stirring in feverish dreams. Others shivered and twitched, or occasionally shrieked out loud. In a city where seeking new sensations was a form of worship, these places were churches to excess and novelty.

Lysander felt a distaste that went beyond the stink of the slum as he walked in through the archway. Before him lay a cultist, naked save for a stained loincloth, his skin ragged and peeling away to reveal the pitted bones underneath. A medical device was hooked up to a needle stuck directly into his spine – whichever drug it contained, it had caused his body to atrophy while his mind travelled in strange places. Lysander stepped over the body as he pushed a curtain of rags aside and forged further into the slum.

The bodies were everywhere. They were curled up in the corners or stretched out across the floor. One cultist, a leather mask stitched on his face, was babbling about serpents that swallowed stars and worlds drowning in oceans of tears. His hands were raw and bleeding, and the bloody talons of his fingers were scratching deep red furrows in his midriff. Another was a woman who convulsed on the floor, dried foam crusted around her mouth. Some of the bodies were completely still and, for all Lysander knew, dead – certainly the smell of death hung about the place, mingling with the dizzying fog.

‘I seek Valienne,’ said Lysander out loud, addressing no one inhabitant in particular. ‘The last anyone heard, she was here. The Veiled One commands I be shown to her.’

One of the slum-dwellers crawled out from the bundles of torn-down curtains and tapestries he was using as bedding. He put a hand on the greave of Lysander’s armour. ‘The Red Knight!’ the cultist gasped. His throat was raw and his voice rasping. It was impossible to tell his age from his hollow eyes, and miniature braziers mounted on his shoulder

surrounded his head in a permanent haze of smoke. ‘I saw you! You rode the tides of the warp! Your mount was hatred and your sword was despair! I followed in your wake as I soared!’

Lysander pushed the drugged cultist aside. Ahead, the shanties surrounded an open space, roughly circular, where an altar was set up consisting of a great stone basin. From the ceiling hung countless trinkets and offerings, jangling in the smoky air – bones, needles, pieces of jewellery, severed fingers and ears, bullet casings. The basin was half filled with blood, congealed and rank, and rivulets of it spilled down the sides. The smell was awful.

Here were gathered the celebrants of Shalhadar, those who still sought to worship their lord even though their fortunes had waned until they were forced to live side by side with the human refuse of that place. They wore patched and crudely embroidered robes, covered in images of open eyes and hands, and scurried like insects as Lysander approached. There were signs of disease on their faces. Lysander pointed at one, whose gnarled staff of wood suggested he was the leader of this group.

‘Where is Valienne?’ demanded Lysander.

The man stared back dumbly. Lysander guessed he was among the oldest residents here, his wrinkled and sunken face disfigured by boils covering one cheek and half his jawline.

‘The Chronicler of the Sun and Stars,’ Lysander continued. ‘The Light in the Darkness.’

One of the cultists pointed a shaking finger upwards, towards the higher levels of the buildings where the hovels formed precarious layers of salvaged materials. Lysander left them to their worship and found a rickety ladder leading up. It barely held his weight, the same being true of the floor he now walked on. Up here worshippers lay in hammocks slung from the building’s rafters like roosting bats. Someone had scrawled thousands of lines of text on the walls and floor, a stream of syllables that Lysander

was wary of reading in case he found meanings there that might bewitch his senses and leave him vulnerable. Even here there was power, born of despair and desperation, that the Dark Gods could turn into conduits for their corruptive influence. Lysander would not be caught with his guard down here.

The few that noticed him turned away in fear. In his crimson armour and with a Space Marine's stature, he must have looked to them like an avenging herald of Chaos sent straight from the warp to pronounce their punishment. No doubt many of them were certain their time had come, and he heard them whimpering their last prayers for forgiveness or pity as he passed.

A section of the upper floors was curtained off with lengths of chain, locks of hair and fragments of broken gold woven into them. Lysander pushed the chains aside and looked into a chamber lit by candles and full of torn or screwed-up sheaves of paper, forming deep drifts in the corners. In the middle of this nest was a figure hunched over, scribbling away with a pen on another sheet that was already illegible with spilt ink. Greyish hair hung down over narrow shoulders.

'You are Valienne,' said Lysander.

The figure turned around. It was a woman, under the grime and the inky finger marks on her face. Her large, greyish eyes widened at the sight of Lysander standing over her.

'That is one of my names,' she said. 'I am the concept sculptress. I am she who weaves new worlds from nothing.'

'News has reached the court of your work. The *Chant of the Changing Ones*.'

Valienne gasped. 'He has read it?'

'He desires it to be performed.'

Valienne put her hands to her heart as if she feared she would die. Her breathing quickened. 'Then... then the lords of the warp have heard me!'

A light went on behind her eyes as an idea hit her. ‘And you!’ she exclaimed. She stood up and looked Lysander up and down. ‘You shall be my Executioner!’

‘Bring the finished work,’ said Lysander, ‘and come with me.’

Valienne’s play was about death. She had spent her whole life writing it, revising and perfecting it, each character the personification of a way in which life could be ended. There were roles for Pestilence, Vengeance, Madness and Fate, and the dialogue was an impenetrable web of metaphor. Its staging called for countless deaths on stage, illustrations of how death could be both random and carefully plotted by powers beyond the comprehension of those involved. It was a work of cruelty, of infinite bleakness.

To Valienne, this was a work of joy. By illustrating the meaninglessness of life and the supremacy of death, she sought to make the acts of worship by Shalhadar’s citizens shine brighter in that darkness. This was the explanation she gave to the courtiers who received her into Shalhadar’s palace, who directed her into some lesser-travelled wing where she would not lower the tone of opulence and beauty.

The manuscript of the *Chant of the Changing Ones* was taken to Shalhadar himself, whose courtiers had already begun to assemble a cast and crew for the play’s production. The palace chambers were full of costumers and artisans. Crafters of flesh pared skin and muscle to make new faces and shapes for those hoping to serve in the chorus. Bizarre mutants, with brightly patterned skin or malformed limbs, auditioned as freak show exhibits. Psykers performed tricks of telekinesis and pyromancy, hoping to make the grade for the performance.

Lysander had watched it unfold from an upper balcony of the palace. It had been extraordinary the speed with which it had kicked into gear, as if the whole city had been primed to gather its resources of performers and madmen for just this occasion. Talaya was walking through the midst of it, ignoring the cultists and hopefuls who clamoured for her attention. She

waved aside acrobats whose long, multi-jointed limbs were stripped of skin and flicked a grovelling suppliant away with a kick of a mechanical leg. She switched without breaking a step into climbing up the wall below Lysander, reaching the balcony in a few strides.

‘How much it must pain you,’ she said.

Lysander looked at her, but gave no reply.

‘How can you keep it all bottled up inside you, Lysander?’ continued Talaya. ‘Everything you see on Malodrax offends you to its core. These people and their acts of worship. This palace. This city. Me. You must want to drive that blade right through my heart, Imperial Fist. But you cannot, because playing along with this world is the only way to kill Thul. What delicious suffering I can taste on you! It twists up inside you and bleeds, does it not? It bleeds that hatred into the rest of you and rots you away. I would be there when you give vent to that hatred, Lysander. It will be something to be seen.’

‘Are we done here?’ said Lysander.

‘The Veiled One has given the order,’ said Talaya. ‘On the next dawn we will move out.’

‘Good,’ said Lysander. ‘I will be glad of it.’

‘But you are not done yet!’ Talaya gestured down at the crowds below. ‘You still have to undergo your transformation. After all, you are to be our Executioner.’



14

‘My conclave was created to seek out knowledge and use it, not destroy it out of hand through some hysterical fear of corruption. It was some way into my Inquisitorial career when I found them, having heard of them from a fellow inquisitor in the form of a cautionary tale of how far those in the Holy Ordos might fall. They did not welcome me with open arms, for anyone who sought them out must by definition come under the gravest suspicions. That is how I knew I was on the only road I could walk.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

‘Hold!’ ordered Chaplain Lycaon, and the strike force dropped into cover behind him. In the cavernous fortress ruins there was plenty of cover but limited visibility, with every approach obscured by the walls and battlements rising all around. Techmarine Kho’s Land Speeder droned along just above head height, playing its guns across the surrounding ruins.

‘We have a sighting up ahead,’ voxed Sergeant Gorvetz.

‘Is there anyone to spot us?’ asked Lycaon.

‘I cannot tell,’ replied Gorvetz. ‘I do not think we were seen.’

‘Lysander,’ ordered Lycaon. ‘Join Gorvetz and scout ahead. Let me know if we have a viable target.’

Lysander headed through the rubble field left from a collapsed wall, picking his way from cover to cover as he passed the rest of the strike force and headed towards Gorvetz’s position. The Devastator squad had the point for that segment of the march, and had spread out through the hollow floors of a multi-levelled pale stone building. The late sun was slanting through breaks in the clouds, fractured by the ruins into beams that passed slowly across the dusty wreckage. Lysander spotted Gorvetz’s Imperial Fists ahead, crouching at the far end of the building, their heavy weapons shouldered, watching ahead through magnoculars and viewfinders.

The horizon was a broken mass of ruins. Sergeant Gorvetz was scanning it through his magnoculars as Lysander crouched down behind him.

‘Where is it?’ asked Lysander.

Gorvetz was not a man of many words, and simply pointed into the distance. Lysander looked in that direction, trying to filter some meaning from the tumbledown towers and battlements.

Then, he saw the movement. His vision adjusted to the distance and he made out the shifting clouds around its upper reaches – birds, flying vermin, clustering around the corruption.

It was a war engine. This one was in the shape of a siege tower, its upper floors fronted with a drawbridge forming the lower jaw of an enormous daemonic face. Huge gun emplacements bulged from the tower’s sides, their massive-bore cannon traversing menacingly across the surrounding landscape, fed by ammunition hoppers so large they gave the siege tower a top-heavy, hunchbacked shape. Banners, tattered and fire-stained, hung from its timbers, bearing the iron face mask symbol of the Iron Warriors.

‘I take it,’ said Gorvetz, ‘that’s what we were looking for.’

‘It is,’ said Lysander. ‘Are there any sentries on its battlements?’

‘None that we’ve seen.’

‘Then it’s probably wild,’ said Lysander.

‘Bloody waste if you ask me,’ said Gorvetz. ‘Make a war machine and just turn it loose.’

‘Kraegon Thul is not a fool,’ said Lysander. ‘The wild war engines are left to test the others. They are sent out here to prove themselves before Thul will export them to whatever warzone demands them next. If they can survive beasts like this, they are fit to fight in the colours of the Iron Warriors. That machine has no doubt accounted for plenty others of its kind.’

‘Good,’ said Gorvetz. ‘I was worried this would be easy.’ He said it without a smile, and Lysander could not be certain there was any humour in the Devastator veteran at all.

‘The target is good,’ voxed Lysander to Lycaon.

‘Then we must move quickly,’ said Lycaon, ‘before our position becomes known. We make the approach. Imperial Fists, to battle order!’

Up close, the stench of the machine’s corruption suffused the ruins and it was clear what had attracted the clouds of winged vermin that followed in its wake. It was the stench of carrion, of the battlefield dead. It was a smell that Lysander had become very familiar with, and it brought his mind back to the hundred battles he had fought in the colours of the Imperial Fists.

Had that been the same man? He answered to the name Lysander, he wore the golden armour and the symbol of the clenched fist, but would that man recognise the thoughts in his head, the recent memories? What would that Lysander have said of a man who had recited a list of sins the current Lysander had committed – trafficking with daemons, permitting witches and mutants to live, shirking one duty to fulfil another to his battle-brothers?

Lysander threw out thoughts like that. He had no room in his mind for anything save the thoughts of a soldier now. Squads Kaderic and Lycaon were moving parallel to the siege tower, keeping the ruins between them and any sensors the siege tower must have. It had to be autonomous, controlled by a corrupt machine or daemon, to roam unscrewed through the ruins, and it would be watching for prey just as it had been the day it rolled out of Kulgarde's forges. The closer Lysander got the fouler the glimpses he had of the machine. Its upper reaches were covered in corpses, mounted on spikes jutting from the blackened timbers. They were old and new, many of obvious mutants, others of ragged creatures dressed in all-covering pale robes who might have been nomads or wandered eking out lives in the region. Hoppers mounted on the engine's sides seemed to be there for the sole purpose of holding more bodies, many rotted away to skeletons, a few fresh and bloody.

'We are closing,' came First Sergeant Kaderic's vox. 'All squads, be ready for contact.'

Ahead, a body lay among a host of fallen rubble. The body was of one of the nomads – so far the strike force had not seen any alive but had come across a couple of bodies on their way through the ruins. This one looked to have been trapped by the rockfall, one leg crushed beneath a block of stone, and to have perished where he lay. With a clack of metal on metal a spidery creature, somewhat larger than a man, scuttled over the fallen wall and over the body. Without a word the Imperial Fists shifted into cover, each man putting something between himself and the creature.

It was a form of servitor, a mechanical creature controlled by a biological, human core component. The Imperium created them from condemned prisoners, or those pious folk who left their bodies to be used to continue the Imperium's work. Presumably this one had been made in Kulgarde – its body resembled that of a ten-legged spider, its body made up of a human torso with the head hanging upside-down to form its face, a

single wide lens mounted in the mouth. A forelimb snickered out and sliced the trapped leg off the corpse, before the servitor threw the corpse over its back and carried it over the ruins towards the rumbling of the siege engine's wheels.

‘It collects them,’ voxed Brother Givenar of Squad Kaderic, the huge Imperial Fist who had wrestled at the funeral games outside Shalhadar's city.

‘Not for much longer,’ said Kaderic. ‘We're coming up to the crossroads. Break cover on my word.’

The sound of the siege engine was so loud Lysander could hear nothing else save for the vox, transmitted directly to his middle ear.

‘In position,’ came the vox from Sergeant Gorvetz.

‘Go!’ ordered Lycaon.

The Imperial Fists broke from cover and burst into the crossroads ahead. Soaring walls formed a sheer-sided chasm in one direction – in the other wound a labyrinth of collapsed buildings, countless layers of floors tumbling down over one another. Through this labyrinth the siege tower approached, crunching through the ruins, heralded by a cloud of rubble dust.

Lysander jammed his helmet over his head as the dust cloud rolled over him. Amidst the sound of the siege tower's engines was the screech of metal on metal as the gun emplacement swivelled to aim at the Imperial Fists that had suddenly appeared in its path.

Bolter fire stuttered up at the engine, pinging off the armour plating that covered its front. Corpses were shot off the spikes covering its upper levels. The huge daemonic face grimaced down at the Imperial Fists as the tower's guns opened up.

Great rents were opened up in the chasm walls as the guns thundered. Shattered stone rained, red-hot and razor-sharp. Spent cannon shells the size of men fell as Lysander sprinted to one side to avoid them. The

percussion of the shots was like a hammer against Lysander's armour – Imperial Fists were thrown off their feet.

‘We have its attention,’ voxed Lycaon.

Another volley from the siege tower's guns threw an avalanche of shattered rubble into the crossroads. Lysander saw a sprawling golden-armoured figure vanish under the torrent. He hauled chunks of rock away until he exposed the battered shoulder guard of another Imperial Fist – Brother Givenar. He pulled on the guard until Givenar came loose. Givenar roared and leapt to his feet, throwing rubble in every direction, furious he had not been strong enough to free himself.

‘Is that it?’ yelled Givenar up at the siege engine. ‘I’ll tear you apart by myself!’

One of the guns was angling down at them. Lysander grabbed Givenar again and dragged him into the relative cover of a section of fallen battlement as the gun roared. The blast picked up Lysander and threw him against a stretch of wall, and he blacked out for a split second in the storm that slammed into him.

He came to on the ground, billows of dust roiling around him. It was Givenar who hauled Lysander to his feet this time, and the pain that ran through Lysander's limbs was a reminder that they were all basically intact. Lucky, he thought. We have been lucky so far.

‘Get in closer!’ shouted Lysander over the din. He and Givenar forged their way through the debris towards the roaring of the siege tower's engines. The dust was blown away by a blast of exhaust and the wheels of the siege engine loomed through the half-light. They were three storeys high, of dense black wood and studded with iron spikes. The structure's lower floors were stained black with old blood, the splits and gaps packed with the long-dried bodies of forge labourers and the sacrifices made to awaken its machine-spirit. More spent shells clattered down against the

wheels, crushed flat under them as the siege engine rolled on through the ruins.

Rogal Dorn had written more on the art of the siege than had anyone else in the history of the Imperium. It was his genius, the purpose for which the Emperor had created him at the dawn of the Great Crusade. Every Imperial Fist knew the core tenets of Dorn's siege-lore – the reduction of fortifications, the murderous geometry of firing zones, the million and one ways in which a set location could be made lethal to any who approached and the equal number of ways to kill an enemy while he skulked behind his walls. Among those principles was one which spoke of the purpose of siege engines, from the primitive rams and ladders of feral peoples to the Imperium's own Titan Legions. The guns on a siege tower such as this were designed to clear enemy walls of opposition, to open up breaches in their fortifications, and to pound the enemy's fortress from a distance to soften them up for the approach. They were not designed to kill enemies swarming around the base of the fortress, since such an enemy should be within his walls sheltering from the bombardment as the siege tower rolled forwards.

The Imperial Fists stayed close, moving with the siege engine. Its guns thundered, but they could not target enemies on foot at so close a range – even if they had the flexibility of elevation, they would have blasted the tower's own wheels off. Thus the theory went, and as Lysander and the rest of the strike force struggled through the rubble to the base of the tower that theory was put to the test.

The theory had not taken the servitors into account. The Imperial Fists, however, were ready for them. Like spiders bursting from their egg sacs, the servitors tore free of the metal blisters covering the middle floors and scurried down the tower's sides towards the ground. The blisters gave the tower a scabbed and diseased appearance which was not lessened by the knowledge they contained the host of spider-servitors.

The servitors dropped down among the Imperial Fists and, scattered by the storm of gunfire and falling rubble, the Imperial Fists had to face them in ones and twos. One dropped right on top of Brother Givenar, its legs clacking as an industrial pincer tried to slice into his armour. Givenar threw the servitor to the ground in a perfect wrestler's move and stamped down on the human torso at its centre. Ribs splintered and transparent greyish blood splattered up over his greaves.

Lysander found himself facing another configuration, this one with three upright human bodies fused together at the spine, each with its mouth wired open and a gun barrel jutting from between its teeth. It moved on a cluster of jointed legs, chunky and industrial, and its abdomens were fused to the centre of the cluster with a joint that permitted them to rotate. As it closed with Lysander it spun and Lysander realised a split second before it opened fire that this servitor was designed to spray bullets randomly in all directions, lethally imperilling anyone nearby.

Lysander dived into a roll as the servitor's guns opened up as one. A spiral of gunfire ripped over his head, filling the air with a buzzing mass of hot shrapnel. Any other soldier would have fled from the servitor, trying to put distance between himself and the stuttering waves of gunfire. A Space Marine knew better. He knew that an enemy with a gun was most dangerous from a distance, because he had time and space to aim and close the gap with a well-placed shot. A Space Marine, on the other hand, was deadliest up close.

Lysander slammed into the servitor and rammed the barrel of his bolter up into its closest ribcage. He squeezed the trigger and hammered half a magazine into its central mass. Desiccated flesh flew as the explosive bolter shells ripped through the servitor from the inside. Lysander kicked over what remained of the servitor to see Brother Givenar reeling, clutching the bloody side of his face.

‘Brother!’ shouted Lysander.

‘Damn thing took my ear off!’ replied Givenar, more angry than hurt.

‘We have a shot!’ came the vox from Sergeant Gorvetz.

‘Take it!’ was Chaplain Lycaon’s reply.

Gorvetz’s Devastator squad had used the chaos to get into position overlooking the intersection. Now, as one, they opened fire from an upper floor, directly into the side of the siege engine. Gorvetz had chosen a spot where an ammunition hopper met the armour plating, where the armour seemed thinner than on the rest of the machine. A plasma blast blew off a panel of armour and heavy bolter fire chewed through wood and metal. Lysander could hear the low stuttering of the heavy bolters over the engines, and then the sudden hot crack of cannon shells cooking off inside the tower. Burning timbers rained down like the giant shell casings had moments before. A sheet of pitted steel fell like a guillotine blade, landing a few metres from Lysander and embedding itself corner-first in the paved ground.

‘Breach!’ yelled Gorvetz over the vox. ‘We have a breach!’

‘On my way!’ replied Lysander. ‘First Sergeant!’

‘Brother Lysander!’ replied First Sergeant Kaderic. The sound of chainblade through bone and metal buzzed away over the vox as he spoke.

‘With me! We go up!’

Lysander ran for the half-collapsed building where Gorvetz was set up. Brother Givenar followed him, and other Imperial Fists from Squad Kaderic. He spotted Lycaon duelling with another servitor, a creature twice his height composed of several bodies wrapped around a steel frame to form its muscles, giving it a hunched, gorilla-like profile. As Lysander watched, Lycaon’s crozius flashed and one of the servitor’s arms came away.

Lysander found a stairway leading to the upper floors of the building, marked with burning flares left there by Gorvetz. He ran up, half blinded by the billows of dust and smoke boiling from the impacts of the tower’s

cannon fire. The shapes of Gorvetz's Devastator squad loomed through the darkness and Lysander made out Gorvetz himself, gnarled old face screwed up in a grimace as he joined his squad in hammering gunfire at the siege tower.

A huge hole had been torn in the side of the tower, three floors up. Inside, lit by the strobes of gunfire, Lysander could make out only a sifting, seething blackness.

'Kho! Break cover!' voxed Lysander.

Dorn's Dagger and the *Talon Blade* buzzed down from their positions hovering out of sight above the chasm walls. Lysander could see the red armour of Techmarine Kho as he guided his Land Speeder down through the eddies of smoke towards Gorvetz's position.

The priority was Kho. Anyone else who made it inside was a bonus, but Kho had to get inside and he had to survive. Otherwise the whole mission on Malodrax would be lost.

The *Talon Blade* thrummed past the position first. Sergeant Gorvetz and Brother Antinas, carrying the squad's heavy flamer, jumped down onto the running plates of the Land Speeder. A Land Speeder was not a troop carrier, but it needs be a couple of Space Marines could hold on for a short ride. The *Talon Blade* swept around close to the breach in the tower's side and Brother Antinas jumped, disappearing through the black gash in the armour. Gorvetz made ready to leap but a falling chunk of debris forced Gethor, at the *Talon Blade's* controls, to swerve away from the breach, and Gorvetz had to hold on.

The *Dorn's Dagger* was close now. Lysander shouldered his bolter and jumped, hitting chest-first against the Land Speeder's engine cowling. He found a handhold and clung on, feeling the impact as Brother Givenar landed alongside him.

The crossroads whirled below him. Lysander could see Captain Lycaon and the Imperial Fists of his squad forming a rough battle line, fending off

the combat servitors surging at them through the rubble to be cut down by bolter fire or drawn onto the point of a chainblade. Lycaon was directing as if conducting a symphony.

Gunfire rattled against the underside of *Dorn's Dagger*. The Land Speeder lurched, and Techmarine Kho wrestled with the control yoke. The servitors below had realised that the Land Speeders were a target and those that could were firing up at them.

Lysander's left hand came away with the shift of weight and he was hanging by one hand over the crossroads, feet kicking out over nothing. The Land Speeder levelled and Lysander found another handhold, clutching tighter to the cowling.

'Brother Givenar, if you will,' voxed Techmarine Kho. Lysander saw *Dorn's Dagger* was level with the breach. Kho put the vehicle into a steady hover and clambered up out of the cockpit, the servo-arms of his harness spread to grab out at anything that might support him. Kho leapt from the Land Speeder and vanished through the breach.

Givenar pulled himself over into the cockpit. 'Go, captain!' he voxed, swinging the Land Speeder around. His touch was not as fine as Kho's, but like every Imperial Fist he had basic training in all the Chapter's vehicles including the Land Speeder. Lysander braced his feet against the side of the engine housing as the yawning mouth of the breach swung closer.

Lysander waited for another half-second, sure that he would get no closer. Then he pushed off with both feet and propelled himself through the torn armour and into the siege engine.

Darkness swarmed around him. Even through the filters of his armour's faceplate he could barely breathe through the stench of death, intensified and concentrated inside the siege tower. Toxin warning runes flickered, projected against his retina by his armour's autosensors. Lysander tried to make out his surroundings, but the darkness clung and the shape of the interior was sketched out as black on black.

‘The *Dagger*’s hit!’ voxed Givenar. Lysander could hear the Land Speeder’s engines shrieking over the rumble of the siege tower.

The shape of *Dorn’s Dagger*, with Givenar behind the controls, loomed in the tear in the armour behind Lysander. With a lurch the speeder crashed into the breach, its nose ripping through the ragged edges of armour as the engines fragmented and threw chunks of burning metal in every direction.

Lysander leaned over the nose of the speeder and grabbed Givenar’s hand. He pulled Givenar out of the cockpit and into the siege tower. *Dorn’s Dagger* stayed lodged where it was, the burning engines casting a flickering light through the tower’s interior.

‘Then we are on our own,’ said Techmarine Kho levelly.

‘Givenar!’ exclaimed Antinas. ‘Glad you made it! You’re sure to make the rest of us look good.’

‘Not hard with children like you,’ replied Givenar.

‘I meant by comparison,’ said Antinas.

In the guttering light Lysander could make out the beams of the siege engine criss-crossing the space inside. It was no surprise by now to see them hung with human skins, each one cured and tattooed to form a banner in the heraldry of the Iron Warriors. Lysander saw the steel face mask of the Legion and bold patterns of yellow and black like the warning flashes on their armour. He recognised the book, tower and hands of Kraegon Thul’s personal heraldry, hanging high on a vast pelt that must have been cut from one of Kulgarde’s brute-mutants.

‘Up or down?’ asked Lysander. Below was the churning of the tower’s engines, and up was the chamber where the troops would wait for the siege engine’s drawbridge to open.

‘Down,’ said Kho.

Lysander, Givenar, Antinas, and Techmarine Kho. Ideally more would have made it through the breach, but there were worse bands of Imperial Fists to take on this mission. Givenar took the lead heading downwards,

and Lysander could see on him the wounded pride from having crashed the Land Speeder and closed up the breach. He had, at least, held on to his bolter, which he was playing through the shadows. The lower levels were choked with bodies, long-dead and dried out, stretched between the wooden beams and forming a dry, crackling layer underfoot. Huge cogs turned and pistons thrust through the gloom, choking oily smoke mingled with the stink of death.

‘Movement!’ shouted Brother Antinas. Before Lysander could focus on the scuttling that came at them out of the dark, Antinas was opening up with his heavy flamer, spraying a long gout of liquid flame over a spider-servitor leaping at him. It was engulfed in the flame and landed on him, fire catching in the greasy joints of its armour and on the dried-out flesh of its human torso. Antinas slammed the servitor into the floor and clubbed it flat with the butt of his heavy flamer. The massive weapon crunched through the ribs of the human component and flattened its skull.

Another servitor leapt from the churning mass of cogs and gears right at Lysander. It was a maintenance device, its torso low and mounted on wheels so its lower jaw dragged along the floor, with countless small manipulator limbs fused to its spine. Lysander met it with his chainsword and sawed it in half, from shoulder to hip, colourless blood spraying over him.

There were few combat servitors down among the engines – most were maintenance devices, which fought with tools and plasma cutters. Techmarine Kho wrestled one to the floor with the mechanical arms of his servo-harness and blasted it apart with his plasma pistol, while Brother Givenar tore the leg off another and shot it to pieces with a burst of bolter fire.

‘The tower’s defenders are still outside,’ said Kho as he threw the ragged remains of the last servitor aside. ‘But they may not remain so for

long if they realise the tower is invaded. We must move quickly. Go lower.'

The engines were huge and in many ways crude in construction, but they had a solidity that explained how the tower had continued to function in the proving grounds on its own. A ruddy glow came from an open furnace door, and Lysander spotted charred bones in the maw of the furnace among heaps of black ashes.

'It fuels itself with the dead,' said Lysander.

'No shortage of those on Malodrax,' said Givenar.

'Most insightful, Brother Givenar,' said Antinas.

'Are you two done?' snapped Lysander. 'You can batter one another bloody when we are done with this world. For now we have work to do.'

Beyond the furnace was a huge chunk of black rock, shot through with veins of silver. Radiation runes were flickering on Lysander's retina as the Imperial Fists approached it. Metal fittings connected cables and pipes to the rock, which had a pitted, cratered appearance – Lysander guessed it was a meteorite, perhaps captured by Malodrax's own gravity, perhaps brought from another world. Even lacking any psychic ability himself, Lysander could feel the malice coming off it, a moral sickness given form, the sense of it clinging to the inside of his skull like an uncleanness trying to seep into his soul.

The controller of the siege tower could have been one of two possibilities. The first was a machine-spirit, similar to those present in ancient cogitators helping command the most venerable starships and war engines of the Imperium, albeit corrupted and malevolent. The second possibility was a daemon, summoned and compelled to possess the siege tower by sacrifices made at the moment its engines were started. The air of malice surrounding the tower had suggested from the start that the latter was more likely.

Techmarine Kho stood before the meteorite, the end of one servo-arm cycling to present the nozzle of a plasma cutter to the stone. The cutter's flame ignited, casting a harsh white light against the edges of the engines on either side. 'You who have called this machine your home,' said Kho calmly, 'you are now to be evicted. Flee to the warp. Stand and fight. The outcome will be the same.'

Kho's plasma cutter scored down through the stone, etching a glowing molten line down through the meteorite's surface. The meteorite was hollow and it cracked in two, the sound like a gunshot.

A gnarl of burning light bled out from the broken meteorite. It took a form – a coiled snake, turning in on itself, forming dizzying patterns with the coils of its body. From the centre of the sinuous body emerged a head, something like a snake's but with several pairs of human eyes. A long, glowing blue tongue flickered between its fangs.

Long slits opened up down its elongated body and vestigial arms reached out, the skin translucent, with malformed bones and fingers.

'This is mine,' hissed the daemon. 'And it is glorious. You are filthy. Burn in my glory!'

The daemon's form changed. A halo of burning gold surrounded it. Reflections of itself spread out behind it, filling the tower's engine block with visions of tangled serpentine flesh. It was accompanied by a rising note, a clashing mix of atonal noise that raked through Lysander's skeleton as it washed over him. He heard the awful daemoniac music again, as played by the orchestra that had accompanied Captain Hexal during his destruction of the *Shield of Valour*.

Anger burned in Lysander. The daemon's aura could not dampen it, and Lysander took a hold of it as surely as if it were the hilt of a sword. This daemon might addle his mind and overwhelm his senses, but the anger would see him through.

Lysander charged on through the blaze of light and colour. He felt writhing flesh slamming against him. He drew his chainblade and plunged it in deep, hearing the chaintooth finding purchase in scale, muscle and bone. The daemon whipped its body into Lysander and threw him back, impacting against the side of an engine housing.

Chunks of machinery fell around Lysander. A huge cog rang against the floor. The snake-daemon reared up, its mouth yawing wide to reveal an endless tunnel of boiling fire down its gullet.

Lysander lunged with his chainblade and cut right into one of the snake's fangs. The blade chewed through the fang and venom spurted. The daemon reeled backwards, the coiling of its bodies slamming into the remains of the meteorite that had housed it. Through its coils forged Techmarine Kho, tearing at it with his servo-arms, the plasma cutter carving slices from its body.

Antinas and Givenar charged into the opening made by Lysander in the daemon's swirling coils. Antinas sprayed liquid fire up into the daemon's face while Givenar laid about him with his chainblade. Gouts of multicoloured blood erupted everywhere. Givenar leapt up onto the daemon's face, grabbing its remaining fang to haul himself up and ram his chainblade into the roof of its mouth.

Lysander unshouldered his bolter and rattled off the magazine into the daemon's skull. Eyes rolled back and burst. Lysander felt the hammer fall on nothing and charged, driving his shoulder towards the daemon's throat. Flesh parted under his feet as he threw his weight into it, ribs crunching in its neck as he impacted.

The daemon's head crashed to the floor onto Lysander's leg. Lysander kicked it away with his free foot and stood over the daemon. Its glory was gone now, its reflections dissolved, the only light coming off it bleeding out of its body along with its lifeblood.

‘I told your kind I would return,’ said Lysander. ‘When daemons have nightmares, I am what they see, and I always keep my word.’

The daemon hissed and coiled back as if to strike. Lysander grabbed it by an eye socket, sinking his fingers deep into the spongy mass inside its skull, and dragged its head forwards again. He rammed his chainblade down into the back of its skull, sawing left and right through the gristle of its spine.

Techmarine Kho appeared through the flailing coils. A servo-arm held the head down while his plasma cutter joined Lysander’s blade in its gory work.

The daemon’s head came away and a mass of iridescent sludge oozed from its severed neck onto the floor of the engine block.

‘The daemon is down,’ voxed Kho.

‘Report your situation!’ came Lycaon’s reply. From the sound of it his squad was still embattled outside the tower.

‘Looking for the controls,’ replied Kho. ‘Stand by.’ He turned to the other Imperial Fists, still smeared with gore from the daemon. ‘Locate the cockpit, or whatever passes for it.’

‘Well killed,’ said Brother Antinas, looking down at the daemon’s severed head. ‘Who shall claim it?’

‘Not you,’ said Givenar, ‘unless we grant the kill for flailing around on the floor.’

‘Split up,’ said Lysander. ‘Lycaon needs the tower opened up. We’re still fighting out there.’

The black heart of the siege tower churned between the engine blocks, with thundering pistons clashing overhead and exhaust pipes glowing dark-red with the heat. As Lysander clambered lower it got hotter and denser, with dust-dry bones flaking apart under his feet where they had fallen from sacrifices long before.

Down there in the tower's depths was a cogitator of ancient mark, with thousands of valves filling a contraption of glass and pitted steel. The glass was discoloured as if by disease and reams of punchcards lay around it like a snowdrift. It was Antinas who found it first, and Givenar expressed gratitude that Antinas had not flamed it at first sight.

While the two swapped insults Techmarine Kho reached the cogitator and levered its casing open, exposing the clacking mass of valves and levers inside.

Lysander stood guard, ready for any remaining servitors to scramble out of hidden corners to defend the cogitator. Kho plunged a servo-arm into the cogitator and wiring slithered out, datajacks finding places to interface with the ancient machine.

'It is insane,' said Kho as the data probes worked their way deeper into the machine. 'It was once proud and noble, but it was stolen by servants of the Dark Gods and implanted in here, under the command of the daemon. It has become corrupted and is beyond help, I fear.'

'Can you control it?' asked Lysander.

'I can,' said Kho. 'But for how long I cannot say. And its machine-spirit has become an abominable thing now, and must be destroyed when it is no longer useful.'

'I doubt that will be a problem,' said Lysander. 'What about the servitors?'

'I can cut the connection,' said Kho. 'They will revert to their simplest behaviour routines. I cannot control them directly or shut them down, not without a great deal of work.'

'That will have to do. Can you open us up?'

'I can lower the drawbridge.'

'Lycaon!' voxed Lysander. 'Get to high ground. The drawbridge is opening up.'

Far above the jaw of the daemon's face ground open, revealing the upper levels where the tower's complement of troops was to wait to reach the enemy battlements. Lysander listened over the vox as Lycaon's squad made for the upper levels of the surrounding ruins.

Lysander met Lycaon's men and the rest of Squad Gorvetz halfway up the siege tower, among the bones and dried-out hides of the tower's countless sacrifices.

'Excellent work,' said Lycaon.

'What losses?' asked Lysander.

'Wounds received,' said Lycaon. 'None dead, and all can fight.'

'Then we have been fortunate.'

'Kho!' voxed Lycaon. 'Can you move us?'

'I have full control over our motivator functions,' came Kho's reply. 'I hope to have weapons online soon. The machine-spirit is not cooperative but I am working to subdue it.'

Already the siege engine was changing direction, its engine blocks complaining as they turned the huge front wheels. The sound of falling rubble thudded against the exterior as the siege tower took on its new course, crushing the remains of the dismantled servitors that had served it a few minutes before.

'Your plan worked, Captain Lysander,' said Lycaon.

'So far,' said Lysander. 'And I imagine that was the easy part.'



15

'It is not for me to say whether my heresy was the correct path. I can say only that for me, there could have been no other. Is it for one man, even an inquisitor, to say what the universal truth of our species is, the one road that all humanity must walk? Some of us no doubt think it is, but I have not yet scaled those heights of arrogance. I chose to wield the knowledge and weapons of the enemy against him. Others say that makes me the enemy. When all history is played out and we look back from the end of time, perhaps we will know who is right.'

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The journey from the outskirts of Kulgarde's hinterland to the city of Shalhadar had seemed to take Lysander forever, struggling through the storms of that broken wasteland. Now, on the way back in the great procession Shalhadar's court had assembled, the landscape of Malodrax seemed to slide by almost without effort. It felt as if Malodrax was letting this silken, many-coloured monstrosity wind across its surface, eager to see what chaos would ensue when it reached its destination.

A hundred carriages were pulled by dozens of citizens each. They had lined up in the streets for the right to be yoked to the carriages, and they had scrambled over one another to be shackled to the one carrying Lysander – for he was the Executioner, one of the lead roles in The Chant of the Changing Ones. Their joy at serving Shalhadar had not dimmed even as they had dropped from heatstroke and exhaustion, to be dragged away by the outriders from Shalhadar's army who ranged ahead of the caravan on their strange bipedal mounts. Each carriage carried performers for the play – the principal actors, the dancers and singers of the chorus, the musicians who were to accompany the performance on stage, the dressers and the stagehands. Valienne had a carriage to herself, covered against the sun, from which she had not emerged throughout the whole journey. Talaya had another, and Lysander wondered if she would take on a role herself or was just there to help ensure Shalhadar's grand plan went off smoothly.

Lysander had to swallow down his disgust, like bile in his throat. Somehow the luxury of it seemed the worst. He had a carriage to himself and it was large enough for a dozen to live in comfortably, upholstered in silk and velvet, with hardwood chests of narcotics and peculiar devices of leather and steel he did not try to guess the use of. It was obscene that he should be feted by the people of Shalhadar's city, and granted such luxury when they were literally dying of exhaustion outside. If he had the option he would have torn it all down and laid waste to the caravan, ripping its painted foulness apart. But he did not have that option. Not yet. As pleasing as it would be to him to see the trappings of Shalhadar's arrogance tattered and burning, Kraegon Thul would still be alive and Malodrax would have won.

He had a copy of Valienne's play, too, which he had memorised. He did not pretend to understand the intricacies of drama, but fortunately the role of the Executioner required little more than a commanding physical

presence which a Space Marine had no trouble mustering. Shalhadar's plan was simple in essence, and it played off the need of creatures like Thul to be worshipped and obeyed, and to have their enemies offer them supplication. Shalhadar was disgusting in every way, but he was clever. The plan would work, up until Lysander himself was required to play his part. Then, so much would be in the hands of chance.

'There!' came a cry from up front. Lysander pulled a curtain aside and looked out across the wasteland. 'Upon the horizon!'

Lysander saw it too. The battlements of Kulgarde, dark grey, fluttering with banners in the yellow and black of the Iron Warriors. There were so many emotions sparked in him by seeing the fortress again that he could pick none out. He recognised the blooms of filthy smoke from the forges behind the walls, and the scars covering the hinterlands from the battles of war engines let loose to prove themselves while Thul watched from the battlements. He saw, as clear as if they were in front of him, the bodies of his captive battle-brothers paraded and then cut down to be dragged to the Isle of the Bone Sculptors.

And yet he could not purify himself with battle. He could not lay about him and exterminate the filth that fawned at the altars of the warp, and burn the uncleanness away. Not yet.

'Send the call!' cried out one of the gang leaders who commanded the citizens hauling the carriages. 'Bring the riders in close! We enter the Warsmith's realm!'

Talaya stalked along the top of one carriage, watching the battlements. 'Send the heralds!' she commanded.

One carriage broke away from the column. Its occupants pulled down the coverings and revealed dozens of men and women there, each carrying a musical instrument. Another carriage followed, this one carrying a choir, to provide the fanfare that would accompany Shalhadar's offering through the gates of Kulgarde.

How many armies had tried to breach Kulgarde? The ground below its walls showed the scars of plenty of battles, and the skeletons choking the spiked rollers of the fortifications had come from somewhere. How many thousands had died trying to climb or breach those walls? And now it turned out that all it took to open the gates of Kulgarde was a song and a dance.

The gates indeed opened, enormous blast doors stained with blood and machine oil. A squad of Iron Warriors stood on the battlements above the gate, carrying enough heavy weapons to turn the caravan's carriages into splinters. The choir and the musicians had gone ahead and played swooning, hypnotic music to accompany the entrance of Shalhadar's gift into Kulgarde. Evidently the Iron Warriors were willing to take his token of supplication, for they did not open fire and instead the caravan passed into the fortress.

Lysander was back among the brutal killing architecture of the fortress, every block and step designed to make the place impossible to take by force. An army might make it onto the walls but would find itself facing a sheer drop on the other side, with only a single-file stairway giving access to the lower levels. Passages barely wide enough for a single Space Marine allowed one Iron Warrior to fend off dozens of attackers alone. The wide, high-ceilinged passageway through which the caravan entered was itself a trap, for when the gates were breached and an enemy force swarmed in they would be covered on all sides by murder-holes and gun emplacements. They would be herded into the wide space which ended suddenly at a second gate protected by barricades and heavy weapons bunkers. The second gate itself consisted of several single-file doors, portcullised with bars so defenders could shoot through them.

Captain Hexal greeted the convoy at the second gate. His squad was with him, the same Iron Warriors who had attacked the *Shield of Valour* and taken Lysander's squad.

Talaya approached the gate, flanked by heralds playing a fanfare. She dismissed them with a gesture and let her mechanical limbs lower her delicately to the floor, where she bowed low.

‘Lord Shalhadar the Veiled One acknowledges your lord’s requests,’ she said, ‘and grants them. They shall be fulfilled as quickly as the suns move across the sky. He asks but one boon from Warsmith Kraegon Thul, that he accept this gift in humility. A performance of *The Chant of the Changing Ones*, an act of obeisance to the gods of the warp. For we all stand before the eyes of the gods, and by their will we yet breathe.’

Two things could happen. Hexal could open the gates and let the performers through, so that Shalhadar’s act of supplication could unfold before the eyes of Kraegon Thul himself. Or Hexal could shoot Talaya and have a hundred Iron Warriors guns appear at the murder-holes, and massacre every living thing in the convoy. Lysander had thought about the odds of each eventuality, and had concluded the chances were roughly even.

Hexal gestured to the Iron Warriors of his squad, and they stood aside. Mutant slaves hauled the gates open. Talaya waved forward those essential to the performance, the actors, musicians and stagehands. Lysander jumped down from his carriage.

Hexal had decided not to kill them all out of hand. That was something. But he might still recognise Lysander, or at least realise he was a Space Marine. It was impossible for Lysander to hide his bulk and the crimson armour he wore only made him more prominent. He joined the crowd of bizarrely-dressed performers heading through the second gate, and tried not to meet Hexal’s eyes as he walked.

The broadsword on his back could cut through power armour if Lysander struck just right. Hexal’s head could be parted from his shoulders, or his spine could be severed by a blade through the abdomen. But Lysander’s mind had hosted those thoughts before, and they were choked down as he

remembered that Kraegon Thul was still somewhere inside Kulgarde, waiting to die.

He swore for the hundredth time that Hexal would die. He passed by Hexal and his squad, through the gate, and into Kulgarde.

The duelling ground took up a significant stretch of the fortress interior. It was a great circular chamber of stone with galleries for the senior Iron Warriors to watch their fellow traitors drilling in close combat techniques or settling differences. This was to be their stage, the expanse of bloodstained stone scored with the marks of old blades. Their audience would be the Iron Warriors of Kulgarde, among them Warsmith Kraegon Thul himself.

Lysander watched motionless in what would become the wings as the stage was set. Sections of scenery were brought in representing a castle, a palace, a battlefield strewn with painted corpses and the fanciful clashes of colour and shape that represented the warp. Valienne, no less bedraggled and filthy than the moment Lysander found her, was arguing with the set builders and costumers about every detail. The rest of the cast were meditating or praying, each making their own form of appeal to the gods of the warp.

Pestilence was played by three youths in a costume that linked them together into a lumpen, shambling monstrosity, its lolling mouth operated by one of the actors while another rolled its bloodshot eyes and a third its malformed claw. The three were sewn into half their costumes and were blooding themselves, marking their skin with intricate bladed implements that left precise patterns of wounds on their skin. They glistened already with blood, and sang with high, wailing voices. Fate was played by a woman of improbable height and thinness, her face obscured by long white hair, her body made up to resemble a walking skeleton, accentuating her protruding ribs and sunken stomach. She was kneeling, throwing her head back and forth, barking like an animal as some spirit of the warp coursed through her. Perhaps the spirit was really there, perhaps it was a product of

the woman's diseased mind. It did not matter. She was quite mad, and it didn't matter whether it was true spirit possession or a lifetime in Shalhadar's insane city that had broken her.

A chorus representing the remorseful dead were praying together, partaking in a feast of raw flesh the origin of which Lysander chose not to guess at. Musicians were anointing their instruments in fresh blood.

The sets were taking shape, dividing the duelling ground into stage, backstage and the audience. A few curious mutants were peering from doorways or from beneath the gallery railings, watching bemusedly as the outlandish scenes were assembled ready to be rolled out onto stage.

Lysander had his own costume, of course. A heavy black robe hung over his armour. He had changed the armour's helmet for an executioner's black cowl which, thankfully, still hid his face. Less fortuitously, his role called for him to give up his well-balanced blade in favour of a huge single-bladed axe for lopping off heads. It was a reasonable weapon, but limited compared to the sword – its balance was off and the single cutting edge reduced his options in a fight by half. It could still kill well enough, though, and a Space Marine had to be ready to fight with whatever came to hand.

The stage was complete. The cast were assembled in the wings, and Lysander found himself surrounded with those fanatics of Shalhadar's reign who had competed their whole lives for this moment. Their eyes shone with joy and an overwhelming gratitude, for they had finally been chosen to perform in the name of the Veiled One. Lysander was again grateful his face was hidden, because that was a look he could not have faked.

Lysander heard the sound of armour on stone and knew Kraegon Thul was being accompanied into the chamber by an honour guard of Iron Warriors. The musicians struck up the overture, a nauseous skirl of rising

and falling tones. The actors muttered their final prayers, and as the music reached a crescendo, the first of them took the stage.

‘My fate on Malodrax did not lie among the court of Shalhadar. Malodrax had misled me, and I had almost fallen for its lies. But the willpower and intellect of an inquisitor was an obstacle this world had never come up against, and the truth became apparent to me even at the last moment.

‘I had to get out. Through the system of emergency dead drops I made contact with Agent Sildyne, who met me by a spot in the city walls where some of the city’s poorest dregs had quarried homes out of the stone. He led me and the remains of my warband, numbering Grun, Thol and Maskelin, through the warrens there and out of the city. Of all the acolytes who accompanied me to Malodrax, it was Sildyne who proved the most steadfast of purpose, the most driven to fulfil his duty.

‘This world had failed to draw me towards its false goal. Instead, as we made our way out of the city’s hinterland, I sought to understand what my purpose here really was. Though a heretic I be, still I feel the eyes of the Emperor upon me and His hand guiding me. Fate, and the Emperor’s will, would not have brought me to Malodrax, would not have seen me witness so many horrors and survive, without a reason. I merely had to understand it.

‘It was Thol who suggested to me the truth. Thol and his brother had been no better than animals when I found them, survivors among a tribe of killers and cannibals. I saw in them the viciousness of which an inquisitor must sometimes make use, but also the loyalty to one another that I felt I could turn into a dedication to the work of the Holy Ordos. As we ate a paltry meal of lizard and insect caught by the brothers, he said to me, “Lord Golrukhan, what this world wants is to be ruled.”’

“‘Indeed?’ I said. “It seems to me that it wants nothing less.”

“‘But,” continued Thol, “have you known that type of dog who bites and growls at everyone, but when you earn his respect, he will never leave

you?"

"I found two such dogs on your home world," I replied.

"Or a woman," said Grun with a smile, "who wants a man, and so who curses and scratches her nails at every man she meets, so that she knows whoever can stand to keep pursuing her is good enough for her?"

"I have not the knowledge of such things as you do, Grun," I replied, "but I understand what you mean." Grun was always the earthier of the two, and the crudeness of his language was enough to make me suspect possession when I first encountered him.

"Malodrax wants a ruler," continued Thol. "But it doesn't want just any backstabber who can lie his way to a crown and a throne. So it sets up its trials to weed out the weak, and make sure that whoever makes it to the top is a worthy king."

'I was struck then by the truth of Thol's words, and even of Grun's. Malodrax was not unusual in being cruel to those who lived there, for any world touched by the warp must be so. But it had a purpose behind its cruelty. Not for Malodrax the callous, random cruelty that blossomed so readily wherever the warp intruded on reality. No, what I had seen thus far, while obscene, had a purpose behind it, a design that only my superior inquisitor's mind could perceive.

'How many on Malodrax had lived and died under its suns, never knowing they were pieces in a plan concocted by the will of this corrupted world? Believing they were the masters of their fate, while Malodrax had determined the time and manner of their deaths from the moment they first breathed its air? It was quite the revelation, for which I thanked Thol and Grun, and immediately set to meditating upon what plan I should now enact to understand more about what Malodrax wanted and how it set about getting it. Could it ever be ruled? What qualities would be necessary in a man to pass its many trials and become its lord?

‘There was one man who might qualify, of all those I had heard of on Malodrax. It was not the daemon prince of the city we had just left. Shalhadar, the Veiled One, was powerful indeed, but could a being of such infinite arrogance and self-absorption ever perceive this world’s machinations that churned away beyond him? Malodrax must have laid a thousand traps for the Veiled One, any one of which Shalhadar might walk into, blinded by his inability to imagine anyone might out-think him. No, Shalhadar was not my goal here, I understood that now more clearly than ever.

‘There was one man. I had heard his name, and I had learned much of the history that created him. A traitor to mankind, to the Emperor himself, one whose willpower had seen him defy the God-Emperor when that divine being still walked the galaxy in the guise of a man. A member of a Legion whose discipline bound its hatred in iron bands, and whose ambitions include nothing less than the mastery of all the armies of the warp and revenge against the whole human race.

‘Kraegon Thul, the Warsmith of Kulgarde. The garish sights of Shalhadar’s city had blinded me to the possibility that Thul was my true objective here. And now, I was certain. What better machine for turning Kraegon Thul into the ruler of his own warp-born empire than Malodrax?

‘The possibilities were dizzying. Was I witnessing the genesis of the next great lord of Chaos, the chosen of the Dark Gods, forged through the trials of Malodrax into a great figurehead to lead the next Black Crusade against the Imperium? The Emperor’s will had put me here, and it was surely His will that one such as I be there to stop Thul taking over Malodrax, and from there, rising to become Warmaster of Chaos.

“‘We head for Kulgarde,” I said to my warband. Though they looked grim to hear it, none objected. Perhaps they felt instinctively, as I did, that our own trial had seen us successfully evade the traps of Shalhadar’s court and that our final test was to stand against its chosen.

‘And what plan did it have for me? Malodrax could surely not tolerate an inquisitor on its soil without planning a fitting fate for him. Perhaps it wanted me corrupted, or broken, or merely dead. Or perhaps it wanted me to sit upon its throne. Whatever Malodrax wanted from me, it would not get it, for I was sworn to greater powers than any in the warp.’

‘Our meal finished, we set out across the wastes in the direction of Kulgarde. Whatever fate awaited us, my acolytes showed no fear of it. They had seen what happened to those who strayed from the Emperor’s path, and that held for them more dread than any death Malodrax might inflict.’

When Lysander stepped from the wings, he was almost overwhelmed with hate at the sight of the Iron Warriors, a small retinue of them at the back of the seating, with aliens and mutants arrayed in front of them. Lysander saw right past the xenos horrors, as if they weren’t there. Instead, he saw nothing but Kraegon Thul.

The Warsmith was wreathed in oily smoke. Lysander could hear the grinding of the cogs on his shoulderguards even from the stage, even above the crooning of the choir who kneeled before the front row. Behind the clouded lenses of Thul’s helmet were eyes watching Lysander at that very moment, and Lysander imagined a film of filth crawling over his skin as the Warsmith’s corruption touched him. Thul’s air hose sprayed spurts of white vapour from its ancient seals.

Beside Thul was the skinny, atrophied form of a type of mutant Lysander recognised – a Navigator, a bearer of a stable mutation that granted him a third eye with which he could see into the warp without being driven mad. That third eye was hidden behind a band of cracked and embroidered leather wound around his forehead. His face was emaciated and his frame, tall by unaugmented standards, was bent and hunched beneath the heavy dark-blue robes. He must have been the Warsmith’s personal Navigator, who directed his fleets when he left Malodrax. How long would it be

before Kraegon Thul gathered his legion of war machines and took off from Malodrax, to crusade against the Imperium he betrayed?

And on Thul's other side stood the creature Lysander had learned was named Karnak, Thul's alien head scientist. It was the first time Lysander had really seen Karnak clearly, the sharp and swooping lines of his elaborate armour, the half-moon shoulder guards and tall plume of the helmet that hid his face from view. Lysander could still not tell Karnak's species – under that armour he could be of any species of roughly humanoid size and shape, which might be one of thousands of hateful aliens the Imperium had encountered.

Lysander hated Karnak as much as he hated Thul, he realised then, but it was a different kind of hate. What he felt to look on Kraegon Thul was hot and intense, a relentless, volcanic emotion that filled him with fire. Thul was everything Lysander's Chapter stood against, an ancient enemy whose existence inflamed the anger of every Imperial Fist. But his hate for Karnak was cold and detached.

The worst sight of all was of the Imperial Fists, shackled to stone blocks just before the stage. Skelpis, Halaestus and Vonkaal were chained there. The stump of Skelpis's leg had been cauterised and was now a red-black mass of scorched scar. Halaestus's skin had been removed in geometric patches all across his body. Vonkaal's torso was torn open, his organs visible through the sawn-out sections of his ribcage. Lysander could not see the hearts beating or the lungs drawing breath. Vonkaal was dead, displayed as a monument to Thul's power. The arrogance of the display spoke of the very heart of the Iron Warriors. They had stood against the Emperor in the Horus Heresy and their Primarch Perturabo had locked horns with Rogal Dorn. They were driven by jealousy of the Imperium and the Loyalist Legions that had triumphed at the Battle of Terra. Now they displayed their captive Imperial Fists as war trophies, flaunting the possession of their deadliest enemies' defeated.

The play was already half-done. A corpse lay at Lysander's feet, of a cultist picked to play the personification of innocence slain by Fate. The actress who performed as Fate had killed him for real, razor-sharp needles on her hands clawing through his face to shred the brain matter behind. The mess of blood and gore pooled around the black leather boots of Lysander's Executioner costume. Another two bodies lay sprawled at the front of the stage, one killed during the play's opening to consecrate the stage to the Dark Gods, the other shot through with arrows representing the random cruelty of Pestilence.

'Behold!' called out Lysander as he followed the lines of Valienne's play. 'For every sin there is a punishment, and though a man might cheat it for a lifetime, in death it will find him. Though he flee into the realms of the Immaterium, yet in madness it will find him. Though he seek to hide at the end of time, in infinity it will find him. Witness the sinner! Witness his folly!'

Lysander had never spoken to the cultist who was to play the victim he executed. The scene was impossible to rehearse fully. This was not a play that could be rehearsed, only unleashed when everyone knew their part. The cultist playing the Sinner danced from the wings, spreading blood from the devotional wounds on his arms and legs. He wore the leather straps of Shalhadar's pleasure-cult, and his skin was livid with old scars.

The sinner's monologue followed. Lysander had it memorised – it was a long mockery of Chaos, of fate and the randomness of the warp, and one of the centrepieces of Valienne's work.

Lysander watched for signs of life among the captive Imperial Fists. These were the battle-brothers he had come so far to save, and if they were just corpses hanging there, then Kraegon Thul would have won. The awful possibility, though Lysander had always known it was such, was a weight in his stomach that wanted to drag him down into the earth.

Brother Halaestus's eyes flickered, barely enough movement to be noticed. Lysander met Halaestus's eyes as they opened a slit, and with an equally subtle nod Halaestus acknowledged Lysander. He knew. Of course he knew a battle-brother. Halaestus had not given up hope here, he had not abandoned the belief that Lysander would return.

'Freedom is my religion!' the cultist cried. 'So shall I do what I will, and the fates be damned!'

The mutants in the audience spat and heckled. Among them Lysander spotted the creatures who served as orderlies in the medical wing, and whose species counted the Bone Sculptors among their number, with their faces like long animal skulls and their fingers tipped with syringes. Lysander felt his fingers tightening on the headsman's axe.

'I will make water on every altar!' cried the cultist who was to be Lysander's victim. 'Make every temple's threshold my soiling-place! And the gods can chase me if they will, for I have wrought spells and magics that blind their sight! See now the wards I have created, proof against daemon and witch. That is what I think of fate! I would walk in the warp if I could, and spit at every god I saw!'

Handfuls of filth spattered the stage from the audience. The cultist grinned as he saw his words getting to them. There were brute-mutants and forge-workers among them, and others besides – exotic xenos, witches bound in chains with steel cages bolted around their heads, celebrants tattooed from head to toe with the sigils of the warp, and followers of a corrupted machine-deity with industrial crushers and saws grafted to their skeletons.

The chorus rose up to grab the sinner and drag him to the back of the stage, chanting the profane names of the warp gods. The audience cheered, screaming for the sinner's head. A light fell on Lysander, and they realised the Executioner's axe was about to swing. One of the chorus dropped to all fours to serve as the executioner's block.

The sinner, by now battered and bloody, grinned up at Lysander. He had waited his whole life to die this way. Whatever he might have been, whatever existence he might have lived, had been stripped away from him by Shalhadar and replaced with a mindless fanaticism. More than anything, this man wanted to die to glorify his lord.

Lysander raised the axe. Valienne had written that the Executioner, personification of all who do fate's work, would slice off the sinner's head with a single stroke. She had specified that the blood would spray onto the stage and the chorus would smear themselves with it and tear the body apart, throwing the chunks of the corpse into the audience and turning the whole gathering into one celebration of death.

The music rose. The audience screamed and bellowed. Only Kraegon Thul, Karnak and the Navigator were still. Lysander's eyes met the lenses of Thul's faceplate.

The axe came down. It was not aimed at the sinner's exposed neck. Lysander let go of the axe as it swung down and it launched from his hands, tumbling end over end towards the audience.

The performers of the chorus were the first to realise Lysander had deviated from the script. The closest, a woman with her head half shaved and her face open with deep bored pits that revealed the cavities inside her skull, turned to follow the axe's path.

Lysander knew he could not penetrate power armour at this distance, not with a mundane weapon. He could not kill Kraegon Thul this way. But he could win an ally for himself in the fight sure to follow.

The axe slammed into the stone block to which Halaestus's hands were shackled. The blade cut right through the chain and embedded itself in the stone. Halaestus's hands fell free.

The woman beside Lysander screamed. The rest of the chorus took up the cry as they realised this holy moment had been profaned.

The cultist playing the sinner kneeled up and gawped, expecting to be dead by now. Perhaps he thought he was, and was wondering why the afterlife looked the same as the one he had just left.

Lysander ran towards the front of the stage, throwing the other performers aside. The audience only realised something was wrong when he vaulted into the front row.

Mutant hands clawed at Lysander, tearing at the leather overcloak of the Executioner's costume. Lysander cracked a malformed skull with a backhand and grabbed one of the skull-faced menials by the throat, smashing his forehead into the face that leered up at him.

A knife arrowed at him. Lysander parried it with his forearm, grabbed the wrist that held it and broke the assailant's arm. He snatched up the knife and with a weapon in his hand he cut himself faster through the pressing ranks.

It was bedlam. A thousand things were happening at once. On stage the chorus were running wild, tearing at their hair and at each other. The other performers were rushing from the wings, the personifications of Pestilence, Fate, Malice and a dozen others weeping with horror that the performance had been destroyed. Some were trying to make their way towards Lysander, furious he had broken from the script, but were swamped by the mutants surging forwards to storm the stage. In the crowd, leaders of the mutant forge-gangs were standing and pointing down at the stage, bellowing orders for their underlings to avenge the insult of the aborted stage play.

Halaestus had extricated himself from his chains. He had snatched the axe from where it had become embedded in the stone block and was hacking at Brother Skelpis's chains, breaking from the task for long enough to cut the head off the brute-mutant bearing down on him.

Talaya was leaping over the scenery, her mechanical legs sending her flying over the stage in pursuit of Lysander. Kraegon Thul stood and turned

aside, his Navigator cowering in his wake. Karnak stepped into Thul's place to cover the Warsmith's escape.

Lysander cut off an arm, a head, carved through a spine. The knife broke off in his hand and he rammed the stump into a skeletal eye socket, carrying on bare-handed. He clasped an equine skull in his hands, lifted and twisted, and threw the lifeless body aside.

Karnak was waiting for him, willing to let him tire himself out battering his way through Kulgarde's vermin. Karnak drew a long silver blade with a rapier point as sharp as the scalpels in his anatomy theatre. A spiked mace arced down at Lysander, but it just gave him something to snatch from his assailant and use to forge on faster.

Behind him somewhere, Talaya was struggling through the mutant horde. She was faster than Lysander and more mobile, but Lysander was stronger. He was making better progress than she was. He just had to keep her off him for a few more minutes, and then it wouldn't matter.

Lysander shattered a mutant's shoulder and trampled an alien orderly underfoot. Just one more row of seating remained between him and Karnak. It was occupied by one of Malodrax's native xenos, deformed and discoloured like the surgeon Lysander had killed on his last stay in Kulgarde. Lysander broke the haft of the mace over its skull and it crumpled underneath him.

He was face to face with Karnak.

Karnak swept his sword in an arc. On the surface it was intended to cut Lysander in half at the waist. In truth it was a feint to draw Lysander into a defensive motion, so Karnak could spear him through with the dagger he concealed in his other hand.

Lysander did not move. He caught the blade on his forearm, trusting the super-dense bone of a Space Marine to hold against the edge of the sword. The impact jarred through him and the blade bit deep into the bone, but it

did not cut through. Lysander turned out of the path of the dagger's point as it punched towards his abdomen.

Karnak's eyepieces were centimetres from Lysander's face.

'I told you,' snarled Lysander, 'I would return.'

He rammed an elbow up into Karnak's jaw. The alien's head snapped back and Lysander locked the elbow of the arm carrying the alien's sword, bending it the wrong way as far as the armour's joint would allow. The armour kept the limb from breaking but the sword came loose and it was suddenly in Lysander's hands.

Karnak dropped back into a guard. Lysander swept the sword around his head to knock back any mutant getting too close. This was their fight now, no one else would interfere. Perhaps the mutants understood that, for none of them clawed at him now, or tried to grab him and weigh him down.

Karnak's eyepieces glinted. Lysander vowed he would tear that helmet off and look into whatever face Karnak sported below, before he took the alien's head.

'Malodrax has won.

'I am going to die. Nothing I can do or say will change that now. Has my heresy finally been punished? Is it the Emperor's will that put me here, and shows me my manner of death before it falls upon me? If so, I accept it. My Emperor has always been my guide, but in following Him I have strayed from the path laid out by His clerics and scriptures. If that choice was wrong, I am responsible for it, and thus should I suffer. But on Malodrax, it is not the Emperor's will. It is Kraegon Thul's.

'I entered Kulgarde as a slave trader, seeking to purchase the stupid and the worthless from Kulgarde's forges at a premium, to be sold on as drudge labour and sacrifices elsewhere. To do this I had items of value and currency salvaged by my acolytes in Shalhadar's city, for while I had not succeeded in entering Shalhadar's court I had moved among its highest echelons and the trappings of such society had not been completely

stripped from me during my flight. Grun and Thol were my pack-mules, lugging these goods, while Sildyne and Maskelin were the slave masters who trained and disciplined my human stock. I had run this identity a number of times, and they were well versed in their roles.

‘Thus did I gain entry to Kulgarde. I was assured by the Iron Warrior serving as castellan that there would be scant business for me, for Kulgarde needed all its bodies to run its forges and construct its war engines. Nevertheless I was given leave to visit the forges and see their need for good, new bodies, so I might return in the future bringing slaves for them to purchase. I knew that this ruse would not gain me an audience with Kraegon Thul, Warsmith and lord of Kulgarde, but it was enough to get within the walls.

‘Firstly, Thol died. I cannot say from whence the blade came that slit his throat. Among the vast anvils and molten pits I was observing the brutal economy of Kulgarde, the raw materials it devoured and the suffering that fuelled it, and for a moment I was awed by the scope of the war that Kraegon Thul could wage. But when I next turned, it was to see Thol stumbling and clutching his throat, gurgling crimson as his blood filled his lungs. His brother Grun caught him, trying to get to the wound and stop the blood flowing, but Thol died not a minute after he hit the ground.

‘Sildyne and Maskelin were at my side with their guns ready, hunting for the assailant. But how Grun howled! Like the wild beasts of his home world, a keening from the world’s end. I cannot imagine anyone felt such sorrow as he did then, and my mind turned again to Talaya and the strange emptiness left in me to see her taken away. That was a chill, shivering sorrow – Grun’s was a fire ripping through him, scorching away his insides and leaving nothing but a vessel full of grief.

‘Could I have stopped Grun? Not without killing him, certainly. Not, perhaps, without dying myself. Perhaps it was that I did not think quickly enough, or that these old bones, able in combat as I may be, did not have

the speed to match a furious feral worlder thirty years my junior. Before I had my hand on the hilt of my sword, Grun had snatched up a pair of glowing hot tongs from the nearest forge and with it had clamped the lower jaw of the nearest forge-slave. While the blade was still half-drawn he had thrown the slave into the forge, his body vanishing beneath the embers in a bright flower of flame.

'I called for Maskelin and Sildyne to stop him, but already Grun had leapt over the closest anvil and run towards an enormous forge-pit where a slave master was calling the rhythm to a gang of slaves operating the bellows. Grun went straight for the slave master, ramming the tongs into the huge mutant's belly and taking the barbed whip from his hands before the mutant's guts had hit the floor. He wrapped the whip around the scaly bull-neck and used it as leverage to break its spine.

'Already, a clamour had broken out. Orders were yelled and more mutants rushed from all corners of the great forge fields. We were seized by muscular soot-stained arms and though I could have fought, I knew myself outnumbered.

'I have not seen my acolytes alive from that moment. Grun I am certain must be dead, pulled apart by vengeful hands. Of the others, I can only guess. I reside now in a cell below the foundations of Kulgarde, hundreds of metres below the ground, where the heat is stifling and the darkness total. My ocular augmentations give me the capacity to write these words but all is the deepest blacks and blues. I shall die without ever seeing even Malodrax's sickly suns again. But not, at least, without getting some of what I came here for.

'The Warsmith descended to this level of the dungeon after three days of my incarceration. Surely most prisoners would have been raving and desperate by now, with their lower extremities immersed in the noisome water that covered the floor of the cell, the nibbling creatures and waterborne insects having stripped away the meat of foot and ankle. My

internal painkiller dispensers were a crude augmentation and would not let me hold up to the most severe tormenting, but they at least made that place bearable, even without food or light. Perhaps it was a disappointment that I was not begging for mercy by then, but I doubt the Iron Warriors expected me to have broken.

‘The door to the cell was cut open, for it had been welded shut behind me. In the sparks from the cutting torch I saw the shape of the Warsmith Kraegon Thul. Like a walking tank, like an engine of war condensed into the shape of a Space Marine, he seemed the very image of industrialised killing. There is no battlefield on which he would not look at home, from the heartland of the Imperium to an embattled daemon world, be it as a general or a frontline butcher. I was looking into the mechanical face of war incarnate.

“‘Your name,” he demanded. His voice was like a distant landslide, accompanied by noisome smoke from the breathing hose and the machinery that whirled and thudded on the back and shoulders of his armour.

“‘Lord Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan,” I said. “Of the Holy Ordos...”

“‘Of the Emperor’s Inquisition,” interrupted the Warsmith. “And you are the first inquisitor to tread the earth of Malodrax.”

“‘I am.”

‘By way of a reply, Kraegon Thul unhooked from his armour a trinket that I had not noticed among the machine parts and the jagged, pitted plates of his armour. It was familiar in form when I saw it clearly. A skull carved from ivory, set into a lacquered red sigil in the shape of a stylised letter ‘I’. The Inquisitorial Seal, badge of an inquisitor’s office. Simply showing it to any Imperial citizen, be he wasteland scavenger or Admiral of a sector battlefleet, can command unyielding loyalty unto the death. It is the symbol of an authority that can command the Exterminatus, place the

seal on a decree of Excommunicate Traitoris, condemn a species to xenocide as Xenos Horrificus. This is what Kraegon Thul held before me.

“Others will follow me,” I said.

“The others will die,” he replied. “Unless they serve.”

“Serve you?”

“Serve me.”

I chuckled at that. “Then that is why you are here? The Warsmith of Kulgarde wastes his time. Recall the words of the man you took that Inquisitorial Seal from, the ones he spoke before you executed him. Use them for my reply. I need not say them. My sentiments and his will be the same.”

“In this fortress,” he said, “I have collected a war-staff that will one day accompany the stars of your Imperium with an army of war machines. One day soon. Among them are psykers born of this world who can strip a man’s mind away and filter from the psychic sludge that remains any information on the innards of your Imperium I could want.”

“Then I shall savour one last struggle,” I said. “Your psychic pets will have to fight to get into my brain. I wonder how many you will burn through before you can open me up?”

“I have such vermin to spare,” said Kraegon Thul. “You disappoint me. I had expected more of the Emperor’s Inquisition. You came here for whatever prizes you could bring back and with them win the renown of your fellow inquisitors, all hollow, corrupted men who hide in shadows and play games of life and death to give themselves the sham veneer of a god. The sooner it all burns, the better. Mankind will thank me when your kind are gone.”

Thul did not stop for further conversation. He dropped something heavy and wet into the water around my feet, turned, and let the door be swung closed behind him. A welding torch flared to reseal my cage and in its staccato light I saw that Thul had dropped the head of Maskelin, my pilot.

'Maskelin's eyes had been put out, those keen eyes that could pick out a landing strip through a low-atmosphere firestorm. I had chosen him from among the Ghoul Stars smugglers, where he had learned to survive among haunted spaceship graveyards and dealers in the forbidden who would kill and skin a man as soon as take his money. He was faithful and brave, and I had met few like him. Those brilliant eyes had been torn from his head and for the most fleeting moment, I was overcome with grief at the knowledge he must have suffered. I shrugged off the feeling, for it was not becoming of an inquisitor, and when the darkness was complete again I let my augmentations recover enough to write these words.

'The volume in which I write is hidden beneath a loose stone at the back of my cell. I am certain the warders of Thul's dungeon must know it is there. It suits them to let me continue to write in it, perhaps in order that I will come to rely on it for my sanity, so it will be all the keener cut to have it taken away. Then when I am quite mad, they will drag me to some gutter to drain away my blood, and slit my throat, and throw me to the mutants.

'This is the death I accepted when I took the vows of the Emperor's Ordos. We do not die young, or well. We die in the depths of a tyrant's fortress, stripped of our sanity, broken in body and mind but never in will. We take with us the satisfaction of never giving in to the interrogations of whatever imprisoned us. Everything else, we lose. And so I welcome this death, because it is the death of an inquisitor. I will go to join the Emperor in his final battle, if He will have this old heretic.

'And, of course, an inquisitor does not die as a normal man does. His mark on the galaxy is never fully erased. He has left his signature on the universe, he has dealt it wounds whose scars will remain. I have left my own scars, and they will not heal before my purpose is done.

'I will die knowing my duty will still be done. That is why I will live forever.'



16

‘I swear I can feel the glee with which Malodrax tells its lies. If the sky could smirk down, the wind laugh at us, the mountains spit upon our despair, they would. It wants more than to make us suffer. It wants us to look down on our hands and see the blood of our own, to understand the lies which have driven us to destroy what we hold most dear, before it crushes the life from us.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

‘That’s a weak spot?’ asked First Sergeant Kaderic, peering through one of the firing slits in an upper level of the siege tower. Through the dust kicked up by the tower’s rollers, Kulgarde’s walls loomed as a brutal black horizon up ahead. Lysander had drawn his attention to the place where several storeys of scaffolding had been set up, spanning enormous new-quarried blocks that had been hauled into place to cover the hole left by the shattered roller at the wall’s base.

‘It is the only one,’ said Lysander. ‘Anywhere else the grinders will chew us up and the gates are a trap. That is where we will break through.’

‘I feel I must thank you, Captain Lysander,’ said Kaderic with a grim smile. ‘I am used to being the least sane Imperial Fist around. But this plan to storm Kulgarde is crazier than anything I could come up with.’

‘Leaving our brothers unavenged is insane,’ said Lysander. ‘Letting Thul build his war engines and launch his crusade is insane. This? This is the sanest thing I have ever done.’

Far below, among the siege tower’s engines, Techmarine Kho was driving the tower across the torn-up ground of Kulgarde’s hinterland, through the enormous shell craters and between the hulks of fallen war engines. The lookouts on the walls would have spied them by now and even if they had first thought the tower was another feral war engine wandering the proving grounds, they would have realised by now it was heading towards the fortress with a purpose. At Lysander’s instruction, Kho was aiming for the place where Lysander had driven the siege idol through the wall when he first escaped from Kulgarde – it had been partially rebuilt and workers scrambled through the rigging and scaffolding even now. The spiked roller at its base had not yet been replaced, which gave the siege tower a chance – just a chance, not a certainty – of breaching deep enough to let the Imperial Fists disembark into the fortress.

This had been Lysander’s plan of attack. It was the only way into Kulgarde – use one of Thul’s war machines against him and hope the breach in the wall was still vulnerable enough for the Imperial Fists to get in the way Lysander had got out. It was, indeed, an insane plan, but on Malodrax it seemed the only thing that made sense.

‘Five minutes,’ voxed Techmarine Kho above the din of the engines.

‘Battle rites!’ ordered Chaplain Lycaon over the vox-net. ‘Let your prayers be your bullets! Let your faith be your armour!’

The strike force was gathering in the upper levels, murmuring ancient prayers to the machine-spirits of their weapons and armour. Lysander

spoke those words to his own wargear – his was new to him, for he had left his original wargear on Malodrax the last time he had seen Kulgarde. He prayed for the souls of their previous owners, for few items of the Chapter's wargear did not have components previously carried by another Imperial Fist. The armour was from a Brother Kalithrax, who had been slain by corrosive tyranid spores in the crusade against Hive Splinter Karkinos, and had been altered to fit Lysander in the forges of the *Phalanx*. The bolter had been carried by Sergeant Thornas, who had replaced it with a storm bolter crafted by the Chapter's artificers. The chainblade was built from components returned to the Chapter after the Imphalian Massacre.

Lysander asked his armour to be resolute and bold. His chainblade he asked never to relent, whatever foe it might find beneath its teeth. His bolter he asked for accuracy and the smoothness of its action. He had said such words a thousand times before, and he felt his mind bedding down into the ways of war, the ways of the soldier taking him over as the world around him turned into a battlefield. He remembered the prayer he has spoken on the *Shield of Valour*, and for a moment he was back there in the chill recycled air of the ship, the Iron Hands about to launch their ambush from the warp.

He looked up from the bolter in his hands. The other Imperial Fists were finishing up their own rites, Lycaon ministering to his crozius arcanum and Antinas to his heavy flamer. Only Halaestus was silent and still, crouched by one wall, eyes closed.

'Brother Halaestus,' said Lysander quietly. 'We are at the eve of battle. We must observe our rites. I will lead them for you, if you wish.'

'Why?' asked Halaestus. 'What benefit is there? War is war. Praying for a better outcome will not change it. If it wants us dead, we are dead.'

'These are not the words of an Imperial Fist.'

'Then I am not an Imperial Fist!' snapped Halaestus. 'What does it matter if my armour holds? If the Iron Warriors aim a bullet at my heart

then I would be glad of it! I would beg for it! I would plead to Kraegon Thul to end me himself! Throne knows I begged for it often enough when the Bone Carvers had me.'

'Then take revenge!' said Lysander, grabbing Halaestus by the shoulder. 'Thul must die. His Iron Warriors must die. Hold on to that if you care nothing for your own survival. Pray for your bolter! Pray for your blade!'

'And what does revenge mean?' Halaestus jumped to his feet. 'What will I get from Thul lying dead before me? I feel nothing. I am hollow. Revenge is the right of every Space Marine, but what does that mean to me?' Halaestus unhooked the clasps of his breastplate and pulled it away from his chest, revealing the tattered patchwork skin on his chest. He pointed at the long red scar leading from below his chin to the top of his sternum. In spite of a Space Marine's accelerated healing the scar had not healed and was still livid and weeping.

'I am not a Space Marine!' shouted Halaestus. 'I am not an Imperial Fist! I am not even a man!'

Lysander could not look away from the scar. There had been the seat of the gene-seed, the genetic material of Rogal Dorn and the organ that had regulated the many augmentations when Halaestus was turned into a Space Marine.

It was gone. The gene-seed had been cut out by the Bone Carvers and taken to Kraegon Thul's armoury, to be implanted into a new Iron Warrior. And though none of them had spoken of it directly, every Imperial Fist in the strike force had known what that meant.

The strike force had all heard Halaestus's words. Their rites completed, they were silent now. Normally one or two would be swapping boasts about the kills they would take in the coming battle, or reciting a parable of the Chapter's heroes, but Halaestus had stopped that.

Lysander picked Halaestus's chainsword off the floor of the siege tower and pressed it into Halaestus's hand, and left anything else unsaid.

‘One minute!’ came the vox from Techmarine Kho. The walls of Kulgarde filled the murder-holes, hung with banners and corpses, streaked with old blood and pitted with bullet scars from a thousand failed sieges past.

Bolter shots cracked against the armoured front of the tower, ranging shots from sentries on the walls. They would be no danger to the tower in themselves, but that was not the purpose. The Iron Warriors had the range. What followed would decide if the tower even made it to the wall.

On top of the battlements, with a great grinding of metal on stone, emerged a hemispherical structure of rust-streaked iron. The dome slid open to reveal a huge and ancient weapon, a massive laser cannon such as might be found in the batteries of a warship or wielded by one of the Imperium’s Titan war engines.

‘They still think we’re feral,’ voxed Chaplain Lycaon, ‘and wish only to put us down like a rabid pet. But they will not believe that for much longer. This is where the battle begins. This is where we decide the fate of this world! Techmarine Kho! Do it!’

The engine note rose as the siege engine accelerated, the whole tower juddering as the rollers crunched through the broken ground. On the huge siege gun scrambled dozens of labourers, menials of Kulgarde working to dial in the focusing lenses and check the connections to the fortress generators that would create the massive laser pulse. The cannon was large enough to spit the siege tower on a lance of laser, and its elevation was being lowered so the shot would go right through its engines and the axles of its rollers. The engine would be crippled in a single shot, and the subsequent shots would blast it apart floor by floor until it was one more heap of wreckage in the shadow of Kulgarde.

The cannon was sighted. The siege engine kept accelerating as the Iron Warriors on the walls came into sight, hulking figures in their black iron armour, mutant labourers cowering from them wherever they went.

Lysander detected another note in the engine din of the siege tower, a higher, rising tone like the buzzing of a giant insect. He saw the reaction of the Iron Warriors on the walls as the Land Speeders zipped out in front of the siege tower, emerging from their concealed positions hovering just behind the tower's rearmost rollers.

Brother Gethor manned *Dorn's Dagger* with one of Squad Kaderic, Brother Glaven, on the multi-melta. With Techmarine Kho needed to drive the siege tower, the *Talon Blade* was flown by the strike force member that Kho judged most able at handling the controls – Brother Shovarn of Lycaon's command squad, with another of his squad, Brother Kaelon, on the heavy bolter. The Iron Warriors opened fire as the Land Speeders hurtled towards the gun emplacement, sprays of bolter fire arrowing around them.

Dorn's Dagger swooped down level with the gun emplacement as its guns opened up, and bright fire stuttered around the emplacement. Broken bodies were blasted apart, mutants torn to pieces by the heavy bolter shells detonating against the gun housing. Bodies fell, tumbling down past the front of the wall. The *Talon Blade* swept around to attack from the other side, stitching its assault cannon fire along the top of the wall. An Iron Warrior threw himself out of the way as another fired a volley up into the Land Speeder's underside.

More Iron Warriors were arriving on the walls. The alarm had spread quickly, the discipline of the Iron Warriors' chain of command kicking them into action. Already, a few seconds after the Imperial Fists played their hand, Kraegon Thul would know they were there. He would know Lysander had brought them.

Thul must have been waiting for them to come back. He must have had a plan for when they arrived, a plan kicking into action even now.

The *Talon Blade's* multi-melta fired, a bright orange bolt of superheated particles ripping into the mechanism that controlled the attitude of the

laser cannon's barrel. Molten metal spat fire as the whole gun shifted to one side, old metal screaming in protest. Menials ran for cover. A power cable came loose, spraying sparks as it whipped out of control.

Dorn's Dagger banked around for another pass, more gunfire falling around the emplacement. Something detonated inside it and white-blue flames erupted as the whole emplacement fell back, collapsing into its housing within the wall. Fuel cells cooked off and lightning raged through the destruction, throwing rubble and bodies everywhere. Debris rained off the front of the siege tower and chunks of burning masonry crashed through the scaffolding cladding the front of the wall.

'Ten seconds!' came Kho's vox through the din.

'Positions!' ordered Lycaon. The strike force stacked up behind the tower's drawbridge.

'I'm hit!' came Brother Gethor's voice over the vox. 'We're coming down behind the wall!'

Lysander saw *Dorn's Dagger* trailing smoke and flame as it spiralled out of control, disappearing behind the mass of burning wreckage that remained of the gun emplacement. The *Talon Blade* banked away from the destruction, keeping clear of the showering debris.

The siege engine rode up alarmingly, tipping back until Lysander was sure it would topple over backwards. But the moment passed and it pitched forwards again.

With a terrible impact, the top of the tower smashed into the wall. The sound was impossible to think through. Imperial Fists were thrown to the floor – Lysander kept his balance and saw the portcullis dropping open, crunching through the battlements.

The siege engine was several metres too short to deliver its payload directly onto the wall. The downed portcullis formed a bridge that sloped sharply upwards.

‘Onwards!’ bellowed First Sergeant Kaderic. He had taken up position at the front of the strike force, and none had questioned his right to be the first through.

Kaderic’s squad followed him as he ran up the portcullis and vaulted over the edge. Lysander went with Lycaon’s squad, who followed him and Squad Gorvetz followed up the rear.

The bullets were already flying as Lysander ran up the portcullis. His vision was full of the plume of flame billowing up from the shattered laser cannon. He leapt over the edge and the top of the wall rushed up to meet him.

He let his knees buckle under him and he dropped into a crouch. To his left was the enormous blocky structure of the gatehouse. Below it was the main way into the fortress, through the gates, and that structure could be filled with Iron Warriors pouring bolter fire into anyone who got past the outer gates and found themselves trapped below. To his right was the gun emplacement, still spewing flame.

A squad of Iron Warriors had made the top of the wall before the siege tower had hit. He recognised that gnarled bare metal power armour of long-obsolete marks, with faceplates mirroring the iron mask symbol of the Legion. Kaderic’s squad had dived into them with fury that would be reckless in anyone else but which was a Space Marine’s most dangerous weapon, marshalled and unleashed as precisely as a sniper’s bullet.

Kaderic bowled an Iron Warrior to the floor as one of his fellow Imperial Fists hammered a volley of bolter fire at point-blank range through the Traitor Marine’s chest. His armour burst open and hot blood rained up.

The Iron Warriors sergeant, a monster a head taller than any other Space Marine there, waded into the fight, swinging a two-handed power maul to a brutal rhythm. Lysander saw Brother Givenar charging at the sergeant, rattling off bolter shells as he closed.

Givenar crashed into the sergeant. The sergeant spun with impossible quickness for a man of his size, knocking the barrel of Givenar's bolter away. Givenar's combat knife was in his hand, blade aimed down to punch through an eyepiece or into the sergeant's throat.

The sergeant drove a knee up into Givenar's midriff and threw him over his head, slamming him down onto the ground. He raised the mace, head downwards, and drove it into Givenar's stomach.

Lysander felt the shockwave of a power field discharging. In a burst of blue light, the mace's head hammered down through Givenar and smashed a crater into the floor.

'Givenar!' yelled Lysander. 'Brother!'

Without seeming to will it, Lysander was running. He vaulted a fallen Iron Warrior as he sprinted for the sergeant. He thought he heard the sergeant laughing, a deep, metallic grating sound.

Lysander ran within the arc of the power mace. Sure enough the sergeant brought it up and whirled it over his head, bringing it round to smack into Lysander at chest height. Lysander brought up his chainsword and the two weapons clashed.

The power mace shattered the chainsword, sending its teeth flying in a steel hail. Lysander dropped to one knee as the mace was deflected over his head. He could feel the buzzing of the power field in his ears as it passed over him.

His sword gone, Lysander rammed a fist into the sergeant's knee. The Iron Warrior stumbled back and Lysander had his opening, leaping on the sergeant and knocking him onto his back. Lysander drew back his gun arm and slammed the butt of his bolter into the Iron Warrior's faceplate, over and over, a dozen hammering blows striking home in a handful of seconds.

The faceplate came apart. The face beneath had not seen sunlight for a long time. It was the colour of ash, of dead wood, dull and lifeless save for the black-irised eyes set way back in their scorched pits. Sharpened teeth

were bared beneath a nose that had been cut away to a pair of slits. Another volley of blows slammed home, shattering jaw and cheekbone.

The Iron Warrior got a leg underneath him and tried to force himself up. Lysander let him, using the sergeant's own strength to bring him up and carry him higher, up over Lysander's head. The mace swung at him but Lysander was already stepping towards the front edge of the battlements, where the crenellations gave way to the sheer drop to the shattered ground far below. Lysander roared with a final effort as he hurled the sergeant out over the edge.

The Iron Warrior reached out to grab at a handhold on the wall's edge, but Lysander kicked his hand away and the Iron Warriors sergeant vanished over the edge, his cry of anger and shock receding as he fell.

Lysander turned. Their sergeant gone, the last Iron Warriors on the wall were fleeing through trapdoors and narrow entrances to the interior of the wall, into the upper levels of the fortress where the Warsmith ruled. Lycaon's crozius was smoking and well-blooded. Lysander counted three Imperial Fists dead – Givenar, one from Kaderic's squad and another from Lycaon's. He did not have time in the bedlam to name all the dead. With luck, the strike force would be back for them. Without it, the bodies would never leave Kulgarde. Nobody had leave to worry about that now.

'We press on,' said Lycaon, walking through the carnage towards Lysander. 'Kraegon Thul marshals his defences even now. Can you lead us onwards?'

Lysander paused to make sure of his bearings. Along the wall, past the gun emplacement, was a landing pad for a small spacecraft. It was now empty but Lysander recognised the landmark and pieced the structures below it together in his mind.

'Yes,' replied Lysander. 'I know the way.'

Any other military force in the Imperium, perhaps even a force from any other Chapter of Space Marines, would have been lost within seconds of

entering the fortress of Kulgarde. Every corner led to a dead end, every intersection was a crossfire with murder holes and gun emplacements located to criss-cross the open ground with chains of gunfire. Each stairwell led not to the next level down, but to a pit without an exit where the defenders could pour fire down at the trapped attackers at will. Every trick that existed to bewitch invaders and lead them astray was employed among those cramped corridors of dark stone, the chambers of armouries and side chapels built to create killing zones at every turn.

But Perturabo, the primarch of the Iron Warriors and their tutor in the ways of fortress-building and the art of the siege, was a contemporary of Rogal Dorn. The two had learned from one another as rivals, and then as blood enemies. The two primarchs were mirror images, using the same pool of knowledge to pit their warriors against one another. The Imperial Fists knew the siege as well as the Iron Warriors did, and every trick the Iron Warriors employed to keep Kulgarde inviolate, Rogal Dorn had taught to his Chapter thousands of years before.

Lysander followed the path down towards the fortress's heart, at every step thinking what the next trick would be. Lycaon and Kaderic were beside him, and they knew the art as well as Lysander. They ignored the obvious pathways and aimed instead for the half-hidden passages the Iron Warriors themselves used to move about the fortress. They knew, as if by an Emperor-given instinct, which levels were actually half-floors where they would be forced heads bowed into killing rooms with spears thrust down from above, and which archways concealed nothing more than a dead end into which they were being herded.

At an intersection, Sergeant Gorvetz brought Antinas forward to flood the corridors with flame, and Antinas did so with Givenar's name on his lips. The Devastator squad fought the gunfire of a dozen Iron Warriors with their own massive firepower, buying an opening for Kaderic's and Lycaon's squads to get past. Lysander voxed for Gorvetz to disengage and follow – Gorvetz replied that he could not turn his back on the enemies

flooding the area or they would all be lost. And so the strike force left Gorvetz behind and forged on.

The fortress's design had robbed the Imperial Fists of a third of the strike force's strength, but any other force would not have made it that far at all. Lysander led the way through a chapel to dark gods, heaped high with sacrifices of bleached bones and the battle-dead. A hall crammed with mutants gathered to worship there was but an obstacle to be crashed through – with volleys of bolter fire followed up with a chainsword charge the hall was swept clean and the Imperial Fists rampaged through over the bodies.

At the far end of a long, broad corridor lined with statues of Iron Warriors from centuries past, Lysander recognised the armour and bearing of Captain Hexal.

‘Brother Lysander!’ called Hexal. ‘We knew you would return. You have kept us waiting too long! Let us get acquainted anew, for I have almost forgotten how it felt to make you kneel.’

‘He seeks to distract us,’ said Captain Lycaon. ‘A fight to settle our honour here will give the Iron Warriors time to cut us off and trap us.’

‘He has distracted me well enough,’ replied First Sergeant Kaderic. ‘If there is one here who should give this creature the duel he seeks, it is I. Go on, Lysander, go on! Hexal will have to take my head long before he tests his blade against yours.’

‘I need you with me,’ said Lycaon to Lysander, as more Iron Warriors burst into the passageway behind Hexal. ‘Let Kaderic have this fight. He can keep Hexal off our heels. We must go on.’

‘Then I go on with you,’ replied Lysander. ‘First Sergeant! Let Hexal know that he is dying! Let him feel what our lost brothers felt!’

Kaderic was already charging, his squad in tow, yelling the Chapter's oldest battle-cries as he closed with Hexal's squad. Any reply Kaderic made to Lysander's words was lost in the clash of chainblades and bolter

fire, and Lysander and Squad Lycaon crashed down a stairwell and further into the fortress.

Lycaon and Lysander entered the sweltering heart of Kulgarde, where the reservoirs of molten rock boiled as they fed the forges above and below. Gangs of mutants, skin evolved thick and leathery against the heat, hauled enormous slabs of war engine armour from gigantic forges. The high ceiling was obscured by banks of smoke and lengths of massive chain looped down, hung with titan-sized weapons for fitting onto Kulgarde's war machines.

The mutants swarmed from their work posts, taskmasters bellowing orders to charge and butcher the Imperial Fists. Squad Lycaon met them with volleys of bolter fire, short and disciplined, shredding bodies as they surged forwards. With a terrible cry more mutants were arriving on the same level, sent by Kraegon Thul's orders to swamp the area and slow the Imperial Fists down until the Iron Warriors could force them to battle.

Like a sea of flesh at high tide, they flowed through their own dead. The taskmasters rose like warships on that tide, ordering forward the new arrivals of pallid medical orderlies and emaciated dungeon keepers, shambling labour-brutes and bloated chapel attendants. Thousands of them were flooding the forges, some pushed into the molten pits as they were crowded too close, others vanishing beneath the feet of the larger mutants around them. Their lives meant nothing as individuals – together, as one raging mass, they were an unstoppable force.

'Brothers!' ordered Lycaon. 'Stand and fight! I shall take Kraegon Thul's head. Lysander, can you get us to the throne forge?'

'I can,' said Lysander, snapping off his own shots into the tide of screaming mutants. 'But we do not have long.'

'It must be you and I,' said Lycaon.

'Then it shall be.'

Lycaon led the way into the burning darkness, where billows of smoke from the forges masked the way ahead. Lysander glanced behind him to see Halaestus fighting alongside Squad Lycaon, jaw set as he rattled off a magazine of bolter fire into the enemy. Then the darkness grew around them and Lysander lost sight of them.

So it was that two Imperial Fists made it as far as the vast circular door, its two halves meeting at a massive combination lock. The lock's concentric circles were marked with sigils taken from the Iron Warriors heraldry, mounted over a mass of clockwork connected to the hydraulic rams that could swing the doors open or slam them closed.

The sound of the approaching horde rang against the pitted iron of the walls. Lysander stepped up to the lock and ran his hands across it.

He hauled the rings around until they lined up a hand, a shattered tower, an open eye and an eight-pointed star. With a hiss of spurting hydraulics the doors boomed open and a fiercer heat rolled out, a blistering gale heavy with sulphur and ash.

Ahead was the spherical chamber that Lysander had seen once before, when he had first come to Malodrax and was dragged by Captain Hexal through the halls of Kulgarde. He and his battle-brothers had been brought here, the forge throne.

The lower half of the sphere was full of churning molten iron, bubbling up plumes of flame. The walls were hung with weapons and armour, each one a unique masterpiece with blades of diamond or polished ivory shining in the yellow-orange glare. Hundreds of them hung there, still glowing, for the heat of their forging had never dissipated.

Suspended over the molten fires, connected to the doorway by a narrow walkway, was the circular platform on which stood the anvil. It looked like it had been hauled from some distant temple-forge, ancient and gnarled, scarred with the marks of a million blades hammered into shape.

Kraegon Thul was waiting. He stood before the anvil, smoke coiling around him, his outline shimmering in the heat. He was every bit the monster Lysander remembered, as if the industrial magnitude of war was distilled and poured into the shape of that ancient, age-corrupted armour. Kraegon Thul raised a hand and from the ceiling fell a familiar shape – the Fist of Dorn, Lysander’s thunder hammer, taken from him when he was first brought to Kulgarde. Thul caught the hammer and swung it as if testing its balance.

It was obscene to see a relic of the Imperial Fists in the hand of an Iron Warrior. The machine-spirit of the ancient weapon must have been crying out in misery and anger. A wave of shame came over Lysander, for he had lost the weapon and placed it in the armoury of his Chapter’s greatest enemy.

Chaplain Lycaon stepped forwards, crozius arcanum in hand. There had been no question that he would be the one to face Kraegon Thul. In ages past it was a law of the Chapter that the Commander’s Right be respected on the battlefield, and that any Imperial Fist who tried to usurp it and face the enemy’s champion himself would be punished with the nerve glove or cortical scourge. That was no longer the case, but the tradition was still strong. Though Lysander had brought the Imperial Fists here, it was Lycaon who should take the Warsmith’s head back to the *Phalanx*.

‘Kraegon Thul!’ called out Lycaon over the scalding gale swirling around the crucible. ‘You owe us many deaths, but to my shame, I can grant you only one! Kneel and I will take your head. Fight and I will cut you to pieces upon your own anvil, and the history of my Chapter will sing of your suffering! Make your choice, Warsmith, and die!’



17

‘When I look upon death, as I know I shall, it will be with the knowledge that I have changed the universe around me. How many men can say that? A man might live two or three hundred years among the Imperial nobility, but what of it? A hundred more and it will be as if he had never existed. Not I. If nothing else, the enemies of mankind will remember me as a deadly foe, a lesson against underestimating my species. And so when I look upon death, I will welcome it.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

The stained-glass window that dominated the chapel displayed a saint of Chaos, a prophet of the warp, dozens of storeys high, surrounded by the ruins of a once-great city. She was shown as a warrior, her skin bright red, horns on her brow, a golden bow in one hand and the severed head of a greenskin alien in the other. She wore a gown of flame with thousands of worshippers burning at her feet. The sky behind her was streaked with falling stars and shattered moons.

Lysander smashed through the window, the saint of Chaos disintegrating beneath him. The chapel whirled as he fell and he reached out, groping for his foe. His hand closed on the plume of Karnak's helm and he dragged the alien with him.

They had fought from the duelling ground through the temple, as Shalhadar's faithful battled the scum of Kulgarde everywhere around them. The surroundings had been a blur until Karnak got the upper hand for a split second, catching Lysander's blade on his own and hurling him through the window.

Lysander hit the ground hard, knocking the air out of his lungs. He had come down in a great clockwork monstrosity, an ancient engine that drove a production line hammering out segments of machinery and armour. Belts of articulated steel ran back and forth across the vast space as hammers and mechanical welding arms swung between the columns of cogs and pistons. The sound was deafening and Lysander's head swam with it.

Karnak had landed a short distance away, on one of the conveyor belts among the machine components. He still had his sword on him and he didn't look as winded as Lysander.

Karnak was already on his feet. Lysander's body complained as he snatched up his axe and circled, picking his way through the machinery grinding overhead. The axe was a crude weapon snatched from a brute-mutant moments earlier, a similar size to the executioner's axe with a notched and blunted blade. Karnak loosened up his shoulders, switching his sword back and forth. Lysander's armour was scored all over by the tip of the sword and his cloak was in tatters.

Karnak sprinted at Lysander. Lysander sidestepped behind a huge cog – Karnak dived through the spokes of the cog and whipped the blade at Lysander's leg. Lysander brought the haft of his axe down in time to deflect the blade but the sword cut straight through his weapon. Lysander dropped the useless halves of the axe as Karnak rolled to his feet.

‘Kneel,’ hissed Karnak in a hoarse whisper of a voice. ‘Obey. Take a warrior’s end.’

‘You know I will not,’ replied Lysander. ‘You waste your breath.’

‘Quite so,’ said Karnak. ‘But I must ask. It is how it is done.’

The exchange had bought Lysander the seconds he needed to think. Karnak was faster. Lysander was stronger. The Codex Astartes made much of how a Space Marine had to accentuate his strengths, never seek to compensate for his weaknesses. Rogal Dorn had taught that an Imperial Fist should be a master strategist when it came to planning the battle, but become a brutal savage when it came to fighting it. Lysander would not beat Karnak in a fencing match, but he had tricks this alien could never match.

Lysander grabbed the spokes of the cog beside him. Metal screamed as the cogs around it disengaged, stripping teeth. He ripped the cog free of its mountings – it was three metres across and solid iron. Lysander spun like a hammer thrower, letting the force come up from his feet, through his legs up to his abdomen and chest, and out through his shoulders. The cog scythed into Karnak, smacking him square in the midriff and throwing him back through a bank of spinning clockwork. Shards of brass and steel rained down. The conveyor belt ruptured under the impact and threw links as it spooled into the air, scattering a fountain of scrap metal.

Lysander leapt the distance between himself and Karnak. He kicked the alien’s sword away and was on him, putting all his weight on the armoured chest. He slammed a fist into Karnak’s throat, feeling the alien buck and squirm under him, trying to wriggle out, but Lysander was too heavy and strong.

‘You should have just killed me,’ snarled Lysander.

Karnak forced an arm free and clutched at Lysander’s face, trying to get his fingers through the eyeholes of the executioner’s hood. The hood came

free and Lysander grabbed Karnak's wrist, trapping his arm against the floor. Karnak was left looking up at Lysander's exposed face.

'You're Lysander,' said Karnak.

Something in the moment of recognition threw Karnak's focus. He stopped struggling for a moment and Lysander smashed a fist into his faceplate. The armour split and Lysander's fist came away with fragments of the eyepieces embedded in his knuckles.

Karnak grabbed a shard of broken metal, a strut snapped off from the clockwork he had crashed through. He stabbed it at Lysander's neck but Lysander knocked the hand away, spotting a great spear of jagged metal stabbing out from the wreckage. He hauled Karnak off the floor, taking his whole weight – as furious as he was, Karnak seemed to weigh nothing at all.

'Wait...' gasped the alien.

Lysander lunged at the wreckage. The jagged spike punched through Karnak's back and speared out through his chest, just off-centre. Lysander let go and Karnak was left hanging there, skewered through like an insect on a scientist's wall.

Karnak convulsed and coughed. Lysander tore the broken helmet off him, ready to look into the alien's eyes before the killing blow went in.

He had wondered many times since he had been on Malodrax just what kind of alien Karnak was. The elaborate armour and the air of arrogance suggested one of the eldar, an ancient and cruel race for which Lysander had nothing but disdain. Perhaps Karnak was one of Malodrax's natives, who had kept the civilisation and learning of his people in return for becoming a slave to Kraegon Thul. Or maybe he was from one of the numberless xenos species with whom humanity had not yet had any contact, brilliant but deviant creatures who planned mankind's downfall in the galaxy's shadows. All these had been possibilities, and Lysander would have been happy to kill any of them.

But he was not looking at an alien now. He was looking into the bloodied face of a human. It was long and lean, the hair shaved back close, the eyes deep-set and grey.

‘They got you...’ said Karnak, a dribble of blood running from the corner of his mouth. ‘They used you. But it is not too late...’

‘Who are you?’ demanded Lysander.

‘Sildyne,’ came the reply. ‘My name is Sildyne.’

Lysander stepped back a pace. ‘Sildyne? Golrukhan’s assassin?’

Sildyne smiled weakly. His teeth were broken and bloody. ‘Who did you think made sure the scalpel would break? I would have done the same for your brothers, but Thul sent them to the Bone Carvers before I could... before I could do anything. I feel no pain, you know. That is how we can tell we are dying. My spine is cut.’

Lysander’s thoughts were spinning. He seized onto the one thing he had – the reason he was there, the man he had come to kill. ‘Where is Kraegon Thul?’ he asked.

‘Somewhere safe,’ said Sildyne. ‘You are here to kill me. You will not get at him now. But...’ Sildyne groped at the belt of his armour, where several compartments were built into the plates around his waist. One of them slid open and he took out a long, thin-bladed dagger, its hilt a vial of colourless liquid, wound round with filigree gold. ‘Golrukhan gave me one last task to perform if he was ever killed or taken alive. To kill Kraegon Thul. This was to be my weapon. The venom in it will seize the gene-seed’s genetic markers and turn them against the host. A Space Marine can survive most anything, but not this. I put myself close enough to Thul to use it, but that... that monster... he never took off his armour.’ Sildyne laughed at that, the sound a ragged bubbling from his torn lungs. ‘One glimpse of exposed skin and I would have killed him. But there was none.’

Sildyne held out the weapon. His fingers went limp and the weapon fell – Lysander caught it before it hit the floor. He saw now the channels in

its stiletto blade, through which the venom would course when the blade was pushed home and the vial shattered.

‘What must I do?’ said Lysander, looking down at the weapon.

‘Leave here. Escape. Come back with friends. But remember, Lysander. This was not an accident. They sent you here to kill me. Malodrax sent you. They are all slaves to its will. Do not follow them. Do not let this world use you any more...’

Sildyne’s eyes rolled back and his mouth lolled open. His hands fell nerveless by his sides. For a moment Lysander could only stare at the man he had killed, the man who had engineered his escape, had dedicated himself to killing Kraegon Thul, and who had been rewarded with an execution.

‘My tome has been taken from me and I write this on a scrap of parchment in the blood of my torn fingers, in a code that only an acolyte of mine could ever read. I am not such a fool that I believe anyone will ever read it, but the Emperor’s sight is upon me and I will set out these thoughts even if He is the only one who will ever see them.

‘I am to die. I have been left to the warders of this dungeon. The door has been removed from my cell and they will come for me when I am weak, so that I will in those final moments consider myself no more than prey. Not an inquisitor, not a servant of the Emperor, nor even a man, but a cowering, feeble prey-creature fit only to be devoured by a superior organism. Before that final breaking comes, I will make my testament.

‘I have broken with the codes of the Inquisition and sought out profane knowledge instead of its destruction. I made terrible bargains for such knowledge, and paid for it in the lives of brave and loyal acolytes who deserved better. I betrayed all that should ever matter to a man to follow this path and gather a greater understanding of our foes, against every teaching of righteous men. But I did this for my Emperor, because I only ever believed that to know our enemy was to defeat it, and that to defeat it

was to best serve Him On Earth. I die, perhaps, as punishment for my heresies, but as all of Terra is my witness if I were to live my life again I would make those same choices, betray those same brethren, and commit those same heresies. For me, there was never any choice.

‘Malodrax has claimed me, as it has claimed billions before. Perhaps I should never have come here, for the very fount of knowledge it promised served as a trap to draw in flawed men like me. But though my body be torn apart by the jackals that gather even now outside my cell, I am not yet done here.

‘Agent Sildyne lives. He contacted me in secret, in the guise of one such warder, at great peril to his own life. He has with him that archeotech weapon for which I paid so much, and I have instructed him in the manner he will kill Kraegon Thul. If I cannot plunder Malodrax for its secrets, I can at least see to it that its most dangerous inhabitant dies. Thus is discharged the final duty I will perform as an inquisitor.

‘They are coming. If they find this note they will be unable to read it, unless Sildyne has broken and given them the code – if so, it does not matter what they know, for they know it already. If you are one such creature of Kulgarde reading this, know that the Emperor will have his revenge against you even if I do not.

‘I have a rock prised from the wall of my cell and I shall break a skull or two before they are done. In the name of my Emperor, I go to my death still fighting His fight.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan.

‘Lord Shalhadar will be most pleased,’ came a familiar voice from high above. Lysander looked up to the rafters and there, among the pistons and noisome steam, clung Talaya by her spider’s legs. She clambered down slowly, savouring the moment, as if every drop of Sildyne’s blood on the

floor was her own victory. ‘And Thul as well. He planned to kill Karnak for years, but one blow from that weapon and any Iron Warrior facing him would die. It was too great a risk even for the Warsmith. But when you walked through the gates of my lord’s city, the problem was solved.’

Lysander picked up Sildyne’s sword. ‘At least I can kill one soul today who deserves it,’ he said.

‘Kill me?’ said Talaya. ‘What a ridiculous idea. I just came to make sure you did your job.’

She scuttled back up a brass column, towards the darkness among the rafters.

Lysander sprinted at the column. He hit it so hard he felt his shoulder crumple with the impact, bone and joint crushed against the metal. The column buckled and bent, ripped free from the ceiling. With a sense of satisfaction that blotted out the pain, Lysander heard the clatter of Talaya falling to the ground behind him, thrown off her perch by the unexpected impact.

‘Did you truly believe I would not kill you?’ said Lysander as he rounded on Talaya. ‘Do you have so poor a view of fate, to think it would not pit us against each other? From the first moment I saw you, I knew it would end with me taking your head.’

Talaya picked herself up, losing her customary grace as she scrabbled across the floor. ‘Malodrax will have its blood,’ she said. ‘Either’s will do.’

Talaya was fast. Lysander already knew that. When she leapt at him, propelled through the air by her back legs, it was exactly what he expected. The rain of blades that fell from her he had not anticipated. Slits opened up in her armoured body and arrowhead-shaped shards sprayed out, hundreds of them. Lysander threw out an arm in front of his face as they rained against him, embedding themselves in his skin, finding purchase in bone and sinew. A dozen slashes of pain flashed against his

consciousness. Power armour might have turned them away, but not the mundane armour he wore now.

Lysander dived forwards, avoiding Talaya as she came down talon-first on the spot where he had stood. Lysander tore off the vambrace now impaled with six or seven shards, feeling the hot blood flowing down his forearm as they were pulled free, and threw it to the floor.

‘Did you like that trick?’ said Talaya with a smile. ‘I have more.’

Lysander lunged at her, reaching for one of her mechanical legs. If he could twist it from its mountings, he could use it as a weapon. Talaya flitted out of reach, skittering to one side and spearing him through the left calf with one of her talons. Lysander yelled and fell to one knee, and Talaya leapt onto his back, grabbing on with her other legs – one speared into his chest, another into the side of his abdomen, a third down through the meat of one shoulder.

Talaya leaned forwards so he could see her face upside-down in front of his. Though Shalhadar had left her form mostly human, there was nothing human now in that face. Her eyes seemed to grow, pupil and iris merging into a swirling, star-scattered vision of the warp, smile wide and manic.

‘You too shall serve,’ she hissed.

A gunshot sounded and the upper half of Talaya’s face was gone, replaced with a great red-black crater.

The force pinning her to Lysander relented. Lysander grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and threw her down to the ground, her talons tearing free of him. The shot had hit her in the back of the head and the exit wound had blasted away everything from forehead to nose. She had been dead before she hit the floor.

Lysander followed the path the bullet must have taken. Leaning against a pillar, still aiming down the sights of an Iron Warrior’s bolter, was Brother Halaestus. Brother Skelpis leaned against him in turn, tottering on his single remaining leg.

‘You live,’ said Lysander.

‘After a fashion,’ said Halaestus. ‘We are not alone.’

‘Come forth!’ shouted Skelpis behind him. From the shelter of a pillar emerged a thin, sorry figure – Thul’s Navigator, fresh bruises swelling one side of his face. He looked terrified.

‘Can he get us out of here?’ said Lysander.

‘I can!’ said the Navigator hurriedly. His voice was dry and whispery. ‘Thul has a ship, a personal transport. I can take you there. And I know the way through the orbital reef. Without me you will surely perish. Do not kill me, for your own sakes!’

‘Do you trust him?’ asked Lysander.

‘Would you?’ replied Skelpis. ‘He’s scared right enough, though. For now he speaks the truth.’

‘You know what will happen if you lie to us?’ said Lysander to the Navigator.

‘You’ll kill me.’

‘I would have hoped you’d credit us with more imagination than that. Brothers, you did well taking him alive. We may yet survive this.’

‘Don’t thank me, captain,’ said Halaestus. ‘It was Skelpis’s idea. I was just going to shoot him.’

The Navigator knew Kulgarde well, and had been primed with the quickest routes to the fortress’s landing pad. The sounds of battle reached them as he led the three Imperial Fists through the labyrinth of passages and side rooms, through the upper levels and onto the fortifications. The few menials and mutants they encountered were shot down or had their necks broken – most were flooding the levels below, where the riot sparked by Lysander had become a pitched battle between Shalhadar’s players and the inhabitants of Kulgarde. No doubt Shalhadar’s people would be butchered to a man down there, and everything in Kulgarde wanted to tear off a piece of flesh for itself.

Thul's ship resembled the older marks of shuttle used by the Adeptus Astartes, ancient and complex in design, its hull armour left bare metal with the black and yellow flashes typical of the Iron Warriors around the engines and gun ports. The iron mask symbol glowered down from the side of the ship. It was substantially upgunned compared to newer ships of its type, with ranks of rotary cannons lining the underside and twin laser turrets either side of the tail.

The Navigator led them onto the landing pad and pressed his hand against a panel hidden among the geometry of the hull. A slice of the hull slid out to form a ramp into the ship.

‘One more thing,’ said the Navigator.

The note in his voice – not of fear this time, but of certainty – told Lysander to look away. The Navigator spun around and ripped the embroidered band from his face.

Lysander threw Halaestus to the floor. Skelpis, unbalanced, fell with him. Lysander covered his eyes with his forearm so he would not see what the Navigator had just revealed.

The ship's crews of the Imperium, the voidborn who served on its battleships and the craft of the Chartist Captains, were a superstitious people, and few topics carried as many dark tales and warning parables as the third eye of the Navigator. Navigators were essential to long-distance space travel, but they were mutants, and hence, while their existence was tolerated, they were hated, feared and avoided by right-thinking people who told tales of the terrors contained in that third eye. It allowed a Navigator to look upon the warp and not only keep his sanity, but chart a path through it. But most of all, it could kill. The reflection of the warp that remained in the third eye would annihilate a man's mind if he looked into it. It could leave his body a dried-out husk, all life and moisture driven from it. It could blast him apart from the inside, leaving him smeared across the deck. A look from it could make him burst into flames

or freeze his blood solid. Every tale had one thing in common – a Navigator may look feeble and broken, but a glance from that eye will kill.

Lysander had heard enough such tales, and he knew they were true. The Navigator's eye would destroy even a Space Marine's mind, if he let it. Lysander did not.

He rammed his forearm into the Navigator's face, and felt the cold fire of the third eye as his arm smacked into it. The Navigator was thrown against the side of the ship, withered frame crumpling. Lysander had pulled the blow but even so he had felt a cheekbone break, maybe the socket of one of the Navigator's mortal eyes. Lysander kept his arm pressed against the third eye as he looked the Navigator in the face.

'Did you think you could outwit Imperial Fists?' snarled Lysander. 'Do you think we are children? Even if one falls, even if all the fates align and you can take one of us down with that cursed eye, the others will avenge him on that withered husk you call a body! I run low on reasons to let you live.'

'Forgive me!' yelped the Navigator. 'I can help you! You need me! Look!' the Navigator shrugged off his robe and Lysander saw, on his scrawny chest, swirls of old ink that formed the lines of a star map. The Navigator's whole torso was tattooed with it. 'Malodrax is surrounded by an orbital reef,' he said, 'and you will never find your way through without me.'

'Without your skin, maybe,' said Lysander.

'The lock!' said the Navigator. 'The lock to the crucible! You do not know how to open it. I do! I know!'

Lysander held out a hand behind him. Halaestus put the Iron Warrior's bolter into it and Lysander pressed the barrel up underneath the Navigator's chin.

'The hand, the eye, the tower, the star,' gasped the Navigator. 'It is the combination. I know more, much more. Let me live, that is all I ask of

you. A small favour. I mean nothing to you.'

'You're right there,' said Lysander.

'We have no time, captain,' said Skelpis, getting back onto his remaining foot and leaning against the hull. 'I hear Kulgarde's forces approaching. They must be done with your players.'

'Get on board and start it up,' said Lysander, pushing the Navigator up the ramp into the ship. Inside the vessel was functional and grim, its utilitarian interior broken only by an altar to the Chaos Gods set back from the cockpit. The altar was a slab of stone, with hundreds of figures depicting the countless warp powers standing over it in niches cut into the steel bulkhead. Thul's heraldry covered a banner hanging in the berths further back into the body of the ship – Lysander tore it down and threw it over the altar. He could destroy it properly once they were off the planet.

The Navigator sat in the pilot's seat and worked rapidly at the many gauges and control runes. The ship's engines started, a loud, shuddering growl. Halaestus helped Skelpis up the ramp and the two strapped themselves into the grav-restraints in the berth section. The ship lifted up off the pad, vertical thrusters howling, and through the cockpit viewshield Lysander could see the walls of Kulgarde and the distant horizon tilting as the ship banked over the front of the walls.

The ship angled upwards, nose to the diseased sky. The main engines kicked up a note and hurled the ship upwards.

Lysander dropped into a place on the grav-bench, buckling the restraints around him. He caught Halaestus's eye and for the first time realised what he must look like to his battle-brothers – Lysander wore not a Space Marine's armour but ornate crimson plate forged in Shalhadar's city, and he had fought with an executioner's axe instead of the bolter and chainsword. But there was nothing to say – the sound of the engines would drown out any words. Lysander looked away from Halaestus and watched

the clouds give way to the dirty black of Malodrax's orbit, as the planet was finally left behind them.



18

‘The secrets this world promises are many and powerful. Here is an opportunity to study such a world in detail, not as conqueror, but as a student of its ways. I shall bring back to my conclave a wealth of such knowledge that shall furnish the armouries of our minds for generations to come. I give thanks that I was born with the qualities to serve in the Holy Ordos of the Emperor’s Inquisition, for to know the exhilaration of such a moment is something the great masses of the Imperium shall never know.’

– Inquisitor Corvin Golrukhan

It was the way of the Imperial Fists to capture such moments in sculpture and fable, and even then, in the very moments it unfolded, Lysander could imagine the forms this history would take.

Lycaon was the model of an Imperial Fists Chaplain – unyielding, a complete stranger to doubt, impossible to dismay. Kraegon Thul might have been crafted to be everything the Imperial Fists hated, an Iron Warrior with the blood of Lycaon’s battle-brothers on his hands, a

harvester and corrupter of the Chapter's gene-seed, a monster with ambitions to bring down another great Heresy upon the Imperium.

Kraegon Thul saluted mockingly, raising the Fist of Dorn as if this were a duel between brothers to decide the better swordsman. Chaplain Lycaon made no such gesture. The two circled the great anvil, keeping the altar of blackened steel between them. This was how it would be remembered, the two matching wits before the first blows, icons of the war that had begun when the Warmaster Horus broke from the rule of the Emperor, and that had never ended.

This was the moment the Chapter's artisans would render in memory of the event. Because the moments that followed could never be.

Thul brought the Fist of Dorn down against the anvil. The hammer split the anvil in two with a thundercrack and from it spilled the trapped souls of a thousand sacrifices, all those in whose blood the anvil had been anointed. Lycaon was thrown off his feet by the eruption of dark magic and Lysander was thrown against the frame of the crucible's door behind him. Thousands of teeth gnawed at Lycaon's armour, tearing away chunks of black-painted ceramite. The gale ripped away the Chaplain's helmet and one side of his face was torn to shredded pulp, blood welling up and hardening into a gnarled half-mask.

Lycaon arrested his fall before he plunged over the edge into the fires. He squared back up to Kraegon Thul, but the Warsmith strode through the two halves of the shattered altar and was within a hammer swing of Lycaon now. Thul thrust the head of the hammer at the Chaplain, who was barely able to turn the blow away with his crozius. A mundane weapon would have been shattered by the power field, but the Fist of Dorn was forged to withstand the fires of hell and the chill of the warp, and it would not be so easy to disarm the Warsmith.

The released sacrifices swirled around the upper half of the crucible, weaving between the weapons and armour hanging there, howling as if

they still felt the pain of their deaths.

Lycaon ducked a swing of the hammer and rammed a shoulder into Thul's chest. But Thul was not knocked back one step and wrapped an arm around Lycaon's shoulder, pinning the Imperial Fist's crozius arm to his side. Thul picked Lycaon off his feet and hurled him against one half of the anvil.

Lysander charged across the walkway. He could already see in his mind Thul's follow-up blow, a swing of the hammer into the prone Lycaon's stomach, crushing him against the anvil. The only thing between Lycaon and that fate was Lysander.

Thul turned to face Lysander. Lysander snapped off bolter shots into Thul's chest – the Warsmith's power armour was proof against them and the shots did little more than grab his attention, but that was Lysander's plan.

'Captain Lysander,' said Thul. 'You come for me again. Did you not learn from your last lesson?' Thul lunged and swung at Lysander, the blow aimed at his head.

Lysander's bolter met the Fist of Dorn. The bolter shattered as Lysander knew it would. He let go of the wrecked weapon and grabbed Thul's wrist with both hands, trying to bend it down and force the head of the hammer to the ground.

Thul had been a warrior for thousands of years. The Traitor Legions spent most of their lives on worlds wholly or partially within the warp, where time did not flow as it did in real space. That meant some of them had been alive since the Horus Heresy, and had fought in hundreds of campaigns over millennia of warfare. Thul had fought every kind of fight there was hundreds of times over. Lysander's gambit was the best one for the situation – lock the opponent's weapon and use the split-second opening to get in a headbutt or a kick to the front of the knee, enough to send the enemy reeling and open for disarming and a killing blow with his

own weapon. Lysander himself had practised it countless times in the sparring halls of the *Phalanx*, and had executed it often enough in battle. But Thul had run those same drills and fought those same battles, only more so, and he was ready.

The heel of Thul's hand smacked into the side of Lysander's head. Lysander's helmet was dented and wrenched sideways, the eyepieces unaligned and his vision suddenly obscured. Thul spun and dropped to a knee, driving his elbow down onto Lysander's thigh. Lysander's femur snapped and the ceramite of his armour buckled, and suddenly he was on his back with a leg folded the wrong way in front of him. Thul wrenched the Fist of Dorn back out of his grip.

'Very disappointing,' said Thul. 'All these centuries I seek to make your kind understand, and what is your response? You break your bodies against us as you have always done. As it was ten thousand years ago, so it is today.'

Lysander tried to roll away but Thul stepped on his shattered leg and the pain that shot through Lysander was too much for even a Space Marine to bear. It blinded him, a white bolt of searing cold slicing from his leg up through his whole body. His thoughts were drowned out by the blank wall of agony.

His armour dumped its reserve of painkillers into his bloodstream and his vision swam back. Thul had the Fist of Dorn up ready to drive the head into Lysander and crush his torso flat. Behind him appeared the shape of Chaplain Lycaon, armour scored and dented from the punishment Thul had dealt out. Lycaon brought up his crozius above his head like a woodcutter about to split a log, the blade positioned to come down against the crown of Thul's head and cut it in two down to the collarbone.

Thul did not even look round. He reversed his grip on the hammer and drove it into Lycaon's shoulder. The power field blew the armour open,

revealing torn bone and muscle. Lycaon reeled backwards and Thul spun around, bringing the full force of the hammer blow into Lycaon's chest.

Lycaon was smacked back into the remains of the anvil, and the spirits released howled a crescendo as his chest was blasted open by the discharging power field. The ceramite of his breastplate was split and splayed out like bloody metal wings. His head lolled back, mouth open, eyes rolled back, in the unmistakable attitude of death.

Lysander might have cried out. It was hard to tell through the haze of pain and the keening of the spirits overhead. It was not the shock or the sorrow that hit him. It was the obscenity of that sight, of a man like Lycaon torn open. He could not fall – he was the image of an Imperial Fist, resembling a statue of Rogal Dorn more than a man. And here he was, turned into nothing more than meat and blood and ruptured armour, by a creature like Thul.

Lysander groped for the remains of his broken bolter.

‘I have lived for millennia,’ said Thul as he turned back to Lysander. ‘I have seen this galaxy and the truths of it. Do you think we do what we do for the sake of it? Because doing evil is its own end? If you put just a fraction of that zeal into understanding what is truly right, Imperial Fist, you would join us in a heartbeat.’

‘While one of us lives...’ gasped Lysander, feeling his guts twisting with the shock of his broken leg. He could not walk, but he could fight.

‘While one of you lives,’ said Thul, ‘the fight will never end, you will be avenged. Is that not it? I have heard the sentiment many times. You, who have lived within your Imperium, among its corruption and hatred, you still rail against those who would change it. I thought perhaps you would understand, Lysander. You have been more than a Space Marine. Malodrax saw to it you were something very different, for a while. But you are the same as the rest.’

Thul kicked the shattered bolter away from Lysander and stamped down on his ruined leg.

The shame was as bad as the physical pain. To be laid helpless by the enemy was, some said, worse than death – to permit him to do whatever he wished and not be able to fight back. It was inimical to the very existence of a Space Marine. If he died here it would not be as a warrior. It would be as a victim, his duty left undone.

But Lysander was not dead yet. There was always a way any battle could be won. The chances might not be high, but they were always there. There was something in Thul that was a weakness – he just had to find it before Thul finally took his head off.

Thul believed. That was the one lesson Lysander could be sure he had learned in all his pursuit of Kraegon Thul. The Warsmith believed absolutely in his cause.

‘Malodrax wanted me,’ said Lysander. ‘It changed me.’

Lysander wished he could see Thul’s face, so he could gauge some reaction. ‘It took you and it used you,’ said the Warsmith. ‘Just as the Imperium forged you into a weapon to use against its own, to murder and oppress your own people. Chaos is freedom, Imperial Fist! Let your experience on Malodrax break you from the cage of your mind. Abandon what you were. You have bargained with daemons and assassinated the foes of the Iron Warriors. You are an Imperial Fist no longer.’

‘I do not know...’ slurred Lysander, fighting to stay conscious, ‘what I am any more.’

Kraegon Thul kneeled over Lysander. ‘You can be a crusader for the freedom of the human race,’ he said. ‘We will take our war to the stars. We will strike at the Imperium, at its underbelly, for it is ancient, corrupted and soft. One swift strike with the war engines of Kulgarde and we will be at the gates of Terra.’

‘And what will you do then?’ asked Lysander. ‘With the Imperium at your mercy?’

‘Burn it down,’ said Thul, and Lysander was sure that behind that faceplate he was smiling. ‘Bring the human race to extinction, and rebuild it in the image of the warp.’

Lysander reached up towards Thul, like a leper reaching for the hem of a saint’s cloak.

He grabbed the back of Thul’s helmet. Thul believed in his cause so completely that, given the chance to convert a new follower, he had let his guard down. It would be the only chance Lysander would get.

With the few remaining drops of strength he had, Lysander tore the helmet off Kraegon Thul’s head.

Thul’s head resembled a planetoid bombarded with meteors and scoured by solar fire. It was impossible to tell between skin, bone and the pitted dark iron of his armour where the collar merged with the flesh of his neck. Corroded implants surrounded one eye socket, reaching up over his battered, hairless scalp. His mouth was lipless and narrow, his cheeks split open by age and decay to reveal the teeth in his jaw. His nose and chin were scarred by the constant application of the rebreather hooked up to the hose that ran down the front of his armour.

‘Look into my face, my new brother,’ said Kraegon Thul. ‘Mankind will fall. We shall found its new age. To none but the warp shall we bow. This I swear.’

Lysander reached down to the ammunition compartment at his waist. Normally this held spare magazines for his bolter. He opened it up and took out the device inside.

Thul’s eye glanced down and in that moment, he knew. He had lowered his defences and Lysander had brought him in with the promise of a rare prize – an Imperial Fist turned from the righteous path.

Lysander drove Sildyne's dagger up into Thul's face. It punched through the eye and into the socket, sinking its long, thin blade into the front of his skull. The crunch of the glass vial in the handle was impossibly satisfying – feeling it break, Lysander forgot the pain for a moment. The venom inside was injected through the microscopic holes in the blade, into Thul's cortex.

Thul reeled away and fell against the anvil. He put a hand to his face, the dagger still sticking out of his eye.

‘Still...’ he slurred. ‘Still, Imperial Fist, you disappoint...’

The venom coursed through his Space Marine's enhanced circulatory system. His organs, forced to peak efficiency by the gene-seed, were thrown into overdrive. Heart hammered, lungs pulsed, and brain spun. Thul clutched his head as blood, discoloured to a dark purple, spurted from his nose and between his teeth.

His slid down the anvil as the organs in his chest ruptured. More blood ran from the joints of his armour. The skin of his scalp writhed and bubbled as his brain boiled in his skull. The skin peeled away from his face, a blackened mask of gore all that remained of his features. The Fist of Dorn dropped from his fingers and clanged against the side of the anvil.

The sound of the spirits died down as they vanished, leaving the weapons and armour sections above swinging from their chains.

For several long minutes Lysander lay there on the platform before the anvil, and more than anything he would have dearly loved to let his mind fall into unconsciousness. Warm waves of dull pain were washing up and down him from his leg and shoulder. But he was not quite done yet.

He rolled onto his front and dragged himself towards the body of Kraegon Thul. The pain was worse and came in sharp, hot bursts, but it was good because it meant he could still feel something. He pulled the dagger back out of Thul's eye. Thul's head lolled to the side as what remained of his brain leaked out through the socket.

Lysander rolled to the edge of the platform. The waves of heat coming up off the molten steel hammered at him, but like the pain, it was good to feel something at all. He dropped the dagger over the edge and it vanished in the fire.

He took *Being A Description Of Malodrax And Its Foulness* from its compartment at his waist. He turned the book over in his hand and wondered if it could ever have been a coincidence that Malodrax had put the book in his path. Malodrax wanted to be ruled, but no ruler ever came up to its standards. Had it been testing Shalhadar and Kraegon Thul, by putting an Imperial Fist into their hands who might be manipulated into serving them, but who might return to destroy them? Perhaps the daemon prince and the Warsmith had been puppets, just as they had made Lysander their puppet, and Malodrax had been the real adversary all along.

Lysander dropped the book, too, into the molten cauldron. It disappeared in a lick of flame. Only then did he let himself pass out.

Halaestus was laid out among the dead in the Chapel of Dorn. Not all the Imperial Fists in the Malodrax strike force had left bodies fit to be displayed on the *Phalanx*, beneath the gaze of Dorn's golden statue and the icon of the Emperor looking on from the altar. Not all had been recovered. Halaestus had left an intact body, though the mutilations from his imprisonment stood out starker than ever against the greying skin of his corpse.

Lysander had not attended the main service for the lost. He had been in the apothecarion of the *Phalanx*, undergoing treatment for the ruptured organs suffered beneath his own hammer. Now Lysander had made the necessary journey to the Chapel of Dorn to pay his respects.

First Sergeant Kaderic stood among the funeral slabs. Battle-brothers from his squad were among the dead. He paused by the body of Chaplain Lycaon, the fatal wounds concealed beneath the body's golden shroud, and looked up at Lysander's approach. Kaderic had led the strike force after Lycaon had died, having defeated Hexal in their duel and cut the Iron

Warrior's head off. He had led the Imperial Fists to the battlements where the *Breaker of Darkness* had sent down its gunships to pick them up. Kaderic had fought off the wretches of the fortress until the gunships could leave, carrying Lysander's unconscious body over his shoulders the whole time.

'You walk, Captain Lysander,' said Kaderic. 'In Kulgarde I had not known if I would see you living again.'

Lysander looked down at Halaestus's ruined face. The shroud did not quite cover the top of the scar in his throat where Kraegon Thul's Bone Carvers had torn out his gene-seed. 'Have you heard how he died?' he asked.

'With valour and fury,' said Kaderic.

Lysander wondered if there could have been a reply that meant less. An Imperial Fist was expected to fight and die with valour and fury – it would be an obscenity if he died any other way. Halaestus could have died a whimpering wreck and the same would still be said of him. Lysander had little doubt that Halaestus had gone into Kulgarde with no intention of walking out again. An Imperial Fist would never speak ill of the Chapter's battle-dead, of course, but that did not mean Halaestus had died well.

'They are your men now, Lysander,' said Kaderic. 'The First. When we saw it was you who killed Thul and avenged Lycaon and all our dead – we knew you were our captain, then.'

'It will take them time to accept me,' said Lysander.

'Time, maybe, but nothing else. Whatever there was to prove has been proven.'

Lysander looked from one end of the chapel to the other. Many had died. Many that could not be replaced. And Lysander had brought them to Malodrax.

Malodrax had come close. He could not deny that. The deals he had made with daemons, the lies he had told, even if only lies of omission, to

his fellow Imperial Fists, and the part he had played in the plan to assassinate Sildyne – that had been almost enough. Thul's words had reached deep into his soul, but not quite deep enough.

It was the anger that had kept him true. That had never died down. That hot focus on revenge had kept the corruption from him, even when he was steeped in it. Malodrax thought it knew how deep a creature could hate, but it had never encountered Lysander before. What compromise and doubt still clung to him, the hatred would burn away. Malodrax had come close, but no one would ever come that close again to turning Lysander into something an Imperial Fist should never be.

'I wonder,' said Lysander, 'how far would be too far, in the name of victory.'

'How many dead would be too many?' said Kaderic.

It was not what Lysander had meant. He had been thinking of all the deeds that had brought him so close to the abyss, the deals and the alliances with the powers of Malodrax. But Kaderic, like all the Imperial Fists, did not need to know how close Lysander had come.

'How many dead,' agreed Lysander. 'How many of our Chapter's futures erased before they happen? To take command means many things, but above all it means making that choice. If a path leads to victory, but is littered with the dead, do we take it? That is what a captain of the Chapter must decide.'

'Then when the choice must be made,' said Kaderic, 'what will you do, Lysander, for victory?'

Lysander looked again at Halaestus, then at Lycaon, and all the faces of the dead on Malodrax.

'Anything,' he said.

The Imperial Fists had sabotaged the forges and war machines before they left Malodrax with their dead and wounded. The Iron Warriors, leaderless, had retreated from the main fortress and by the time they retook it when

the Imperial Fists were gone, the place had been rendered useless for Thul's plan of sending a legion of war engines to fuel a Black Crusade and drive to the gates of Terra. It was overrun with mutants and xenos dregs who rose up in rebellion against the Iron Warriors, for with Thul dead the Iron Warriors seemed vulnerable and mortal as they never had before. Kulgarde was consumed by war. In the corpse-choked passageways and underground warrens, it seemed the place had been built to maximise the death of its inhabitants.

Shalhadar's city had begun to tear itself apart before the Imperial Fists even reached Kulgarde. Many of the population fled into the rocky desert, there to die of thirst or starvation, or to form a feast for Malodrax's predators that descended following the scent of death. Some of Shalhadar's courtiers overcame their grief and began battling to see who would become the new lord of the city. Their followers slaughtered one another in the streets as the devastated citizens continued to tear at their flesh and enact ever fouler sacrifices to the gods for deliverance. The city became an ever more monstrous vision of madness, worthy of the warp itself.

Malodrax wanted to be ruled. Two beings had arisen who wanted to be lord of the planet, but each one had been undone by a common plan to divide the world among them and to use a lone Imperial Fist to serve them. That plan had killed them both. And so they were unworthy of the crown.

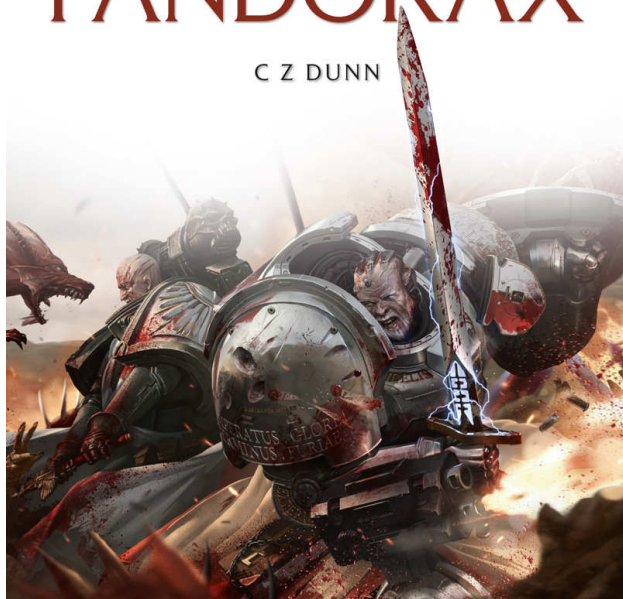
Malodrax wanted to be ruled. It was patient. Another would rise, and perhaps this time he would prove up to the planet's standards.

For now, Malodrax would wait.

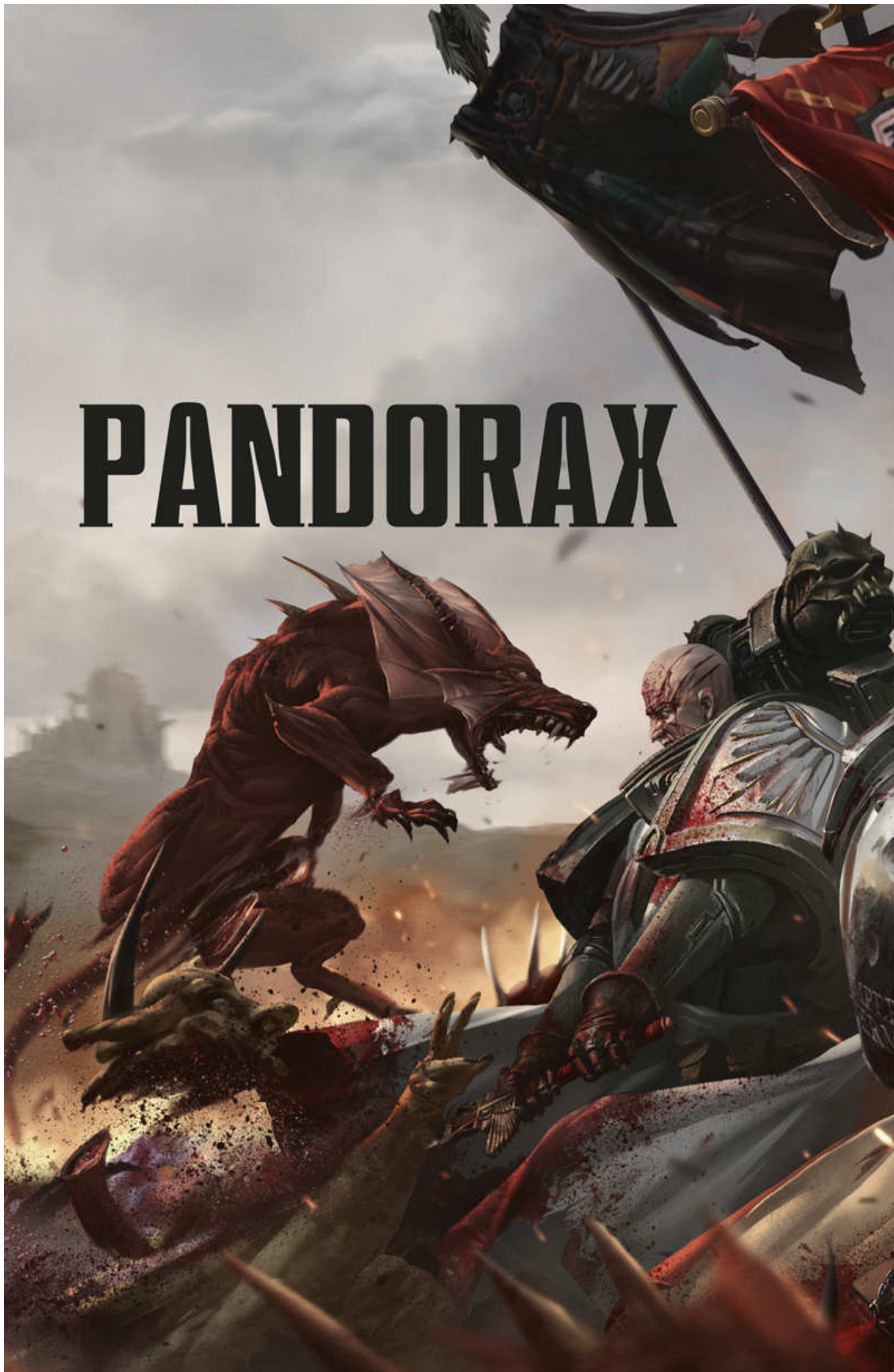


PANDORAX

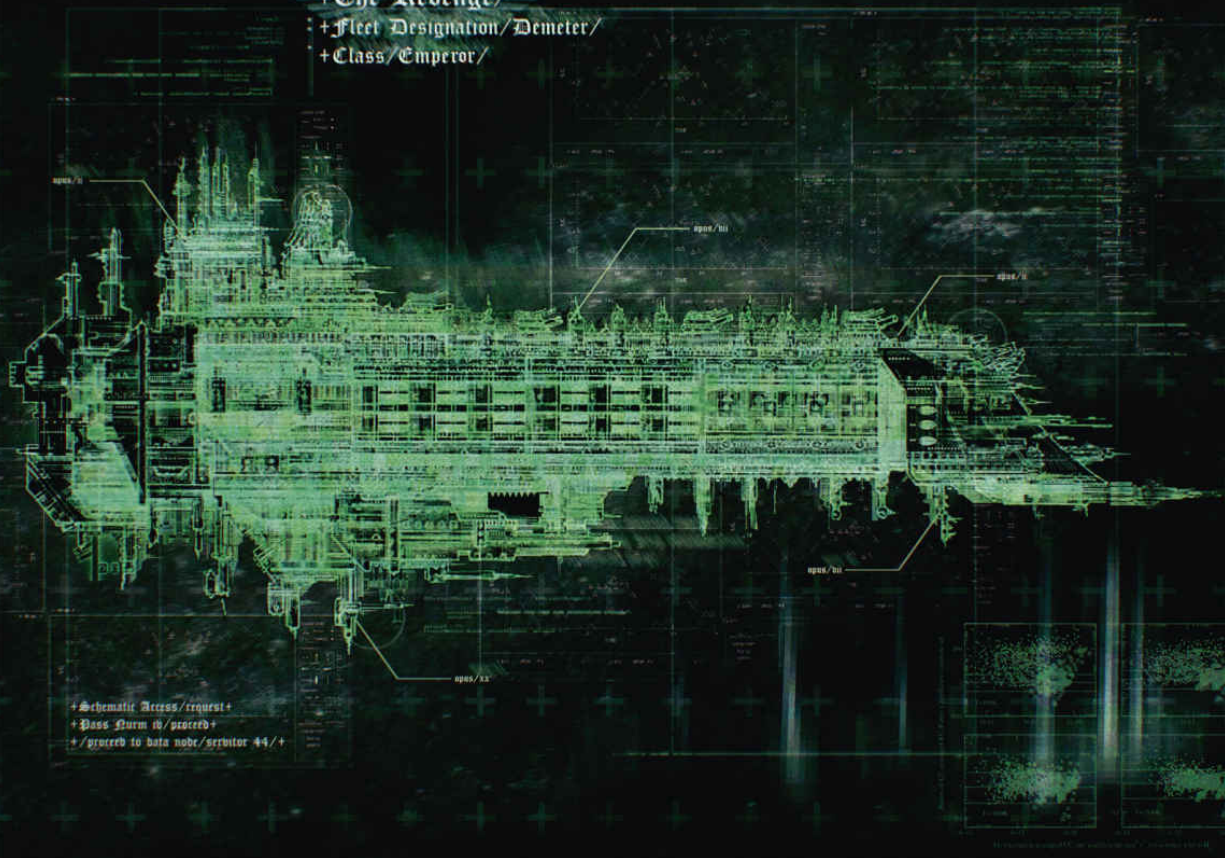
C Z DUNN



PANDORAX



+The Revenge/
+Fleet Designation/Demeter/
+Class/Emperor/





CORPULAX



THE PRISONER FROM THE EMERALD CAVE





RECLUSIAM
High Interrogator
Interrogator-Chaplains
Chaplains



1ST COMPANY
(The Deathwing)
Grand Master
Undisclosed number of
Deathwing Terminator and
Deathwing Knight Squads



CHAPTER COMMAND
The Supreme Grand Master
heads a council drawn from
the most senior members of the
Inner Circle



2ND COMPANY
(The Ravenwing)
Grand Master
Undisclosed number of
bikes, Land Speeders, and
atmospheric fighters



LIBRARIUS
Chief Librarian
Librarians
(Lexicaniums, Codiclers
and Epistolaries)



3RD COMPANY
(Battle Company)
Company Master
6 Tactical Squads, 2 Assault Squads
and 2 Devastator Squads



4TH COMPANY
(Battle Company)
Company Master
6 Tactical Squads, 2 Assault Squads
and 2 Devastator Squads



5TH COMPANY
(Battle Company)
Company Master
6 Tactical Squads, 2 Assault Squads
and 2 Devastator Squads



6TH COMPANY
(Reserve Company)
Company Master
10 Tactical Squads



7TH COMPANY
(Reserve Company)
Company Master
10 Tactical Squads



8TH COMPANY
(Reserve Company)
Company Master
10 Assault Squads



9TH COMPANY
(Reserve Company)
Company Master
10 Devastator Squads



ARMOURY
Master of the Rock
Technicians
Servitors & Vehicles



10TH COMPANY
(Scout Company)
Company Master
Scouts



APOTHECARIAN
Master Apothecary
Apothecaries

PANDORAX



C Z Dunn



PRELUDE

347956.M41 / Fal'shia, Tau First Phase Colony

With feline grace and the alertness of a hawk, Tzula Digriiz prowled through the benighted corridors of the museum. No light, save the wan orange glow of one of Fal'shia's moons seeping through a skylight, marked her way and no sound did her passing make. Step by silent step, she followed the route she had memorised on her sole previous visit to the museum, pausing only to check and recheck for motion sensors and noise detecting alarms she may have missed on her initial reconnaissance. She glided past priceless artefacts and irreplaceable masterpieces without stopping to give any a second look, her resolve focused solely on her mission. In a former life she would have stripped the place clean and come back for seconds once the dust had settled, but that life was nothing but a memory now, closed off to her ever since the day she'd finally been caught and pressed into the service of the Imperium of Mankind.

The corridor she was navigating terminated into a vast hall, the light filling the chamber with a lambent glow, not enough to see by but sufficient to denote the outlines of the exhibits and pieces. Manually adjusting the sensitivity of her night-vision goggles, she scanned her new environs for anything that could give away her presence but found nothing. Fortunately for Tzula, her erstwhile hosts practised a political system that preached fairness and equality in all things – the Greater Good, as the tau

liked to call it – and as a result suffered very little in the way of crime within their society. So far she had yet to encounter any security measures she would have to evade and there were certainly no guards assigned to watch over the artworks and antiquities. She was even surprised when she turned up for her after hours visit and found the doors locked.

With a newfound surety that alarm bells were not about to ring nor was a cage about to descend from the ceiling and ensnare her, she headed for the far end of the main exhibition hall, though, ever cautious, she made certain to remain silent. It was sound practice like this that ensured she'd spent a profitable decade looting the finest riches all across Segmentum Pacificus and a good few years beyond that doing the same in the employ of her new master.

The works that lined the walls and plinths of the hall were worth the proverbial king's ransom and purloining a single one of them would set her up for a lifetime, several with all the juvenat treatments she would be able to afford, but even that was too small a price. The people she worked for were more than capable of tracking her wherever she chose to lie low and the ramifications of crossing them didn't bear thinking about. Her death would be the ultimate consequence, but the route they took her down to reach that destination would be long and gruelling. Besides, her new calling was not without benefits. Her master was teaching her all sorts of new skills and one day, when her apprenticeship was served, she would take his place.

One piece in particular caught her eye. She turned about and cautiously took a few steps towards it. It was a suit of power armour, Mark V judging by the shape of the helmet, in pristine condition with the exception of a small eye-sized hole in the breastplate where a shot from a fire warrior or gun drone had despatched its former owner. The combination of poor lighting and the green filter of the night-vision goggles meant that Tzula could not make out the colour of the livery, but the clenched fist outlined

by a circle on the left pauldron suggested which Chapter was missing an irreplaceable relic. Under the mask of her bodyglove, she allowed herself the slightest smirk. No matter how enlightened or progressive a society may claim to be, give them the opportunity to brag about former victories or conquests and they won't hesitate to take it. You could not move in the Imperium for fear of stumbling over a statue or monument to some hero or other. There were entire worlds dedicated to the sole purpose of reminding the populace of dead saints and martyrs, and several alien races Tzula had encountered down the years sported trophies taken from fallen enemies on the field of battle. For all their claims of inclusivity and mutual assimilation, they had no qualms about displaying the product of their expansion for all to see.

Conscious that her master was tracking her progress through the bodyglove's sensors, she turned her attention back to the task at hand and cautiously completed her passage to the back of the hall. There, nestled between an exquisite eldar sculpture older than the tau race itself and a cylindrical device of unspecified origin that Tzula couldn't begin to guess the purpose of, sat the object she had broken into the museum to liberate: a knife. Not a fancy ceremonial dagger nor a weapon used to wage war, not even a duelling blade or the tool of some worthy figure's demise. Just a plain knife, its tarnished metal blade attached to a worn wooden handle by a tight binding of frayed leather cord.

Some Imperial scholars might have described it as 'pre-historic' but in the Imperium that term was a relative one at best. All that Tzula could be certain of was that the blade was very, very old. Perhaps this was why the tau had put it here in the museum, because they thought it a quaint example of a barbaric culture's roots? Had they the slightest understanding of the thing's true heritage and what it was capable of, it would have been under lock and key in their deepest, strongest vault being pored over by

their finest minds until they ascertained how to use it, not merely left on a plinth in a museum on a world populated almost entirely by artists.

Carefully peeling off the tight-fitting glove on her right hand to reveal the dark skin underneath – experience had taught her that when performing a delicate task such as this, it was better to rely on the true sense of touch not dulled by the barrier of a second skin – she reached down and delicately grasped the hilt of the knife between her thumb and fingertips. Controlling her breathing, Tzula waited until it had slowed to the point where her lungs were barely moving and, on her next inhale, gently lifted the knife from the inconspicuous plinth upon which it rested.

The wail of alarms that followed was so loud that Tzula found it difficult to maintain her balance.

She spun on her heel, about to race back the way she had come when a wall of solid force sprang up mere centimetres in front of her. Turning back she found that she was enclosed on all four sides and above by coruscating energy, trapping her in a prison no more than two metres square. Already having a fair idea of the outcome, she threw the glove she'd removed at one of the walls and watched through her goggles as it disintegrated immediately upon contact. Through the translucent cell she saw security shutters glide into place, barring all exits from the main exhibit hall and when she looked skyward, saw the same happening to the glass in the ceiling. For the second time in her life, Tzula Digriiz, former cat burglar turned agent of the Ordo Malleus, was well and truly trapped.

‘What in the name of the Throne have you gone and done this time, girl?’ her master’s voice crackled in her ear. ‘We can hear those alarms from all the way over the other side of the city, and there are fire warrior teams converging on your position.’ His displeasure dripped from every word and the very fact that he’d breached mission protocol to contact her on her vox-bead spoke volumes about how badly wrong the operation had gone.

‘I just need a couple of minutes. The damn knife was on a pressure plate and it triggered an energy chamber. It looks similar to the ones the Imalthuti used on—’

‘You don’t have a couple of minutes. Those fire warrior teams are on the steps of the museum now.’ The pause that followed was heavy with anticipation. ‘Use it.’

The anxiety Tzula had been fighting hard to control fought its way to the surface. ‘You know I can’t do that. Even if it does work, how will you—’

‘We’ll find you. We have to. Now stop arguing and get out of there.’

The vox-link went dead in her ear. If the tau already knew that it was their human guests who were responsible for the break-in at the museum then her master and his cohort would have to make it off-world in a hurry. Just like she had to. She had never held a knife such as this – precious few throughout the history of mankind had – but she had been well-schooled in the theory of its application and, gripping it blade down in her fist, held it aloft as if she was making to stab thin air. Her forearm tensed as she waited for it to gain purchase but the knife sat there useless in her hands. With the noise of approaching tau growing ever louder, she lowered the blade. Closing her eyes, she raised it again, relaxing the muscles in her arm and letting the knife do the work instead. Within seconds she was rewarded and, as the first of the fire warriors reached the shuttered main entrance, the blade twitched as it came into contact with the edges of reality.

Tzula began to tear through it.

Shas’ui Bork’an Kop’la, like all those of the tau race, was not one to believe in magic, superstition or the divine. When he tapped in the nine digit code to shut off the museum’s security system and entered the main exhibit hall, he started to suspect that there was more to this universe than the surety of the Greater Good.

Pulse rifle raised, he ventured over to where he had expected to discover the gue'la woman trapped within the energy cage, but found only the charred remnants of what could have been a glove or gauntlet and a set of what he assumed to be eyewear. The other members of his team scanned the room for any sign of the intruder, butts of rifles rested firmly against their shoulders as the markerlights played across the walls and ceilings.

Kop'la signalled for one of them to deactivate the cage. The other fire warrior removed a small handheld pad from his belt and tapped a series of keys, causing the energy field to dissipate with a sharp hum. Kop'la retrieved the eyewear and, after removing his helmet, held them up to his eyes in the vain hope that they would reveal the alien's cloaked form. The goggles functioned similarly to his armour's nightvision system, but whereas the tau technology used complex algorithms to compensate for the lack of light and allowed the viewer to see as if they were in daylight, colours and all, the gue'la equivalent was crude but functional, delineating that shrouded by darkness solely in monochrome green. He moved his head in a circular motion, trying to take in the entirety of the chamber, but the only living souls he saw were the eleven other members of his la'rua.

He was about to discard the primitive device when something in the vicinity of where the energy cage had been caught his attention. There, suspended half a metre from the museum floor, was a glowing vertical slit of energy. As he watched, it faded away to nothing. When he stepped over to experimentally pass his hand through where he thought it had been, he caught the vaguest scent of something sulphuric on the air, but that too was gone as quickly as the glow. He broke his attention away and realised that every member of his la'rua was staring at him, this odd unhelmeted figure waving his hand through thin air while sniffing like a kroot hound.

'What are you staring at?' he barked to mask his embarrassment. 'The perimeter is secure so the gue'la thief is still in the building. Split into teams of two and do not report back in to me until you have found her.' He

replaced his helmet and, pairing up with the fire warrior who had deactivated the energy cage, headed for the west wing of the museum to track down the interloper.

The fire warrior team scoured every square metre of the museum twice before Shas'ui Bork'an Kop'la called off the search for the gue'la female. With shame weighing heavy on his heart, he reported back to Aun Ki'lea that the woman had escaped. The ruler of Fal'shia was disappointed in Kop'la's failure to apprehend the woman, but the loss to the tau empire was insignificant. Rather than steal one of the priceless heirlooms of their fledgling race, the thief had only taken a small knife recovered from a Third Sphere colony, an artefact of no consequence at all, merely a curiosity that the artisans of Fal'shia had seen fit to display to show how little the gue'la had evolved in all their millennia rampaging across the universe.

Ki'lea's words brought him some solace, but Kop'la could not shake the feeling that somehow his inability to capture the woman had run counter to the Greater Good. That feeling would be augmented shortly after when an administrative error meant he was overlooked for the Trial by Fire and he and his la'rua were shipped off to Fi'rios to mop up the remnants of the ork forces the tau had wrestled the world from.

Though he and his fellow fire warriors fought well, the Be'gel worked their sheer weight of numbers to full advantage, slaying both tau and kroot alike at close quarters. Their fate sealed, Kop'la's la'rua fought a final, desperate stand atop a rocky outcrop on the arid world's desert plains, each of his brave fire warriors falling in turn until he was the last one left standing against a horde of the debased alien beasts. Firing wildly, he felled many of the orks but still they pressed on, clambering over their own corpses in their frenzied attempt to reach him. His weapon ran dry and, as he was about to start swinging his pulse rifle as an impromptu club, a blow to the side of his head cracked his helmet and smashed him to the hard ground.

As Kop'la felt the first greenskin blade pierce him close to the heart and looked up to see the brute making ready to deliver the killing blow, his final thought was: *where had the gue'la woman gone?*

**228958.M41 / Undesignated Feral Ice-world, Segmentum
Tempestus**

Inquisitor Mikhail Dinalt had never been fond of the cold, hailing as he did from a scorched desert world, and as the heavy snow fell, he pulled his cloak tighter about his shoulders and ploughed on through the thick powder underfoot. Behind him, the six figures that made up his cohort followed in his wake, the three humans among them shivering in the sub-zero temperatures, the xenos and the two gun servitors seemingly oblivious to the adverse conditions.

‘We’ll freeze to death if we stay out here much longer,’ said the tall, muscular male at the rear of the group. He wore several furs over his matching leather jacket and trousers, and snow had settled on the wide brim of his hat. The harsh lines and creases of his face were pale, frost had formed on the week’s growth of stubble on his chin and his lips were rapidly turning an unhealthy shade of blue. ‘I didn’t spend all this time hunting for her just to end my days face down in the snow.’

Dinalt, as he had conditioned himself to do so over their many years together, tuned out the gunman’s moaning and, ignoring him entirely, continued laboriously on. Dinvayo Chao might be one of the finest shots the inquisitor had ever encountered in almost two centuries of service to the Golden Throne, but he was also one of the greatest whingers too. Dinalt had never seen Chao miss; either a shot with his twin bolt pistols or an opportunity to complain about the latest injustice being perpetrated upon him.

‘All the intelligence points to this being the correct planet,’ said the woman walking at Dinalt’s shoulder. Her robe was the same deep crimson as that of her master and her voluminous blonde hair cascaded over it all

the way down to her waist. ‘According to my charts, the primary settlement is less than three kilometres away from where we put down. We should be there within the hour,’ she added sternly.

Tryphena Brandd was a recent addition to Dinalt’s band of operatives and though she and Chao clashed regularly, he often had to stay his tongue by dint of her rank of junior interrogator. He considered a retort but thought better of it, turning instead to the xenos. The short, hairy figure loping along beside him had picked up a heavy coating of snow, the white powder almost completely obscuring the orange-brown fur beneath.

‘It’s alright for you, K’Cee,’ Chao said. ‘You got your own fur coat. Chumps like me and Liall here,’ he gestured to the slight figure of the astropath rigidly staggering along in front of them, ‘we just got to fight back the cold with warm thoughts. Ain’t that right, boy?’

The robed youth struggled on for several seconds longer muttering to himself under his breath before, by way of delayed reaction, he started as if shocked by the mention of his own name and stopped to face Chao and the jokaero.

‘Stars burning brightly. The sun upon your cheeks. The balefire of eternal damnation,’ Liall said in a monotone devoid of emotion. ‘Thoughts. Warm thoughts,’ he added before turning back and carrying on through the tundra, still muttering under his breath.

Most astropaths were eccentric in some way as a result of their soul-binding and contact with the immaterium, but Liall was something else altogether. Dinalt had once shared with Chao his belief that Liall’s condition pre-dated his voyage on the Black Ship and was the likely root of his vast astropathic abilities. The boy had been able to send messages over large intergalactic distances without the aid of relay choirs and was far too talented to spend his servitude to the God Emperor stuck in an Administratum facility transmitting troop deployments or munitions shipping orders. His incorporation into Dinalt’s retinue had not been

without difficulties – a blind man who couldn't stand the touch of another human being the least of them – but his usefulness far outweighed the downsides.

Chao was about to say something else to the jokaero when from out of the whiteout he caught sight of a spear tip reflecting the planet's dim sun as it flew through the air.

'Down, down, down!' Chao yelled, drawing the pair of bolt pistols holstered at his hips. Dinalt and Brandd dropped to one knee, reaching for their own weapons while K'Cee bounded over on all fours to take up a position behind them. Liall simply threw himself forwards into the snow, burying himself into the wet powder and covering his head with both arms.

The first of the lumbering gun servitors reacted too slowly and the spear took it square in the forehead, sliding through its lobotomised brain before emerging through the back of its skull. For a few confused seconds it turned this way and that, synaptic signals failing to reach its twin heavy bolters, before crashing lifelessly to the ground. The other servitor manipulated the weapons slung at its side in place of arms, attempting to find a targeting solution through the white static but, just as it had succeeded in filtering out friendly forces from hostiles, another spear flashed through the air and struck it in the back of the head. It fell to its knees, confused at its plight before a third spear flew out of the blizzard and struck the servitor in the chest, killing it instantly.

'They've got us surrounded,' Dinalt said, pointing his plasma pistol at the vague outlines resolving through the falling snow. As if to acknowledge him, a dozen spear-carrying figures stepped forward, weapons pointed at the throats of the inquisitor and his companions.

'Want me to take them down, chief? We'll probably lose Liall and the monkey, but I'm pretty sure I can kill them all before they get you, me and blondie?'

The jokaero shot Chao a glance and narrowed his eyes. ‘Nothing personal, little man,’ he added.

The jokaero exhaled a sharp breath, flapping his ample lips.

‘Stay your hand, Chao. If they’d wanted to kill us they would have done so by now,’ the inquisitor ordered. ‘Everybody put your weapons on the ground.’ Dinalt allowed his plasma pistol to drop, its weight causing it to sink below the surface of the snow. Brandd and Chao did likewise. Liall lay there continuing to mutter to himself.

Their assailants, both men and women, were clad in thick, dirty furs. Long, unkempt hair stuck to their faces, wet from the blizzard. Totemic skulls of small animals hung from leather cords around the necks of some, while others wore larger skulls like shoulder pads adorning the animal hides. One particularly brutal looking savage, a mass of tight, corded muscle and matted black body hair, had what looked suspiciously like human skulls in place of where his kinsmen had animal remains.

It was this one who spoke, his deep guttural drawl sounding not dissimilar to the dark tongue of some cults Dinalt had previously encountered.

‘Can you understand him, Brandd?’

‘A little. All primitive human dialects seem to evolve along similar lines, at least during the formative stages. He asked us if we came from the sky.’

It had been little more than a year since Tryphena Brandd had become part of Dinalt’s retinue, her former master having died in his attempt to wipe out an ancient Chaos cult, but in that time not only had her combat and investigative skills proved useful, but also her background in linguistics. A military orphan, Brandd had been placed in the care of the Schola Progenium while still an infant before finding herself inducted into the Order of the Fractured Cypher, a Dialogous branch of the Adepta Sororitas. Almost as soon as she had taken her final vows, she found

herself part of an inquisitor's retinue, distinguishing herself to such a degree that even before she was out of her teens, her former master had taken her under his wing as an Inquisitorial apprentice. But her former master was dead, as would she be if she couldn't talk herself out of this situation.

Dropping her weapon, she slowly rose to her feet, the tips of half a dozen spears pointed at her throat as she did so. She cleared her throat and emitted a string of harsh, phlegmy syllables.

The dark-haired tribesman's eyes went wide as soon as she had finished speaking and he issued several angry grunts, echoed by the others of his tribe. Spears jabbed forward threateningly, forcing Brandd to her knees again.

'What on Terra did you say to them to get them so enraged?' Dinalt asked, his piercing gaze locking with that of his junior interrogator.

'I told them to put down their weapons and surrender,' she said. 'We are agents of the Most Holy Ordos and our authority here is sacrosanct.'

Dinalt looked ready to castigate Brandd when Chao said, 'If you'll allow me.' He slowly got to his feet and raised both hands, palms out in supplication. 'What I think the lady was trying to say is, can you take us to whoever's running things around here?'

Brandd's assertion that they were close to the primary settlement proved to be accurate and they were soon led through a massive stone archway that opened out into a snow-covered square, surrounded on all sides by buildings made from the same material as the gate. Braziers burned outside many of the structures and the smell of roasting meat and human waste hung on the thin, cold air. Their captors had treated the inquisitor and his cohort well, going so far as supplying the obviously ailing Liall with extra furs, but the spears remained constantly aimed at their hearts and throats.

They passed through the square towards a dominating structure at the far end, the town's inhabitants spilling from doorways to stare in awe at the

captives. Most stood a respectful distance back, simply content to witness the coming of the strangers, but others prostrated themselves before them. One woman went so far as to run out into the street and try to place a necklace of rat skulls around Liall's neck, which led to a nervy few minutes of the youth shouting at the top of his lungs while Chao and Brandd attempted to calm him down.

As they got closer to the large building and visibility improved, Dinalt saw that it was far more ostentatious than he had first realised. The stone of its walls was smoother and of a better quality than the other dwellings, and crude statues of warriors lined the wide steps that led up to a set of well-crafted wood and steel doors. As they reached the foot of the steps, the high doors swung inwards and the tribesmen who had been keeping them prisoner gestured with their spears for them to ascend. All five of them did so, as did the dark-haired warrior who they assumed to be the leader, spear in one hand, an animal hide sack holding the prisoners' weapons in the other. A tribeswoman greeted them at the top and after a brief conversation with the armed warrior, he handed over the sack of weapons and received a jangling leather pouch in exchange. Without giving any of his former captives a second glance, he went back down the steps two at a time counting out his payment.

'Come. With me,' the woman said with an effort, as if her vocal cords were not used to making those sounds. Her furs were cut and arranged as if to form a dress and jewellery hung at her neck and earlobes.

'You speak Low Gothic?' Brandd ventured but all she got in response was a blank look followed by a sweep of the woman's arm urging them to move on.

Another set of doors opened at their approach to reveal a high-ceilinged throne room, the air greasy with the smoke from tallow candles set into recesses in the walls and a vast wooden chandelier overhead. The flickering light caught upon jewel-encrusted vases and goblets sat atop

smoothly polished tables, and finely embroidered tapestries that covered immense sections of the wall. The other décor paled into insignificance when the five of them caught sight of the elaborate throne upon a raised marble dais upon which sat Tzula Digriiz, the near ebony of her skin in stark contrast to the alabaster flesh of the two handmaidens who attended her.

‘I have to admit, Master Dinalt,’ Tzula said, a playful smile forming on her lips, ‘I was expecting you a little sooner.’

‘Do you have the knife?’ he responded, ignoring her quip.

‘Two years I’ve been stuck here and all you—’

‘Do you still have the knife?’ he asked again, threat evident in his tone of voice.

Tzula sighed and parted the furs covering her midriff to reveal a crude wooden hilt. ‘It hasn’t left my side the entire time I’ve been here.’

‘We have the knife, master. Now we should execute her for heresy and continue with our mission,’ said Brandd, her face expressionless.

‘We haven’t even been introduced and already you’re threatening to kill me. I can see we’re going to be the best of friends.’ The playful grin disappeared from Tzula’s lips. ‘She’s wearing the symbols of the Ordo, does that mean you’ve already replaced me, master?’

‘Junior Interrogator Brandd was formerly under the tutelage of Inquisitor Morven until he died in the service of the Ordo. I had oathed to him to take Brandd as my charge and complete her training should anything happen to him, and he oathed likewise to watch over you should I fall in service to the God-Emperor.’ Dinalt turned to give Brandd an admonishing look. ‘And she won’t be executing anybody for heresy. Not today at least.’

‘But, master, she rules over these people like an empress. Even the throne she sits upon is golden. This sedition cannot go unpunished.’ Brandd’s cheeks started to flush with anger.

‘I rule over these people because it was the best way to ensure the safety of the knife. When I fell from the sky – and believe me, this thing isn’t accurate and I did, literally, fall from the sky – I could have tried to take on an entire world of spear-wielding savages or I could have taken the route of winning hearts and minds and make the aggressors my guardians and by default, guardians of the knife.’ Tzula’s smile returned. ‘Seems the latter worked out pretty well not just for me but for you too. If I hadn’t offered a vast reward for the safe capture of any other visitors from the sky then it would have been your corpses that Urk brought before me. Remember that, Brandd. You already owe me your life.’

The junior interrogator bristled and Tzula’s smile broke into a grin.

‘Chao, Liall, K’Cee. I didn’t expect to see any of you again.’

K’Cee’s lips pulled back and he gave a toothy grin that mirrored Tzula’s. Liall stopped muttering under his breath at the mention of his name and gave Tzula a puzzled look with his dead eyes, as if he was trying to remember who the owner of the voice was.

Chao let out a booming laugh. ‘Tzula Digriiz. You always did land on your feet.’

‘Some of your luck must have rubbed off on me. How long have you been in the master’s service now. Five? Six years?’

‘Seven years and counting.’

‘I,’ she paused, weighing up the choice of her next words, ‘I take it that the others are all dead?’

Chao nodded solemnly.

‘Minerva?’

‘She didn’t make it off Fal’shia. Fire warrior took her head off with a pulse rifle from a hundred metres away,’ Chao said.

‘Berrick?’

‘Taken down by the same cult that did for Inquisitor Morven. It happened during the operation to rescue the junior interrogator here.’

Tzula cast Brandd a dark look, adding another mark to her mental tally. 'Sivensen?'

'Went down fighting, but you wouldn't have expected anything less from him. Held off a pack of warp beasts while we made off with that damned book.'

'Book? What book?' Tzula said.

'There will be time to discuss all that later just as there will be time to honour those who laid down their lives in service to the blessed Ordo and the Golden Throne,' the inquisitor said. 'We have already tarried too long in our search for you, Tzula, and we must make with all haste for Pythos and pray that we are not too late.'

'Pythos? You've discovered its location?'

'The book has already given up many secrets and should give up many more on our journey. Now gather anything you need and be ready to head out for the shuttle as soon as day breaks.'

Tzula slid down from the throne and gracefully traversed the smooth stone floor to the door of her quarters. Opening it, she lingered on the threshold. 'Brandd?' she said.

The junior interrogator turned to face Tzula. Through the half-open door he could see an enormous bed covered in furs, fine jewellery suspended from ornately crafted wooden stands and other trappings of frippery.

'Yes,' Brandd replied.

'You were wrong about me.'

'Oh,' Brandd said, surprised. 'How was I wrong?'

'I'm not their empress.' Tzula's grin returned. 'I'm their *goddess*,' she added before entering her quarters and shutting the door behind her.

Brandd turned to Dinalt, her cheeks flushing an even deeper shade of crimson. Before she could speak, Dinalt opened a channel on the vox-link on the forearm of his sleeve.

'Dinalt to *Terran Fury*. Are you receiving me, over?'

‘Loud and clear, my lord,’ replied a male voice.

‘We have recovered our cargo and will be returning aboard imminently.’

‘Very good, my lord. We shall prepare the landing bay.’

‘And, captain?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘As soon as the shuttle is clear of the planet’s atmosphere, shower the surface with virus bombs.’

PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

**823959.M41 / The Deathglades. Twenty kilometres west of Atika,
Pythos**

The beast opened its vast jaws, foul breath ripe with decay hitting the Catachan standing before it. Thick ropes of saliva descended from its top to bottom lip and the remnants of a previous meal nestled between teeth the size of a man's fist. The scaled saurian eyed the thick-set soldier before thrusting forward open-mouthed to feed. Its jaws clamped down on the proffered leaves and with a contented snort, the herbivore consumed its meal. The Catachan patted his mount on the head but before he could feed the other five arbosaurs that served as his squad's method of transport, the commander's voice diverted his attention.

‘Leave them alone, Mack. If you feed them now they'll be sluggish for hours and I'd like to make it back to base before nightfall.’ There was no malice in Piet Brigstone's voice, only the naked authority of a man used to commanding and being obeyed. ‘And get over here. I want you to take a look at this.’ Mack, discarding the armful of foliage he had collected, did as he was asked without question. The commander was knelt down examining a deep mark in the mud of the jungle floor while four slab-muscled figures in red bandanas looked on.

‘What is it, chief?’ Mack said coming over to join them. Though each man in the squad understood him perfectly, his syllables were clipped, making it sound as if he was speaking with his mouth covered.

‘It’s a track. First clear one we’ve been able to make out. Can you identify it?’ The commander motioned with a finger, drawing along the entire half-metre length of the deep footprint. Mack scrunched his flattened features and scrutinised it intently. Few Catachans could claim intellect high enough to qualify them for a position within the Administratum or Departamento Munitorum, but Mack’s development was notably arrested. Not that it mattered to Brigstone or the rest of the squad: what he lacked in one area he more than made up for in others. Not only was Mack a one-man heavy bolter team, but in the three years since they’d been stuck on Pythos he’d taught himself to identify the native fauna from just their spoor, droppings or bite pattern.

‘Looks like a carovis, chief. Big one too,’ Mack said after some deliberation.

‘You sure?’ Brigstone asked. Carovis were far from the biggest predators to roam Pythos but they usually stuck to the abundant hunting grounds deep into the Deathglades or out on the open plains of the Scorched Savannah. For one to come this close to a populated area was rare but if Mack was correct, this would be the third one in a week to get within twenty kilometres of Atika.

‘Sure.’

Brigstone took him at his word. When the Catachan 183rd had found themselves stranded on Pythos en route to the Maelstrom, many had scoffed at Tank Commander Piet Brigstone’s idea to retrain some of the men as beast riders. It didn’t take long for them to come around to his way of thinking – almost thirty Chimeras and Sentinels lost beneath the swamps and rampaging carnivores accounting for several hundred souls will focus the mind like that – and it was at times like this that the patrols,

or rather the native wildlife, were worth their weight in ration packs. Even if they didn't pacify the creature on their way back to Atika base, the perimeter guard could be doubled overnight and heavy weapons mounted in the sentry towers. The carovis wouldn't make it within two hundred metres of the city.

'C'mon. Let's get hunting!' said Kotcheff, one of the previously silent Catachans, enthusiastically. His sweat-soaked bandana was tied around his forehead and his moist, close-cropped scalp glistened in the late evening light. He was daubed from head to toe in mud, mirroring his fellow troopers, and his lasrifle hung at his side. Also mirroring the other squad members, one hand rested on the weapon's butt ready to swing it into action at the first sign of trouble.

'Alright, but let's not take any stupid risks. If it's steak for breakfast then let's all be around to enjoy it,' said Brigstone. Though the 183rd had enough rations and equipment to last for months and bulk freighters brought in fresh supplies every few weeks from nearby agri-worlds, unsurprisingly most of the Catachans preferred the taste of real meat. With no livestock able to survive on Pythos thanks to the predations of the numerous feral beasts that shared it with the ruby crystal miners and Imperium soldiery, the only time fresh meat was ever on the menu was when patrol bagged one of the creatures. If Brigstone and his men could make it back with a few slabs of carovis, none of them would have to pay for drinks for the next month.

Mounting up, the six Catachans headed back towards the planetary capital, the sun slowly sinking behind them.

Like most of the surface of Pythos, the landward side of Atika was made up of swamps and marshes from which sprang vast thick-trunked trees, the canopies of which sat hundreds of metres above ground level, obscuring most of the planet's harsh sunlight. Despite the blessed respite from the biting heat, temperatures below the cloud cover could still reach the limits

of human tolerance, and a blanket of warm steam hung ominously above the stinking black water.

Brigstone and his men were ever vigilant for the predatory fauna that could emerge from the fog at any moment and devour a man whole but the flora also posed a danger. Great tentacle-like creeper vines were a constant threat as were the bulbous pods that grew at the base of trees ready to explode in clouds of choking spores at the merest hint of movement. Even the swamp itself was deadly; if it wasn't the thick viscous mud attempting to suck the unwary to their doom, it was the chemical reaction between agents in the water and the air, turning the steam to acid and dissolving anything that came into contact with it.

As the Catachans slowly made their way back to Atika along one of the known solid paths through the swamp, that was what Brigstone was particularly alert for.

Each member of the squad had their assigned task on the patrol. Brigstone was keeping an eye out for signs of acid-steam: bark stripped from trees, bare patches of foliage. Cimino was on vine duty and every once in a while the 'rookie', as he was known to the rest of the squad for his not-quite five years of service, would be forced to loose off a shot to prevent one of the tendrils bringing down an arbosaur, much to the ire of the others who thought the shots were scaring off their quarry. Zens was on guard for any other threatening plantlife while Mack and Furie were detailed with looking out for carovis. Kotcheff brought up the rear, alert for signs of enemy activity.

Though this was ostensibly a peacetime operation, the 183rd simply waylaid and killing time until new transports could make it through the warp and relay them to their theatre of war, the words 'peace' and 'time' formed an oxymoron at the twilight of the 41st millennium. The enemies of the Emperor were all about and a moment's laxity could cost them dear. Many a Catachan rested in the dirt feeding worms after thinking that because the regiment wasn't at war, the war would pass them by. The

commanding officer of the 183rd, Colonel 'Death' Strike, had survived for more than a decade in service to the Emperor from not thinking that way, and he drilled it into all of his commanders, who in turn instilled that same ethos in the men they led into battle.

A crash in the distance brought them all to attention.

At the head of their formation, Brigstone raised a hand and the other Catachans brought their beasts to a halt behind him. Those with lasrifles unslung them and raised them to their shoulders, barrels aimed into the jungle ready to shoot at the first thing to emerge from it. Mack checked the action of the heavy bolter pintle-mounted to the saddle of his arbosaur. Seconds passed before another crash, closer this time but still some distance off.

'It's coming from that direction,' Zens said in a stage-whisper, her half-ink, half-flesh arm pointing to the left of where they'd come to a halt. As one, six weapons all turned to point in the same direction. Through the swamp haze, the tops of plants swayed as something moved beneath them. Closer and closer it came.

'Hold your fire. Hold your fire...' Brigstone's order was barely audible over the oncoming noise. The shaking foliage was moving closer at speed.

Twenty metres. Fifteen metres. Ten metres.

'Now! Now! Open fire!' Brigstone's last three words were drowned out by a crescendo of gunshots. Concentrated fire poured into an area no more than a few metres wide, shredding anything unfortunate enough to come into the kill zone. As the barrage continued, several small saurians emerged from the undergrowth and darted straight past the mounted Catachans. Many of the tiny quadrupeds were wounded but a steady stream of them continued out of the jungle.

'Cease fire!' Brigstone signalled and after a few moments the message got through to the rest of his squad. They lowered their guns and looked on

as the last few diminutive beasts scuttled through the legs of the arbosaurs and into the treeline behind them.

‘Hatchlings,’ said Cimino dismounting and moving to pick up one of the dead creatures.’ They won’t make much of a meal on their own but with the amount we’ve—’

‘Wait. What were they running from?’ Brigstone said, interrupting the trooper.

He didn’t have to wait for an answer.

Heralded by a bellow of sheer pain, its approach masked by the noise of the hundreds of hatchlings fleeing in terror, the carovis loomed out of the swamp mist and decapitated Cimino with a brutal swipe of its massive claw. Before the unfortunate Catachan’s head had hit the ground, the beast drove forwards, toppling Furie’s arbosaur. The mount hit the floor with a thud, its neck snapping on impact, but Furie was thrown clear. He reached for the lasrifle that had landed in the mud beside him and swung the weapon to bear on the carovis. He squeezed the firing stud but nothing happened. Furie was about to try again when the sky above him went dark and an enormous foot, the same one that had made the print they found earlier, hovered above him poised to deliver a crushing blow.

Heavy bolter fire rang out followed by impact thuds. Furie recoiled as the carovis’s foot exploded, showering him in blood and gore. The beast roared again and unsteadily turned to direct its attention on the source of its pain. Readjusting his firing angle, Mack rattled off a flurry of shots into the beast’s chest, opening up rents in the thing’s orange-scaled flesh and bringing it to its knees. It tried to cry out again but its scream was curtailed as Brigstone, Kotcheff and Zens concentrated their las-fire at the freshly opened wounds, internal organs cooking-off under the intense heat of their energy weapons.

Prone and helpless, the carovis’s breathing was ragged but even at the edge of death, its claws were still capable of inflicting devastating

damage. Manoeuvring around the beast in a wide sweep, Brigstone unsheathed the dulled blade of his combat knife and positioned its tip at the soft, fleshy area where the saurian's spine attached to its skull. The commander braced himself but, just as he was about to force the blade through muscle into brain matter, he noticed the look in the beast's eye. Where he had expected to see rage and primal fury, instead he found what could only be described as terror. Both hands on the hilt of the knife, he drove the weapon in with all of his considerable strength and the beast breathed its last.

Wary that the carovis might be one of a breeding pair or part of a larger pack, it was several minutes before any of the Catachans spoke or lowered their weapons. Once the sound of the hatchlings had trailed off into the distance, they set about tasks with a resolve as dark as their knife blades. Mack and Furie rounded up the spooked arbosaur mounts while Kotcheff and Zens set to work on the still-warm corpse of the carovis. Brigstone found Cimino's headless body and retrieved the dead man's night reaper blade. After several minutes searching, he also found his detached head and recovered the Guardsman's bandana. Tying the red strip of cloth around the hilt of the knife, Brigstone placed a foot firmly on the fallen soldier's body and with several firm movements of his leg, rolled the corpse into the undergrowth. What the jungle takes, the jungle keeps, such was the Catachan way.

'Chief. Come and take a look at this,' Zens called, standing over the dead carovis.

Brigstone slid Cimino's blade into his belt alongside his own weapon and joined the two Catachans over by the felled beast. 'What have you found?'

'Not sure. These are the wounds Mack inflicted,' Zens said using her knife to indicate where chunks of flesh had been rent from the carovis's hide. 'And these are burns from our lasrifles. But this...' She pointed the

tip of her weapon to a blackened patch of scales across the rump. Pus oozed from between cracks in the hide and the smell of decomposing flesh was amplified in the stifling jungle heat. 'I have no idea what caused this.'

Brigstone crouched down for a closer look, but the oppressive scent of decay caused the battle-hardened veteran to retch and cover his mouth and nose. 'Leave it.'

'But, chief, Cimino died bringing this thing down. It seems wrong to let it go to waste,' Kotcheff countered.

'And if we take it back and feed it to the regiment, it'll kill a lot more than just Cimino.' As if to reinforce the commander's point, maggots spilled from the necrotised area. 'Now come on. We still have a chance to make it back before nightfall.'

Mack, who by now had rounded up their arbosaur mounts, led the beasts over and the surviving Catachans mounted up and set off in the direction of Atika at pace.

Before they'd even made it out of sight, the jungle of Pythos was feasting on the corpses they had left behind.

823959.M41 / Atika Hive, Pythos

The sun was retreating behind the Olympax Mountains by the time Brigstone's squad made it back to Atika. The late-evening twilight bathed the Catachan base in a crimson aspect as thousands of jungle fighters checked weapons, sharpened blades and filled packs with rations and ammo. As they rode through the high metal gates under the watchful eyes of the sentries up in their watchtowers, a few of the Catachans stopped their activity and cast hopeful glances in their direction but, upon seeing that Brigstone and his squad were not dragging a saurian carcass behind them, carried on about their business.

Something struck Brigstone as being odd: it was almost dark and the base should have been getting ready for lockdown. Instead, it seemed the

entire regiment were out of barracks and preparing to mobilise. A trooper he recognised hustled by and Brigstone hailed him.

‘Goldrick. What’s going on? Have we been given orders to ship out?’

The barrel-chested gunner stopped and looked up at Brigstone, elevated several metres off the ground in the saddle of his beast. ‘No, sir,’ Goldrick said, saluting briefly. ‘A shuttle came in just before sundown. Small thing but armed to the teeth. Covered in aquilas too and some other symbols none of us recognise.’ Both men looked skywards towards the spire of the hive city and the now occupied landing pad jutting awkwardly from its flank. ‘A bunch of bigwigs in robes disembarked demanding to see the colonel. They’ve been in with him for the past few hours but Strike immediately ordered us to battle stations.’

‘Robes? Were they Ecclesiarchy?’ Brigstone had encountered the Ecclesiarchy before, back on Catachan when the missionaries had arrived to reinforce the will of the Emperor on what they saw as nothing more than savages. The people of Catachan were loyal servants of the Golden Throne but they did not take fondly to having any kind of will enforced upon them, and after the first few shiploads of missionaries found adapting to life on the death world difficult, Ecclesiarchy mission ships started bypassing Catachan altogether. Not all who hailed from the planet were such reluctant devotees and there were those in the 183rd – the colonel and many of his officers included – whose worship of the God-Emperor was heartfelt and unstinting.

‘Don’t think so. Two of them were women so I’ve heard, but not Battle Sisters. Rumour is there’s more of them on the shuttle that haven’t come out yet. Some of Batawski’s squad are guarding it and swear blind they can hear people moving about in there.’ The gunner looked around furtively, keen to be getting back on with his duties.

‘On your way, Goldrick,’ Brigstone said. ‘But let me know if you hear anything else.’

The gunner scurried off in the direction of the hangars storing the regiment's tanks, leaving Brigstone and his squad to take their mounts back to the beast pens.

When they got there, somebody was waiting for the commander.

Brigstone dismounted and handed the reins of his arbosaur to Mack. The figure waiting by the entrance to the pens snapped off a quick salute which Brigstone returned.

‘Commander Brigstone. The colonel has asked me to escort you to him the instant you got back in from patrol.’

Unlike Brigstone and his squad, the newcomer wore a sleeved khaki jacket with brass buttons fastened right up to the lapel over which rested an aquila symbol affixed to a chain. In place of a bandana was a red beret, a brass likeness of the Catachan regimental symbol pinned to it. His grizzled features were assuaged by the smoothness of his chin but the cuts to his cheeks suggested a man unused to shaving.

‘Major Thorne. The colonel really must be receiving distinguished guests to get you dressed up in ceremonial togs. You look more like a Vostroyan than a death world veteran,’ Brigstone smirked.

The older man shook his head and scowled before breaking out into a wide, toothy smile.

‘You don’t know the half of it, Piet,’ he said, clasping the commander’s hand and locking forearms together in a traditional tribal greeting. He glanced cautiously at the rest of Brigstone’s squad. ‘Can’t say any more now. Strike will fill you in when we get up there.’

‘I just need a few moments, Eckhardt.’ Brigstone motioned to the extra blade tucked into his belt. Both men stopped smiling.

‘Who was it this time?’

‘Cimino. Carovis came out of nowhere and took his head clean off.’

Thorne nodded grimly and breathed a sigh of relief.

Back on their home world, the Catachan maintained strong tribal traditions and structures, and this carried over to the regiments drawn from the death world. Whereas the tribe would elect a headman, the regiment would elect its own captains, sergeants and other ranking officers and entire regiments could be drawn from relatively small geographical areas. The 183rd hailed almost entirely from a tiny archipelago chain in Catachan's southern hemisphere and as a result, many squads were made up of men related to each other. Cousin fought alongside cousin, brother alongside brother and quite often served under an uncle or, in exceptionally rare circumstances, a grandfather. None of the men in Brigstone's squad were blood relatives but Thorne's nephew fought under his command.

'How's he doing?' Thorne said motioning with his head in Mack's direction.

'You worry about him too much, Eckhardt. He's as strong as an ox and has the heart of one too. Show me a braver man in this regiment and I'll show you my arse.'

Thorne threw back his head and laughed, dislodging his unfamiliar beret and causing it to slip back over his bald pate.

'Go on,' he said, readjusting his headwear. 'Do what you need to do. I'll wait here for you.'

Brigstone nodded solemnly and headed for the clearing around the back of the beast pens. Hundreds of red bandanas fluttered in the warm breeze, each one tied to the hilt of a knife that had been thrust into the dry ground, constant reminders of those Catachans already claimed by Pythos. Carefully weaving his way between the memorials, Brigstone found a bare patch of earth and pulled Cimino's knife from where it had been sheathed at his belt. Kneeling, he stabbed down sharply and embedded the knife at a perfect vertical angle before returning to Thorne.

‘Right, let’s go and see what’s got everybody so worked up,’ Brigstone said, following the major to the base of the spire.

To the few souls in the Imperium who had ever heard their name uttered, the Inquisition were nothing more than a myth, a legend of a bygone era used by mothers and fathers as a bogeyman to scare wayward children or as a convincing lie by carousing drifters to work their way into another’s bed. Many a child has gone to bed terrified that the Black Ships would come to claim them in the night, just as many a heart has been broken upon waking to find that the agent of the Ordos who had shared their bed and promised them so much had disappeared under the cover of darkness.

To others, those unfortunate few, the Inquisition were quite real and, as a force within the Imperium, highly destructive. Few who had dealings or even brief contact with the Ordos came away unscathed. At best, lives were left in tatters or people displaced once their usefulness to an agent of the Throne was at an end. At worst, it resulted in death, not only of individuals but of entire worlds, planetary systems and cultures.

Up until two hours ago, Colonel ‘Death’ Strike of the Catachan 183rd sat squarely in the camp of those who believed the Inquisition was a myth, the subject of conjecture and speculation by Imperial naval ratings with too much time and too big a drinks ration on their hands, or regimental lags who knew a trooper who once knew a trooper who was seconded by an Inquisitorial agent. In light of what was to follow, Strike would look back and wish that it had ever remained so, but for now his most pressing concern was that not one, but three of these ‘myths’, clad in identical crimson robes, stood in his command room and were making very real demands of him.

‘It is a simple request, colonel,’ said Inquisitor Mikhail Dinalt, idly pacing the room as if it were his own office, his crimson robes flowing behind him. ‘I need to commandeer three of your Chimeras and their crews to take us deep into the jungles of Pythos and assist me and my team in the recovery of an...’ He paused, considering what to say next. The two

similarly robed women accompanying him looked on impassively. ‘An object.’ He let the word hang there euphemistically.

‘My lord, with the greatest respect, that is a far from simple request.’ Strike had faced down Catachan devils back on his home world and lived not only to tell the tale, but also to wear their teeth on a chain around his neck. Although he’d just become aware of their existence, he would not be cowed by the Inquisition.

Dinalt rose to his full height, a few centimetres taller than the taut figure of the colonel, and moved his face so close to Strike’s that the Catachan could feel the inquisitor’s breath upon his cheeks.

‘If I so willed it, colonel, I could bring your entire regiment under my command and march every single one of them out into the jungle to find that which I seek,’ said Dinalt. From under her cowl, Brandd smirked. Tzula, who had grown to despise the woman more with each passing day, cast her a disapproving glance.

Strike pulled his shoulders back and expanded his chest. What the colonel lacked in height over the inquisitor, he made up for in girth. ‘And if that was your intention, you would have done it already.’

Dinalt arched an eyebrow.

‘You work for an organisation so secret that until you showed up on my shuttle pad, I thought it was as real as a two-metre tall ratling, a commissar with a conscience, or a necron.’

Tzula looked as if she were about to say something then thought better of it.

‘The last thing you want is ten thousand Catachans scouring the surface of Pythos for this “object” you’re after,’ Strike continued. ‘Hell, there are men standing guard outside this command centre right now who have seen the three of you and still don’t believe that the Inquisition is real, and I’m fairly confident that that’s how you’d like things to stay.’

Dinalt was visibly impressed.

‘I’m not being difficult over the Chimeras, I’m being prudent. I’ve been stuck here for three years and believe me when I tell you that all the good a personnel carrier is going to do you out in those swamps is make you a nice big coffin.’

‘Why haven’t you modified them for amphibious use?’ Brandd scoffed. ‘Surely that would have been the first thing you should have done when you became aware of your situation.’

Strike overrode his first, potentially suicidal, reaction before saying, ‘That may be how you get things done in the Inquisition but the reality for the Imperial Guard is very different, my lady. Even if we did have the necessary parts to make those modifications, we don’t have any tech-priests to carry them out. And if we had the means to ship them to a forge world we might as well head towards the Maelstrom, which is where we were going before we got waylaid here.’

‘What happened to your tech-priests? A mechanised brigade should have had Mechanicus adepts assigned to it,’ Tzula asked.

‘They’re dead,’ Strike stated plainly.

‘What, all of them?’ Tzula responded.

‘My lady, this is a death world on a par with Catachan and casualties among my own men have still been high. Those Imperial personnel without death world training didn’t last very long. The Administratum clerks, tech-priests, even the commissars didn’t make it to the end of our first year on Pythos.’

‘An Imperial Guard regiment without commissars to instil discipline? Unheard of!’ Brandd said incredulously.

‘It’s more common than you think, my lady,’ Strike said, before adding quietly, ‘especially with us.’

‘I suppose that explains why their colonel is an insubordinate oaf,’ Brandd said turning to Dinalt.

Strike had survived the barbs of a spiker; he wasn't about to be stung by one from the blonde inquisitor. 'Although our tanks have proven inoperable in the local environs, a detachment of my men have tamed some of the native saurians and are using them as mounts. Not as fast as Chimeras but adept at navigating the narrow paths through the Deathglades nonetheless.'

There was a loud rap on the door of the command centre.

'Enter,' Dinalt said before Strike could open his mouth. Thorne opened the door, saluted sharply, then stood to one side to allow Brigstone into the room. The commander entered and saluted the colonel, eyeing the three robed figures quizzically. Brigstone seemed entirely oblivious to his haggard appearance and poor personal hygiene after a day in the saddle.

Brandd gagged and put the back of her hand to her mouth and nose, eliciting a smirk from Strike. Thorne closed the door behind them.

'My lord, this is Commander Brigstone. He leads the detachment I was telling you about,' Strike said.

Brigstone was about to salute but upon hearing the word 'lord' was unsure whether he should bow instead. In the end he did nothing and simply stood there.

'This man can be trusted, yes?' Dinalt asked.

'*All* of my men can be trusted, lord,' Strike countered.

The inquisitor addressed Brigstone directly. 'These beasts you have tamed, do you have enough of them to carry the six of us?'

The tank commander was momentarily confused, but remembered what Goldrick had said about there being others still on board the shuttle.

'We have a few spare arbosaurs, my lord, but they are tricky beasts to ride, certainly for a novice,' he said to Dinalt's dismay before adding, 'They are quite large creatures, though, and it would be possible to double-saddle them and have your people ride with mine.'

Dinalt's mood, which had been sombre and business-like ever since he'd entered the command centre, lightened. 'Excellent. There's that Catachan adaptability I've heard so much about. How soon can you have the beasts ready, commander?'

'I'll make sure my men are ready for you at dawn's first light.'

Dinalt nodded his appreciation at the colonel.

'Lord inquisitor?' Strike said, causing Brigstone to grow pale at the realisation at who he had just been speaking to.

'Yes, colonel.'

'My men will do everything in their power to make sure you and your team make it back in one piece. Can I count on you to ensure the same for my men, lord?'

The inquisitor shared a look with the two women before answering.

'Naturally, colonel. I will treat your men as if they were my own.' With that he swept from the room, cape billowing behind him. The two women started to follow him out but Brandd stopped on the threshold and turned back to the colonel.

'Colonel "Death" Strike? I take it "Death" is an honorific and not your given name?' she asked.

'It is. One earned during my previous campaign against the insurgents of Burlion VIII.'

'Hmm. Amusing,' she scoffed.

'I don't understand. In what way is it amusing, my lady?'

'The native tongue of the Burlion System is a variant of an old Franbaric dialect if I'm not mistaken.'

'That's right. It's spoken on the dozen core worlds and several of the outlying moons.'

'Then your honorific does not mean what you think it means.'

Strike remained calm, unsure if the woman was trying to bait him again.

'No. What does it mean?'

‘It’s a portmanteau word. The “de” part means “from” or “of the”, while “ath” means “dirt”. Literally translated it means “from the dirt”,’ she said with a grin before following Dinalt out of the command centre.

Tzula followed close behind her but she too stopped and spoke to the colonel. ‘I’d like to say she grows on you over time but she really doesn’t.’ The smile that followed was warm and genuine and she shared it with Brigstone too. ‘The Ordo Malleus is grateful to you and your men for your cooperation, colonel,’ she added before taking her leave.

‘Piet. You and your men go and get your heads down but I want you all to report to me before first light so I can brief you before your mission,’ said Strike.

‘Understood, sir,’ Brigstone said, saluting.

‘And cut that crap out. It may impress the “Most Holy Ordo” but it does nothing for me.’

Brigstone smirked and moved his hand away from his head before nodding his farewell to Thorne and heading back down to the barracks.

‘Would you like me to get the men to stand down from battle stations, sir?’ the major asked once Brigstone had closed the door.

‘Not yet, Thorne. Keep the regiment on full alert until I order otherwise.’ Strike stared out of the viewport at the rear of the command centre to where the first of Pythos’s moons was beginning to rise into the black night sky. ‘They may claim that they’re here on a mission of discovery but if only a fraction of the things I’ve heard about the Inquisition are true, trouble won’t be far behind them.’



CHAPTER TWO

829959.M41 / The Deathglades. One hundred and seventeen kilometres south-east of Atika, Pythos

‘I never claimed it would be easy to find,’ Brandd said, pulling her robes tight to shield herself from the driving rain. On the saddle in front of her, Kotcheff drove the arbosaur on from beneath a waterproof poncho while the beast itself plodded on, seemingly oblivious to the torrential downpour.

Another arbosaur moved up alongside Kotcheff’s, Brigstone deftly navigating the narrow walkways that threaded through the swamp but were now in danger of being washed away altogether. Seated behind him, the hooded figure of Dinalt replied. ‘This jungle is vast. Even if we sought something the size of a city, we could spend a lifetime hunting for it and still find nothing. Are you certain your interpretation was correct?’

‘My interpretation was flawless!’ Brandd snapped. ‘I’m certain my interpretation was flawless, Lord Dinalt,’ she corrected in a more level tone, suddenly aware of whom she was addressing.

It had been a week since Dinalt, his cohort and the Catachans had set out from Atika and, despite their mounts, progress had been painfully slow. No more than a couple of hours would pass before some threat would be thrown up by the jungle and precious time would have to be spent dealing

with it before they could move on. If it wasn't hungry saurians trying to make a meal of them, it was clouds of poisonous marsh gas or pit-trap glades barring their passage. The rain had been a new development, the skies opening after they'd broken camp that morning, but after hours of constant drenching, moods had darkened and tempers had begun to fray among the inquisitor's retinue. The Catachans, sheltered under their ponchos, seemed as unconcerned by the weather conditions as their mounts.

'If the auspex reads true, we should know if she's right in the next few hours,' Tzula said from the rear of the reptilian caravan. Unlike Brandd, Liall, Chao and Dinalt, Tzula was at the reins of her own arbosaur, her privileged upbringing on her home world meaning most of her formative years had been spent on the back of similar creatures.

It had been much to Brandd's chagrin that Tzula had taken to the beast like a natural and the blonde inquisitor's disgust at having to ride with Kotcheff was palpable. She'd barely said two words to the Catachan since they'd left Atika and the man wore a bandage around three broken fingers on his left hand. This was not as a result of the predations of the Deathglades but as a consequence of placing his hands a little too low below Brandd's waistline while helping her down from the arbosaur when they made camp on the first night.

'And besides,' Tzula said, taking her beast through the shallows of the swamp to draw alongside and then overtake Kotcheff and Brandd's mount. 'If we don't find anything we can always have her executed for incompetence.' K'Cee, his hairy arms wrapped tight around Tzula's waist, flashed a big toothy grin at the other acolyte as they passed her by. Brandd narrowed her eyes and scowled at the xenos.

'If we are going to find whatever it is you're looking for, it'll be tomorrow now,' Brigstone added. Despite a week spent in the saddle with Dinalt, Brigstone and his men still had absolutely no idea what the

inquisitor sought, such was his level of secrecy. The Catachans could be trusted implicitly to get Dinalt and company through the jungle but that trust extended no further. ‘Sun’s going down, so we’ll make camp at the next clearing we find with some degree of shelter.’

‘Agreed,’ Dinalt said. While Brigstone had full control of traversing the Deathglades, there was no doubt as to where command of the mission lay.

A sudden burst of heavy bolter fire from the head of the formation drew everybody to an abrupt halt.

‘Creepers,’ Mack yelled over his shoulder. ‘Just creepers.’ Behind him on the saddle, sodden robes clinging to his slight frame, Liall rocked back and forth, hands clamped firmly over his ears. Cautiously, the bulky Catachan placed his palm on the astropath’s shoulder and gently shook him. To everybody’s surprise, instead of freaking out Liall moved his hands away from his head.

‘Has it gone? Did you get it?’ Liall asked.

‘I know your eyes don’t work too good, Liall, but it wasn’t no saurian. It was just creepers.’

‘You got them though, didn’t you? They’re gone now?’

Mack smiled. ‘I got them good.’

Though reluctant to share a saddle at first, in the days since they’d left Atika, Liall had formed a bond with the young Catachan to the point where they were almost inseparable. Conversation between the pair was sparse but they always sat together when it came time to open the ration packs and when it was Mack’s turn to patrol the camp perimeter, Liall preferred to go out on patrol with him rather than sleep.

Zens’s arbosaur drew alongside them. ‘Sheesh, why don’t you two get a tent,’ said Chao, rainwater pouring off the brim of his hat and onto the back of Zens’s poncho. ‘I know I can’t wait to make camp and get Zens here out of these wet things.’ The female Catachan scoffed derisively and tapped the arbosaur’s flank with her heel, spurring the beast on.

‘Come on,’ Brigstone said. ‘That clearing up ahead looks pretty well sheltered.’ He urged his beast forward, followed by the others.

Less than an hour later, a half dozen tents stood pitched towards the edge of the modest clearing, rain spattering off their roofs causing puddles to form around the pegs and guy-ropes. With proximity alarms placed at regular intervals deep within the jungle, the Catachans sat around a small fire tucking into the roasted carcass of a small saurian they’d caught and playing cards, except for Furie who was on first patrol duty. Liall and Chao played with them, the blind astropath rubbing his thumb over each card dealt to him to identify the suit and rank. K’Cee watched their game in between stripping down and rebuilding Brigstone’s lasrifle, and every once in a while would draw the ire of the assembled card players by shaking the rainwater from his fur with such vigour that he not only drenched them but almost extinguished the fire too.

Coming so close to the revelation that the Inquisition were not the mythical organisation they’d previously believed them to be, the Catachans’ acceptance of the small xenos had been relatively straightforward and taken in stride. Aside from a few occasions where the owners of weapons had taken umbrage at K’Cee’s ‘borrowing’ of them, the death worlders grew to tolerate him. Once they realised how effective his modifications were, they started treating him almost as if he was one of their own.

On the opposite side of the clearing, beneath the shelter of vast leaves high up in the jungle canopy, Dinalt, Tzula and Brandd huddled around a smaller fire studying the tome that had not left Brandd’s side since the day she, Dinalt and nearly a full battalion of Cadians had battled across a daemon world to take possession of it. While Dinalt, Brandd, Chao, Liall and K’Cee escaped with both the book and their lives, the other half of their strike team and thousands of Imperial Guardsmen had not.

‘I still have my doubts about your interpretation of the text, Brandd. If this is indeed the *Hellfire Tome*, then why does it tell us exactly where to

find the stone? The written works of the Ruinous Powers usually come veiled in deceit and lies, not as point-by-point guides to finding unholy artefacts,' Tzula said, precipitation streaking down the sleeves of her bodyglove. Her robes hung suspended between two tree branches, drying in the warmth of the fire.

'It doesn't say "exactly" where the stone is, only where it is likely to manifest on any given occasion,' Brandd said, contemptuously. 'Based on previous appearances and using the formulae in the tome, I have a seventy-one per cent certainty that the Hellfire Stone is at those exact co-ordinates.' She pointed at the portable auspex unit strapped to Tzula's belt. 'Though for how long, I cannot be certain.'

'And you're happy to go along with this?' Tzula asked Dinalt.

'If there was only a one per cent chance of finding the stone, I still would have done everything I've done, and spent all those lives.' There was a solemnity to Dinalt's voice that neither woman had heard before. 'It will be another forty years before it manifests within the material realm again. We have the means to destroy it.' He motioned to the knife sheathed in Tzula's belt. 'If we now find ourselves with the opportunity then we must act.'

For the majority of Mikhail Dinalt's almost two centuries of service to the Golden Throne, he had been fixated with the Hellfire Stone, a debased artefact with rumoured power prodigious enough to open a portal directly to a point deep within the Eye of Terror. That its power remained only rumour was thanks in no small part to the vigilance and duty of Dinalt. As a junior interrogator, he and his then master, Thaddeus Lazarou, had infiltrated a cult bent on activating the stone and brought it down from within. Their mission was successful but Lazarou suffered grievous wounds. As the old inquisitor lay dying in his apprentice's arms, Dinalt was made to swear that he would devote his life to ridding the Imperium of the stone's threat.

Quickly rising to the rank of inquisitor, Dinalt dedicated himself to unearthing the secrets of the Hellfire Stone with a zeal befitting a far more seasoned agent of the Ordo Malleus. Where cults sprang up in veneration of the stone, Dinalt was there to put them down. Where Traitor Astartes warbands sought to harness the stone's power for themselves, Dinalt was there to counter them. And where scrolls, scriptures and tomes surfaced with even the merest mention of the Hellfire Stone, Dinalt was there to claim them.

His desire and single-mindedness paid off, and on its next manifestation on a backwater agri-world in the Segmentum Solar, he came within minutes of vanquishing it. With Chaos forces expending every effort to activate the stone, it was thanks to an eleventh hour interrogation of an Alpha Legion prisoner that Dinalt garnered the exact location of the stone's manifestation. Leading three entire Brotherhoods of Grey Knights and almost the entire Segmentum Solar Imperial battlefleet, Dinalt arrived in time to defeat the Archenemy fleets converging on the planet but was too late to destroy the Hellfire Stone, which frustratingly disappeared right before his eyes as he and the Grey Knights made planetfall.

The stone had eluded him that day, but his prisoner would provide yet more information beneficial to Dinalt's search. He told the inquisitor of the *Hellfire Tome*, the means by which he could locate the stone, and he told him about the knife, the means by which he could destroy it. And, right before he died under interrogation, he told Dinalt where to start looking for it.

So many lives sacrificed for the pursuit of a single goal. Was it worth it? If Brandd had done her job properly they would soon find out.

'Lord Dinalt...' Tzula motioned over her shoulder, her movement exaggerated by her flickering firelight-shadow against the trees. Behind her, Brigstone and K'Cee approached, the Catachan examining his newly modified lasrifle. Brandd hastily put the book back into the leather satchel

that constantly hung from her shoulder, while Tzula replaced her damp but warm robes.

‘Pardon the interruption, lord and ladies, but if you want to eat I’d suggest you do so now. Inquisition or not, a Catachan’s stomach respects no higher authority,’ Brigstone said.

‘My thanks, commander. I’ll take mine in my tent,’ Dinalt replied.

‘As will I,’ added Brandd heading briskly in the direction of her tent. Brigstone and K’Cee parted to allow her by, but as she passed them her thigh struck the xenos sending him sprawling backwards into the mud. Brandd carried on, either ignorant or inconsiderate of her action.

Brigstone offered K’Cee his hand and lifted the jokaero up onto his feet. Tzula puffed out her cheeks and pulled out her ears in imitation of Brandd’s facial features, to which K’Cee smiled.

‘Permission to speak freely, lady?’ Brigstone asked.

‘I wouldn’t have it any other way, commander,’ Tzula replied. K’Cee wandered off to the edge of the clearing where the rain was coming down more heavily and began to wash out the mud that now matted his fur.

‘That woman has the manners of a grox. As mean as one too. If she pulled that crap back on Catachan she’d have gotten a boot right to her—’

Tzula never did find out to which part of Brandd’s anatomy Brigstone would have applied his boot to, as at that moment two things happened simultaneously, both of which made the other redundant. The proximity alarms sounded and, felling trees as if they were matchsticks, the largest land creature on Pythos emerged from the jungle – a land dragon.

Abandoning their meal, the Catachans reached for their weapons, and within moments the clearing was lit up red from a sustained barrage. Tzula drew her plasma pistol and added her firepower to that of the Catachans as did Dinalt and Brandd, emerging from their tents with weapons blazing.

The land dragon roared as the shots hit its thick, leathery hide, more out of irritation than pain. Despite its mass and lack of legs, the thing moved

quickly, leaving wide channels in its wake as it slithered across the muddy ground. Its gigantic head, the size of an ogryn, lashed forward and Mack pushed Liall out of the way before the snapping jaws could grab hold of him. The Catachan opened up with his heavy bolter and temporarily drove the land dragon back into the treeline, so ferocious was his assault.

‘It’s trying to get around the back of us!’ Brigstone yelled, tracking the land dragon’s movement through the treeline. ‘Mack, same again when it re-emerges but concentrate your fire on its head. Everybody else do likewise.’ Then he added, almost as an afterthought, ‘Where’s Furie?’

The question soon became moot. Springing forth from the trees, the land dragon opened its fanged maw and lunged for Brigstone. Blood smeared its enormous pointed teeth and bits of meat and scraps of camouflage clothing nestled in its rancid gums. The Catachan commander scrambled backwards, struggling for purchase in the mud, but somehow he avoided being clamped in the beast’s jaws before finally toppling over backwards. The monster reared up ready to strike at Brigstone’s prone form, but Mack opened up at the land dragon’s head, supported by the combined plasma fire of Dinalt and Tzula. It slunk off back into the treeline, the smell of burning flesh trailing in its wake.

‘Does it have any weak points?’ Chao said, raising his voice to be heard above the din of battle and crash of falling trees. He was still sitting by the fireside chewing on a hunk of saurian meat.

‘The base of the skull where it meets the spine,’ Brigstone yelled back. ‘Why? Do you feel like helping?’ he added sarcastically.

Chao discarded the piece of meat and wiped his hands on the front of his trousers. ‘Sure, why not. But first,’ he stood up and drew the bolt pistols from their holsters at each hip, ‘let’s even the odds a little.’

Charging back into the clearing, the land dragon kept its head down as it headed for the lone figure standing by the fire. With less than ten metres between Chao and the beast, he loosed off a shot from each pistol, both of

which found their mark. The bulbous orbs of the land dragon's eyes exploded, showering those nearby in gore. For the first time its roar was one of pain. It thrashed wildly, narrowly avoiding crushing the panicked arbosaurs tethered to a tree, collapsing tents and extinguishing fires. The Catachans and Dinalt's retinue made for the trees.

Chao did likewise but rather than cowering behind a trunk like Liall, or using it as cover to fire from behind like everybody else, he holstered his pistols and began to climb. The sheer size of the trees caused a wide pattern to the bark, big enough for a man to place his hand or foot into, and Chao's progress upwards was rapid. Reaching the lowest set of branches – still some ten metres above the jungle floor – he clambered onto one and, hanging upside down, ventured out using both his hands and feet so that he was suspended over the clearing.

Predicting what he was attempting to do, the others took up positions so that the beast was completely surrounded and used their fire to force the blinded creature into position below Chao. With the beast directly beneath him, Chao let go of the branch and, spinning in mid-air, landed on the land dragon's neck. Ignoring the pain from where several of the barbs that ran along the beast's back had pierced his flesh, Chao hung on with one hand while drawing a bolt pistol with the other. Sensing that some parasite had attached itself, the land dragon thrashed and bucked erratically, trying to dislodge its unwanted passenger. Chao held firm to one of the barbs and, once the thrashing had abated, placed the muzzle of his weapon at the apex of the land dragon's spine and discharged three rounds into its brain. Instantly, the beast stilled, crashing to the floor of the clearing with a wet thud.

'Well, look at that,' Chao said, jumping down from the dead thing's back. He winced upon landing, obviously aggravating his numerous wounds. 'I just bagged the biggest living land predator on this whole dirtball.' The last part was aimed at Zens in a transparent attempt to

impress her. She, along with the others, came out from the trees to examine Chao's trophy.

'Come back and see me when you've killed its mother or father,' she said to Chao as she turned away to see what she could salvage of the camp. 'This one was only a baby.'

830959.M41 / The Deathglades. One hundred and nineteen kilometres south-east of Atika, Pythos

The heat of the morning sun roared furnace-hot, turning the pooled rainwater into steam, which in turn formed a mist that reached right up to the jungle canopy overhead. Visibility was almost zero and so Tzula rode at the head of the pack with the other riders in tight formation behind her, the auspex guiding her where eyes could not. None of them spoke. Though they had been fortunate the land dragon had only caused one fatality, the Catachans were still smarting from the loss of one of their own.

Brigstone's recovery of Furie's knife from the jungle had helped matters, but Brandd's subsequent petulance upon discovering that just two of the tents were salvageable and she would have to share was insensitive even by her standards. At one point during her outburst, Tzula was certain that if any of the Catachans had moved to strike Brandd, Dinalt wouldn't have done a thing about it.

'How much further?' Dinalt said quietly as Brigstone pulled their shared arbosaur alongside Tzula's. His whisper was more out of respect than at not wanting to be overheard.

'We should be right on top of it according to the auspex, but I think this moisture is playing havoc with our equipment,' Tzula said. Right on cue the screen of the handheld device flickered as it recalculated their position. 'If we split up we'd be able to cover more of the area.'

Dinalt looked to Brigstone.

'Splitting up's not a good idea, lady. With visibility this poor we'd be relying on our ears for signs of approaching predators and not all of them are as noisy as a land dragon,' Brigstone said. He looked up at the leaf

cover high above. ‘We can maybe think about splitting up in another couple of hours once this mist has burned off. Unless we’ve already found what you’re looking for by then,’ he added leadingly.

‘Give it another hour, then we’ll dismount and search the area on foot,’ Dinalt said ignoring both Brigstone’s advice and his attempt to fish for information.

‘Hey, boss?’ Chao called out from somewhere in the humid fog. ‘We got time for a quick stop?’

The inquisitor sighed and motioned for Brigstone to draw their mount to a halt. ‘Don’t be long,’ Dinalt said. Behind him, Chao, and a couple of the Catachans taking advantage of the break, dismounted and headed into the trees, their feet splashing in the quagmire underfoot as they went.

Only a few seconds passed before the wet footsteps came back in the opposite direction.

‘Boss,’ said Chao, peeling out of the mist flanked by Zens and Kotcheff. ‘I think we’ve found it.’

830959.M41 / Atika Hive, Pythos

Colonel Strike was signing off on the latest batch of paperwork to cross his desk when Major Thorne entered the command centre. Instead of the formal attire he’d worn to greet the inquisitor and his retinue the previous week, Thorne now wore the more familiar olive drab vest and bright red bandana of a death world veteran. He approached the colonel without a salute.

‘We’ve lost contact with Mauscolca Primus,’ Thorne stated. ‘No communications in or out for the past two days and a Valkyrie due to carry out a squad rotation is hours overdue back from there.’

‘Sure it’s not just the weather? Those storms last night could have knocked out comms and any Valkyrie pilot worth his stripes isn’t going to try and land in that.’ Strike got up from his desk and moved to the

viewport, looking out over a blanket of grey mist that stretched all the way to the horizon.

‘We’re unable to reach Krensulca Hive either and the watch stations at Sepulture and Hollowfal haven’t yet reported in this morning.’

‘The storms—’

‘I checked the meteorological reports and conditions were near-perfect at Sepulture and Hollowfal,’ interrupted the major.

‘Atmospherics? Solar activity is constantly affecting the vox-links.’

‘Why is ours still operational?’ Thorne gestured to the vox-array at the opposite end of the command centre where three operators sat busily adjusting gauges and dials.

The gravity of what the major was implying was now apparent to Strike. ‘You think this is deliberate? That they’ve been targeted?’

‘Without the feeds from the long-range auspexes at Sepulture, we’re blind to anything moving in-system and if Hollowfal has gone too then we have no comms with anything in orbit.’ Thorne paused. ‘Do you think it’s greenskins, sir?’ His words were tinged with excitement.

‘Unlikely. If it was orks, they’d already be storming the base of the hive by now. Subterfuge and sabotage never was their thing. No, this is something different. I don’t know what yet but I’ll bet you a year’s rations that it’s got something to do with that inquisitor blowing through here.’

‘What are your orders, colonel?’

Strike now addressed the personnel of the command centre, many of whom had already started listening in on his conversation with the major. ‘Move the entire hive to combat readiness and have Valkyries ready to be in the air as soon as the mist lifts. Prep three dozen Leman Russes and station them around the base of the hive. Get the astropaths to raise Battlefleet Demeter and put them on standby.’ Despite almost three years of inactivity, war was second nature to the colonel – as it was to all men

and women of Catachan – and knowing what to do in a situation like this came as naturally as breathing to him.

‘Anything else, sir?’ Thorne asked, activity in the command centre already increasing.

‘Pray,’ he said simply. ‘If this isn’t the weather playing tricks on us then pray to the immortal God-Emperor for us all.’

830959.M41 / The Deathglades. One hundred and nineteen kilometres south-east of Atika, Pythos

Leaving the Catachans behind to guard the perimeter, Chao passed through the mist and out into the jungle clearing, Dinalt, Tzula and Brandd in lockstep behind him. One second they were enmeshed in the warm, clinging haze, the next visibility cleared as they stepped out into bright sunlight. Tzula looked around her at the wall of fog that terminated on the threshold of the treeline, as if the swamp vapour dare not encroach on this place, and directly up at the clear blue sky. Chao unfastened his holsters, wary of any unseen danger while Dinalt and Brandd fixated on the object in the centre of the tract.

Twice the length of the average human and half as wide, a flat, grey stone no more than half a metre in height lay rooted in the muddy ground. No weeds or vegetation grew around it and no moss coated its rough surface, but other than that, the thing looked entirely normal. If it weren’t for the obviously unnatural condition of its surroundings, it could easily have been mistaken for a natural feature of the jungle floor. Brandd paced around the stone, studying it warily. Dinalt approached it slowly.

‘This is it?’ asked Tzula. ‘I expected something, well, scarier. You know, all spikes and pustules, burning with the unholy green flame of the warp and screaming blasphemous litanies from a thousand fanged maws.’

Brandd scoffed. ‘Not all tools of the Archenemy are so obvious. The works of the Dark Powers can take many forms.’

‘Yes,’ Dinalt replied, seemingly mesmerised. ‘It’s exactly how I remember it.’ His gaze lingered on the stone for agonising moments before he snapped back to reality, suddenly aware of his surroundings again. ‘Commander Brigstone,’ he called.

‘Yes, my lord?’ came the reply from out of the mist.

‘Tether the beasts and have your men stand ready. Liall. K’Cee. You will remain there.’

‘You’ve found what you’ve been seeking, lord?’ No reply was forthcoming. ‘As you command,’ Brigstone acknowledged.

‘The knife, Tzula,’ Dinalt ordered, taking his eyes off the rock for the first time since entering the clearing and turning to his apprentice.

‘You don’t want to study it first, master?’ Tzula challenged, freeing the knife from its sheath.

‘I have spent a lifetime studying the Hellfire Stone and in all that time I have learned one thing above all others – it must be destroyed at any cost. Tzula, give me the knife.’

Deftly gripping the tip of the blade between her thumb and forefinger, Tzula offered the small knife to her master, handle first. Dinalt reached out a hand to take it from her but a crash of falling trees from within the jungle distracted them both before he could take possession. Drawing their pistols, Chao and the three inquisitors stood back-to-back around the stone, peering out into the jungle for signs of the oncoming predator. Vague silhouettes of trunks tumbling to the ground were evident in the haze but, strangely, were not accompanied by the thudding footsteps of a saurian. The felling trees drew nearer.

‘Over there. It’s coming from that direction,’ Dinalt said, aiming his plasma pistol towards the opposite end of the clearing from where they entered. From out of the mist a tree fell into the copse, its blackened dead trunk shattering as it made contact with the ground. Seconds later power armoured figures became apparent in the mist.

‘Traitor Astartes!’ Dinalt yelled swinging his pistol around to draw a bead on the largest of the armoured forms. Before he could squeeze the firing stud, there was a loud bang and an intense pain struck him between the shoulder blades, dropping him to his knees. Blood flowed freely from a fist-sized wound, and his breathing became ragged from where a round had passed straight through a lung.

Tzula turned, ready to shoot her master’s assailant but found that Brandd had an autopistol aimed at her head. ‘Give me an excuse.’

Rage boiled inside Tzula. ‘I had you figured wrong, Brandd.’

‘Really? How so?’

‘I always thought you were just a bitch. Turns out you’re a traitorous bitch,’ Tzula spat.

More figures hove into view from out of the jungle, weapons aimed at Chao, Tzula and the kneeling, bleeding figure of Dinalt. At their head was a bloated figure in ill-fitting Terminator armour that struggled to contain his corpulent bulk. Necrosis had taken hold of his features, rotting flesh hung from his cheeks and his nose, bone and all, had rotted away completely. As he passed through the vegetation on the fringes of the clearing it shrivelled and died, leaving only desiccated husks in his wake. Flanking him were half a dozen equally pestilent figures each wearing standard power armour, albeit warped by the corruptions of the Plague God. Each one of them carried a bolter as ravaged as their armour.

‘It seems your agent did not let us down, Morphidae,’ the Terminator-armoured figure said. His voice had a thick, wet quality to it that sounded as if it was being spoken from the bottom of a swamp.

An ancient, wrinkled figure in ragged brown robes drew alongside him. Small even by human standards, the newcomer was dwarfed by the Traitor Marines he stood amongst. He carried a gnarled stick that came up to his shoulder but his movement was fluid and unhampered, suggesting that it was not to aid his walking. ‘The Davinicus Lycae seldom fail our masters,

Lord Corpulax.’ In contrast to the Plague Marine, the old man’s voice was like a dry wind blowing through a graveyard. He opened his mouth and directed a toothless smile at Brandd. ‘Isn’t that right, Tryphena?’

‘Master, there are four Imperial Guardsmen along with an astropath and a jokaero in the jungle back there. None of them pose a threat but they should be dealt with nonetheless.’ Brandd’s haughtiness had amplified, emboldened by her treachery.

‘Take care of it. Spare the astropath, he may be useful, but kill the rest,’ said Corpulax ordering away two of the Plague Marines with a wave of an ungauntleted skeletal hand. They did as they were ordered and disappeared into the trees, swallowed up by the cloying mist. The hulking figure then turned his attention to the mortally wounded Dinalt. ‘Do you know who I am, inquisitor?’

‘Corp... Corpulax,’ Dinalt ventured, blood flecking his lips with every syllable. ‘You used to be... of the Consecrators Chapter but now you’re nothing more... nothing more than an animated corpse. A shambling husk blindly carrying out the bidding of his... vile master.’

Corpulax smiled, baring his sharpened teeth. ‘Very good, inquisitor. I’m pleased you know who I am, because I know who you are too, Mikhail Dinalt.’

Dinalt raised his head to look the Plague Marine directly in the face but said nothing.

‘I know that you are a fool who has become overcome by his obsession to find this,’ he pointed to the Hellfire Stone. ‘A fool who is so blind that he would believe anything and anyone, any scrap of information that pertains to the stone. A fool who believed the dying words of an Alpha Legionnaire intentionally left behind for you to find and interrogate; who believed that an agent of the Davinicus Lycae was actually the protégé of another member of his Ordo whom he’d oathed to take under his wing upon her master’s death; who believed that a simple, single book could

unlock the unfathomable secrets and enigmas of an artefact blessed by the Four.'

With each new revelation, more of Dinalt's will ebbed away from him. 'No... You're lying. The *Hellfire Tome*—'

'The *Hellfire Tome* is nothing but a fake,' Brandd said, sliding the volume out of her satchel. Its spine was split from where it had been opened and read, and the artwork on the cover had faded to the point where all that could be made out was the faint remains of an illustration of a crude locomotion device and a human figure. 'Well, not so much a fake but a different book altogether and not a very good one at that.' She tossed the book to Corpulax who caught it in his skeletal hand. It instantly turned to dust which the Plague Marine allowed to be carried away on the light breeze.

'No. I've... I've studied it my entire life. The stone... It's a gateway for daemons. A bridge to a fixed point within... within the warp,' Dinalt said through sharp intakes of breath.

'You narrow-minded fool. Two hundred years of study and you haven't scratched the surface of what the Hellfire Stone is capable of, the raw power it possesses. It is all things to all men at all times. A portal into the warp is the least of its abilities. It is a prison for daemons and the means by which a man can ascend to daemonhood. It is a destroyer of worlds and a creator of life. It is a thing of such pure, unrefined beauty and an abominable horror. Right now it is a lock, one that my master would very much like opening.' Corpulax crouched down low so that his face was almost in line with Dinalt's. 'I'd wager that all those years of study never told you it could be used as a lock. Don't you still hunger for knowledge, inquisitor? Don't you want to know how to open the lock?'

Blood loss was taking its toll on Dinalt and he rocked from side to side, struggling to stay upright. 'How... how do you open it?'

Impossibly quickly, Corpulax drew a serrated blade from his belt with his non-skeletal hand and placed it at Dinalt's throat. 'A sacrifice, inquisitor. A blood sacrifice.' He drew the blade across Dinalt's neck with such force that he almost severed the head and allowed the corpse to drop sideways onto the stone, blood fountaining from the severed artery and coating the dull surface. Chao made to step forwards but decided against it when Corpulax's Plague Marine bodyguards raised their bolters in his direction.

Tzula turned her head away, unwilling to witness her master's demise. 'You'll pay for this, Brandd. If it's the last thing I do, I'll watch you breathe your last,' she said through gritted teeth.

'You'd better hurry. By my estimate your lifespan can be measured in minutes at this point,' Brandd countered.

As the blood flowed into the grooves and runnels of the Hellfire Stone, it started to pulse and glow with an unnatural green ambience. Runes and characters from long dead blasphemous tongues formed upon its surface and a painful buzzing noise emanated from it. Just as the sound was about to become overwhelming, it ceased and the stone vanished. Tzula and Chao braced themselves for whatever horrors the unlocking was about to unleash, but it was all in vain as daemons did not suddenly materialise nor did hellfire rain down from the skies.

Corpulax chuckled wetly. 'The first seal is broken,' he said opening a vox-link. Relief was etched large upon Tzula's face – if there were more locks that needed opening there was still a chance to prevent Pythos's damnation.

Corpulax's next utterance rapidly turned that relief into abject terror.

'Inform Lord Abaddon he can begin landing his ground troops.'

Just as Mack could identify the native fauna by their spoor and footprints, three years out in the jungles of Pythos had taught Piet Brigstone to recognise the same by the noise they made as they moved through the

trees. Carovis were slow, lumbering bipeds, noisy creatures that found it difficult to sneak up on prey, whereas land dragons slithered along the ground but gave their presence away by bringing down trees as they went. What both of these creatures, and indeed all Pythosian land predators, had in common was that if you stood stock still with your feet on the jungle floor, you could feel the vibration of their movement from kilometres away.

As Piet Brigstone stood stock still with his feet on the jungle floor in the mist outside the clearing he had been ordered to guard, he could hear trees coming down in the distance but felt no vibration underfoot. Zens, Mack and Kotcheff unslung their lasrifles in anticipation of dealing with yet another angry death world inhabitant but Brigstone raised his hand and shook his head. Something felt different, something felt wrong.

‘Liall. You and K’Cee go wait with the arbosaurs but hide at the first sign of trouble,’ he hissed quietly. ‘The rest of you melt into the jungle.’ Even if the mist hadn’t been so low, the Catachans would still have instantly disappeared. One moment they were there, the next they were like phantoms in the green, malevolently haunting the jungle.

It did not take long for Brigstone’s prudence to pay off.

Through the haze, two shapes resolved themselves, and though none of the Catachans had encountered this particular enemy previously, the *Imperial Infantryman’s Primer* had taught them to recognise their outline: Chaos Space Marines.

Not wanting to call out and give away the element of surprise, and with visibility too poor for hand signals, Brigstone resorted to their old tribal hunting form of communication, bird calls. He made three squawks in imitation of the Catachan razorbill to signify ‘knives only, target once the kill is certain’ and received three identical responses by way of confirmation.

If the Traitor Marines were onto them, they weren’t letting on. ‘Split up. If you find them first, save some for me,’ a voice rasped wetly from out of the mist, followed by the sound of an armoured figure moving further

away. The speaker had given away his position and at that moment all four Catachan blades were poised ready to strike. Brigstone's opportunity came first.

A shadow in the mist formed only a few metres in front of him and, remembering what he'd been told by returning Catachan veterans who had faced this enemy before, he threw his knife aiming for the armour's weak spot. End over end, the Catachan fang flew until its tip made contact with the seal between helmet and body armour, sliding through the corroded material with relative ease. The figure made no sound as it fell to its knees, its voice now robbed of precious air, and as it flailed to remove the blade, a human shape detached itself from the mist and thrust another, identical blade into the Traitor Marine's throat. Gripping the hilts of both knives, Mack pulled them in opposite directions, opening the enemy's gullet and releasing a torrent of blood, pus and other vile substances. Forcing back the urge to gag, he tossed Brigstone's fang back to him and became one with the jungle again.

Confident that the other Plague Marine was not in close proximity and had not heard his comrade's murder, Brigstone addressed his squad in a whisper. 'We have to assume that the inquisitor and his team are either dead or captured.' He reached into the pack at his back and, after removing several items, set to work on the corpse of the Plague Marine. 'Here's what we're going to do...'

830959.M41 / Atika Hive, Pythos

'I want fresh pit traps digging and the spikes coating with whatever noxious substances you can find. This planet's been trying to poison us for the past three years. It's about time we start using that to our advantage.' Colonel Strike shouted to be heard above the din of tanks being manoeuvred into position. Behind him, the vast edifice of Atika Hive thrust upwards high above the dwindling mist and into the clouds. Before

him, the muddy plains that marked the approach to Pythos's capital buzzed with the activity of an army preparing for war.

‘What about the rest of the armour, colonel?’ Thorne asked, motioning for a squad of Catachans to carry out the colonel's order. ‘We can position twice as many around the hive if we have to.’

‘Keep the rest in reserve. Those Leman Russ are nothing more than fixed artillery platforms in these conditions and I won't risk losing any more than we have to.’ His point was driven home by a tank to his right skidding into position before sinking into the quagmire halfway up its treads.

‘Look. A meteorite!’ called out a young recruit, breaking off from rolling out razor wire on the ground in front of the battle tanks.

‘It's a shower,’ said another, shielding his eyes from the fierce sun and looking skywards.

Strike gestured for a nearby officer to hand him a set of magnoculars. Without the aid of the eyeglasses, it did indeed look like one of the not infrequent meteor showers to hit the planet. With these, it was a very different story. Streaking through the sky leaving fiery contrails in their wake were drop pods. Thousands upon thousands of drop pods. Strike adjusted the zoom on the magnoculars to try and identify the markings and almost instantly regretted it. Every single one of them was daubed with a golden eight-pointed star inset with an eye motif.

‘Sweet mercy...’ Strike uttered.

‘What is it?’ Thorne asked.

Strike handed Thorne the magnoculars. ‘I don't think you prayed hard enough, major.’

830959.M41 / The Deathglades. One hundred and nineteen kilometres south-east of Atika, Pythos

‘Pthirus?’ From behind the grille of his helmet, the Plague Marine’s words were garbled, and to Brigstone’s ears it sounded as if he was saying ‘virus’. The armoured traitor plodded on through the mire, his bulk causing him to sink further with every step forwards.

‘Pthirus?’ he said again, bolter swinging from side to side as he searched for his comrade. Covered by both mist and the trunks of trees, the Catachans drifted past him silently, towards their awaiting mounts and away from what was about to happen.

‘Pthirus?’ The Plague Marine’s tone was now one of surprise, having found his former squadmate face down in the muddy jungle floor. Somewhere in the distance, a bird called. He knelt down and with a bloated, gauntleted hand rolled the corpse over.

It was only when he heard the multiple *clicks* of pins being pulled from grenades he realised what a terrible mistake he had made.

‘I’ll take the knife now,’ said Brandd.

Her autopistol was aimed at Tzula’s head and the blonde acolyte held out her palm in expectation.

‘Don’t give it to her. Use it. Get away from here and—’ Chao’s words were abruptly cut off by the autopistol discharging. It took him a moment to realise that Tzula had not been the target and looked down to see a bloody hole where his stomach used to be, innards spilling out. ‘I... I...’ he said futilely, desperately trying to gather up the parts of his insides that had been displaced. He collapsed backwards into the mire. Brandd placed the still warm muzzle of her pistol to the side of Tzula’s head.

‘I’m dead either way.’

Tzula looked down at Chao, his eyes blinking wildly, still trying to stuff his guts back inside him.

‘In fact, I’m not sure why I’m not dead already,’ he said.

‘The ritual,’ Corpulax said. ‘It is... inexact. I wasn’t sure how much blood would be required and so you were useful. That usefulness is now at

an end, but if you cooperate I will grant you and your friend here a swift death. Choose to be difficult and the pain he is currently experiencing will be a mere fraction of that I will inflict upon you.'

Tzula looked again to Chao. Stomach wounds were the worst. It could take a person hours to bleed out, every moment in pure agony. 'How do I know you'll keep your word?'

'Because you can watch me blow his head off right before I do the same to you,' Brandd said with a grin. 'I won't ask again. The knife.'

Hesitantly, Tzula reached down to her waist and gripped the handle of the knife. She slowly slid it out of her belt and briefly considered using it as a weapon. Remembering the gun at her head, she placed it into Brandd's still open palm. The blonde woman regarded the blade with obvious delight.

'I'll take that,' rasped Morphidae. He moved closer to Brandd, the hem of his already filthy robes dragging in the morass beneath his feet, and stretched out a withered hand. Brandd did nothing for a moment and the old man narrowed his eyes in displeasure. Eventually, reluctantly, she passed him the knife. He gave a low moan, relief tinged with ecstasy and he looked upon the weapon greedily before placing it in the folds of his robe. 'My eternal gratitude, Lord Corpulax. For nigh on ten millennia, the Davinicus Lycae have sought to recover that which was once ours and now, thanks in no small part to you, it is—'

A huge explosion from the jungle behind interrupted the cult leader followed shortly after by the ruined form of a Plague Marine hurtling into the centre of the clearing from out of the trees. Two of Corpulax's bodyguard moved out of its path but another was not quick enough and caught the corpse of his dead comrade squarely in the chest, knocking him backwards and pinning him down.

Brandd's Inquisition training subconsciously took over and she took the gun away from Tzula's head to track the projectile.

It was the opening Tzula needed.

Dropping to her knees, she stuck out a leg and swept Brandd's feet out from beneath her. The blonde woman dropped like a dead weight, her pistol discharging harmlessly into the air. At the same instant, from the same direction the Plague Marine's body had blasted out of the jungle, five saurians emerged, riders on the backs of all but one. Whooping and hollering, the Catachans atop them discharged their weapons, the element of surprise accounting quickly for two more of the Plague Marines.

'Tzula! Jump on that one,' Brigstone yelled, indicating the riderless arbosaur. Tzula rose to her feet and unceremoniously barged Morphidae to the ground with her shoulder. The arbosaur was still some distance away and she sprinted across the clearing, avoiding both enemy and friendly fire. Mack, with Liall seated behind him, laid down covering fire and her route to the beast was unimpeded, the heavy bolter sending Plague Marines diving for cover. As her mount tried to dart past her, Tzula gripped the reins hard and brought the arbosaur to heel. She had just got one foot in a stirrup when she heard a female voice from behind her.

'So close, Tzula. So close,' Brandd said. She was no more than ten metres away from her target and her autopistol was levelled at Tzula. 'I'm really going to enjoy this.'

Before she could squeeze the firing stud, a single bolt pistol shot rang out, catching Brandd's shoulder with a glancing hit and forcing her to drop the weapon.

'Go... go now,' Chao said weakly from where he was still slowly bleeding out, smoking bolt pistol in hand.

Tzula looked upon her friend for one last time and smiled sadly before throwing her other leg over the arbosaur and snapping the reins. Seeing that Tzula was safely mounted, the Catachans ceased firing and charged for the edge of the clearing and the comparative safety of the misted jungle. Brigstone and K'Cee were first to disappear into the haze, quickly

followed by Kotcheff, then Mack and Liall. Zens wasn't so fortunate, her route out of the clearing taking her through a Plague Marine's line of fire. A short burst of bolter fire shredded her torso and dropped her corpse from the back of the arbosaur.

Ducking low to avoid the shots whizzing overhead, Tzula took a look back over her shoulder. Striding across the clearing, recovered pistol in hand, Brandd made her way over to the prone form of Chao. The last thing she saw before the fog enveloped her was the blonde traitor delivering one clean shot to the gunslinger's head.

With pained relief, she snapped the reins again and rode hard for Atika.

Corpulax was not quick to anger but, as he stood in the centre of the clearing looking around at the carnage wrought upon his bodyguard by a handful of mere Imperial Guardsmen, he could understand why some saw the attraction of following the Blood God. Four Plague Marines lay dead, another two needed the ministrations of a surgeon and the double-agent was bleeding from a shoulder wound. He thought about turning his ire upon her but, upon seeing the old man rising out of the mud with the help of his staff, knew that it would have more effect to channel his displeasure at the organ grinder rather than the monkey.

'This was supposed to have been simple, old man. Instead, four of the blessed are lost to us and one of Dinalt's acolytes has escaped. Lord Abaddon will flay your soul for this,' Corpulax said, his voice bubbling with rage.

Morphidae cleared his throat uneasily. 'The mission was a partial success. We have broken the first of the seven seals and soon the Damnation Cache will be opened. And besides,' he reached into the folds of his robe, 'after nearly ten millennia the Davinicus Lycae have reclaimed the athame... The Emerald Cave will be opened and its prisoner set...' His voice tailed off as he frantically patted his garb seeking the elusive blade. 'The knife. It was here. I had it only a moment ago!'

Brandd turned away, shaking her head in disbelief and disgust.

Corpulax advanced on the old man. ‘There is one thing you must remember while in the service of Abaddon the Despoiler.’ The towering Plague Marine placed his skeletal hand scant centimetres from Morphidae’s head. ‘You only ever fail him once,’ he finished allowing the tips of his fingers to touch the old man’s scalp, instantly turning him to dust.

Meanwhile, already over a kilometre away and heading back towards the planetary capital at speed, former thief turned Inquisition agent, Tzula Digriiz, checked her belt to make sure that the blade was still safely stowed there.



CHAPTER THREE

832959.M41 / The Cargo Port. Atika Hive, Pythos

As the sun broke over the horizon on the second day of the conquest of Pythos, Atika burned.

Battered by artillery and the twisted engines of war landed on the surface by the enemy, the spire blazed, a beacon in the half-light of dawn to guide the invaders. For a day and a half, Strike and the 183rd Catachan regiment had defended Atika Hive as if it were their own home world but still the enemy drove at them, forcing the beleaguered Guardsmen ever backwards. The civilian population, a little over ten thousand by Strike's reckoning, had been ordered into the vast network of tunnels that ran deep below the hive for their own safety and now, without collateral damage to worry about, the colonel found himself fighting a battle on two fronts.

The hive proper had been abandoned hours earlier as cultist and Traitor Legionary alike stormed through the hastily erected defences backed up by monolithic daemon engines and other debased servants of the Dark Gods, and so Strike had made the call to split his forces. Half of the regiment were valiantly keeping an escape route open to the Olympax Mountains ready for the inevitable retreat. The other half were desperately trying to hold the port long enough to load cargo ships – more accustomed to

carrying ore – with the regiment's armour so they could be ferried off to safety, held in reserve for the long war that would inevitably follow. Foul magicks had taken out Atika's astropathic choir, driving them all mad the instant they had tried to send out a distress call.

No outside help would be coming to aid the Catachans. This would be Strike's war to prosecute. He would not have it any other way.

'Colonel, we've just heard from the garrison at Olympax. No enemy contact yet. Khan's Hold and Beluosus are reporting the same,' Thorne said, scrambling behind the same ore container the colonel was using for cover. Strike leaned around the side of the huge metal box and let off two shots from his lasrifle, each one felling an onrushing cultist. 'Still no word from Mauscolca Primus,' Thorne added.

Strike unleashed another volley and yet more cultists were swept down before they could reach the Catachan lines. Thorne added his firepower as more enemy soldiers poured into the killzone. Though they were consummate jungle fighters, all Catachans prided themselves on their cityfighting abilities. 'They're hitting the major population centres first. Once they've taken the hives, they'll move on to the smaller settlements and outlying strongholds.'

Thorne continued firing, mowing down more of the seemingly endless tide of wailing, tattooed madmen. 'How do you know that?' he asked.

'Because it's good warcraft and exactly how I would have gone about invading this planet.'

Cries went up from their right and both men turned to see cultists breaching a section of barricade formed from stacks of unrefined ore. Although nearly two metres high, the enemy fighters were using the bodies of the dead as steps to climb over it, and several had already made it over the top. Leaving Thorne to man his section of barricade, Strike drew his Catachan fang and waded in. A brute of a man, bigger even than the largest Catachan, had two men pinned underneath him and was

battering them both with a makeshift club. Strike's first swipe of the blade took the cultist's hand off at the wrist, forcing him to drop his cudgel. The second opened his throat and killed him stone dead.

'Collapse the top section of the wall!' Strike roared, punching his blade through the chest of an onrushing cultist. Lending his strength to the effort of his men, Strike clambered up the barricade and placed his shoulder against the rocks. On his signal, a dozen Catachans pushed at once, sliding the top of the wall down onto the hapless cultists below. Those who didn't die instantly under the crushing weight of the ore were quickly mopped up by Imperial fire.

'Defend this until the very last moment and then fall back to the next line of barricades,' Strike commanded. The invasion of Pythos had been swift but the Catachans had been stuck here for three years and had been far from idle. Thanks to Strike's predilection for overpreparedness, Atika was as defensible as any hive in the Imperium. He was about to retake his place alongside Thorne when the portable vox-unit clipped to his belt crackled into life.

'Colonel Strike. This is Major Rayston. Do you receive? Over,' fizzed the voice in an accent that was clearly from Catachan's northern hemisphere.

Strike put the device to his mouth and pressed the switch on the side to speak. 'Receiving you loud and clear, Rayston. Are you keeping that escape route open for us?' Rayston had fought with distinction alongside the colonel in many of the key battles on Burlion VIII and when he volunteered to oversee the retreat, Strike had no qualms whatsoever about putting him in charge of the operation.

'Affirmative, sir. That wasn't why I raised you on the vox though.'

Strike ducked back against the cargo container to avoid a volley of shots aimed at him from the enemy lines. 'Then what is this? A social call?'

Even in the midst of a firefight, a Catachan's grim sense of humour very rarely deserted him.

‘No, sir. It's Brigstone. He's made it back and has the astropath with him.’

832959.M41 / The East Gate. Atika Hive, Pythos

It was difficult to determine who looked the most haggard as Strike leapt out of the still moving Chimera to greet Brigstone and the remnants of his jungle expeditionary team. The colonel bore the scars of battle: nicks and scratches from where he had got into close combat with the hive's attackers, scorch marks and burns to his shoulders where lasweapons had discharged in close proximity to him. Brigstone on the other hand was coated from head to toe in mud, as were the other four survivors. All of them bore chemical burns from where they'd charged incautiously through the noxious Pythosian swamps.

‘I don't know what surprises me more, the enemy attack or seeing you walk out of that jungle.’ Strike's words were mirthless. ‘When those drop pods started falling out of the sky, I feared the worst.’ He looked down at the exhausted band sitting wearily on the filthy ground. Mack sat alongside Liall, the astropath hugging his own knees and gently rocking while muttering quietly. K'Cee was slumped against an ammo crate. Large areas of fur were missing from his legs and arms from where acidic marsh gas had burned them away. Tzula sat staring out at nothing in particular, her jaw set rigid with determination. ‘I take it the rest of you—’

‘Didn't make it, chief.’ Brigstone finished the colonel's sentence for him. He rose to his feet and the two men clasped arms in greeting. ‘We lost Furie to a land dragon and Zens was killed by the enemy along with the inquisitor and the gunslinger. Kotcheff went only a couple of hours ago. Poor bastard breathed in too much swamp gas and disintegrated his lungs.’

‘You’ve had enemy contact in the Deathglades?’ If what Brigstone was saying was true, Strike’s theory about the enemy hitting population centres was in doubt.

‘A small force, no more than a dozen elite troops.’ Brigstone paused but realised that the incredulity of what he was about to say did not hold up to many of the other events of the past week or so. ‘Plague Marines. They were lying in wait for us as soon as the inquisitor found whatever it was he’d been looking for. The blonde was in on it too judging by the way she was shooting at us as we made our escape.’ The flight towards Atika had been swift and desperate, pausing only for short breaks before mounting up and continuing on, even during the hours of darkness. Tzula had not yet spoken about what had transpired in the jungle clearing.

Strike soon rectified that. ‘On your feet,’ he commanded Tzula.

She slowly turned her head to regard him but made no other movement.

‘I said, on your feet,’ Strike repeated.

‘I am an agent of the Most Holy Ordos, colonel. I am not yours to command,’ she said, regretting it instantly when she realised how much like Brandd she sounded.

‘I am de facto governor of this planet and, if you hadn’t noticed already, trying to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Archenemy. I don’t care if you’re an agent of any Ordo, a High Lord of Terra or have verified lineage to the God-Emperor himself. Men and women under my command are dying by the thousands out there and I think it has something to do with the mission your boss was on and whatever it is he was trying to find.’ He took a step closer to Tzula, invading her personal space. ‘So start giving me some bloody answers and start doing it now!’

Sighing with reluctance, Tzula stood up. Her bodyglove was torn and frayed, and her once neat corn row braids had started to unravel. She took a step back and looked the colonel straight in the eyes. ‘What I’m about to tell you—’

‘Yeah. Top secret. Beyond classified. I get all that. Now cut the crap and start talking,’ Strike snapped.

And so Tzula did. She told him why they’d come to Pythos, about her master’s lifelong devotion and how they’d come here to destroy the Hellfire Stone. And she told him how, thanks to Brandd’s betrayal, they had unwittingly aided the enemy. But in everything she told him, she was careful to leave out one very important detail.

‘So this “seal” that they opened, there are more of them?’ Brigstone asked once she had finished.

‘They said seven, though the nature of the remaining six and what they hold bound are not known to me,’ she said, honestly.

‘And Abaddon himself is leading the assault?’ said Strike. There was a very slight quiver to the colonel’s voice.

His question hung there a moment.

‘Yes,’ she said eventually, the weight and inference of her answer evident to all.

Strike eyed her suspiciously. ‘You’re holding something back. What aren’t you telling us?’

A man does not rise to command of an entire regiment of Catachans without being able to read people, and that was exactly what Strike was doing with Tzula. She briefly considered maintaining the deceit but carefully removed the blade from where it was safely stowed in her belt and held it out to show the two men.

‘My master entrusted me with this knife and also with its secrets.’

Brigstone looked to his own blade at his hip, then at the tiny thing in Tzula’s hand.

‘It is not a weapon, but I have no doubt that if it was used as such its effect would be devastating. Ever since my master...’ Tzula paused, before correcting herself. ‘Ever since my former master took me on as his

apprentice, he trained me in its operation so that when it came into his possession we could be ready to use it to its full potential.'

"Its operation"? It's just a bloody knife and not a very big one at that,' Strike scoffed. When it came to knives, few in the Imperium could rival those of Catachan for both enthusiasm and knowledge.

'As I said, this is not a weapon. Though it is capable of tearing through flesh and armour, its true purpose is to tear through reality and act as a bridge between worlds,' Tzula said, the conviction of her words disarming the two Catachans.

'You're saying that if you were to use it you could put a hole in reality and we could step right through it back to Catachan?' Strike said after the implications of what Tzula had just said became apparent.

'If only it were that simple. I could use it and be as likely to open a portal to a world within the Eye of Terror as I would Catachan. And besides, even if I could get you and your regiment back to Catachan, you're not the kind of man to run away and abandon this world to the forces of the Archenemy.'

Strike smiled, Tzula having read him as well as he'd got the measure of her.

'What is vital,' she continued, 'is that this blade does not make it into the hands of Abaddon or any of the enemy agents. Entire cults have spent millennia studying and coveting this blade and they know far more about its power and application than either Lord Dinalt did or any other faithful servant of the Golden Throne. In their hands they may be able to harness it so that rifts may be opened directly to Catachan, Cadia or wherever they choose. Even Terra.' Strike and Brigstone noticeably flinched at the mention of their home world. 'Catachans above all others know the true value of a good blade. This one could be worth as much as the Imperium itself, and so we must defend it with our lives until reinforcements arrive to liberate Pythos.'

‘There are no reinforcements,’ Strike said coldly. ‘The astropaths tried to get a message out as soon as the first drop pods hit but something prevented them. They went crazy and turned on themselves, ripping out each other’s throats with their teeth and clawing at the walls of the choir chamber until fingers wore down to knuckles. By the time Thorne got to them, the only ones left breathing had to be put down out of mercy.’

‘We’re on our own then,’ Tzula said.

‘Not necessarily...’ Strike turned to look at Liall, who was still sitting with his hands clasped around his legs.

‘He’s a single astropath. If an entire choir couldn’t get a message through, what makes you think he can?’

‘If a lone astropath was good enough for Dinalt’s purposes then I’m sure he’s more than capable of getting a message out to fleet command. And if we can get him to an astropathic chamber, his chances of success will be far greater.’

‘Hollowfal?’ Tzula said. ‘It’ll take weeks to reach there through the jungle.’

‘Weeks we can’t afford. That message has to be sent as soon as possible otherwise all any reinforcements will find on Pythos will be our corpses.’ Strike looked skyward towards the smouldering spire of Atika Hive.

‘You can’t be serious. Even if you could fight your way up there, he’ll never agree to it.’ Tzula looked forlornly upon the emaciated figure of Liall, his filthy robes swaddled around him as he talked to himself and rocked.

‘I have a feeling he could be persuaded,’ said Brigstone. ‘Mack? Come over here. There’s something I need you to do for me.’

833959.M41 / The base of Atika Hive, Pythos

Tzula’s sleep had been fitful and restless and she had awoken feeling as tired as she had done before Strike had ordered her and the rest of the

jungle survivors to get some sleep. No more than a few minutes would go by before the noise of another artillery barrage or missile strike would rouse her from her slumber and the continued chatter of small arms fire and distant enemy chanting from the frontlines made it an effort to get back to sleep. Not that Brigstone or Mack had the same trouble – an orbital bombardment could not wake a Catachan, or so they claimed – and K’Cee could grab some shuteye almost on command. Even Liall seemed to have little trouble entering a restful state, though his lack of eyes made it hard for Tzula to tell if he was truly sleeping or not.

Liall.

He had been part of Dinalt’s retinue before Tzula had been taken under her former master’s wing, and despite being less than useless – practically a liability, in fact – in a combat situation, his astropathic abilities had saved them on many occasions. Tzula was only here on Pythos because Liall had been able to signal for reinforcements, raise an evacuation or direct a precision strike so many times over she had lost count.

So why did she find it so easy to send him on his way to certain death?

Duty. Duty and revenge.

Dinalt and Chao were dead but the Lord Inquisitor’s mission was incomplete. The Hellfire Stone was lost, not to appear again for decades, the knife still needed protecting and there was still the matter of the remaining seals. The fact that the sky had not turned upside down, the atmosphere had yet to become pure warp-stuff nor had the planet’s population sprouted horns and cloven hooves, suggested that the enemy had not achieved that particular feat. Yet, as long as the seals remained unbroken, there was still a chance that she could stop them and gain some measure of vengeance while she was at it.

Nobody spoke as they trudged towards the makeshift entrance at the base of Atika Hive. Rayston had pulled some of his men away from keeping the escape route to the mountains clear to open up a corridor to the hive and, in between sporadic exchanges of fire with enemy zealots, to a man the Catachans all turned away from their emplacements and acknowledged

Mack and the squad he was leading. They weren't sure what to make of the little man in scruffy robes at their compatriot's shoulder mumbling away to himself, but if he was brave enough to make his way deep into enemy territory with only a dozen Catachans by way of bodyguard, he was worthy of their respect. Or pity.

To everybody's surprise, Liall had not protested in the slightest when Mack had asked him if he would go to the top of the hive to send the message. All that he had asked was for Mack to go with him to which the brawny Catachan had agreed without hesitation. Strike had shown similar decisiveness when he put Mack in charge of the mission and told him to go and find volunteers, but even the colonel was surprised when almost a hundred men had put themselves forwards. For the first time since the invasion, Strike began to have doubts – was this simply heroic camaraderie, wanting to stand by one of their own, or was it something much darker, that they'd given up hope and sought a quick death?

No. These were men and women of Catachan, born unto a world that had tried to strangle the life out of them since birth and where survival itself was a badge of honour. Sons and daughters of Catachan did not barter their lives so cheaply, they exacted a toll from the enemy in blood and would keep them paying until the breath fled their lungs and their hearts beat their last.

The sombre troop stopped as they neared a wide rent in the hive wall. Unlike typical hive cities where buildings were piled atop each other until a crazed, haphazard structure thrust toward the sky, Atika had been built with a thick outer wall to protect those within from both the elements and the planet's native life forms.

'We're all proud of you, son,' said Strike, who had ceded command of defending the docks to Thorne while he helped cover Mack and his team's entrance into the hive. 'I'm proud of you, your uncle's proud of you. This whole damn regiment is proud of you.' A cheer went up from those

manning the barricades, the sound incongruous against the din of las-fire and the screams of the dying.

‘I won’t let you down, sir,’ Mack said, saluting the colonel. Strike stopped himself from admonishing the trooper and instead returned the gesture.

Tzula approached Liall. ‘Thank you, Liall. What you’re about to do takes a lot of courage.’

His hollow eyes seemed to bore right through her. ‘No, you are quite wrong. Courage. The quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face danger without fear. Courage.’

‘Wrong?’ Tzula said, puzzled. ‘You don’t think you’re going to face any danger?’

Liall tilted his head sideways as if he was visually appraising the junior inquisitor. He lowered his voice so that Mack and his team could not hear. ‘Oh no. The danger we will face up there is almost beyond human comprehension. The horrors that will be wrought upon our bodies cannot be given name but pale into insignificance compared to the atrocities our souls will endure. What you are wrong about is that I face that danger without fear.’

Tzula fought down the urge to throw her arms around Liall and hug him. ‘You do remember that there is another message you have to send, once you’ve sent the message to fleet command?’

‘Of course. Standard operational procedure,’ he replied.

‘C’mon. Time to go, Liall,’ Mack said, shouldering the flamer he was using for the mission in place of his unwieldy heavy bolter. He approached the astropath and gently put a hand on Liall’s elbow, guiding him towards the breach in the hive wall.

‘The Emperor go with you,’ Tzula said after them.

As Mack’s team disappeared into the darkness, each one of them saluted Tzula and Strike. Right before Mack led Liall through the gap, the

astropath turned back one last time. Tzula could have sworn he was smiling just before the darkness engulfed him.

‘Care to tell me what all that business with the other message was about?’ Strike asked, taking up position behind an impromptu barricade assembled from empty ammo crates.

‘I’m sorry, colonel, but that’s—’ Tzula said, drawing her pistol and kneeling beside him.

‘Classified,’ Strike finished for her. Two rapid shots from his lasrifle burst open the chest of a charging cultist.

‘If it’s any consolation, if the message does get through you’ll find out soon enough.’ With catlike reflexes she rose from her position, took the head off a cultist about to put an axe through Strike’s skull, before resuming her firing position all in one fluid movement.

‘Provided we live that long, of course.’

833959.M41 / Interior. Atika Hive, Pythos

A quick burst from Mack’s flamer illuminated the darkened stairwell and showed them the route upwards. Although the Catachans had been billeted in tents and temporary constructs around the base of the hive ever since they’d arrived on Pythos, they all knew the layout of the interior as the bars, cantinas and other pleasure venues were the destinations of choice when they were granted a few hours R&R. Keen for the Catachans not to mix with the population any more than they had to, Strike had insisted that, where possible, his regiment use access tunnels and maintenance stairways to get around. Which was where Liall, Mack and the rest of the squad found themselves.

The way they moved was straight out of the Catachan basic training manual, or at least it would have been had the Catachans *had* a basic training manual rather than the oral tradition of teaching warfare that they practised. One trooper would advance up the steps to the next stairwell and, after he’d recced it and made sure it was all clear, signal for the rest

of the squad to follow. That trooper would then cover their rear while another trooper moved to the next stairwell, checked it out and called up the rest of the squad. Although it was a slow process, Mack and his men had taken out three enemy guards without any Catachan casualties in the hour they had been ascending Atika Hive.

Lendpar, a young, dark-skinned trooper, all bundles of muscle and sinew, signalled for the rest of the squad to move up to the stairwell he had just checked for signs of the enemy. In single file, eleven more Catachans and a scrawny, bedraggled youth strode past him. Boniax, barely older than Lendpar but with the same toned physique, took his place at the head of the formation and was about to climb the next set of steps when he felt a meaty hand on his shoulder. It was Mack.

‘Be extra careful up there. It’s been a while since we had enemy contact and Liall has started getting twitchy.’ He motioned with his thumb to the astropath who was shivering like he had been plunged into a vat of ice-cold water.

‘Will do, chief,’ Boniax said. He swung his lasrifle around onto his hip and advanced upwards, the barrel of the weapon pointing his way. Reaching the top of the flight, he put the muzzle of the weapon around the corner into the next stairwell before following it around with his head. He didn’t like what he found.

‘Stay back,’ he stage-whispered back down to the waiting Catachans. ‘They’ve left a corpse here. Classic booby trap.’ He slowly moved forwards, uncertain whether the body was really dead or shamming, ready to spring an ambush. ‘Just give me a minute to dis—’

There was a split second between Boniax feeling the tripwire against the fabric of his fatigues and the ensuing explosion. The force of the blast ripped away all extremities from his body and human shrapnel blasted back down the stairway along with the debris of collapsed masonry. The waiting Catachans, caught unawares, could only duck in reaction to the

heat, dust and rockcrete fragments cascading down upon them. All of them, with the exception of Lendpar bringing up their rear, suffered burns and scratches, and several gagged and vomited through a combination of inhaling grime and the stench of charred human flesh.

Mack reacted first and, after patting down Liall's robes to put out smouldering sections that could easily have set him alight, scrambled up the remnants of the stairs to see how bad the damage was. The next flight was impassable, choked with rubble among which Boniix's scorched and still twitching torso sat grotesquely.

In that moment, Mack suddenly became aware of two things – he could feel a draught coming from somewhere and the intense ringing in his ears was giving way to another sound. Singing. Atonal, discordant singing.

Bringing his flamer up into firing position, he turned around and activated the firing stud just in time to incinerate the first of the cultists swarming through the hole blown into the wall of the maintenance stairway.

833959.M41 / The base of Atika Hive, Pythos

Whether it was because the enemy knew what Strike was attempting or because operations were over elsewhere, the enemy forces surrounding the base of the hive had swelled significantly in the past few minutes and the fighting grew ever more intense. From behind improvised barricades and hastily dug trenches, Catachan lasrifles filled the rapidly dwindling no-man's-land between them and the forces of Chaos with searing energy only to have their assaults returned upon them tenfold.

Tzula had stayed by Strike's side throughout the battle, her already haggard appearance made worse by the cauterised scar she now bore on her cheek as the result of not ducking quick enough to avoid a cultist's shot. Strike was bleeding too from numerous wounds where he and his blade had got up close and personal with a few frothing madmen who had

made it to Imperial lines, but nothing that hampered either his ability to lead or fight.

Power pack depletion and weapon malfunction due to overheating was becoming a real issue, and the Catachans would have had to retreat already if it wasn't for the ministrations of K'Cee running along the lines and servicing their weapons. Naturally, the jokaero had introduced some refinements of his own after getting his hands on the Catachan lasrifles and almost every shot that struck an enemy combatant was a kill shot thanks to the improved power and accuracy.

'To your right, colonel!' implored a trooper next to Strike. Instinctively, the Catachan commander turned and loosed off a rapid succession of las-shots, felling the cultist hurtling towards him. As the dying man went down, something cylindrical and metal fell from his hand and skittered towards the barricades.

'Grenade!' Strike yelled, the final syllable lost beneath the detonation. He put his arms over his head to protect himself from the mud and debris raining down on his position. Tzula did likewise.

'Thanks, trooper. That was a close one.' Strike patted the man next to him on the shoulder, but the trooper's body had gone limp. The colonel spun him around and the man's head, half of it missing as a result of the grenade blast, lolled sickeningly to one side. Taking the trooper's knife and tucking it next to his own on his belt, Strike returned his attention to penning the enemy back.

Something had changed. Instead of the sporadic fire followed by a charge upon the barricades, the enemy's fire had become more sustained, as if they were trying to pin the Catachans down so that they could not return fire. The reason for this soon became apparent.

From the rear of the enemy lines, massive shapes coalesced. Armoured figures, their profiles broken by vicious spikes, loomed over the smaller cultists and bloodcurdling cries issued forth. Many of the Catachans

stopped firing altogether, spooked by the guttural howls until Strike ordered them in no uncertain terms to keep shooting.

When he saw what leapt over the enemy lines and began charging towards them, those orders soon changed to retreat. Reports had come through during the early hours of the invasion that the enemy forces were backed up by Traitor Astartes, but it was only now that he saw them for himself for the first time.

‘Berzerkers! Fall back! Fall back!’ Strike yelled at full volume, struggling to be heard above the unholy warcries. ‘Make for the docks.’

The Catachans did not need to be told twice and, under a hail of bolter fire, a sea of green flowed out of the trenches and back towards the docks.

Covering his men until the last of them was clear, Strike aimed a shot at the nearest berserker and struck the behemoth in the knee with a clean shot. Fuelled by battle lust, the other onrushing Traitor Marines simply trampled him underfoot, so bent were they on reaching the base of the hive.

‘Did we buy them enough time?’ Tzula asked, plasma pistol glowing hot in her hand.

Strike took one last look up at the hive. ‘Emperor willing we did,’ he said before they both turned to follow the retreating Catachans.

833959.M41 / Interior. Atika Hive, Pythos

Lendpar was the first to fall, a solid round from an autoweapon taking him cleanly between the eyes and dropping him to the floor of the hab level before he even knew he was dead.

All about them, cultists screamed in rage and pain as Mack and the two other Catachans armed with flamers burned a path through the throng.

‘Keep moving. Head towards the ramp,’ Mack yelled, igniting another robed lunatic who dropped to the floor and rolled around in a futile effort to put out the inferno his clothes had become.

The Catachan squad had emerged from the ruined stairwell onto one of the many hab levels of Atika Hive, straight into the line of sight of several dozen cultists. Many more had flooded out of the low rise hab buildings at the sound of gunfire. Mack found it odd that the first thing the cultists had done after taking over the hive was set up home in the vacated dwellings. When he saw that they were still wearing their crude armour and brandishing weapons, he realised that they weren't trying to live there but were looking for the people who used to live there. That was good. It meant that the enemy did not know that the civilians had been evacuated below the hive. He would have to tell the colonel this when he saw him again.

Then he remembered he was never going to see the colonel again.

Another Catachan went down beside him, a las-round hitting her in the throat and ripping it away in a spray of arterial blood.

'C'mon. We're nearly there!' Mack was using the flamer with one massive hand, his other was planted firmly on Liall's shoulder. The astropath's shivering had ceased and he seemed completely unfazed by the melee going on around him. It was almost as if he knew what hand fate had dealt him and was going to play it out with a serene grace.

Torching another two cultists who had taken up position on the ramp, Mack and Liall ascended to the next level of the hive. Ramps like these connected all of the hive levels to their vertical neighbours to allow bikes and other motored vehicles access, and with their stealth mission up the service stairs uncovered, they were going to have to fight their way up Atika Hive the hard way. The Catachan way.

The other surviving members of his squad followed Mack up shortly after, laying down a wall of flame to prevent close pursuit.

When the conflagration abated, the handful of cultists still drawing breath made it to the base of the ramp in time to hear the *plink plink* of the pair of grenades the Catachans had rolled down after them.

833959.M41 / Atika Dock, Pythos

‘Thorne? Are those damned tanks loaded yet?’ Strike bellowed down the vox. Night was beginning to fall again over Atika but the quayside was lit up as bright as day, such was the volume of las-fire being exchanged.

‘Still another fifty or so to be loaded. We’re rolling them on as fast as we can,’ Thorne replied down the crackling vox-link, his frayed temper evident in his tone. Since the Chaos forces had made planetfall, Thorne had eschewed sleep entirely to make sure all of the 183rd’s armour was loaded onto the massive ore transporters, and though the man was doing his best, it still wasn’t quick enough for the colonel’s liking. Even assigning Brigstone to help Thorne hadn’t sped things up.

‘It’s desperate down this end. I’m not sure how much longer we’re going to be able to hold them off,’ Strike said, his tone more conciliatory. ‘I don’t want those tanks to fall into enemy hands. Put them on the bottom of the ocean if it looks like any of your ships are going to be captured. Do you hear me, Brigstone?’

Under Strike’s orders, Brigstone had been assigned to command the flotilla ferrying the tanks away from the planetary capital. The tank commander wasn’t happy about it – the way he looked at things he’d already missed too much of the action tearing blindly through the jungle – but he saw the sense in Strike’s thinking. Better to be deprived of Imperial armour altogether than be facing it across the other side of the battlefield.

‘Understood, colonel,’ Brigstone said, breaking across the vox channel. ‘I’ll get them out into deep water and await your orders.’

Strike cut the link and turned his attention to Tzula who was running at a low crouch across the quayside to avoid the superheated beams whizzing overhead.

‘What in the Emperor’s name are you doing back here? I thought I ordered you to evacuate the wounded to Olympax in that shuttle of yours?’ Strike said. Almost as soon as the first drop pods had hit Atika’s surface,

Strike had ordered the Inquisition shuttle be moved from the landing bay and down to the docks. His original plan had been to load it on one of the container ships with the tanks but, now that Tzula had made it back out of the jungle, it had been put to better use ferrying the severely wounded out of Atika.

‘I came back for you,’ Tzula said, her jaw fixed as hard as it was the first time Strike had seen her after she came out of the jungle.

‘You’re wasting your time. I’m staying right here with my men and when I call the retreat, I’ll be at their head leading them to Olympax.’

‘And what good will you be to your men and the people of this world dead?’ She fiddled with the gold Inquisition insignia hanging from the chain at her neck. ‘I could pull rank on you, you know?’

‘Yes,’ Strike said, ‘and I could shoot you, you know?’

The tension in the air was as real as the las-rounds passing through it. It was only broken when Tzula snorted and shook her head.

‘Now stop hanging around drawing fire and get my men and that infernal knife out of here,’ Strike said, sidling up to a stack of oil drums and shouldering his lasrifle.

‘The Emperor protects,’ she said coldly, before ducking her head and running back in the direction of the shuttle.

A few minutes later, the whine of twin engines carrying her craft aloft filled the docks as the backwash sent dust and debris kicking up from the battlefield. A few hopeful shots were aimed in its direction but they bounced harmlessly off its thick hull and before long Tzula’s craft was two bright lights heading in the direction of the Olympax Mountains.

As it had done back at the base of the hive when the berzerkers had first appeared, the noise from the Chaos lines changed, and instead of chanting or warcries, the sound became a reverent whisper. All gunfire from the enemy stopped and for the briefest of moments, Strike thought that they had miraculously surrendered and laid down their arms.

He quickly realised it was the exact opposite of a miracle.

Heralded by cultist and Traitor Astartes alike prostrating themselves before him, an enormous figure, taller than the berzerkers thanks in part to the topknot he wore in his hair, strode through the chaos. The gold trim of his black armour reflected the pale light of Pythos's moon and an ancient power claw hung menacingly at his side, flexing in anticipation of the slaughter to come. Here, in all his brutish majesty, was Abaddon the Despoiler, Abaddon the Warmaster and, in that moment Strike knew, Abaddon the Conqueror of Pythos.

Strike's guts turned to ice, such was Abaddon's imposing presence even at more than a hundred metres away. All around him, men pissed themselves in fear.

The vox at his belt crackled rudely to life, desecrating the sombre hush that had descended.

'Colonel Strike? This is Major Thorne. It's the enemy, sir. They've stopped firing like they've given up. I hate to admit this but I'm not sure what to do. What are your orders, sir?'

From the other side of the battlefield, the son of Horus bared his teeth in a wicked parody of a smile. The sound of weapons beating against armour and cries venerating the Warmaster's name rushed in to fill the vacuum of silence.

'Are you receiving me, colonel? What are your orders?' This time Thorne's words registered with Strike.

'Get out of there,' Strike said, his voice catching in his throat. 'All of you, get out of there now,' he added, finally able to move legs he had thought turned to stone and followed the already fleeing Catachans to the last escape route left open to them.

The jet of promethium passed through the blue pilot light burning at the flamer's tip, igniting the liquid and spewing forth fire which engulfed the throng of cultists who were either too slow or too stupid to move out of the weapon's arc. Sweat-soaked robes of crude manufacture became infernos and the front ranks, ablaze and panicked, ran blindly into their comrades behind them in turn, setting them alight and spreading the fire between them. For every cultist who burned, another would emerge from the level below, swinging a brutal close combat weapon and chanting vile litanies.

'One more level, Liall,' Mack said softly to his friend. 'One more level and we'll be at the astropathic chamber.' The Catachan had not relinquished his grip on the astropath since they'd been forced to enter the hab levels and Mack guided Liall backwards towards the final ramp, brief bursts of the flamer abating the advance of nearby cultists.

Four of them remained now. Twenty-seven levels of intense combat had accounted for the rest of the squad, each life laid down to ensure Liall reached his destination and relief for both regiment and planet be secured. Four soon became three.

Surrounded on all sides by enemy combatants, Olevski, a squat, barrel-chested man from one of the islands near to Mack's own back on Catachan, depressed the firing stud of his flamer but nothing happened. Frantically he shook the weapon, coaxing out the last few drops of promethium in fear that it had run dry but upon hearing the fuel tank slosh half-full, noticed the blue ignition flame had gone out. Already feeling the first slashes across his back and arms from enemy blades, Olevski drew his knife and raised it high above his head before stabbing it down hard into the flamer's fuel tank.

The ensuing burst of flame was brief but devastating, instantly incinerating everything within a ten-metre radius and the shockwave from the explosion knocked those further away to the ground. Mack was able to keep his own footing and his tight grasp prevented Liall from falling prone. Janaczek, the only other surviving Catachan, put his back to the wall of the final ramp and laid covering fire with his lasrifle.

‘Come on! Quick, while they’re still down,’ Janaczek yelled.

Mack practically dragged Liall the last twenty metres and up onto the top level of the hive. Janaczek followed, moving backwards so that he could pick off any cultist rising to their feet.

The bars and gambling dens were the most recognisable parts of Atika to the men and women of the 183rd, but all of them were familiar with the top level as it had served as regimental headquarters for the past three years. Rare was the Catachan who could keep his nose clean for any prolonged period of non-combat. During their time on Pythos, almost everyone in the entire regiment had at some point found themselves on a charge for brawling or drunken behaviour and been forced to appear before Strike to explain themselves. After a dressing down from the colonel, very few of them had made a repeat performance.

‘Where to now?’ Mack asked. The astropathic chamber’s lack of food, alcohol or opportunities to either make a profit or get familiar with the locals meant that very few of the 183rd knew how to locate it.

‘Atika. Standard Momus-pattern pre-fabricated hive city. Manufactured on over nine thousand Imperial planets and used primarily on temperate death worlds due to its thick outer shell and outstanding heat-dissipating qualities,’ Liall said to the surprise of the Catachans. ‘Sixty-three storeys high, four hundred and twelve metres in diameter at its base. Capable of comfortably accommodating six thousand inhabitants, that capacity can be increased to nine thousand if necessary. Optional modifications include a landing pad for shuttle craft on the exterior of the fifty-seventh level and a cupola-style astropathic chamber on the exterior of the top level.’

Over the few weeks that he’d known Liall, Mack had come to realise that the youth had an uncanny ability for remembering facts. He must have overheard one of the inquisitors discussing the hive and filed the information away.

‘As interesting as all that is, it doesn’t help us find it,’ Janaczek said impatiently, the chanting of cultists rising in volume as they approached the ramp to the upper level.

‘North,’ Liall said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Astropathic chambers are traditionally sited on the north face of a structure.’

An eye constantly over their shoulders for pursuing cultists, the three of them raced past the command centre and other buildings commandeered for regimental business. The noise behind them grew in volume as they bolted and other, more guttural, sounds mingled with the profane chorus.

Rounding the final corner, a simple metal door greeted them, secured by a padlock and chain. Janaczek was about to swear when Mack doused the shackles in flame before slicing through the superheated metal with his fang. Both chain and lock hit the rockcrete floor with a satisfying thud.

‘Go. I’ll cover you here,’ Janaczek yelled, his lasrifle coming to life in his hands and taking down the first of the cultists to round the bend. Mack nodded solemnly and threw open the heavy door with a slam of his shoulder. He bundled Liall through before following.

They were at the base of a narrow spiral staircase that hugged the profile of the hive’s exterior and ascended gently upwards, presumably to the very pinnacle of the spire. Liall took the steps confidently as if some kind of sense memory were guiding him. Mack followed, ascending backwards to despatch any of the enemy who pursued them once Janaczek inevitably succumbed. From the sounds coming from behind the door at the bottom of the staircase, that would not be long.

Taking the final curve of the stairs, Mack was surprised to find Liall waiting for him outside the door to the astropathic chamber.

‘What’s wrong? Is this door locked too?’ Mack said.

‘No,’ Liall said serenely. ‘I just wanted to say thank you.’ He held out an open hand and, arm bent, presented it to Mack who reciprocated. The two

men stood there, hands and forearms clasped in the Catachan style. No more words were said, none were needed, and after a few seconds Liall released his grip, opened the door and stepped into the astropathic chamber.

Liall's blindness was a boon as, deprived of sight, he could not see the mutilated corpses of the astropathic choir who until recently had practised their psychic arts here. Their wounds had been inflicted upon each other, but they were as much a result of the predations of the enemy as if they'd each been run through by a cultist's blade. Moving to the centre of the chamber, almost tripping over human detritus as he did so, Liall made ready to contact the Imperial battlefleet.

The temperature in the room dropped significantly and a cold sweat broke across Liall's forehead as, his psychic gifts amplified by the chamber, he engaged the aether. Blocking out the sound of the door at the bottom of the staircase being torn from its hinges, he sent the psychic cry for help the relatively short distance, easily circumnavigating the simple wards placed within the warp by the enemy.

Sensing that their cantrips and defences were void, enemy psykers targeted Liall directly and the strain upon his body caused him to convulse. He began to bleed from his nostrils and ears. Shutting off the sounds of the flamer discharging outside the door and the screams of the dying, Liall erected shields within his mind and ascended higher into the aether preparing to send his next message over a much greater distance. Finding the intended recipient within the sea of souls, he focused every fibre of his psychic might, expending the entirety of his talent in this one single message that must get through no matter what the cost.

The noise of chainweapons and booming warcries emanated from outside the chamber and the sound of Mack's flamer was soon joined by his screams as his defence of the chamber door ended.

Convulsing, bleeding, smoke pouring from the dead holes where his eyes once were, Liall was still sending the message as the door burst open.

PART TWO



CHAPTER FOUR

**847959.M41 / Imperial Command Centre. Olympax Mountains,
Pythos**

As he had done every day for a week since the shattered survivors of the assault on Atika had completed their deadly march through the Deathglades, Colonel Strike made his way through the secret tunnels of the delver stronghold, ascending ever higher to his vantage point atop the range's highest peak.

Unlike every previous occasion he had made this climb, this time he was being followed.

His head-mounted lume strip shone through the cloying darkness, illuminating the route both for him and his unseen pursuer and as he rounded the final corner and walked up the final steep slope, he switched it off as natural light began to filter in. Emerging into the red-hued dawn of Pythos, he took a deep breath and expelled the dank air of the stronghold's caverns, replacing it with the crisp thin air of the mountains.

Away in the distance, Atika Hive stood dark and silent, rising up out of the emerald jungle like a grim memorial to the Catachans' defeat and the massive loss of life endured there. Cells of his men had stayed behind to run a counterinsurgency against the invaders, but not one of them had

made contact since the rest of the regiment had fled the hive, and speculation was rife as to what new horrors the enemy had inflicted upon them. Even then, they may have been the lucky ones.

Of the nearly eleven thousand Catachans who made it out of Atika, a little more than half had survived. Those who perished had not fallen to the guns and blades of the enemy but were instead claimed by the hostile wildlife of the death world's jungles. Abaddon's forces had not pursued them, and whether that was down to allowing the jungle to do the work of soldiers or other, darker reasons was the source of as much speculation as the fate of those who remained in Atika.

'Please don't tell me you come up here for the view, Colonel Strike,' said a woman's voice from the tunnel behind him. 'I'd hate to think you're becoming sentimental.'

Strike's fang was in his hand and clear of its sheath before she had even uttered his name. Fortunately for Tzula, with her newly-cropped hair, he identified her before he could inflict any damage with it.

'Are there no secrets from the likes of you?' Strike said, shaking his head but smiling. He safely stowed his blade back at his hip.

'All part of my job,' Tzula replied warmly. In the week since Strike had emerged from the Deathglades at the head of a column of his men, he'd formed an uneasy relationship with the junior inquisitor. Though he still placed the blame for the invasion squarely with Dinalt and his cohort, Tzula had already proven to be a valuable asset and, in Brigstone's absence, had begun training three dozen of his men how to tame and train some of Pythos's smaller saurians so that they could expand their patrols deeper into the jungle. Her xenos pet had proved his worth too, ensuring the few Valkyries and other flyers that had made it to Olympax stayed airworthy, allowing Strike to order rapid missions of opportunity whenever and wherever they presented themselves.

‘And what of your secret? Are you ready to tell me who that second message was intended for? Can we expect salvation or were you double-crossing us like your blonde friend?’

‘She was never my friend,’ Tzula said coldly. ‘And if you really believed that I was a traitor too that knife of yours would be between my ribs, not sheathed at your hip,’ she added, warmth returning to her voice.

‘True enough but if you really were sending for aid, I don’t understand why you’re being so clandestine about it.’

‘If the message made it through, you’ll understand soon enough.’ A noise in the distance caught her attention and, shielding her eyes, she looked in the direction of the rising sun. ‘Ah, I think *your* little secret is about to be revealed, colonel.’

Silhouetted against the pink disc slowly rising on the horizon, four Valkyries made their way towards the makeshift Imperial Command centre, engines whining in protest at the great cargo slung between them. As they struggled to keep formation, the bulky object – almost the size of the four flyers combined – swung precariously from thick chains, threatening to send the aircraft crashing through the canopy below.

‘What in the name of the Throne is that?’ Tzula asked.

‘Why don’t you come and find out?’ Strike said, hitting the activation stud on his lume strip and climbing back down into the gloom of the stronghold.

The hangar, more used to accommodating the dirigibles that transported Pythosian crystal to the spaceports at the planet’s poles, was teeming with Catachans, so many that it was impossible to make out what the squad of Valkyries had delivered. Men and women, all clad in camouflage pattern fatigues, green vests and red bandanas, swarmed over the new arrival, obfuscating its outline as they clambered over it.

‘Atten-hut!’ Major Thorne bawled noticing that the colonel and junior inquisitor had entered the hangar. Within seconds, the green cover melted

away, circling the rusted object beneath in an impromptu honour guard.

‘Is that a—’ Tzula began.

‘It is,’ said Strike as if it was the second coming of the Emperor himself. ‘It’s a Hellhammer.’

Coated in millennia of rust, the Baneblade variant more closely resembled a mobile fortress than a super-heavy battle tank, even in its dilapidated condition. A huge hellhammer cannon, from which the tank drew its pattern name, was mounted into its turret and a Demolisher cannon and autocannon were positioned beneath it. Along its thickly armoured hull, two sponsons sat either side, housing a lascannon and heavy flamer in each. Pintle-mounted in front of the turret was a huge heavy bolter. None of them looked as if they were in working condition and though the tank still had treads, close to half the links were missing.

‘It’s... it’s...’ Tzula struggled to find the words.

‘One of the finest military machines ever to roll out of a forge-world? The most glorious relic of the Imperium you’ve ever cast your eyes upon? A miracle that the Emperor saw fit to bless us with by leaving it for us to find in the jungle?’ Strike proffered.

‘It’s a wreck,’ Tzula concluded. ‘Why did you waste time and effort hauling this thing back here? None of the weapons systems are operational and you’ll be waiting until doomsday to get the engine running.’

As if to spite her, the hangar filled with the *chug chug* of the ancient Phaeton thermic combuster attempting to turn over. This was quickly followed by the roar of it springing to life accompanied by a thick cloud of sooty black smoke pouring forth from the engine vents. A cheer louder than the sound of the tank’s engine went up from the assembled Catachans and Tzula felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment at her pronouncement. A second wave of appreciation sounded out as the top hatch sprung open and an orange-furred hand sprang out of it making a thumbs-up gesture, soon followed by the rest of K’Cee.

‘You were saying?’ Strike said smugly.

888959.M41 / Hesodikas Stronghold. Hesodikas, Pythos

The agonised screams of the dying merged with the roar of blue flame as the fire engulfed its victims, melting flesh, rending fat and scorching bone. Nine times nine was the required sacrifice, and warpfire was the method by which they were to be slaughtered. Corpulax had seen to the first requirement when he had stormed the delver-stronghold and made prisoners of the Catachans who fought in vain to defend it. Abaddon had fulfilled the second by supplying the Plague Lord with a seemingly endless stream of sorcerers, so numerous were the cabals who had rallied to his cause.

The death cries echoed around the huge subterranean chamber in which the sixth seal to the Damnation Cache was located before dying down. The sound of bubbling tallow and the unholy dirge of sorcerous chanting struck up in its place. The discordant wail reached a crescendo before, as quickly as the sapphire flame had been conjured into being, it dissipated, the only sign of it ever existing being the molten mass of human waste smoking on the expansive rocky floor.

One of the sorcerers, a tall, wiry figure whose neck was adorned with many rings giving it a bizarre, elongated appearance, stepped towards Corpulax, who had observed proceedings from the mouth of the chamber. ‘It is done, Lord Corpulax. The penultimate seal is broken and we edge ever closer to reopening the Damnation Cache.’ His voice was reed thin and laced with venom.

‘Prepare the ritual. I will inform Lord Abaddon of our success and apprise him of our next objective,’ said Corpulax.

At a signal from the sorcerer, a prisoner was brought before Corpulax and thrust unceremoniously to his knees. Whereas the sacrificial Catachans had been prime specimens, this one – a young captain of the 183rd – was bedraggled, his face and limbs bloated to unnatural

proportions and had a jaundiced tone to them. Pus wept from his tear ducts and nostrils, mingling with the viscous sweat that coated his flesh.

‘Please...’ he rasped through lungs full of noxious fluid.

Corpulax leant forward and gently placed the forefinger of his skeletal hand to the Catachan’s mouth. The captain’s lips and tongue desiccated the instant they were touched, the dead flesh dropping to the floor and forming an ash-like mound at the Plague Marine’s feet.

‘Hush,’ Corpulax said to the man who was tentatively touching his lower jaw, not sure what had just happened. ‘We need your silence.’

Almost on cue, the cabal struck up their chant again, this time more rhythmically, in a harder, more guttural language than the one used to break the seal. The kneeling Catachan’s flesh started to writhe as if things were moving around it sub-dermally, like rats or mice had got beneath the skin and were scurrying about inside him.

When it looked like his flesh was about to tear, the chanting stopped and Corpulax uttered a single word that turned the Catachan inside out.

Lungs and other internal organs burst forth from a mouth that was stretched impossibly wide followed by muscle, sinew and other, less identifiable parts of the human anatomy. As the pile of innards spilled onto the rock floor they took on new form, twisting and manipulating, tearing and reshaping. Thigh bone flattened and expanded until it resembled a spiked pauldron; deltoids separated to create the likeness of a power claw; wrist tendons rotated around each other to form a topknot.

When the simulacrum of Abaddon was complete, it spoke to Corpulax through a mouth made of repurposed appendix. ‘Is the seal broken, Plague Lord, or is this yet another one of your requests for me to send you more warlocks you can burn out?’ The rendering of Abaddon’s body had been appropriated from somebody else’s, but the voice was most definitely his own.

‘It is broken, my master.’ Although he was not actually in the presence of the Warmaster, Corpulax still took to one knee out of deference. ‘And I have yet more good news. Our agents believe they have located the final seal.’

‘If your information is accurate, the Black Legion themselves will be at your disposal to ensure it is broken.’

‘It is not as simple as that, lord. There are... complications.’

The flesh-Abaddon scowled, cheeks of calf muscle tensing. ‘Several thousand of the galaxy’s finest warriors should be enough to resolve any complication. My warriors have spent weeks scouring the surface of this planet for the likely locations of the seals. I shall give them the purpose they were bred for.’

‘My lord, the final seal is located directly below the delver-stronghold at Olympax.’

‘Where the savages have established their new base? We would have eliminated them already if we hadn’t been scouring the jungle for weeks. Olympax will burn, I will have their commander’s head upon a stake and the final seal will be opened. Then my hunt can begin in earnest and you can turn your attention to opening the Emerald Cave.’

‘With all due respect, Lord Abaddon,’ Corpulax lied, ‘the Olympax stronghold and the surrounding mountains are the most defensible location on the planet. The slopes approaching it are sheer and slow going. Even an airborne assault would be catastrophic as the bulk of their anti-aircraft weapons and flyers survived the initial assault.’

‘And an orbital strike is out of the question as that risks destroying the seal before it can be opened.’ Abaddon snorted. ‘Is that why you contacted me, Plague Lord? To tell me that our only option is a risky suicide mission that may result in failure because an Imperial Guard regiment had the blind fortune to base themselves right on top of our objective?’

‘There is another option. One that is less direct but offers us our greatest chance of success.’

‘Subterfuge? I thought that was the preserve of our Tzeentchian brethren?’

‘I am nothing if not pragmatic, lord. I believe I can get a cell into the Olympax stronghold and break the seal from within without interference from Imperial forces. It may take us longer to achieve but with the final seal broken, the cache will open and our allies will make short work of the cowering Catachans.’

The Abaddon-thing nodded in approval. ‘I hope you are right, Plague Lord, because if you aren’t and our mission on Pythos fails I will hunt you until the ends of eternity and personally flay your soul.’ His final utterance complete, Abaddon remotely broke the spell and the simulacrum collapsed into a wet heap of offal.

Corpulax turned to the throng of cultists and sorcerers who had stood witness to his communion and addressed one in particular.

‘Have your cell ready to move out within the hour,’ Corpulax said. He reached down to his hip with his gauntleted hand and removed a vial of dark liquid from a pouch at his belt. He offered it to the robed cultist who accepted it with a feminine hand. ‘You know what this is and you know when to use it. Do not fail me like your master did.’

The robed figure pulled back her hood to reveal stubble of freshly shaved blonde hair. ‘Our success is assured,’ she said, carefully placing the vial into the leather satchel hanging over her shoulder.

**913959.M41 / Hangar Level, Imperial Command Centre.
Olympax Mountains, Pythos**

It was the sound of the sputtering Valkyrie engine in the distance that drew Major Eckhardt Thorne’s attention from the other flyers undergoing repairs in the hangar. Field engineers put down their spanners and

blowtorches and turned their heads toward the vast opening in the mountainside that allowed the Imperial aircraft easy access.

A trail of thick black smoke denoted the crazed route through the sky the Valkyrie had taken as the pilot struggled to keep it in the air with only one working engine. The craft jinked uneasily as it approached the Imperial base.

‘Who’s piloting that thing?’ Thorne asked a bearded officer who had stopped what he had been doing to watch the stricken flyer. Many of the other Catachans in the hangar also sported substantial facial hair, the niceties of personal grooming set aside while at war.

‘I don’t know, sir,’ the officer replied. ‘All of our birds are accounted for.’

Thorne stroked his own thick stubble and furrowed his brow. ‘The most recent contact we had from the colonel had them several hours flying away from Olympax. Even with a light load, an advance scout wouldn’t have made it back this quickly.’

For the past few weeks Strike and the bulk of the Olympax contingent had been defending Khan’s Hold from an enemy assault and, though the counter-attack had been a success, the colonel had stayed on there for some time afterwards, wary of a second attack wave and to mop up small guerrilla bands of cultists in the surrounding jungle.

‘It could be an enemy trick. Shall we shoot it down?’ the officer suggested.

Thorne thought for a moment. The noise of the malfunctioning engine was louder now and the Valkyrie would be attempting its landing within seconds. If this was some underhand ploy by the invaders, he did not have long to make the call.

‘Stand down,’ Thorne said at the last possible moment. ‘Those markings on its hull are Devil’s Brigade who were based at Hesodikas. We lost contact with them weeks ago. But, just in case...’ He drew his laspistol and checked how much charge was left in its cell.

The screaming of the Valkyrie became a high-pitched whine as the pilot struggled to find the altitude to get his craft through the hangar opening. Buffeted by crosswinds it tossed from side to side, coming close to smashing against the mountainside more than once.

‘He’s not going to make it... He’s not going to make it...’ the officer beside Thorne muttered. All around the hangar, money started changing hands as the Catachans began to wager on the success or failure of the Valkyrie’s landing.

With metres to spare, the pilot caught an updraught and the Valkyrie popped up into the view of those assembled in the hangar. The dark humour gave way to panic as it became apparent to everyone that the flyer wasn’t going to come to a fiery end on the slopes of Mount Olympax but was instead going to crash, possibly quite spectacularly, right among them.

The sound of scraping metal rang out around the chamber as the pilot barely made it over the lip of the hangar entrance and sheared off the undercarriage. Sparks trailing in its wake, the Valkyrie skidded along the hangar floor forcing Catachans to dive out of its way. The further into the hangar it slid, the more its momentum was arrested and, after bouncing off two berthed flyers, causing only minor damage, it came to a halt scant metres from the back wall.

Nothing happened for what seemed like an age until, just as prone Catachans started raising themselves from the floor now that the threat of explosion had passed, the rear hatch of the Valkyrie opened with a hydraulic hiss. Obscured by the smoke still pluming from the ravaged engine, several figures descended the ramp.

Thorne raised his pistol in their direction. ‘Stop right there. Name and rank. Now.’

The smoke parted revealing five figures all dressed in identical fatigues and vests, blood-red bandanas tied tightly around their scalps. A woman,

the only one among the group, took a step forwards. Thorne lifted the pistol so that he was looking straight down the barrel at her head.

‘I said stop.’ Others in the hangar had drawn weapons and they too were trained on the newcomers. ‘Give me your name and rank now.’

‘Captain Troy, Devil’s Brigade,’ the woman said matter of factly. ‘We’re all that’s left of the garrison at Hesodikas.’

Thorne looked her up and down, pistol still aimed at her head. On the surface she looked like a Catachan but there was something about the woman that didn’t ring true. Her hair was too freshly shorn where it was visible at the base of her skull and her fingernails were clean. He’d also never heard of a Captain Troy, but in a regiment the size of the 183rd it was impossible to keep track of, or know the identity of, every soldier.

‘Devil’s Brigade, you say?’ Thorne took a few steps closer to her, never lowering his weapon. ‘Hesodikas sounds tough if you were the only ones to walk away. Still, I bet it was nothing compared to the Battle of Caol Ila.’

The woman looked him squarely in the eyes. ‘I don’t know what you mean, major. Devil’s Brigade didn’t fight at Caol Ila. We were engaged deep behind enemy lines at Mortlach at the time.’

Thorne grinned and lowered his laspistol. The other weapons pointed at the Hesodikas did likewise. Captain Troy had not only passed his little test, she had passed it with distinction.

‘Can’t be too careful, captain.’ Thorne reholstered his weapon. ‘Hesodikas is gone, you say?’

‘It fell days ago. Total annihilation,’ she said, fingers scratching underneath her bandana. ‘Those of us who were left stayed behind to harry the enemy but when our numbers got so few that we were ineffective, I decided it was time for us to get out. We’re more use here as part of the larger resistance effort.’

‘Glad to have you, captain. Mulgrew?’ he called to the bearded officer. ‘Take Captain Troy and her men to Major Rayston and have him redeploy them.’

The woman saluted lazily. Thorne returned it in kind. Mulgrew was about to lead the five reinforcements out of the hangar when Thorne spoke again.

‘And Mulgrew?’

‘Yes, sir. What it is it?’

‘Have that Valkyrie stripped down and used for spares when you get back,’ Thorne said, gesturing with his thumb to the wreck at the back of the hangar.

Mulgrew nodded and continued on his way, Troy and her men in tow.

In a secluded corner of the hangar, somebody else had stopped their repair work to view the spectacle of the crashing Valkyrie and the subsequent entrance of the new arrivals. However, unlike Thorne, they knew that Captain Troy and her men were not what they claimed to be.

Removing his welding mask, K’Cee jumped down from the hull of the Hellhammer and loped off to find Tzula.

‘Sounds like Hesodikas was a bit of bad business,’ Mulgrew said as he led Troy and her men through the narrow manmade caverns of Olympax.

Before the invasion of Pythos, Olympax had been one of the main delver-strongholds on the planet, its high, easily defended location making it a haven from the predation of the jungle’s inhabitants. Where once it had been home to the bulk of the world’s crystal production, now it played temporary home to the bulk of its defenders.

‘It was a bloodbath,’ the woman in the captain’s uniform replied. ‘Not a single soul got out of there alive.’

‘Except for you five of course, sir,’ Mulgrew added cheerfully.

‘No. Not even we survived. I mean, *we* did, obviously, but the former owners of these filthy rags are as dead as you.’ She drew the stolen blade from her thigh and jabbed it hard into Mulgrew’s throat before he could react. The Catachan sank to his knees, hands clamped around his neck, vainly trying to stem the flow of arterial blood. ‘Nobody survived. Those I didn’t kill myself, I watched die. Like Troy here.’ She pulled at the chain around her neck to reveal a set of dog tags from beneath her vest. ‘It took him an age to die under the ministrations of the interrogator acolytes of the Davinicus Lycae, but before he breathed his last, he told us all we needed to know to pass ourselves off as members of your regiment.’

She rotated the Catachan fang in her hand so that the blade pointed towards the ground and stabbed down hard, driving it through Mulgrew’s temple. Then she withdrew it with a wet pop and, removing the red bandana from her head, wiped the knife clean before scabbarding it.

Throwing the bloodied rag to the ground next to the corpse of the Catachan officer, Tryphena Brandd led her infiltration team deeper into the stronghold.

**913959.M41 / East Entrance, Imperial Command Centre.
Olympax Mountains, Pythos**

‘Be ready to head out again at first light,’ Tzula Digriiz ordered as she swung her legs from the saddle and dismounted the arbosaur. ‘Just because the enemy have left us alone until now doesn’t mean it’ll stay that way forever.’

She received nods from the half a dozen Catachans who’d accompanied her on patrol as they stretched and twisted, trying to work out the knots of hours in the saddle. Though not a Catachan herself, Tzula had proven a capable tutor when it came to taming and riding the beasts, and those under her command had grudgingly accepted her once she had proven her worth.

Handing the reins of her mount to one of the Catachans who would lead the beast away to the pens, she removed her bandana and wiped the sweat from her forehead. With her bodyglove ruined in the battle for Atika, she had taken to dressing in a similar fashion to the death worlders, and her fatigues and green vest matched those of the 183rd perfectly. What she didn't copy, for fear of causing offence, was the red bandanas they wore, instead choosing a black square of cloth that she wore wrapped like a headband. Regardless, she'd still look like a Catachan to the enemy rather than a servant of the Ordos which was precisely the way she wanted it if they were, as she suspected, hunting for the knife.

She was about to remove the rest of her outfit and hit the makeshift showers just inside the cave mouth of the east entrance when K'Cee emerged from the base. He looked excited or agitated, and bounded over to Tzula before grabbing her arm and tugging on it.

'What is it, K'Cee? Have you finished working on Strike's tank and want to show me?' She gripped the bottom of her vest in preparation to pull it off over her head. 'Give me a while to shower and I'll be right with you.'

K'Cee shook his head vigorously, his ample cheeks flapping. He tugged on Tzula's arm again.

She stopped trying to undress and began to take him seriously. 'I don't understand.'

The jokaero released his tight grip on her arm and placed one hand on each of his ears. He pulled them so that they stuck out and blew hard with his mouth closed to inflate his cheeks. With his impersonation finished, he jabbed out a finger and pointed upwards into the base.

Suddenly understanding, Tzula drew her plasma pistol. 'Show me. Now,' she said, following the diminutive xenos back into the caves of Olympax.



CHAPTER FIVE

913959.M41 / The Tunnel System, Imperial Command Centre. Olympax Mountains, Pythos

Tzula didn't need to know the route Brandd was taking as the trail of bodies told her which direction to head in. A map of mortality pointing ever deeper into Olympax.

Just as Strike had found his way through the warren of tunnels to the peak of the delver-stronghold, Brandd was heading in the opposite direction. In pursuit of what goal, Tzula could only speculate but she had a pretty good idea what it was the traitor sought: the seals. One had been opened for certain but how many others still remained closed? How many seals were there to begin with? Tzula came to the sudden realisation that for all her Inquisitorial training, for all her years of experience in service to the Ordo and as a thief before that, she was utterly helpless in all this, a mere bystander to the events that were unfolding around her on Pythos. That would all change if Liall had succeeded in getting his second message out. *Liall*. Another mark on Brandd's tally sheet as far as Tzula was concerned.

'More bodies, sir,' one of the Catachans said, illuminating the roughly hewn steps with the lume strip taped to the side of his lasrifle. Once K'Cee

had shown Tzula where Brandd had crash-landed in the Valkyrie and, between her and Thorne, managed to piece things together, the major had assigned her a squad to pursue the traitor.

Tzula counted three corpses in all, each one lying face down with multiple stab wounds to their backs and shoulders. Their weapons were still slung over their shoulders and no scorch marks blackened the coarse stone walls. With vox-communication impossible in the confines of the base's tunnels, Thorne had been unable to broadcast a warning that there were traitors in their midst.

Without any prompting, the two lead Catachans carefully searched the corpses for signs of traps. The squad hadn't exercised such caution with the first body they'd come across and of the ten Catachans who had begun the descent with Tzula, seven now remained. Each time they had to stop, valuable time was wasted and Brandd gained a bigger advantage over them.

'Clear,' one of them called after a couple of minutes. The brawny Catachan retrieved the blades from his dead comrades' belts and took his place at the rear of the formation as Tzula and the rest of his squad filed down the steeply descending tunnel.

Further ahead down the maze of stone corridors and out of earshot of their pursuers, Brandd and her team had reached their goal, though, at first glance, it was not immediately apparent.

She had halted in a wide vestibule in the tunnel and was facing a sheer rock surface that terminated so high above them that it seemed to go on forever. It appeared to be of the same material as the rest of the mountain, but its crafting marks were cleaner, more refined than those of the tunnel and the rest of the delver-stronghold. She placed her palm against the smooth rock. It was warm to the touch.

'The cabal's scrying was accurate. This is the place. I can feel the power coursing through the very rock itself.' She pulled her hand away from the

heated rock and drew her knife.

‘Ajanipol. Come here, it is time to fulfil your service,’ she said. One of the fake Catachans eagerly approached her. He too had removed his bandana but instead of revealing a smooth scalp, two small protrusions sat just above his forehead, the earliest blossoming of vestigial horns.

He looked as if he was about to deliver a speech, profound last words before expending his duty but before he could say anything, Brandd’s blade, already slick with blood, ran him through. With both hands, she tore upwards, parting the flesh to open up his insides.

Ajanipol moaned in pleasure-pain and placed his hands inside his wound. Moments later he removed them, covered in dripping crimson gore, and began to daub haphazardly upon the wall of the vestibule. His bloody smears formed crude sigils, blasphemous icons that were painful to look upon, and when he had made three identical marks in a triangular pattern he took his finger and drew a bloody trail to link them.

The instant the final sigil was connected to the others, the mountain itself started to shake and the already warm surface of the wall radiated an intense heat. Brandd and the other cultists retreated back to the far wall of the cavern but Ajanipol, struck dumb by loss of blood and awe at what he had set in motion, remained still, his flesh blackening as it fried. The tremors within the mountain grew more intense and a deafening noise, like two tectonic plates scraping against each other, forced the four lucid figures in the chamber to clamp their hands tightly to the side of their heads in defence of their eardrums. With one last violent shudder, a wide crack, the girth of two men, formed in the base of the smooth wall and raced up the inside of the mountain, chasing itself up towards the peak.

As quickly as the tremors and the cacophony had begun, they ceased.

‘Lord Corpulax gives you both his blessing and his thanks, Ajanipol,’ Brandd said, stepping over the smoking body of the cultist and into the crack.

**913959.M41 / Hangar Level, Imperial Command Centre.
Olympax Mountains, Pythos**

Thorne was still cursing himself for allowing the traitor to get the better of him when parts of the hangar roof came showering down.

The floor began to rock and, avoiding chunks of stone that were dropping from above, he sought sanctuary in the open hatch of a Valkyrie undergoing repairs. Others too had the same idea, and for the duration of the quake Thorne was confined to the enclosed space with almost a score of sweating Catachans, unable to cover his mouth and nose as the noise from debris hitting the hull forced him to cover his ears. For what seemed like far longer, but was in reality only a matter of seconds, the Valkyrie swayed from side to side, battering its occupants against the walls and each other.

As quickly as the tremors and the cacophony had begun, they ceased.

Emerging from the grounded craft into a billow of rock dust, Thorne took stock of the situation. All of the Valkyries within sight had sustained damage but, apart from those that had suffered damage or malfunction prior to the quake, looked airworthy. Something told him they were going to need them soon.

‘What the hell was that?’ asked a slab-muscled woman rubbing her shoulder from where she’d taken an impact.

‘I don’t know, but I’ll wager any of you a year’s rations it’s something to do with that traitor inquisitor,’ said Thorne, wiping rock dust from his eyes. ‘Come on. Let’s get this place cleaned up and start assessing the damage.’

‘Sir. Over here. You need to see this,’ called a bearded officer from the lip of the hangar entrance. Thorne strode over to join him, unable to see what the sergeant was trying to point out until he was practically alongside the man, such was the volume of dust choking the hangar.

Away in the distance, at the very limit of unaugmented human vision, the sky was full of tiny black dots, a hundred at least by Thorne's reckoning.

'Is that Colonel Strike, sir?' the sergeant asked.

'I hope so,' said Thorne gesturing to another sergeant to bring him a set of magnoculars. 'For all of our sakes, I damn well hope so.'

**913959.M41 / The Tunnel System, Imperial Command
Centre. Olympax Mountains, Pythos**

Feeling the first vibrations, Tzula threw herself flat against the tunnel wall. Her home world was criss-crossed by multiple faultlines and the practice drilled into her as a child returned instinctively. If there had been a table or desk to duck under or a doorway to stand beneath, she would have used that as cover but, exposed as she was in the tunnel, pressing her back against the wall was the most protection she could afford herself.

The Catachans followed Tzula's lead and spread out along the rockface. A couple were too slow and in amongst the fist-sized chunks of stone that were pouring down, a weighty slab of rock crashed amongst them, pulverising bone and meat and pinning their corpses to the tunnel floor. The others could only watch on helplessly as the tremors intensified and the mountain threw more of itself down.

As quickly as the tremors and the cacophony had begun, they ceased.

With the noise of the rockfall still echoing along the tunnel, Tzula knelt down to check the bodies of the two Catachans pressed beneath the slab and, after confirming what she already knew, retrieved their knives. Handing them over to one of the surviving death worlders, she began to pick her way through the carpet of debris to continue her pursuit of Brandd.

She hoped she was not too late.

In her time as a servant of the Davinicus Lycae and while posing as the apprentice to not just one, but two inquisitors, Tryphena Brandd had witnessed many things, both wondrous and abhorrent. As she stepped inside the vast subterranean cavern opened after untold millennia by dark ritual, she wasn't sure which category to mentally file this one under.

A flickering blue glow bathed the entire area, rising in a column through the gloom. It illuminated the recesses of the vaulted ceiling high above and highlighted immense stalactites descending from the roof like giant fangs. The effect was spectacular but it was the source of the light that both repulsed and enthralled her.

Upon a raised dais in the centre of the cavern, a stasis field hummed and crackled gently, pulsing rhythmically in a strobe-like manner. Beneath the protective canopy of energy, thirteen robed figures, emaciated to the point of skeletism, moved in grotesque slow motion, like a pict feed slowed down to a single frame every few seconds. The attire they wore was threadbare and rotted in places, exposing cadaverous frames entirely bereft of muscle or fat. Limp skin hung from their limbs, giving the impression that they wore a second set of robes beneath the top layer. Their mouths moved in a fashion that was painful to observe, taut skin slowly stretching and cracking as their jaws opened and closed over a lengthy cycle. Other than the almost imperceptible movements, the only other sign that the occupants of the chamber were still alive was the puffs of breath that condensed in the freezing air of the stasis cocoon. If they were aware of the newcomers to their home, they were showing no outward signs.

‘Psykers,’ Brandd spat. ‘Thirteen bound psykers left to watch over the final seal. All that remains now is to slay them, and after ten thousand years the Damnation Cache will be open once more. Our masters will soon walk this realm again as lords of all!’

Unprompted, one of her companions drew a crude autopistol and pointed it at the dais.

‘Stop!’ yelled Brandd, a moment too late.

The cultist pulled the trigger and the bullet sped inexorably towards the dome of blue energy. It hit the stasis field and bounced off, ricocheting crazily off the walls of the cavern, given new impetus by its deflection.

‘The field doesn’t just keep them alive, you fool. It protects them too. Killing them is going to take—’

She was interrupted by the changing sound of the rogue bullet. Instead of bouncing off the cavern walls, it had hit something metallic before dropping to the floor and rolling towards her feet from out of a benighted recess.

‘What was that?’ she asked.

Activating a lume strip, the shooter lit up the alcove. What they saw there gave them a moment’s pause.

Covered from helmet to boots in verdigris, moss and fungal mould the form of a Terminator-armoured Space Marine stood sentinel in the alcove. Halberd in one hand, the helmeted figure was a near-perfect representation of the superhuman elite of the Imperium’s armies, right down to the bolt pistol holstered at its hip and the numerous purity seals applied to its pauldrons and breastplate. A glint of silver reflected the light of the lume strip where the bullet had grazed a knee guard and removed the detritus of the ages.

Even a representation of the mighty Adeptus Astartes was enough to instil awe and it was several moments before anybody spoke.

‘It’s a statue,’ said the cultist holding up the light. ‘How typical of the Emperor’s curs to leave a mere statue to keep guard over—’

A creak emanated from the recess. As one, the cultists’ guns came up and aimed at the monument.

‘It moved! The statue just moved,’ the cultist said, shining the lume strip up and down to find the source of the noise. The statue remained immobile.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Brandd scoffed. ‘It was probably just a rat.’ She lowered her weapon to emphasise her point, as did the other cultists.

‘That was no rat. This thing—’

He never got to finish his sentence.

‘I can assure you, traitor,’ said the statue drawing and firing its bolt pistol in one swift movement, turning the cultist’s head to a cloud of crimson mist, ‘I am far more than a “mere statue”,’ it added before opening fire on the remaining cultists.

**913959.M41 / Hangar Level, Imperial Command Centre.
Olympax Mountains, Pythos**

The Valkyries were so close now that Thorne could make out the colour schemes and markings of the individual craft. All of them were gunships that had set out from Olympax weeks earlier, and none of them were showing obvious signs of hostile intent.

But neither had the traitor inquisitor when she flew straight in and passed herself off as a Catachan captain. How did the old saying go? *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.*

‘Chief, we still can’t raise the incoming Valkyries,’ called a vox-operator from the back of the hangar. ‘The quake knocked out the comms tower. It’ll be hours before it’s operational again.’

‘What do you think, major? Is this another ploy by the enemy?’ asked the sergeant beside Thorne.

The major put the magnoculars back to his eyes. The full glare of Pythos’s sun reflected back off the cockpit canopies making it impossible to see who was piloting the craft. Would that make a difference anyway? The enemy had already tried to pass themselves off as soldiers of the 183rd, and the jungles and delver-strongholds were rife with dead Catachans from which to pilfer uniforms.

‘They’re about to come into range of the anti-aircraft batteries, chief. If we hit them now we should be able to down most of them before they have a chance to return fire. Do you want me to give the order to fire?’ The sergeant gestured for a runner to be ready to deliver the order to the flak gun crews.

Thorne ran a hand across his bearded jaw, deep in contemplation.

‘We’re going to lose our chance,’ the sergeant urged. ‘You need to make the call now, major.’

913959.M41 / The Tunnel System, Imperial Command Centre. Olympax Mountains, Pythos

The last sound Tzula Digriiz expected to hear as she picked her way through the rock-strewn tunnels of the depths of Mount Olympax was the report of a bolt pistol echoing up from below. When she raced through the vast crevice that had opened up in the heart of the mountain, plasma pistol already in hand, the source of the firing was the last thing she had expected to see.

Halberd in one hand blazing with blue energy, a Terminator-armoured Space Marine was exchanging fire with Brandd and her cronies. The cultists were using the stasis field as cover, circling around it and taking shots at the armoured goliath, but the mixture of solid autopistol shot and las-fire did nothing more than reveal more of the silver armour beneath the conglomeration of lichen and filth.

Sensing the presence of others in the chamber, the Space Marine aimed his pistol at the entrance but stopped short of firing it when he saw that Tzula and the soldiers accompanying her were also attacking his targets.

The air filled with the heated discharge of las and plasma fire, punctuated by the staccato of bolt shells. The Space Marine dealt with one flank while the Catachans and Tzula drove up the other, cutting off the cultists’ means of escape and pinning them down under a steady barrage.

Over Tzula's shoulder, a Catachan went down hard, a well-placed volley taking off the left side of his face. Tzula avenged his death instantly by doing likewise to the cultist who had made the shot.

A scream rang out from the other side of the chamber as a bolt shell evaporated the shoulder, arm and most of the chest of a cultist. Using his corpse as a shield, another rattled off a string of las-bolts, all of which missed the onrushing Space Marine. In response, the giant fired a single shot into the cultist whose life he had just ended, the round passing straight through him and exploding the torso of his comrade behind.

That only left Brandd.

Out of options, she reached into her satchel and pulled out the vial of dark liquid given to her weeks ago by Corpulax. She held it above her head, using her other hand to alternately point her weapon at Tzula and the Space Marine.

‘Do you know what this is?’ Brandd said.

‘Hold your fire,’ Tzula ordered the Catachans behind her. ‘It’s a vial of Life Eater, the same thing that’s used in virus bombs. Not nearly enough to threaten the planet or even the base but more than enough to kill everyone in this chamber.’

‘Very good, Tzula. I knew Dinalt didn’t just keep you around for your looks.’ Cornered like a dog, Brandd’s tone was still one of superiority. ‘Do you know what else it’s good for?’

Tzula said nothing.

‘It’s an airborne pathogen which makes it excellent at breaching stasis fields. Unfortunately, those psyker slaves in there don’t have their own air supply which means the protective dome, while sufficient to prevent solid objects from passing in and out, is porous enough to allow gas and liquids through.’ She emphasised this point by spitting through the field, a wad of phlegm landing on the hem of an oblivious psyker’s robes. She shook her pistol at the Space Marine. ‘Even he can’t save you now.’

+Be ready to move when I do.+

The shock of psychic intrusion registered briefly on Tzula's face but if Brandd noticed, she did not react. Though he wore no psychic hood of the Librarius, the Space Marine was a psyker. +Do not let the vial hit the ground.+

+Understood.+ She replied in the manner her former master had taught her.

Impossibly quickly, more so because of his armoured bulk, the Space Marine slashed down with his halberd, a blur of sapphire energy crackling through the stale air of the cavern. It made contact with Brandd and sheared through bone, removing her forearm at the elbow. Moving not nearly as quickly as the genhanced warrior, but still fast by human standards, Tzula dived forwards and grasped the wrist of the severed arm, stopping the vial from smashing scant centimetres from the hard floor.

She breathed out in audible relief. Lying next to her on the dais, Brandd screamed and clutched at her cauterised stump. Strangely, her screams soon gave way to choked laughter.

'It's too late,' she rasped through gritted teeth. 'It was on a timer.'

Looking in horror at the limb she still clasped in her own hand, Tzula heard the hiss of a valve releasing as the liquid within the vial began to seep out and expand. She dropped the arm, container and all, to the ground and scrambled away from it. As the vial shattered, a tiny droplet splashed her on the back of her hand.

+Move. Now,+ the Space Marine said directly into her mind. When Tzula didn't react, instead sitting there trying to wipe the noxious substance from her hand, the Space Marine picked her up and bundled her under his arm, sprinting towards the entrance.

The black ooze spread and multiplied like liquid cancer, consuming all in its path. Brandd's severed arm dissolved at its touch, as did the still laughing traitor when the dark substance spread over her body and

engulfed her. It seeped in through the stasis field and climbed over the husks of the psykers, rising over them before disappearing inside them through their slowly opening and closing mouths.

The Catachans did not need the same warning nor aid that Tzula had and were heading back towards the entrance under their own power. Chased all the way by the proliferating Life Eater virus, one of them tripped and was instantly engulfed by the blackness, all traces of him drowning beneath it. The others continued running for their lives but their efforts were too futile. Not having the speed of the augmented Space Marine, the remaining Catachans could only look on helplessly as he disappeared through the crack, Tzula under his arm, while they became the next victims of the creeping death.

‘My arm,’ Tzula said as the Space Marine set her down in the vestibule, confident that the virus was contained to the chamber. ‘It’s... it’s spreading,’ she said, panic rising in her voice.

The tiny splash that had landed on her hand had expanded across her fingers and up to her wrist in the short space of time it had taken for the Space Marine to outrun the Life Eater. Tendrils were slowly creeping up her forearm and her digits were starting to dissolve.

‘This is going to hurt.’ The Space Marine’s voice was dry and he over-enunciated each syllable as if he were speaking High Gothic for the first time.

‘What? What’s going to hurt?’ She was only half-concentrating on his words, sickeningly fascinated by the change her body was undergoing.

‘This,’ the Space Marine said, slashing down with his force halberd at precisely the same spot where he had separated Brandd’s arm from the rest of her body. Tzula cried out in pain and looked down at the stump expecting to be greeted by a fountain of blood but instead found the wound was smooth and cauterised. Her severed forearm and hand dissolved into nothingness at her feet.

‘It was the only way,’ the Space Marine said unapologetically.

Tzula stared a little longer at the space where the rest of her left arm used to be, experimentally flexing her shoulder and bicep. She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing which had become irregular and sharp. ‘At least it wasn’t my shooting arm,’ she said eventually, wincing through the pain.

‘Good. I think you’ll be needing that soon,’ said the Space Marine. He helped her uneasily to her feet. ‘Can you walk unaided?’

‘Yes. The trauma should soon pass and you took it off clean so blood loss won’t be an issue,’ she replied before pausing. ‘Who are you anyway? I wasn’t aware of any Chapter operating on Pythos. Where are the rest of you?’ Tzula had fought alongside several Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes during her career, but was struck by how odd it was to find a Space Marine operating alone. The livery and markings of his armour were unfamiliar, but there was rumoured to be over a thousand Chapters scattered across the Imperium and, even as an agent of the Inquisition, she could barely name or identify a hundred of them.

The Space Marine did not answer, instead looking the junior inquisitor up and down.

‘My name is Tzula. Tzula Digriiz, junior inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus and agent of the Golden Throne.’

‘Zoo-ler,’ the Space Marine repeated uneasily.

‘It’s Tzula. T. Z. U. L. A. The “t” is silent,’ she paused again expectantly. ‘And you are?’

‘I am...’ He seemed to be considering his answer. ‘I am Epimetheus of the Grey Knights, Sentinel of Pythos and Keeper of the Seventh Seal.’

‘A Grey Knight?’ Tzula asked, surprised. ‘A Brotherhood is already here on Pythos. Thank the Emperor. I thought—’

‘As far as I’m aware, I am the sole Grey Knight on this planet.’ He halted, the crackling of his force halberd breaking the silence. ‘I do not

sense the psychic spoor of any of my brethren on this world, just the presence of the Archenemy. With the final seal broken, it is only a matter of time before the Damnation Cache bursts open. Come, junior inquisitor. We have work to do.'

'I don't understand. How can you be here on your own? And your armour? How did it get into such poor condition.'

'The time for answers will come later,' Epimetheus said, starting off along the stone corridor at pace. 'For now, we have a world to save.'

**913959.M41 / Hangar Level, Imperial Command Centre.
Olympax Mountains, Pythos**

'What the hell happened here?' Strike bellowed to be heard above the sound of engines spooling down as he strode along the exit ramp of the Valkyrie. The floor of the hangar level was carpeted in fallen rocks and dust, and otherwise airworthy craft were dented and scratched, cockpit windows crazed and shattered. Men and women frantically dashed about attempting to clear landing spaces for the Valkyries hovering in a holding pattern at the hangar entrance.

'There was an... incident, chief,' Thorne answered sheepishly before explaining the events of recent hours.

'And the girl, the traitor, she's still in the base?' Strike asked after hearing Thorne out. He knew that the major would be giving himself a hard enough time about being duped by Brandd; admonishing him about it would serve no purpose now.

'I think so, yes. The other inquisitor, the loyal one I mean, Tzula. She took a squad after her.'

'The tremors? Was that the final seal being broken?'

'I have no idea. If it was, we probably would have known about it by now, don't you think?'

A commotion from the hangar bay opening drew both men's attention. Recently landed pilots and disembarked troops alike were staring and

pointing into the distance towards Atika. Strike and the major jogged over to see what was happening for themselves.

‘It’s the hive, chief. It’s on fire,’ a pilot, still dressed in full flying gear, told him.

Unnatural smoke billowed up into the sky and over the jungle canopies, vast plumes of blackness spiralling sharply in all directions growing ever greater in volume.

‘Pass me your magnoculars, Thorne,’ Strike asked. The major lifted the cord attached to the eyeglasses over his head and passed them to Strike. The colonel looked through them in the direction of the planetary capital. When he removed them a few moments later, the colour had drained from his face.

‘That’s not smoke,’ he said, fighting to keep the emotion from impinging on his voice. ‘It’s daemons.’



CHAPTER SIX

913959.M41 / Imperial Command Centre. Olympax Mountains, Pythos

The Xerxes support craft unleashed a volley from its rocket pod, each missile unerringly finding its target and blasting the daemon out of the air. The thing's serpentine body ruptured and its leathery brown wings tore and holed, sending the beast spinning towards the ground. Another Xerxes altered course in a gravity taunting motion and finished it off with a single shot from its multi-laser, gore streaking the flyer's hull as it flew through the space vacated by the now dissipating warp entity.

'Good shooting, Green Wing,' Thorne enthused over the vox from the co-pilot's chair of a nearby Valkyrie. Only a handful of the gunships returning from Khan's Hold had actually made it into the hangar at Olympax before the daemoniac assault had been launched, and many of the near hundred Valkyries had simply turned around to engage this new enemy, still overloaded with troops from their previous engagement. The quake-damaged craft had also been scrambled and with their numbers added to the Valkyries already airborne, over one hundred and fifty craft of varying patterns now filled the skies above the Olympax mountain range.

'What are we dealing with here, Thorne? How many of them are there?' Strike's voice fizzed over the vox. With the comms tower out at Olympax,

the colonel had boarded his newly refitted Hellhammer, currently perched on the lip of the hangar entrance, and was using it as a mobile base of operations.

The major looked out through a cracked section of cockpit. Less than a kilometre in front of the gunship formation, an angry black cloud roiled in the sky, flashes of warp energy and balefire picking out the spiteful teeth and claws of its constituent parts.

‘Impossible to say, chief.’ Another of the serpentine beasts forming the daemonic vanguard darted between a phalanx of Valkyries only to die screaming as door gunners ripped it to pieces with heavy bolter rounds.

‘All we’re encountering at the moment are the advance scouts.’

‘I’m getting everybody in the base out through the east entrance, but that’s going to take time. Keep them occupied for as long as you can, then split your formation to the four corners of the planet. Tell those pilots to head for any delver-stronghold that still remains in our hands and establish contact with other Catachan cells as soon as they can.’

‘We’re giving them Olympax?’ said Thorne, sceptically rather than dissenting.

‘They had Olympax the instant the sky turned black with daemons. If those seals were holding back a tide of warpfiends we have to melt back into the jungle and keep them occupied until somebody, anybody, arrives to reinforce us.’

‘But we don’t even know whether the astropath was able to contact the battlefleet, and Brigstone and the armour have probably been lost at sea. Help might not be on its way.’ The chatter of heavy bolter fire echoed from further back inside the Valkyrie. The door gunners had sheared a wing from one of the daemons and it flipped erratically end over end. Reaching out with a claw as it dropped, it raked the side of another gunship at lower altitude. The craft rocked precariously and, sensing easy prey, two more of the winged horrors pounced upon it before the gunners

could react, tearing through armour plating like paper and casting the occupants violently down onto the mountains below before sending their craft down after them in a ball of fire.

‘We can’t think like that. We have to keep fighting and keep hope alive until there’s not a single Catachan left to draw breath on Pythos. And even then, if our sacrifice is so total that not a single soldier of the 183rd will be around to witness it, we have to believe that Pythos will be saved.’

The sky outside lit up as the front ranks of the aerial daemon army came into range and the Catachan craft commenced their assault.

‘I only hope I’m around to be proven wrong,’ Thorne said launching one of the Valkyrie’s hellstrike missiles in the direction of a host of flat, blue daemons that had separated from the main pack and were heading directly for him.

913959.M41 / The Tunnel System, Imperial Command Centre. Olympax Mountains, Pythos

‘Your arm?’ Epimetheus had stopped higher up the stone stairs and was waiting for Tzula to catch up with him. ‘Is it troubling you?’

‘Not really,’ she replied. ‘The opposite in fact. It feels like my forearm and hand are still there. Right now I have the sensation that I’m flexing my fingers and twisting my wrist, but that’s impossible of course.’

‘You’d be surprised. Brothers of mine who have lost limbs in battle claim that they’ve been able to feel the presence of a phantom limb even after they’ve had an augmetic replacement fitted.’

‘And where are they?’

‘What?’ Epimetheus said non-plussed. ‘The phantom limbs?’

‘No,’ said Tzula finally catching up to him. ‘Your brothers.’

‘I’ve told you, this conversation can wait. If the final seal has been broken and the cache is once again open, this entire planet is in peril.’ He turned to continue his ascent.

‘And I’ve told you that I am an agent of the Most Holy Ordos of the Emperor’s Inquisition. I demand some answers.’

The Grey Knight stopped once again. +And who are you to demand anything of me?+ He did not bother to turn and face Tzula.

+I thought I just made that abundantly clear. I serve the Ordo Malleus, as do you.+

He turned to face her again. ‘Then you are either deluded, a very convincing liar or a lot has changed since I have been down here.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘I have never heard of this Ordo Malleus of which you speak. Nor am I aware of it having any ties to the Grey Knights or the Inquisition.’

It was Tzula’s turn to be non-plussed. ‘How long have you been down here?’

‘I’m... unsure. My implants were keeping me in a state of suspended animation. It was only the psychic wards I left in place that alerted me to the traitors’ presence in the seal chamber and roused me.’ His speech was becoming more normalised now, as if it was improving with practice.

‘What year is it?’

Tzula was taken aback slightly. ‘It is the nine hundred and fifty-ninth year of the forty-first millennium,’ she answered hesitantly. She did not need to be a psyker herself to sense that this information unsettled Epimetheus.

‘In that case, Tzula Digriiz of the Most Holy Ordos of the Emperor’s Inquisition,’ he said, climbing upwards again at speed. ‘I have been down here almost ten thousand years.’

913959.M41 / Imperial Command Centre. Olympax Mountains, Pythos

Blue flame engulfed the Valkyrie flying above Thorne’s in the formation, exploding it in a shower of twisted metal and human wreckage. It rained

down on the craft below, unbalancing them as they prepared to unleash their weapons into the oncoming wave of daemons. The darkening sky filled with energy beams from over a hundred multilasers accompanied by the contrails of missiles launched from the gunships supporting the troop carriers. The front rank of daemons peeled off and broke, leaving the Catachan weapons to hit those arrayed behind them. In a roar of explosions and otherworldly screaming, nigh on a thousand daemons succumbed in the space of seconds.

It was nowhere near enough.

Those that had broken under the initial assault now regrouped and engaged the Catachan craft, reinforced by swift, spindly daemons who seemed to have no discernible way of keeping aloft other than dark pacts sworn to even darker deities. Some breathed warfire, burning plasteel hulls as if they were made of dried wood and cooking off missiles from pregnant pods. Others launched wicked barbs from their mouths and other orifices, spears of solid flesh and iron-hard bone that impaled pilots and clogged engine rotors. Those with no means of ranged attack simply flew directly at the Valkyries and barged bodily against them, crashing them into others in the tight formation or diverting them into mountain faces. A pair of the flat, blue daemons wailed monstrosly as they synchronised their assault on one of the Xerxes gunships, each one tearing off a turbojet as they launched themselves under its wings at speed. The craft hung ponderously in the sky for a second before dropping like a stone onto the mountain peak below.

And still the daemons came.

Like an industrial chimney spitting out toxic pollutant into the Pythosian dusk, the flow of daemons from Atika Hive was ceaseless – a morass of newly spawned malevolence ready to claim dominion over the material world.

As the Imperial Navy pilot at the helm of Thorne's Valkyrie struggled valiantly to avoid the onrushing daemons, the major noticed a change in the pattern of the column spewing forth from the planetary capital. Where

it had previously appeared to be a single mass, it had now broken up, daemons suddenly flying off like a shoal of fish dispersing once a predator got amongst them. Two vast shadows broke away from the silhouette of the hive city, massive compared to the daemons the Catachans were already battling, and faster with it. A palpable wave of panic spread through the enemy ranks. They scattered as if their very existence was under threat allowing Thorne and his men time to regroup.

‘Something’s happening, chief,’ Thorne voxed. ‘New targets have presented themselves. Big targets.’

‘I see them too, major. How long can you buy us? Strike responded. The vox-feed had grown choppy and distorted the colonel’s voice in a macabre fashion.

‘As much as you need.’ Thorne switched to the general channel. ‘All wings. New priority targets. Let’s take those big bastards down.’

Taking shots of opportunity at the fleeing minor daemons, the Valkyries resumed formation and gunned their engines towards the new threats. By the time Thorne realised his mistake, it was already too late.

Moving preternaturally quickly for something with wings, the first shape collided with the lead Valkyries before any of the others could react. One moment, three gunships were taking point, the next a crimson blur barrelled through them turning them to scrap, a trio of fireballs the only evidence of them ever existing. Once the flames had cleared, the Catachans got a clear look at what had wreaked such bloody havoc.

The colour of darkest blood, the behemoth hovered in front of the Imperial position goading them to attack, every beat of its powerful leathery wings generating turbulence that swung the stationary Valkyries roughly from side to side. In one hand it wielded a double-bladed axe, thick with fresh ichor from where it had carved a path through its weaker cousins. In its other, it gripped the handle of a long, barbed whip, the thong of which seemed to be made from the same material as its wings.

Curved horns sprouted wickedly from its forehead and plates of thick brass armour etched with heretical symbols that stung human eyes to gaze upon them hung over its shoulders, chest and thighs.

‘Skullrender,’ Thorne said down the secure line to Strike, his voice a frightened whisper. It was rare for any veterans of the Catachan regiments to return to their home world, rarer still to be breathing when they did come home. Some of those veterans, the ones whose psyche was frayed a little too much and whose anecdotes fell just the wrong side of fanciful, would speak in hushed, feared tones of an entity so bloodthirsty that entire battalions had committed suicide in their barracks rather than face one. Others in the Imperium had different names for this particular classification of warp entity but those who knew of such matters – scholars of the forbidden and the esoteric – called them Bloodthirsters.

‘Emperor preserve us,’ Strike replied. ‘Do what you can, Thorne, we only need a few more minutes.’

‘Understood, chief,’ Thorne said, regaining some of his composure. He switched back to the open channel before bellowing, ‘Concentrate fire!’ Over a hundred weapons answered his call, enough firepower to level a small city in the blink of an eye, all trained on one target. Except their target was no longer there.

Thrusting upwards, the Bloodthirster flew in a wide, vertical arc, tucking in its wings at the apex and diving down upon the Catachans packed so tightly below. As it hit their formation, it lashed out with whip and axe simultaneously, slicing one of the Valkyries in twain while spinning another into the side of an identical craft. Three more blazing wrecks cascaded down upon the thickly forested valleys below.

In the weeks since Abaddon’s invasion of Pythos, Major Eckhardt Thorne of the Catachan 183rd had seen many strange and diabolical sights, but what he witnessed next was the most bizarre of all.

Despite being almost the same size as the Bloodthirster, the second dark shape had ended up in the midst of the Valkyrie formation without anybody seeming to notice. Looming large through the cockpit window, Thorne could quite clearly make out the spindly, purple form of a feathered, bird-headed daemon. Its frame was the equivalent of its counterpart but the bulk it wore upon it was barely half that of the Bloodthirster. Instead of armour it wore robes of fine cloth that constantly changed colour and texture in a mildly hypnotic way. In place of a whip or axe it carried a staff of ornate crafting that terminated in a crescent moon shape inset with a living, blinking eye.

It opened its mouth to speak, revealing numerous sets of tiny fangs within its beaked mouth and uttered a single word that made Thorne's ears bleed to hear it. Without any physical interference or act of violence being perpetrated upon it, the Valkyrie alongside Thorne's simply fell apart, reduced to its constituent parts in mid-air and exposing its occupants to the effects of gravity.

The daemon smiled and turned its attention to Thorne's craft.

It had just opened its mouth to speak when a sonic boom sounded from somewhere back in the mountains. The thing's eyes widened in horror right before the shot from the hellhammer cannon struck it, knocking it back in the direction from which it came.

'I thought you could do with some help,' said Strike over the vox.

'But how—'

'The inquisitor's monkey made some modifications when he repaired the tank.' Thorne could hear K'Cee protesting noisily in the background.

'Got quite a range on it now.'

A purple shape whizzed over the cockpit canopy, only avoiding collision thanks to the pilot's quick reflexes. Despite the daemon's frail construction, the hellhammer shell had done little, if nothing, to impede it.

'Looks like you're about to have company, chief.'

‘Don’t worry about me. I’ll keep our feathered friend busy, you keep that Skullrender off our backs.’ The vox abruptly went dead.

‘Chief? Chief?’ No response. Thorne tried the open channel. ‘All wings. Is anybody receiving?’

A string of affirmatives followed.

‘The other daemon has breached Olympax. We can’t let the Skullrender make it through as well. Break formation. Attack from all angles.’

Engines screaming as Valkyries banked and rose, heavy bolter fire joined the multilaser and missile fire as the flyers presented their flanks to let the door gunners join the attack. Surrounded on all sides as well as above and below, the Bloodthirster was penned in and took dozens of hits, flame wreathing it as explosions blossomed across its armour and hide. It roared in pain but did not succumb.

Cornered like a beast, it lashed out at the closest targets and, despite the best efforts of the pilots to dodge its wild swings, the daemon accounted for two more of the Valkyries. A third lost its tail to the axe’s backswing and spun to the ground trailing smoke in its wake.

The Catachans poured on the fire, but the Bloodthirster soaked it up and returned it in kind. Having learned from the mistakes of their now dead comrades, the pilots were staying well out of the range of the daemon’s axe. It lashed out instead with its whip, raking the barbs across a dozen cockpits, collapsing them and showering those inside with lethal fragments of plastiglas.

Thorne looked on helplessly as more of the flyers simply dropped from the sky, pilots dead at the controls or instruments wrecked. Every one of these pilots would fight to the death to ensure that Strike and the remaining Catachans had enough time to evacuate the base, and it was looking increasingly like that was what it was going to take to cover their retreat: the death of every one of them. Thorne made a decision.

‘All wings. Get out of here. Spread out across the planet and make for the outlying strongholds. We go underground, harry the enemy at every opportunity and wait for reinforcements. The Emperor protects!’ The vox channel swelled with affirmatives and repeated blessings.

Through the crazed apertures of the cockpit, Thorne saw the remaining Valkyries peel off and speed away in all directions. The Bloodthirster hung suspended, momentarily confused and unsure which targets to pursue. The pilot by Thorne’s side made to pull back on the control stick and send the craft higher into the atmosphere, but the major’s hand stopped him.

‘Not us, son,’ Thorne said solemnly. ‘We have to cover *their* escape.’ He looked back down the interior and received nods of confirmation from the two door gunners.

The pilot nodded in understanding and swung the Valkyrie sharply around, its weapons systems all trained on the daemon’s rear. The beast was about to beat its heavy wings in pursuit of a cluster of gunships when Thorne gave the order to fire. Las-rounds and solid shot impacted against the thing, followed by a direct hit between its shoulder blades from a hellstrike missile, the detonation briefly obscuring the daemon from view.

When the smoke and flame cleared, the wounded Bloodthirster turned and bellowed in rage, its powerful breath violently shaking the craft and forcing the pilot to lower altitude to avoid the wave of turbulence. Sensing its opportunity, the daemon cracked its massive whip, wrapping it around the hull of the impertinent flyer and yanked back hard, veins the thickness of a man’s arm bulging in its bicep. The Valkyrie barrel-rolled, tossed like driftwood in a tsunami and the door gunners were thrown clear, their bodies smashed as they hit the rocks below. Righting itself, the Valkyrie hovered vulnerably before the thing from the warp.

‘What do we have left?’ Thorne asked the pilot. Receiving no response, he turned to see the slumped form of the Navy man, face caved-in from where it had impacted against the control facia. Quickly unstrapping the

man from his seat, Thorne unceremoniously dumped his corpse on the cockpit floor and assumed the pilot's seat. As part of their training, all Catachan officers were given simple instruction in operating Imperial Guard vehicles and though it had been almost a decade since he'd been at the controls of a Valkyrie, he'd spent enough time in the co-pilot's seat these past three years to relearn the basics.

The Bloodthirster lashed out again. Instinctively, Thorne pushed forwards on the control stick, entering into a steep dive that he barely pulled out of before making contact with a mountain. Now, facing away from the daemon, he spun the craft around in a one-hundred and eighty degree turn and squeezed the firing stud for the hull-mounted multi-laser, hitting the beast in the chest and scorching the brass of its breastplate. Unfazed, the Bloodthirster lowered its head and dived towards Thorne.

The major looked all around him to see dozens of craft disappearing into the distance, tiny pinpricks of light in the Pythosian dusk. Over the Bloodthirster's shoulder, the lesser daemons were getting braver, swarming to launch a new assault. He had done enough to allow the Valkyrie wings to get to safety, but he could still buy Strike and the rest of the regiment more time. Priming the last of the hellstrike missiles in its launch pod, Thorne pulled back hard on the throttle and drove upwards towards the onrushing daemon.

Thirteen tonnes of forge-world manufactured aerial troop carrier hit almost a thousand kilometres per hour as it flew inexorably towards a warpborn fiend of almost the same weight, flying at a near-identical speed. When they hit the point where neither could pull out, Thorne launched the hellstrike. The Bloodthirster's eyes grew wide with realisation.

'I'll be with you soon, Mack,' Thorne whispered as the flames and shockwave hit.

From the command compartment of the Hellhammer, Strike watched his friend die.

The orange bloom of an explosion filled the greying sky, followed shortly by the sound of metal rending through flesh and muscle. The Valkyrie had embedded itself in the Bloodthirster's abdomen and they hung suspended in the sky, before dropping towards the ground in a fiery morass. The daemon howled as it fell, its grip on the material realm slipping rapidly, and by the time Thorne's craft hit the jungle floor, all trace of the daemon-beast had passed from reality.

Strike made a fist and slammed it down on the armrest of the Hellhammer's command seat. The time for mourning would come later, not just for Thorne but all those of the 183rd who'd laid down their lives this day. Right now though, the colonel had bigger problems.

Tucking its wings back, the feathered daemon landed in the hangar bay and turned to look back at the last faint traces of the explosion in the sky. It moved uneasily on its crooked legs as if unused to its own body. When it spoke, it did so with a thousand tiny voices.

'Ah, Bellanoth. Ever the capricious beast. A shame really as I'm certain you would have revelled in the slaughter yet to come.' Its beaked head darted this way and that, giving the impression that the beast had an acute nervous tic. Tendrils of ethereal smoke clung to it like ink suspended in water. 'But where have all my toys gone? I was so looking forward to playing my little games.'

In response, the Hellhammer's main weapon came to life, a mighty boom echoing around the hangar bay as it spat one of its heavy siege cannon shells towards the bird-like monstrosity. Unperturbed, the daemon merely lifted its hand, stopping the shell mid-flight only centimetres from its palm and holding it in place. It tottered awkwardly around the immobile projectile, peering at it and tapping it with its macabre staff.

'Such an ugly thing. Artless and utterly without grace. I imagine it is effective though.' With a flick of its wrist, the daemon turned the shell on its axis and sent it flying back towards the Hellhammer. Missing the tank

by some distance, it instead exploded against the wall of the hangar, collapsing part of the ceiling and turning to scrap the partly damaged Valkyries that had been awaiting repair. Chunks of Olympax thudded against the tank's hull, tearing off an armour plate mounted over the engine housing, much to K'Cee's consternation.

'Back us up! Back us up!' Strike ordered. The driver slammed the Hellhammer into reverse and coaxed the war machine backwards, crushing debris under its enormous chassis. The brief shock and revulsion the crew had felt at being so close to a warp entity had soon passed, as if the hull of the tank was protecting their souls as well as their bodies.

'No, no, no,' the daemon said in its choir of tongues. 'This game is far from over.' It tapped the butt of its staff on the floor of the hangar three times and the Hellhammer came to an abrupt halt, its super-charged engine revving frantically, but its tracks locked as if frozen.

'She won't shift, chief,' called the driver.

'Are the weapons still operable?' Strike asked the gunners. Each response was in the negative. K'Cee started banging instrument panels in frustration.

A tapping noise sounded from on the top of the hull, the arrhythmic plodding of hooves over metal.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are...' the daemon said mockingly, strutting over the motionless tank. 'Don't make me come in there and get you,' it added in a far more sinister tone, as if its thousand voices were all crying out in pain. It raised the staff above its head ready to smash open the Hellhammer's turret.

A single shot rang out, striking the daemon on the wrist and sending the gnarled rod skidding away across the hangar floor. It rubbed its wrist where it stung from the impact and arced its neck to ascertain the source of the gunfire.

Within the tank, a ripple of confusion passed over the Catachans.

‘The rest of the lads should have evacuated. Somebody must have come back,’ suggested one of the gunners.

‘That was a bolter round. Must be one of the Valkyries coming back to evacuate more personnel,’ said another.

‘If it was one of the flyboys, he must have glided in because we didn’t hear any engine noise,’ added the driver, Tamzarian.

Jumping down from the commander’s seat, Strike clambered up the ladder to the top hatch and slid back the cover of one of the spy slits. What he saw through it made his heart sing.

‘So, a new player enters the game and a Space Marine at that.’ The daemon’s beak peeled back in a smile and it rubbed a serpentine tongue over rows of razor-sharp teeth. ‘Hmmm, such sport, just like Abaddon promised.’

‘Abaddon?’ Epimetheus exclaimed. ‘He’s behind reopening the cache?’

‘The Warmaster granted us our freedom in return for our fealty the next time he leads forth a crusade. A small price to pay, all things considered.’ The daemon waved a hand and its discarded staff flew back into its grip. Casting it in a wide arc, a wave of boiling warp energy crackled towards the Grey Knight. Epimetheus moved out of its path, spun, and came around with his halberd in both hands. He jabbed it in the direction of the winged beast and unleashed his psychic fury in a concentrated blast, but it met a hastily erected kine shield and fizzled out harmlessly against it.

‘Your mindshields are strong, Space Marine, but I do not need to read your thoughts to know that you are not of this era.’ The daemon circled Epimetheus, sizing his opponent up like a pugilist looking for an opening. ‘You are from the time of the Great Awakening, when your brothers cast off the shackles of the Imperium and forged a new destiny as servants of the true gods.’

‘And you are a Lord of Change. Every word you utter is an untruth, every statement a trick.’ Epimetheus unleashed another blast of psychic

energy but this too washed harmlessly over the daemon's defences. 'The time of which you speak was not one of awakening, it was one of death and dishonour, of treachery and heresy.'

'Ah, the rich tapestry of history, ever to be woven by the victor except in cases where there was no clear victor.' It tried a different prong of attack, darting forward almost imperceptibly quickly and striking out at the Grey Knight with its staff. Epimetheus parried with his halberd, sickeningly coloured sparks and the reek of sulphur emanating from where his psychic conduit came into contact with the raw stuff of the warp. 'Of course, with the Damnation Cache open again, we draw ever closer to the final battle in the war we started ten millennia ago,' the daemon added, pulling his staff away and drawing Epimetheus forwards under his own momentum. The Lord of Change swung again but connected with thin air as the Space Marine ducked under the daemon's weapon, countering with his own thrust.

'And what do you know of the Great Heresy? I expect you were cowering behind the veil, lurking in the warp and waiting to see which side won rather than taking to the field of battle. Your kind always do.' He brought the force halberd around in a blue blur, narrowly missing the daemon's head.

The Lord of Change bristled visibly, its feathers ruffling at the slight. Its voices took on a higher pitch. 'I was far from idle, Space Marine. I helped bring half a Legion under the sway of the Four True Gods and took part in the destruction of their home world when their faith was found wanting. I looked on while a primarch died, content in the knowledge that I played a part in his downfall.'

'Yet somehow you still ended up imprisoned within the Damnation Cache. If you are so powerful, so clever that you could cause a schism among an entire Space Marine Legion, how did you come to be penned up

among the ranks of lesser daemons? Does your patron no longer favour you?’

Anger took hold of the daemon. It lashed out erratically, putting Epimetheus on the back foot. ‘Pythos! It was to be our foothold in the material realm, the beachhead from which we could launch our assaults on the shattered Imperium and finish what we’d started while our enemy was still weakened. Bellanoth and I leading hordes of the damned against the remnants of mankind, worlds cowering in our shadow until... until...’ Its bubble of anger burst giving way to chilling laughter. ‘But you already know all this don’t you, just as I know who you are? Your armour may be the wrong colour through years of wear and neglect but I know who you are, Epimetheus of the Grey Knights, and your soul will belong to me.’

The sweaty forms of Catachan tank crew peered out of every available aperture, watching in awe as the Space Marine duelled with the daemon. For over a minute they sat transfixed, watching one of the Imperium’s finest do battle with a thing that defied possibility, each evenly matched in the arena of psychic warfare.

It was Strike who broke their collective trance.

‘Do we have control of the steering and weapons?’ he barked, his voice echoing uncomfortably around the confines of the crew compartment.

Reluctantly pulling themselves away from the spectacle occurring outside, the driver and gunners retook their positions and tested their systems. The Hellhammer lurched backwards and the turret and weapons sponsons rotated as evidence of the daemon’s ensorcellment having come to an end. A series of affirmatives rang out through the tank.

‘Do we target the warspawn, chief?’ asked one of the gunners.

‘Negative,’ Strike replied, looking out through a spy slit. ‘Just as likely to hit our green saviour.’

The melee outside was taking place at breakneck speed, each cut, thrust and parry happening at a pace far outstripping that of any mortal being.

‘We bugging out, chief?’ ventured Tamzarian.

‘Affirmative, trooper. Let’s get her down to the east entrance and head for Khan’s Hold.’ He looked through the aperture again. The Space Marine struck the daemon a wicked blow that sliced the tip from one of its wings. It retaliated with a cannonade of blue flame which the armoured figure evaded. ‘I think our friend is more than capable of handling himself.’

Manipulating the ancient control levers, the driver manoeuvred the super-heavy tank, turning it around so that they could descend the exit ramp and take the transit tunnel that ran deep within the mountain’s belly. Before they had moved more than a few metres, a banging sound issued forth from the roof.

‘What in the name of Terra is that?’ asked one of the gunners, the noise of the daemon stalking over the hull obviously still fresh in his mind.

Strike looked out to where the daemon was locked in combat with the Space Marine. Off in the distance, beyond the hangar opening, the ominous black cloud of lesser daemons was drawing ever nearer, but none had yet breached the Imperial base. Switching to the other side of the turret, Strike pulled back an aperture cover to witness a dark-skinned woman’s hand bashing a rock against the armour plating.

‘Halt!’ he called to the driver. Still lurching forwards under the effect of braking, Strike popped open the turret hatch with a hiss of releasing pressure and the artificial light from the hangar bled into the poorly illuminated troop compartment. Moments later, Tzula Digriiz followed the light in. Still woozy from the trauma of losing her lower arm and almost at the point of exhaustion from following the Space Marine up through the warren of tunnels, she half-climbed, half-fell down the ladder.

‘What happened to your arm?’ Strike asked, lifting her from the cold floor of the Hellhammer and propping her up in one of the numerous unoccupied crew positions.

‘A Space Marine did it.’ Even in her diminished state, Tzula was careful not to use Epimetheus’s name or give away his Chapter affiliation. Strike looked at her sceptically, hand reaching unconsciously for his fang. ‘No, nothing like that. Brandd had a vial of contagion which she used to open the seal. I got some on my arm. He only did what was necessary.’

‘Looks like you made it back just in time. We’re the last ride out of here.’ Strike signalled to the driver to get moving again but Tzula stopped him.

‘No. We can’t leave without him. Didn’t you hear what I just said? He saved my life. I owe it to him.’

‘And I owe it to my men and the people of this planet to prosecute this war until support arrives to reconquer it. If your friend outside is any indication, those reinforcements are already on their way. His Chapter will–’

‘His Chapter will do nothing because they’re not here yet. He’s alone,’ Tzula snapped. ‘He’s been here longer than anybody. Longer than you, longer than the miners, longer even than the first settlers. He helped put the seals in place and, until the cavalry arrive, he’s the only chance we’ve got at containing the warp breach.’

Strike rubbed the several weeks of growth on his chin contemplatively.

‘Right now there’s an entire army of daemons headed for this place and he isn’t going to be able to handle them on his own,’ she continued.

‘Please, Strike. Don’t leave him to face them alone.’

‘So your brothers abandoned you, did they? Left you behind to keep watch over the Damnation Cache while they went around the galaxy seeking true glory.’ The Lord of Change swatted aside a riposte from the Grey Knight’s halberd. ‘That must rankle you, Epimetheus. To know that they chose you to remain here because you were the least of them.’

‘I am immune to your words, filth,’ Epimetheus spat, channelling his rage but not allowing it to overtake him. He swung low and wide with the

force weapon, attempting to unbalance the daemon. It lifted one foot in time to avoid the blow, but its back foot didn't move quite as swiftly and it fell backwards, wings crumpling beneath it. Instantaneously, Epimetheus was standing over it, halberd held aloft in both hands and poised to land the killing blow.

‘That’s right, Epimetheus. End me. End me so that you might at last emerge from Janus’s shadow,’ the daemon taunted.

The force halberd crackled with lambent psychic energy but before Epimetheus could drive it down, a dark form flew in from his blindside and bowled him over, causing him to lose hold of the weapon. Long fangs, more akin to claws, snapped at his armour, trying to chew through the aged ceramite. Gripping the serpentine thing by the neck, Epimetheus got back to his feet and tore its head from its body, showering his armour in gore. More of the detritus that coated his armour dissolved away, revealing further patches of silver beneath. He stooped to recover his halberd but when he turned back to the spot where he’d left the prone daemon, the Lord of Change was no longer there.

‘Janus would have landed that blow. Khyron too.’ The daemon had taken to the air now, flanked by more of the serpentine daemons and blue horrors that had earlier assailed the Catachan Valkyries. Heralded by the loud roar of engines, the Hellhammer opened up with all of its weapons, tearing over the rubble coating the hangar floor, taking out any target that presented itself. Daemons either side of the Lord of Change disintegrated as autocannon fire stitched through them. The greater daemon raised his kine shield just in time to prevent the rounds causing it damage too.

‘A truly wonderful toy,’ the daemon said as the Hellhammer scorched a cadre of blue horrors with its flammers. ‘Come, Epimetheus, let me kill you quickly so that I can play with it.’ The Lord of Change swooped down on its massive wings and struck the Grey Knight a glancing blow with its staff. Epimetheus slashed upwards but, seeing his foe unbalanced, the

daemon performed a turn in mid-air that ran contrary to all known laws of physics and knocked him to the ground. Before he could react, the winged monstrosity was upon him, pinning him down with twisted, clawed hands.

‘Such a waste really, to spend ten thousand years waiting for something only to find that the something you were waiting for was your own death.’ Thick strands of spittle drooled from its beak, spilling over Epimetheus’s helmet.

‘I am nothing if not patient,’ the Space Marine said, straining to break the daemon’s grip. ‘For centuries I dwelt on Titan while the Sigillite kept us hidden from reality, training my mind and arming myself with the knowledge I would need to go forth and eradicate the daemonic from the material realm. I had hundreds of years to not only armour my mind from psychic assault but also to turn it into the sharpest blade with which to sever my enemies’ links with the corporeal. But that was not the greatest weapon I armed myself with.’

‘Wasn’t it? Please illuminate me, Grey Knight,’ the Lord of Change said in amusement, its myriad voices raised over the din of the Hellhammer’s slaughter. ‘But make it quick. I can already sense the entities gathering in the warp waiting for a taste of your soul.’

‘Knowledge. Knowledge is the most powerful threat I wield. I had hundreds of years to prepare to do battle with monsters like you and entire libraries at my disposal filled with books that listed the rituals of banishment, the rites of warding and, most important of all, the true names of daemons.’

The daemon sneered. ‘True names are worthless if you don’t know who they belong to. Come now, I am bored of your prattling. Time to die.’ It raised a clawed hand ready to tear through the Grey Knight’s armour.

‘But I *do* know which true name belongs to you, daemon. I knew it even before you let slip that you turned half a Legion.’

The Lord of Change’s expression became one of puzzlement and doubt.

‘I know who you are, daemon, because I *recognised* you.’ The Grey Knight lowered a portion of his psychic defences, not enough to allow the daemon full access to his mind, but enough to share the information he needed to.

The Lord of Change relinquished its grip on Epimetheus and backed away. ‘No! It cannot be. You! The one who defied me, who very nearly unravelled everything. You’re not supposed to be in this place. You’re not even supposed to be in this *time*.’

Reaching for his weapon, Epimetheus rose to his feet and advanced upon the daemon, both Grey Knight and Lord of Change seemingly oblivious to the weapons fire exploding all around them.

‘This was not foreseen. A different path was laid out for you, yet you do not walk it. How can that be?’ There was genuine fear in the daemon’s voices.

‘Somebody switched places with me. That is now his path to walk,’ Epimetheus said before crying out the daemon’s true name, the one that granted him power over it.

The Lord of Change froze on the spot, its body convulsing as weird energies consumed it. Epimetheus continued to advance upon it.

‘Please,’ it said meekly. ‘I have waited so long to be set free.’

The Grey Knight ignored the plea and, without ceremony, thrust the force halberd into the daemon’s chest. It disappeared in the blink of an eye, the sound of air rushing into the space it had vacated its only fanfare.

‘Not as long as I have,’ Epimetheus said.

Daemons poured in through the hangar opening at a prodigious rate and, despite the best efforts of Strike and his crew, the numbers were becoming overwhelming. Drawing his bolt pistol, Epimetheus sprinted over to where the Hellhammer had drawn to a halt, downing daemons as he went. When he reached the rear of the tank, the hatch hissed open with an outpouring

of pneumatic pressure to reveal Tzula, K'Cee and the skeleton crew within.

‘Get on board,’ Tzula called. ‘We’re retreating.’

The Grey Knight said nothing and ascended the ramp, ducking to get his massive Space Marine frame through the man-sized opening, to be greeted by a group of awestruck Catachans who looked like the Emperor himself had just stepped aboard their tank.

With the hatch still closing, the Hellhammer sped for the exit ramp, abandoning Olympax to its new daemoniac occupiers.



INTERLUDE

343960.M41 / The Chapel of Eternal Repose. Grey Knights Fortress-monastery, Titan

The hall was cold and silent, the tapping of the sculptors' tools having fallen silent to allow Kaldor Draigo his moment of grief. Clad in full Terminator armour, he knelt before the corpse of Lexek Hasimir, until only a few days ago Grand Master of the Fifth Brotherhood of the Grey Knights, and bowed his head low. In the days to come, the body would be transferred to the Dead Fields where it would rest for all eternity, the half-finished statue beside him placed atop as everlasting memorial, but for now he lay in state awaiting the procession of former brothers who wished to pay their respects. The noble deeds of Lexek Hasimir were numerous and, despite most of the Chapter being deployed on operations, already a lengthy queue of Grey Knights had formed at the gates of the hall, patiently waiting to mark a hero's passing.

As Supreme Grand Master, Draigo had no privilege of rank when it came to honouring a fallen brother, as no hierarchy of grief existed among the Grey Knights order. Captains, justicars, Grand Masters, all were equals in the Chapter's death rites, so the fact that Draigo had been the first in line when the gates of the hall swung open was not by dint of his station, but of the overwhelming desire to mourn for a brother he felt he owed his life to.

Draigo stood and placed his hand on Hasimir's cuirass, running his hand over the claw marks that ran deep through the ceramite breastplate. He pulled his hand away, dried blood coating the tips of his gauntlets, then ran his fingers over the shoulder pad of his own armour, finding three similar, yet not so severe rents.

The source of the gouges had been the same, but whereas Hasimir had reacted in time to prevent the servant of the Pleasure God from slaying the Supreme Grand Master, Draigo had been unable to return the favour, watching helplessly as the Keeper of Secrets had sliced open the leader of the Fifth Brotherhood. In response, the daemon had been banished and his acolytes purged from the surface of the planet they had turned into a world of debauched pleasure, but that seemed scant reward for the loss of a Chapter hero. In time, a conclave would be called so that Draigo and the Grand Masters could appoint a new commander of the Fifth, but for now ceremonies of a different kind were in order.

Uttering a prayer of gratitude to his dead brother and making a sign of warding over the corpse, Draigo took one of the unlit candles surrounding the altar and ignited it using a small psiflame he conjured forth from his fingertips. Carefully placing the taper next to Hasimir's unhelmeted head, Draigo bowed again.

'A light to guide you in dark places, brother. May your slumber grant you the peace that eludes us all in life,' Draigo said before turning to make the long walk back to the gates of the hall and allow the next mourner to take his place by the deceased Grand Master's side.

He hadn't gone three paces when the tingling started in the front of his skull, alerting him to psychic activity within the chamber. The temperature dropped rapidly, hoarfrost forming on his armour. The candle flame guttered and died, as did the braziers ensconced in the chapel walls, extinguished by an unnatural breeze that formed out of nowhere. Crackles of blue energy licked over the surface of Hasimir's torn armour, forming a

corona around his head, a halo for a dead angel. Draigo's hand reached for the hilt of the *Titansword*.

With the creak of Terminator armour straining to move without a power source, Lexek Hasimir sat bolt upright and slowly turned his head to look Draigo dead in the eye.

'The Damnation Cache is open once more. You must lead the Chapter back to Pythos,' the dead man said through mortised lips. His eyeballs rolled back in their sockets and he crashed back to the altar, cracking the stone in two as his deadweight impacted against it.

Stopping neither to check the condition of the body nor relight the candle, Grand Master Kaldor Draigo raced from the Hall of Repose, not in fear at his former battle-brother's reanimation but because of the urgency of the message the corpse had conveyed.

PART THREE



CHAPTER SEVEN

766960.M41 / The Bridge. Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Lord Admiral Orson Kranswar was not having a good war.

From the instant the battlefleet at his command had entered the Pandorax System and lost two destroyers, *Hand of Macharius* and *Avatar of Woe*, to a surprise attack from Chaos raiders waiting in ambush, the portents had been ill for a successful campaign. Every time it appeared that the Imperial Navy were gaining the upper hand and driving Abaddon's vessels further towards Pythos, some new complication would arise to put Battlefleet Demeter on the back foot again. At the Third Battle of Sunward Gap, his ships were about to put the enemy to rout, Abaddon's general having committed his entire fleet to counter Kranswar's superior numbers, when the armada of Huron Blackheart arrived in-system at the eleventh hour, inflicting heavy casualties on the Imperium and depriving it forever of almost a dozen ancient vessels. Using the asteroids of the Adamantium Fields as a temporary refuge, the battlefleet regrouped in preparation for a counter-assault but the Fourth Battle of Sunward Gap was an even greater disaster than the Third.

With force disposition on each side now evenly balanced, the Imperial fleet emerged from the asteroid belt – in reality a graveyard for the

countless vessels that had succumbed to the space-bound predators, both human and xenos, that plagued the Demeter subsector – only to find the combined forces of Abaddon and Huron lying in wait for them. With the enemy harassing them every parsec of the way, Kranswar ordered all ships back to the base they'd established at Gaea on the edge of the Pandorax System. Presenting their backs to the enemy, the Chaos forces showed them no mercy, decimating the Imperial fleet as it fled. The selfless actions of the men piloting the fast attack craft ensured casualties were not heavier and that Kranswar's ships were able to make it back to Gaea to regroup at all.

In the days that followed, whispers spread throughout the fleet drawing the Lord Admiral's ability to command into question. It was nothing he hadn't heard before, as far back as his early days in the academy at Bakka. *Plays it by the book. No innovation or flair. Too predictable.* And so, as he had done ever since his time as a cadet, he ignored them. Just as he was ignoring the pleas of an ensign on the bridge of his flagship, *Revenge*.

'But, sir, his men haven't been fed properly for almost a week and his tanks are of no use in a void battle. All he's asking is for his regiment to be allowed passage down to Gaea to resupply and recuperate while the fleet opens the route to Pythos,' the ensign said, trying to hand the Lord Admiral the written request. 'He has over three hundred tanks sitting in the holds and at least ten times that number of personnel. It would free up resources for the crew.'

Once Battlefleet HQ had received the distress call from Pythos, the reserve fleet and all Imperial ground forces in the vicinity were scrambled. Not even waiting for troop transports to arrive from other subsectors, entire Imperial Guard divisions and regiments were crammed into the battleships, cruisers and frigates of Kranswar's fleet, such was the import of liberating the conquered world.

‘It’s cowardice, pure and simple,’ Kranswar snapped. ‘What is he? A bloody Vostroyan?’ The Lord Admiral was of early middle age, but the severe lines carved into his face and the rapidly developing widow’s peak brought on by the strain of command made him look significantly older.

The ensign checked the piece of paper he had been trying to pass to Kranswar. ‘Yes, sir. Brigadier Montague Gethsemane Heinrick-Hague XXVII of the Vostroyan 116th Armoured regiment according to his signature.’

‘Lazy bluebloods. All he wants to do is take his men down to the planet and lord it over the population. Probably stock up on a few fine wines, horses and properties while they’re down there. The man needs to show some backbone. Don’t hear those two Attilan regiments begging to be let off their ship, do you?’ The admiral’s raised voice was carrying across the bridge causing some of the crew to look up nervously in his direction.

The ensign swallowed. ‘With the greatest respect, sir, both Attilan regiments were billeted on the *Avatar of Woe*.’

The Lord Admiral’s cheeks went red but he did not immediately give voice to his rage. Awkward moments passed before he snatched the piece of paper from the ensign and tore it in half. ‘Request denied,’ he said with a flourish before stamping off to return to the other high-ranking officers of the fleet around the stone-wrought strategy table laid out in the centre of the bridge.

The *Revenge* was an ancient vessel, having made its first voyage through the warp while the Space Marine Legions were still being divided, and though its exterior resembled every other ship of its marque, the interior finish was a baroque marvel from another age. Above decks, its floors were made of the finest polished marble and the bulkheads of the bridge and vital operations stations were carved from finest basalt and slate, as were the quarters of every officer above the rank of lieutenant. Brass filigree and fluting livened up every otherwise bare surface or space, and

every door was constructed from the highest grade timbers from trees extinct for millennia. Even the throne sitting before the vast oculus on the bridge was worthy of that name, cast from a single piece of silver and finished with elaborate precious stones and the engraved names of every man and woman who'd ever sat in it.

Acknowledging the salutes of the dozen or so admirals, captains and commodores standing to attention over a huge parchment map of the Pandorax System, Kranswar took his place alongside them at the table.

‘Gentlemen, though the losses inflicted upon the fleet during our flight from the Adamantium Fields were grave, I believe that those losses ultimately proved worthwhile as it has finally provided me with the key to unlock their defences.’ None of the officers said anything but several exchanged bemused looks. ‘By using our assault squadrons to cover our defence, we exposed the Chaos forces’ soft underbelly. Our fighter-interceptors were able to get in close and strike with impunity, too fast for both their defence batteries and the enemy’s interceptors.’

A younger, heavy-set man with a thick red beard cleared his throat to get the Lord Admiral’s attention.

‘Yes, Admiral Blaise?’ Kranswar said, annoyed at not being able to continue with his grand plan. Blaise wore the same pristine white naval uniform as the Lord Admiral, minus the blue tabard that denoted the higher rank. He had the bridge of the *Stalwart* and as such was the second-in-command of the fleet.

‘That’s not strictly accurate, sir,’ Blaise said, his voice heavily accented. ‘The enemy interceptors are all stationed on craft that held back and didn’t pursue us to Gaea.’

Kranswar ploughed on regardless. ‘Irrelevant, admiral. Intelligence suggests that our fast attack craft outnumber theirs at least twofold. Should we encounter any aerial resistance, we can split our number in two, half carrying out strafing runs, half providing cover.’

Audible murmuring rippled around the table which, like so many other things, the Lord Admiral ignored.

‘Our strategy is this: the bulk of the fleet will move forward as a screen and engage the larger enemy vessels within the Adamantium Fields. The *Revenge* and *Stalwart* will stay within Gaea’s orbit and launch successive waves of attack craft, refuelling and rearming each wing as it returns, ready to be sent straight back out to battle.’

The murmur became louder and some of the officers gesticulated with each other.

‘Does anybody have a problem with that?’ the Lord Admiral said coldly.

Blaise was the first to speak up. ‘The *Revenge* and *Stalwart* are the most heavily armed ships in the fleet. They need to be at the forefront taking the battle to the enemy, not kept in reserve as mobile launch platforms.’

‘You’ll be leaving the capital ships vulnerable, not to mention putting another world in peril. What if the attack fails? The path to Gaea would be left wide open,’ added Commodore Yarl of the *Banshee*. Younger than either Kranswar or Blaise, he was an ambitious officer who hailed from the Pandorax System.

‘Having *Revenge* and *Stalwart* in the heart of the battle means the attack squadrons won’t have so far to return to resupply,’ said Ibzen, a tall, gaunt man who commanded *Inviolate*, one of the fleet’s Sword-class frigates.

Kranswar’s cheeks flushed red again. ‘This is not a committee!’ he raged. ‘Those are your orders. Now return to your ships and be ready to carry them out.’

Still discussing amongst themselves the wisdom of the Lord Admiral’s tactics, the officers took their leave of the bridge, returning to the shuttles waiting to ferry them back to their own vessels. As they exited through the high set of elaborate mahogany doors, a young ensign squeezed past them, handwritten note clutched in his hands. He briskly strode over to Kranswar and snapped off a sharp salute.

‘Begging your pardon, sir, but I have a message from a Commander Keene of the Mordian Fifth. He has asked if he and his men could take shuttles down to—’

The retort that followed could have stripped flesh from bone.

**766960.M41 / Merciless Death, Adamantium Fields,
Pandorax System**

Malgar Irongrasp, warlord of Abaddon’s fleet, navigated the corridors of *Merciless Death* with the confidence of a man assured that victory was close at hand. His ancient suit of black power armour, once the bleached ivory of a White Consul, hissed and clanked as he moved, and footsteps rang out as heavy boots met iron floor. Though many Chaos vessels developed characteristics and modifications akin to the patron god of those who crewed it, the forces of the Black Legion were pragmatic in their worship and, as such, Abaddon’s ship remained relatively untouched by the pervasive influence of the warp.

One such enhancement, however, was the door that Irongrasp now approached, resembling more a curtain of woven flesh than any conventional aperture. When he halted on the threshold, a globular eyeball detached itself from the organic sheet and leered out at the Chaos warlord on a stalk constructed of twisted sinew. Unblinking, the amber sac looked him up and down before rapidly retreating back into the folds of skin with a wet sucking sound. The flesh peeled back to allow him access to the chamber within.

Two robed acolytes turned to see who this newcomer was and, upon reaching the realisation that it was the commander of the fleet, bowed in supplication before quickly taking their leave. The doors closed behind them with the sound of bloody meat hitting an abattoir floor.

The chamber was small but packed from floor to ceiling with all manner of esoteric artefacts and ephemera, both mechanical and organic. Jars of assorted liquids sat upon shelves, their contents casting an unnatural

multi-coloured glow over everything around them. Brass syringes and bizarre callipers and vices of all shapes and sizes sat alongside rotting wooden trays of desiccated organs and skeletal remains of small alien creatures. Scanning the tightly packed shelves, Malgar found what he sought.

Submerged within a glass barrel filled with viscous green liquid was a human head, dreadlocked hair matted to the sides of its face, features barely visible through the opaque fluid. As soon as Malgar espied it, the head's sightless eyes opened yet its face remained entirely devoid of expression. Taking the container down from the high shelf, he placed it on a small rusted table at the edge of the chamber and unscrewed the lid. With a hiss of escaping pressure and a stench comparable to that of the grave, Malgar plunged his hand into the barrel and pulled the head out by its hair, planting it on the table alongside its former housing. Its eyes remained open, staring blankly ahead.

'I wish to commune with Lord Abaddon,' said Malgar Irongrasp, wiping some of the excess green ooze from the severed head's face. Its milky orbs rolled in their sockets and its mouth moved in a wordless incantation, the stump where its tongue used to be flapping every time it moved its jaws. Slowly, in the space before the disembodied psyker's head on the table, the flickering, diminutive form of Abaddon coalesced. The psi-image was washed out and distorted as if it was being viewed through water. Malgar was about to address it when another, similar image gradually faded into reality beside that of his master. Crimson armour washed out to pink by the projection process, Huron Blackheart leered as his features realised.

'Why is *he* present for our communion, lord?' Malgar asked, trying to retain some respect in his tone. Blackheart's intervention in the Third Battle of Sunward Gap had neither been sought nor welcomed by Irongrasp, and the brief vox-communications they had exchanged since the Red Corsairs fleet arrived in-system had been terse and confrontational.

‘You should count yourself fortunate that *you* are present at this communion, Irongrasp.’ Abaddon’s words resonated with power and a malign dignity. ‘If it wasn’t for the centuries of flawless service you have given my Black Legion prior to this campaign, another would already have taken your place at the head of the fleet.’

‘A role I would have accepted only too gratefully, Lord Abaddon,’ Huron said, his lips peeled back in a vicious grin.

‘There are a thousand men under my command who would lead my fleet before you entered into my consideration, Blackheart.’ Even as a small psycholithic projection, the expression Abaddon wore on his face could have razed cities. ‘Until you take to your knee before me, you will not so much as set foot on one of my ships, let alone command one. Are you prepared to do that, pirate? Here and now. Bend your knee and bow before me to pledge your allegiance and that of your band of renegades to the Black Legion? Willingly, and without query or reward, make a gift to me of your spacecraft and engines of war?’

The watery image of Huron Blackheart said nothing. His bared teeth remained on show.

‘Of course not, for you are nothing more than an aspiring usurper. One eye constantly on my mantle of Warmaster, the other on your back lest you find a blade sticking in it,’ Abaddon said once it was clear that Huron wasn’t rising to the bait. ‘For the time being, you are useful, Blackheart. The instant that situation changes, our arrangement will be at an end and you will be considered an enemy once more.’

‘Understood, Abaddon.’ Huron’s lack of honorific was entirely intentional. ‘Though I have a feeling I will be of more use to you during the coming campaign than even you yet realise,’ he added cryptically.

Ignoring the Red Corsair’s attempt to draw him, Abaddon addressed Irongrasp once again.

‘The Imperial fleet should be nothing more than drifting wrecks by now, Irongrasp. With the Cache open, Corpulax and our daemonic allies are keen to spread their influence away from Pythos and into the Pandorax System and beyond.’ He cast Huron a sideways glance. ‘Besides, if I find that which I seek, I’d prefer to keep knowledge of it from those beyond the veil.’

Huron feigned a dismissive expression.

‘Our forces are too evenly matched, lord, and their admiral follows Imperial naval doctrine to the letter. His every manoeuvre and feint is straight out of the academy textbooks and his execution has been flawless.’ Malgar leant his head forward slightly as he spoke.

‘So you have finally been outclassed. Perhaps it is time for fresh blood to assume command of the fleet.’ There was no anger in Abaddon’s words, only cold logic.

‘Far from it, my lord,’ Irongrasp asserted. ‘During our last encounter I allowed him to believe that we were weak in certain areas and that his fast attack craft held the greatest threat to us. I also know exactly what his tactics will be during the next battle.’

‘And how do you know that?’ sneered Huron. ‘Have your psykers read his mind? Do you have a spy on his bridge?’

‘Neither. The fool is so predictable, so wed to Imperial naval dogma, that when he next assaults us he will do so with his small fighter craft backed up by frigates and destroyers. Instead of committing his two capital ships to close quarters fighting within the Adamantium Fields, he will keep them both back as launch platforms before moving them into position once our larger craft have been destroyed.’

‘And what are you going to do to prevent your craft being destroyed? He has a numerical advantage in terms of fighters and if the battle is to be fought at close quarters, bringing them down is likely to cause as much damage to your own vessels as theirs.’ As both a loyal servant of the

Imperium and a renegade warlord, Huron Blackheart had fought countless space battles and was the consummate tactician.

‘He believes that we will remain in the cover of the asteroid field and so his entire strategy rests on that. Once his first wave of fighters and their escorts have reached the point of no return, we shall burst forth from the ships’ graveyard and engage them head-on, nullifying any advantage they would have gained from engaging us among the wrecks. Without having to worry about getting swarmed by fighters, my ships can smash through the escorts and take the battle directly to his capital ships held in reserve.’

Abaddon nodded in approval. Even Blackheart’s impressed expression seemed genuine.

‘A sound stratagem, Irongrasp,’ said Abaddon. ‘But still not entirely without risk. What if I were to supply you with the means to guarantee victory and ensure the utter annihilation of the Imperial fleet?’

‘Lord Abaddon, any boon you could grant me would be a welcome one,’ Irongrasp said with relish. ‘Are you going to unleash the Legion for boarding assaults?’

‘Resistance is stronger down here than anticipated. It seems an entire Imperial Guard regiment found themselves stranded on Pythos by the capricious whims of fate. Jungle fighters too so they’re able to make the most of the terrain.’ Abaddon’s image began to diminish. ‘I will spare you several hundred of the Legion, no more. Blackheart will also lend his aid to the fleet. I’m sure you will find his strategy an... interesting one.’ The Warmaster disappeared altogether, his last words disembodied. Huron’s image lingered, still wearing a feral grin.

‘Tell me, Irongrasp,’ he said. ‘What do you know about asteroids?’

**766960.M41 / Primary Flight Deck. Revenge, Pythos
blockade, Pandorax System**

Shira Hagen stood upon the boarding ladder of her Kestrel-class fighter-interceptor, desperately resisting the urge to leap down and pummel into a bloody mess the flight officer who was disrupting her launch preparations.

‘Didn’t you hear me, pilot?’ the officer said, pitching his voice so it carried over the bustle of the flight deck preparing to launch three entire wings of attack craft. ‘I said your headgear isn’t regulation issue.’

In annoyance, she broke off from her pre-flight check and slid down the ladder propped against the void-capable Thunderbolt variant. Removing her helmet to reveal shoulder-length black hair, she placed it under the crook of her arm and stared the officer, several years her senior, dead in the eyes.

‘Would you rather I miss my launch slot and go and requisition another? Or should I forgo the mission entirely and repaint it.’ She tilted her head towards the helmet. Instead of the standard grey-green headgear that her fellow pilots wore, Shira had modified hers so that the visage was that of a great bird of prey. Majestic white feathers were individually depicted along the ceramite shell and perfectly rendered eyes stared out from either side. The visor too had been customised so that it resembled a hooked beak. Finding the material necessary to personalise it had not come cheaply, but on a ship the size of the *Revenge*, anything could be had. For a price.

The flight officer cleared his throat. ‘Imperial Navy statute gamma epsilon twelve niner quite clearly states that no personnel are to make modification, adjustment or adornment to...’ His voice tailed off. Shira had replaced her helmet and was leisurely clambering back towards the cockpit. ‘Do not ignore me. I am your superior and you will look at me while I am addressing you.’

She halted her ascent and turned back to face him, her head in line with the almost two score depictions of talons rendered in white against the drab grey hull of the Kestrel. Kill markings. Each one confirmed, each one hard won. ‘I’ll listen to you once something sensible comes out of that

puckered hole you call a mouth. Until then, either throw me in the brig or let me get my bird ready for take-off.' Perched atop the ladder, she looked every inch the predator she imitated.

'I'll have you on a charge the instant you return to this ship, flight lieutenant...' He consulted the data-slate that he had unconsciously raised into a defensive shield before him. 'Hagen. Enjoy your mission. It'll be the last one you fly for a while.' He turned on his heel and walked off at pace back to the launch control booth. Shira made a single-digit gesture by way of send-off, much to the delight of her fellow pilots who were similarly engaged in readying their craft.

'You and that mouth of yours, Hagen. Always getting you in trouble,' a man's voice crackled through her helmet vox. 'Why don't you let your flying do the talking for a change?'

'I thought you'd be happy to see me sit this one out, boss,' she voxed back, looking over to the other side of the hangar and the source of the voice. Already strapped into his cockpit, Wing Commander Barabas Hyke sat shaking his head. Like all of the pilots of Red Wing, his hull sported kill markings in double figures, but only his tally came anywhere close to Shira's. 'It'd give everybody else a chance to catch up with me.'

'Hey, Shira. Your mouth can get me in trouble any time you like,' said another voice over the vox.

'Hey, Forczek,' Shira replied. 'Can you count backwards from five?'

'Huh? I don't get it,' the other pilot responded looking towards Shira. Forczek's Kestrel was at an advanced stage of preparation and the cockpit was already closed.

Shira held her hand up, fingers outstretched. 'Five. Four. Three. Two...' Each time she said a number, she dropped a finger until only one remained extended which she used to salute Forczek, the same way she had the flight officer.

‘Cut the crap, both of you,’ Hyke admonished. ‘There’ll be time for fun and games later. Right now we have a job to do.’

The ship-wide address system, which had been nothing but background noise until now, rose in volume. The Lord Admiral’s voice boomed out, the closing stages of a no doubt rousing speech by which to inspire and rally the men and women under his command.

‘...to the heart of the Archenemy and liberate the brave and loyal people of Pythos,’ Kranswar intoned in his slightly nasal timbre. ‘Our actions this day will determine if our names will live on in triumph or be eternally despised. Launch all attack squadrons and prepare to engage the enemy! Let us win glory!’

‘You heard the Lord Admiral,’ Hyke voxed, pulling down his canopy and locking it in place. ‘We have a war to get back to.’

Ahead of her, Forczek’s afterburners became tiny red pinpricks as Shira sat at the entrance to the launch tunnel awaiting her slot. The other nine pilots who formed Red Wing were already clear of the *Revenge* and racing to catch up with their slower moving escorts, who were nearing the Adamantium Fields. Shira didn’t hold much belief in superstition – she didn’t believe in much other than her abilities as a combat pilot – but, as she had done for every single sortie since the Pandorax campaign started, she would be the last of her wing to launch. Last one out and, provided her Kestrel didn’t let her down or she didn’t do anything stupid in the heat of battle, last one back in.

‘Red Six you are cleared for take-off. Commence launch procedure when ready.’ Shira recognised the voice in her headset and turned to peer out of her cockpit into the launch control booth. There, hunched over a bank of instruments, the lights of which cast a pale blue glow over his strict features, was the flight officer from earlier.

‘Acknowledged, launch control,’ she replied. The flight officer seemed to freeze momentarily. From behind the plastiglass shield, he looked up as

understanding took hold of him. Shira inclined her head, regarding him with the eagle's eyes painted on her helmet.

The officer spoke again but even through Shira's helmet vox his words were swallowed by the noise of her engines spooling up to full power. This ran entirely contrary to Imperial Navy statutes, fighter pilots were not allowed to engage full thrust until they hit the red line halfway down the launch tube, but Shira suspected that the flight officer already knew this. As the whine of her engines grew louder, he abandoned all attempts to communicate with her verbally and instead gesticulated wildly. Shira smiled, and in that instant the flight officer realised her intent. He dived to the floor of the launch booth and wrapped his arms around his head.

Shira's power gauge reached its limit and, using one hand to engage forward thrust, the other to disengage the ground brakes, her Kestrel shot forwards like a mass reactive shell from a bolter, massive G-force pinning her back in the pilot's seat. The sonic boom it generated shattered the window of the launch booth into thousands of tiny shards, but by the time the first of them hit the floor and showered the hapless officer in glass, she had already cleared the launch tube and was in the cold embrace of the void.

She didn't need the power of premonition or a reading from the tarot to know that her immediate future contained a multiple-week stay in the brig, but that was of no concern to her. Every moment spent on board the *Revenge* felt like incarceration to Shira and it was only when she was at the controls of her own craft that she felt truly free.

Picking up their returns on her auspex, Shira silently cut through the blackness towards the rest of Red Wing and their escorts, determined to make the most of every second of her liberation.

**766960.M41 / The Bridge. Revenge, Pythos blockade,
Pandorax System**

As with any Imperial naval vessel on the precipice of battle, the bridge of the *Revenge* buzzed with suppressed urgency. Ensigns and strategicians moved from console to console, officer to officer, not running but at a pace brisker than walking. Real space navigators tapped away at arrays of buttons, their keystrokes running at a fraction more per minute under combat conditions, while beside them calculus logi ran through thousands of flight vectors per second, feeding the optimum results to their human counterparts only after every possibility had been processed.

Kranswar sat upon his command throne staring contemplatively through the oculus. To the starboard side, *Stalwart* hung motionless in space, the afterburners of her last launched wave of interceptors disappearing into the distance, while dead ahead of them lay their objective. The largest of the asteroids were constantly visible at this distance, but the Adamantium Fields sparkled periodically as the light of Pandorax's sun caught the hull of one of the wrecked Imperial vessels drifting dead among the celestial rock.

'Even the stars are taunting me,' muttered Kranswar under his breath.

'Sir?' came the confused response from the immaculately attired lieutenant beside him.

'Nothing, Faisal.' He turned his attention from the cosmos back to what was happening on the bridge. 'Report. Are all attack waves deployed and running alongside their escorts?'

'Affirmative,' replied a young woman sitting before a vast screen, streams of seemingly indecipherable letters and numbers scrolling rapidly before her augmented eyes. 'Primary and secondary flight decks are reporting that only three interceptors failed to launch.'

'*Stalwart* are reporting the same,' added a vox officer, one cup of his headset held to his ear, the other hanging loose so he could hear the activity on the bridge. 'All birds released, no failures to launch.'

The Lord Admiral smirked ruefully. Something else for that smug bastard Blaise to hold over him. 'Time until contact?' he asked nobody in particular.

‘Seven minutes, Terran standard,’ said one of the strategicians, reading from a sheet of parchment one of the calculus logi had just produced from its portable cogitator unit.

Kranswar was about to deliver fresh orders when activity flared over by the auspex array, followed by an excited buzz of chatter.

‘Lord Admiral. We’re picking up multiple contacts on the edge of the asteroid belt,’ an ensign called from the far end of the bridge.

Kranswar turned his throne away from the occulus to face the bridge crew. ‘Scout vessels. The enemy commander isn’t stupid. He knows that his instruments are useless while he cowers behind the asteroid belts and drifting wrecks. He’s running reconnaissance, for all the good that’ll do him now.’ He started to turn back to the occulus, but the ensign spoke again.

‘There are too many contacts for scout vessels. Two, three hundred craft at least, sir.’ The ensign kept looking back to his auspex as he spoke. ‘They must have known we were coming for them. The entire Chaos fleet is moving to engage our assault.’

766960.M41 / Red Wing. Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

To Shira’s starboard side, the frigate *Feinstein* died in a nimbus of blue flame, warp engines torn asunder by the concentrated fire of a dozen Chaos fighter-interceptors. She dipped her control stick, putting her Kestrel into a vertical descent to avoid the attentions of an enemy pilot who had latched onto her tail before pulling up sharply and delivering her pursuer directly into Hyke’s crosshairs. The corrupted craft imploded silently as his nose-mounted lascannon shattered the cockpit canopy, allowing the immeasurable pressure of deep space to finish the job.

‘What do you reckon, we share that kill?’ Shira voxed, moving into formation alongside the wing commander’s craft. ‘I did all the hard work, you only had to shoot straight.’

‘I think I get that one to myself just for saving your skinny ass,’ Hyke replied, his voice warping over the comms channel. The Imperial fighter craft’s auspexes were being occluded and whatever foul sorcery the enemy was employing was affecting the vox-units too.

The Chaos counter-attack had not been a surprise – visual contact had already been made with the larger vessels before the auspex problems became apparent – but the speed of their assault had caught the Imperial ships on the hop and several were lost before any form of defence could be mounted. The enemy flagship had burst from the Adamantium Fields at full speed, ramming the *Equaliser* and *Sword of Honour*, two Cobra-class destroyers packed in close formation, before either could take evasive manoeuvres. Already the gravitic pull of the asteroid belt was tugging at their drifting shells, claiming them as the latest occupants of the ships’ graveyard.

Even Red Wing, seemingly impervious to death during the prior engagements with the Chaos fleet, were two Kestrels down, Goyez and Makita both succumbing to defence turret fire as they sought to assault an iconoclast destroyer.

‘Red Wing. Form up on me,’ buzzed Hyke across the general vox channel. ‘We’re going to target that idolator engaging the *Arbitrator*.’

Against a backdrop of stars, the two ships were literally blowing chunks out of each other as their shields failed. It was impossible to miss at such close range. Vast gouges in the hulls of both craft bled atmosphere and crew into the cold blackness and though both were far from inoperable, if they maintained their barrages, destruction was mutually assured.

‘Quofe, Vandire, Forczek, Skelmer, Tetsudo, Mkana. Fly cover. Hagen, you’re going to target the warp engines with me. Think you can take on something that big?’ Under the heat of combat, there were no witty comebacks to the wing commander’s unintended innuendo, only distorted confirmations.

‘Just keep their interceptors off my back and try to stay out of my line of fire,’ Shira replied as the rest of Red Wing fell in line alongside her and Hyke.

Afterburners glowing the brightest orange, the eight Kestrels banked and adjusted formation into a blunt-headed ‘V’ shape before powering towards the duelling behemoths. A swarm of enemy fighters broke off from their personal dogfights and strafing runs to target the more obvious threat.

Skelmer was the first to peel off, rapidly cutting his afterburners and allowing the two lead enemy craft to overshoot him, placing themselves directly in front of his deadly weapons array. Unlike the Thunderbolt used by planet-based naval wings, the Kestrel forwent autocannons and instead carried extra powercells for the two nose-mounted lascannons. It was one of those lascannons that destroyed the first Chaos flyer, a hellstrike missile the second. Both burned briefly before their onboard oxygen supplies, like the craft themselves, were utterly consumed by the flames.

Another of the Chaos interceptors fell in behind Mkana, but a quick burst from Quofoe’s lascannon sheared away one of its wings, making it spin away madly before Forczek finished it off with a concentrated pulse from her own nose-mounted weapon.

Vandire and Tetsudo did not fare so well. Isolating one of the enemy fighters, they poured fire at it but to no avail, the swifter craft always ahead of their guns. So intent were they on claiming the kill, neither of them saw the other Chaos pilot coming at them from below. A wave of solid shot broke across the hull of Tetsudo’s Kestrel, breaking it into three and spilling its already dead occupant from the cockpit. Vandire avoided the worst of the autocannon shells but as he banked to avoid absorbing yet more fire, he impacted with the wrecked fore-section of Tetsudo’s Kestrel. Embedding in the port-side engine, Vandire lost control and, as he spun recklessly end over end, consciousness. Red Wing watched on helplessly

as his bird smashed against the shields of a Chaos destroyer, a brief ripple of energy the only marker of his passing.

‘Hagen. Commence your attack run. I have your wing,’ said Hyke, his voice adrift in a sea of static. The enemy destroyer loomed large through Shira’s canopy. ‘The rest of you keep those fighters busy.’

The response from Red Wing was instantaneous. Forczek put one of her hellstrikes straight down the fleshy exhaust port of the craft that had killed Tetsudo while Skelmer did the same to the enemy pilot his two dead comrades had been pursuing in the first place. More of the Chaos fighters converged on their position, but Hyke and Shira were clear of the dogfighting now and heading straight for their objective.

‘I’m out of missiles,’ Hyke voxed. ‘Better make yours count.’

‘I bet you have a rack full. You just don’t want the embarrassment of missing such a large target,’ she voxed back.

‘And if you can’t hit it, I’m sure the crew of the *Arbitrator* will be embarrassed for you.’

Hyke’s words were sobering. Too often the fighter pilots of the fleet sought only personal glory, the pursuit of new kill markings for their hulls their primary driver. It was easy to forget that their real job was to make sure the bigger vessels remained protected.

‘When have you ever known me to miss?’ Shira said, twisting her control stick and lining her Kestrel up with the port-side of the Chaos destroyer, ready to commence her attack run.

‘There’s always a first time for everything,’ Hyke replied, mimicking Shira’s manoeuvre and drawing alongside her, mere metres between the tips of their wings.

Defence turrets opened up all along the length of the hull, but the enemy gunners were chasing ghosts. At near top speed, the two Kestrels evaded the barrage of fire, Hyke shooting his lascannon on full-auto, destroying many of the bizarrely deformed anti-aircraft batteries before they could

open up. Alongside him, Shira primed her last two hellstrikes and attempted to get a visual on the hull breach that had exposed the destroyer's warp engines. It didn't take her long, the tell-tale blue glow of the pulsating drives lighting her way like a flare. Pulling up to achieve a better firing angle, Shira eased her pace slightly to give herself longer over the target. Alongside the breach, two turrets rotated towards her Kestrel, both lascannon barrels trained straight upon her. Hyke quickly took care of them.

'You're all clear,' he said, giving Shira the thumbs up from his cockpit as he banked away from the hull of the destroyer.

Narrowing her eyes, Shira flicked the safety cover away from the firing stud and squeezed down with her thumb. Beneath her wing, a missile detached itself, racing straight and true towards the tear in the ship's hull. She pulled her Kestrel up and away sharply, looking back over her shoulder to follow the hellstrike's path. Overshooting the rent by a few agonising metres, it detonated harmlessly near an inactive defence turret, a shallow black crater the only lasting damage.

'Why did you have to go and jinx me?' Shira spat down the vox.

'You'll get it next time,' Hyke encouraged. 'Red Wing. Regroup and prepare to commence second attack run.' Beneath them, the anti-aircraft batteries renewed their barrage.

'No time for that. We can only avoid those turrets for so long and there are more enemy craft inbound.' Another full squadron of Chaos fighters were converging on their position. 'I'm going back in right now.'

'Don't be stupid, Hagen. The turn alone will—'

Shira cut the vox-feed, disinterested in Hyke's admonishment. Knowing what was to come next, she pulled the rebreather away from her face and double-checked that her flight harness was secure. She pulled back on the control stick, putting the Kestrel into a sharp swooping vertical turn. Massive G-forces planted her back into her seat as far as she could go

without being pushed through the back of it as she fought to remain conscious. Reaching the apex of the climb, her fighter flipped over and the urge to vomit she'd been suppressing messily overwhelmed her. Now on a collision course with the Chaos destroyer, she forced her eyes to remain open, the gravitic energies she was being subjected to deforming her features and painfully stretching her skin and muscles. With an effort akin to pushing her thumb through a block of lead, she tore the tendons in her hand as the firing stud depressed.

Not needing to see the evidence of the missile striking its target, she jerked the control stick violently towards her, sharply pulling upwards before she followed the hellstrike into the body of the ship. Behind her, a noiseless explosion detonated as the missile tore into the unprotected warp engine ripping it asunder. A bow wave of energy chased her, buffeting her Kestrel and emptying the contents of her stomach again.

Unaware of its own death, the Chaos vessel continued to fire even as thick cracks tore it open and unnatural blue warp energy engulfed it. Sensing an opportunity to inveigle their way into the materium, thousands of daemoniac hands and tendrils thrust forth from the gap sliced through reality, clawing at the rapidly disintegrating ship, attempting to gain a hold in the corporeal realm.

Accompanied by the anguished screams of the Neverborn, the warp rift closed as quickly as it came into being, taking the wreck of the destroyer with it.

Groggily, Shira wiped the puke from around her mouth with the sleeve of her flight suit and switched her vox back on.

'...king idiot. You could have died pulling a stunt like that. If you weren't already on a charge once we get back to the *Revenge*, I'd throw you in the brig myself.' Hyke's reprimand seemed incongruous against the backdrop of whoops and hollers from the other four members of Red Wing sharing the same vox channel.

‘Hey, Shira. You should put in for a transfer to the *Arbitrator* once you’re out of the stockade,’ Quofe laughed. ‘You’ll never have to pay for another drink again as long as you—’ His booming voice cut out replaced by static followed by the hiss of three more vox-units suddenly going dead.

Blinking and shaking her head to overcome the adverse effects of her risky loop-the-loop, Shira turned to face the last location of her four fellow flyers. Four explosions briefly bloomed and died, the edges of a dark, jagged shape picked out in the intense orange light.

‘No... They’re not supposed to be real,’ Hyke, who had a better view of the Kestrels’ destruction, muttered. ‘They’re just the ramblings of space jockeys and asteroid miners, the fevered dreams of those who’ve spent too long in the void. They’re not real. They’re not real. They’re not—’

‘What? What aren’t supposed to be real?’ Shira asked. When she saw what was headed directly for them, she got her answer.

Like a mythical dragon of old, the beast glided through space as if it were riding on warm currents of air, snorting destructive bursts of balefire as it went. A metallic beaked head snaked out from a slender, serpentine body made from the same unholy alloy and its daemonic eyes darted this way and that, seeking out its next prey. Four wicked rending talons protruded from its underside and the inherent wrongness of the thing was completed by the three pairs of wings that were swept forward in antithesis of everything Shira knew about the principles of flight and aerodynamics.

‘Heldrake,’ Hyke barely managed to utter. ‘It’s a Heldrake.’

766960.M41 / Merciless Death, Adamantium Fields, Pandorax System

‘Lord Irongrasp. We’ve lost the *Perfidious Virtue*,’ said one of the hooded bridge crew, flickering psycholithic markers slowly moving in the air in

front of him. ‘*Mutilator, Incarnadine Thirst* and *Blighted Sky* are all reporting catastrophic damage.’

In contrast to the bridge of the *Revenge*, the command centre of the *Merciless Death* had a dark calmness to it, crew and servitors going about their appointed tasks with an almost laconic detachment from the battle raging around them in space. From his command pulpit, Malgar Irongrasp orchestrated the Chaos counter-attack as if by rote, over a thousand years of experience fighting for and against the forces of the Imperium ingraining within him certain automatic responses.

‘Have them overload their warp engines and ram larger vessels. Let not their deaths be in vain,’ he ordered as if he were sending the ships for a refit rather than to their certain doom. At this stage of the battle, the loss of four destroyers and raiders was a better casualty rate than he had anticipated, twice that number of Imperial Navy vessels having been lost to his guns along with scores of fighters and interceptors. The battle was currently going his way but the two capital ships remained skulking at the back of the Imperial battlefleet, ready to rearm the still numerous wings of attack craft and tip the balance back in their favour.

‘Blackheart wishes to address you, lord,’ said another hooded figure through a grilled half-face mask. The contempt for the pretender Chaos lord exhibited by both Abaddon and Irongrasp was mirrored by even the lowliest vox-operators of the Black Legion fleet.

‘Transfer him to my private channel,’ Malgar said. The vox-bead in his ear crackled as the communication from Blackheart’s fleet was patched through.

‘Impressive, Irongrasp,’ Huron said, but only Malgar could hear it. ‘I had expected your gambit to have been more costly, but to take down eight of the enemy vessels with the loss of just one of your own? Even I would have been proud of such a feat.’

On the psycholithic display towards the fore of the bridge, three more small icons blinked out swiftly, followed by three larger ones of a different

colour.

‘Ah, it seems I spoke too soon,’ said Huron, obviously witnessing the same thing on his own sensors. ‘Still, at least that’s three fewer ships that my fleet have to worry about.’

Malgar was unsure whether Blackheart meant the Imperial vessels or the three he had just sacrificed.

‘Is your ship in position, Blackheart?’ Malgar asked, brushing aside the Red Corsair’s attempt to goad him.

‘Of course,’ he replied, feigning indignation. ‘It has been since before you sprung your little trap.’

‘Then why don’t you stop trying to antagonise me and deliver your surprise to the enemy admiral,’ Malgar said, cutting the link.

766960.M41 / The Bridge. Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Through the occulus, Kranswar witnessed the trio of explosions, each blue halo of rapidly dissipating warp energy signalling the demise of one of his ships.

‘We’ve just lost the *Inviolate*, *Banshee* and *Light of Faith*,’ confirmed a helmsman, removing three ship markers from a parchment starchart spread out in front of him.

With these new losses, Kranswar’s fleet was down to almost a third of the number of ships he’d had under him when they struck out for Pandorax. The losses of Imperial Guard war machines and personnel were not insubstantial either, and the Lord Admiral was beginning to wonder whether, if they did break through to Pythos, they would have enough manpower to liberate the world. If he and every crewmember on board his ships had to pick up a lasrifle and take the fight down to the planet, he would give the order in an instant if that’s what it would take.

‘Admiral Blaise wishes to speak with you, Lord Admiral,’ called out the vox officer, the single cup of the headset still pressed to his ear.

‘Put it over the speakers, Uldar,’ Kranswar said, rising from the command throne. The fury in Blaise’s voice when it boomed over the vox caused him to sit back down again.

‘What in the Emperor’s name are you playing at, Kranswar?’ the thickly accented voice rang out. Even in the midst of battle, it was delivered with such venom that every man and woman on the bridge of the *Revenge* froze. ‘It’s a massacre out there. Swallow your pride, you stubborn bastard. Recall the fleet while you still have a fleet to recall.’

All eyes were on the Lord Admiral. He stared off into the distance, out through the occulus. Another explosion ripped noiselessly through the dark. The helmsman removed another piece from the starchart.

‘You sent your ships into battle with talk of history ringing in the fleet’s ears,’ Blaise continued. ‘If you don’t get those ships back here now and regroup, how do you think history will remember you?’ The vox-feed cut out abruptly. Whether by accident or design, nobody on board the *Revenge* could tell.

‘He’s right,’ Kranswar said quietly. The entire bridge crew were still fixated on him, the next words from his mouth were potentially the most important he would ever speak. ‘Recall the fleet.’

The glacier of inactivity melted and the volume on the bridge rose as new orders were relayed to the few surviving ships of Battlefleet Demeter. Calculus logi and real space navigators plotted escape vectors for the larger vessels, while the flight decks were told to prepare for returning assault craft. Gunnery stations were put on alert to deal with any of the Chaos ships that had the temerity to follow them back to Gaea.

Kranswar sunk back onto his throne, deflated but not defeated.

‘For what it’s worth, sir,’ said Lieutenant Faisal handing him a sheaf of casualty reports, ‘I think you’re doing the right thing.’

The Lord Admiral smiled weakly. ‘Sometimes, even the right decisions can be made too late,’ he said grimly.

‘Lord Admiral. We’re picking up a new contact. Another ship has just translated in-system and is heading towards our position at speed. It’s broadcasting an Imperium identification code, outdated but confirmed,’ an ensign said from over near the auspex array. Several of the bridge officers moved to join him.

Kranswar’s heart leapt. Reinforcements. Perhaps the day could yet be won. His newfound optimism did not last long.

‘It’s the *Might of Huron*, sir,’ the ensign said dejectedly.

To a man, every member of Battlefleet Demeter knew of the *Might of Huron* and the reputation of its piratical captain, Huron Blackheart. Many of the worlds under its protection had suffered at the hands of the Red Corsairs and scores of its ships had been lost to the renegade Chapter. Most had been destroyed outright, but those unfortunate enough to be captured were pressed into service under new, traitorous colours. Twice before the *Revenge* had engaged Huron Blackheart’s flagship and twice before they’d fought each other to a stalemate. On both occasions, the Imperial vessel had needed to undergo months of repairs before it was starworthy again.

The mere mention of his old adversary seemed to breathe new life into Kranswar, his hunger for battle returning at the sound of Huron Blackheart’s name. ‘Where is it? I don’t have visual confirmation.’ Through the occulus, all he could see were the ships of his fleet performing painfully slow turning manoeuvres, harried the entire way by lances of weapons fire.

‘It’s approaching us from the rear,’ replied the ensign. ‘Transferring pict feed now.’ A previously dark bank of screens strobed into life and a grainy sepia-toned image gradually resolved itself, turning to colour as valves and transistors worked themselves up to operational temperature. The

prow of a Slaughter-class cruiser grew ever larger on the monitors, haloed by a rough circle of textured grey.

‘What is that?’ asked Faisal, furrowing his brow in confusion.

‘It looks like it’s towing something,’ offered another lieutenant.

As the huddle of bridge crew looked on, the image changed and the rapidly moving spacecraft dropped suddenly out of the picture, leaving only the strange spheroid to crowd the visual field. Realisation washed over the crew of the *Revenge* like a tsunami. Mouths hung open in horror and awe at what was about to happen.

His spirit utterly broken, Kranswar dropped to his knees before the image unfolding in front of him. ‘Sweet Emperor on the Throne of Terra,’ he wept. ‘It’s an asteroid. The lunatic is going to ram us with an asteroid.’



CHAPTER EIGHT

766960.M41 / Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

From the instant the weaponised asteroid crashed into the aft of the *Revenge*, reality became something very different for those on board.

On the crew levels, the handful of personnel fortunate enough to be granted rest during battle footing were flung rudely from their cots, bones shattering and skulls splitting. Those who died from the impact were the fortunate ones, the survivors suffering a drawn-out and lingering death at the tendrils of warp apparitions that bled through the hull of the ship and devoured their souls.

In one of the many galleys on board, a cook who had taken the Emperor's coin to serve on board the *Revenge* by way of escaping justice for the string of murders he had committed on his home world, found himself reshaped and repurposed as a tool of Chaos. Flensed and torn apart by paring knives and cleavers, his muscle and bone were restitched by foul magicks, his skinless body compelled to hunt the corridors of the ship, claiming new victims with the blades he now found in place of fingers.

In the officers' chapel, not a hundred metres from the bridge, a young preacher hung herself with her own robes, unable to cope with the voices of the two children she had not carried to term whispering to her from

beyond. Upon finding her body, a fellow ecclesiarch defiled the limp corpse with his own hands, carving blasphemous sigils upon her flesh with his fingernails before ripping out his own eyes and slicing his jugular.

Imperial Guard regiments billeted in the cargo holds like cattle were slaughtered by lesser daemons who materialised in their midst, hundreds of men dead before a weapon was raised in retaliation. Larger, more hideous, entities stalked the lower decks, by now a morass of body parts and otherworldly substances oozing from the very fabric of the ship. In those sections of the ship gouged open by the asteroid, confused accounts of Traitor Astartes boarding parties were exchanged over vox-channels but none were confirmed, communications abruptly ceasing after the initial reports.

The only place where the malign influence of the Archenemy was yet to instil itself on board the *Revenge* was the bridge, but from the anarchic scenes taking place there, it was difficult to tell.

Helmsmen and officers alike ran from console to console, checking the distorted returns from auspexes and sensor arrays, while vox-operators tried in vain to make contact with other sections of the ship. Calculus logi spat endless reams of parchment from their portable cogitators, the tacky black ink denoting only nonsense in confused strings of random symbols.

Through the hubbub, Kranswar made out snatches of conversation, all of it insane.

‘...turned on each other. Less than twenty of them survived and most of those are...’

‘...grew teeth and began chewing away at the bulkhead...’

‘...Corsairs boarding parties have breached *Stalwart*. *Might of Huron* moving to...’

‘...off his own arm and beat himself to death with it...’

‘...says they’re in the air filtration pipes. Pink things with...’

Lieutenant Faisal shook Kranswar by the shoulder to get his attention. Ordinarily, that sort of behaviour would have been met with a rebuke, time in the brig and a possible demotion. Right now, none of that seemed to matter.

‘Sir, we’ve lost the lower twenty-seven decks.’ The young officer’s voice was hoarse. A slick of sweat coated his face and darkened the fabric of his tunic below the armpits.

The Lord Admiral was momentarily confused. The entire ship was going to hell in a tramp freighter and he was being bothered with this?

‘Well, have the naval militia or one of the Imperial Guard regiments go and retake them,’ he bellowed in irritation.

‘No, sir. You misunderstand me,’ Faisal replied, confident rather than confrontational. ‘We’ve *literally* lost the lower twenty-seven decks. They’re... they’re just not there any more.’

Kranswar had no time to process the information, as one of the vox-operators called out to him.

‘Lord Admiral. One of the Guard regiments has made contact. Their commander says he wants to speak to you.’

He bounded over from the throne dais and snatched the headset from the woman, speaking into it before he had even put it on properly.

‘This is Kranswar. Go ahead.’

‘Dashed good fortune you not letting us off the ship,’ said the most overtly aristocratic voice the Lord Admiral had ever heard. ‘To be absolutely frank, I did consider coming up there and throttling you myself when you refused my request but good job you did, old bean, otherwise you’d be up shit creek without a paddle right about now.’

It was the Vostroyan brigadier. Kranswar involuntarily let out a nervous laugh, partly out of the ridiculousness of the man’s turn of phrase, partly out of relief that there were still other survivors on board.

‘Good to hear your voice, brigadier. I was beginning to think we were on our own up here,’ Kranswar said.

‘You almost are, I’m afraid. Bad scene down here, old chap. The Cadians tore each other apart at the first sign of trouble, and the Godesian and Asamantrite regiments are floating past the portholes at the moment, poor bastards.’ The brigadier’s tone was one of genuine sadness. ‘Just us Vostroyans left to mount the counter-attack. Provided you’ll let us deploy on board your ship, of course, admiral.’

‘Permission granted,’ Kranswar said without giving it any thought. ‘But I’m not sure how long you’ll last out of your tanks.’

It was the brigadier’s turn to laugh now, hearty and with more than a hint of relish. ‘That’s what I’m asking your permission for, old boy. I want to roll my armour out and take the fight right to whatever it is that’s tearing your ship apart.’

Kranswar took it in his stride. On a day when an asteroid had been smashed into the back of the *Revenge*, the denizens of the warp had decided to make his lower decks their temporary home and Traitor Legionaries were possibly on their way to take control of his bridge, a titled and overbearing Vostroyan brigadier asking to fight a tank battle on the decks of an Imperial Navy battleship sounded like the sanest idea anybody had ever had in the history of the Imperium.

‘Permission granted,’ Kranswar said, again without giving it any thought.

766960.M41 / Red Wing. Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Jinking to avoid the razor-sharp tip of the Heldrake’s wing, Shira let rip with two pulses from her lascannon. At point-blank range it was impossible to miss the creature, but its thick metal hide merely repelled her shots as if they were pellets from a child’s catapult. In her wake, Hyke attempted the same but met with the same results.

‘The armour’s too thick. It’ll take hellstrikes to even scratch it,’ Shira voxed in frustration.

‘Let’s get the fleet back to Gaea first, then we’ll rearm and come back for this thing. Until then, keep it occupied and away from the big ships but do not attempt to engage it,’ Hyke broadcast over the general channel.

Though only two of Red Wing remained, pilots from other Kestrel wings belonging to the *Revenge* were still operational, along with scattered remnants of the Fury squadrons launched from the *Stalwart*. Believing himself to be the highest ranking pilot still flying, Hyke had assumed leadership of the screening mission to cover the fleet’s retreat. Imperial losses had been heavy but the casualties inflicted on the Chaos interceptors were just as brutal and the Navy flyers maintained a numerical advantage over the enemy. There were close to two hundred Kestrels and Furies still involved in the battle by Shira’s estimation, but communication between them was almost non-existent thanks to incompatible vox-units and the sorcerous interference.

Oblivious to Hyke’s order, a brave, or possibly foolish, Fury crew ran the gauntlet of Chaos interceptors to get in close to the Heldrake. Bigger but carrying the same weapons fit as the single-man Kestrel, the Fury opened up with its wing-mounted lascannons, its complement of missiles already spent earlier in the battle. The rapid fusillade met with predictable results and as the craft spun away to regroup with the rest of the Imperial fighters, the Heldrake thrust out its neck with preternatural quickness, grasping the Fury’s tail section between its gargantuan jaws. Exhaling derisively, it washed the stricken fighter in a stream of baleflame before relinquishing its grip and allowing the blackened shell to drift forever lifeless among the stars.

Emboldened by the presence of the daemoniac flyer, the Chaos pilots renewed their assault on the fleeing frigates, destroyers and cruisers. Bereft of missiles, they too were reduced to las and solid shot weapons,

seeking to exploit ruptures in the shells of vessels whose shields had failed. Pursued all the way by three Kestrels from Yellow Wing, the double axe-head shape of a Hell Talon got in close to the *Scion of Ultima*, a Sword-class frigate with almost two millennia of service, and set off a ripple of explosions along its quarterdeck, a well-placed shot taking out a tertiary generator used for powering the ship's lighting systems. Larger holes opened up in the hull and, though the culprit was quickly punished by the guns of Yellow Wing, yet more Chaos fighters swarmed the stricken frigate. At the rear of their formation, the Heldrake swerved among them, seeking to reach the head of the pack and claim the kill as its own. Just as it got within range to issue forth its daemonic flame, a dark shape jetted past, missing it by barely a metre and spoiling its aim. Leaving the *Scion of Ultima* to the predation of the Hell Talons, the Heldrake struck out to chase its new target.

‘You stay with the fleet,’ Shira voxed to Hyke, gunning her Kestrel's engines for all they were worth. ‘I'll draw that thing off.’

‘Be careful, Shira,’ Hyke voxed back, his voice faint. ‘There's a round of drinks with your name on it as soon as you're out of the brig.’

‘Careful?’ she said, dipping the nose of her Kestrel to narrowly avoid an intense burst from the Heldrake's baleflamer. The temperature in the cockpit rose suddenly and patches of her flight suit ignited, forcing Shira to operate the control stick with one hand while she used the other to pat out the flames. She heaved as the smell of her scorched flesh mingled with the stench of drying vomit.

‘I'm always careful,’ Shira concluded, not entirely believing her own words.

766960.M41 / Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

‘They're dead, sir,’ the vox-operator reported solemnly. ‘All of them dead.’

The already melancholy atmosphere on the bridge became even more sombre as the fate of the Vostroyan armoured brigade became clear. The initial euphoria at a meaningful fightback had soon given way to anguish as the screams of dying gunners and drivers rang out over the intra-ship vox-network, and all-out despair had taken hold once contact had been lost entirely. Determined to ascertain whether the Imperial Guardsmen had fallen or whether the lack of communication was more Archenemy foul play, Kranswar had deployed a squad of ship militia to get eyes-on confirmation.

‘The passageways are littered with wrecks. Tanks torn open by duh... daemons.’ Barely into his twenties, the comms man struggled to get the words out. ‘Bodies dragged out and – oh, Throne – smeared all over the...’ The sentence unfinished, he closed his eyes and issued a plaintive wail.

Since they had last slept, the crew of the *Revenge* had endured more than most citizens of the Imperium, even those pressed into military service, suffered in an entire lifetime. They had met those challenges head-on and despite showing the basic human emotions that come to the fore under periods of extreme duress, they had tempered it with stoicism and grit, never allowing hope to elude them.

Now, even that was gone.

Staring at the faces of his crew, many tear-streaked and sullen, he realised that they were looking to him to give them leadership, to show them light in this time of darkness. Despite leading them to their inevitable deaths, they were offering him a chance at redemption. Clearing his throat, he seized the opportunity.

‘The enemy has taken almost everything from us. Comrades, friends, lovers. All now lie dead at their hands. Beyond our hull, the wrecks of almost three-quarters of Battlefleet Demeter are destined to drift eternally, escorted in their silent repose by the ruined frames of Kestrels and Furies, their pilots having laid down their lives so that others had a better chance

to survive. Beneath our very feet, dark agents are abroad, slaying with impunity those few brave souls who have found it deep within them to resist, however futile that resistance may be.

‘Though the blood of those who served the Imperium so valiantly still drips from the blades and teeth of the servants of the Ruinous Powers, an equal portion of that blood is on my hands too. It was my mistakes that led us to this point, my errors of judgement that have put us in a position where, short of a miracle, victory is now impossible. That miracle will not be coming, for I have not earned it and for that, and for all my errors, I truly apologise.’

With nothing else left to cling to, every soul on the bridge hung on his every word.

‘The Emperor will judge me in the next life, of that I am certain, and he will find me wanting, but in this life I have one more action to perform. When I have finished speaking to you, I am going to draw my pistol, leave the bridge and fight my way down to the engine room where I will overload the sub-warp drives and tear the *Revenge* apart. Any crewman wishing to join me is welcome to do so, and given the gravity of our situation, it is perfectly understandable if you would rather spend your final moments in silent prayer or speeding up your journey to the next world.’

Kranswar raised his voice, building the speech to a crescendo.

‘They may have taken our lives, robbed us of our sanity and savaged our pride, but by the Emperor, they will not have our ship!’

Kranswar unclasped the holster at his hip, drawing the archaic six-shot stubber by its ornate ivory handle. He opened the cylinder to check that each chamber was loaded with a round and spun it back into position. When he looked back up, he found that he was standing shoulder to shoulder with the entire bridge crew. Even the emotional vox-operator had

found the courage to participate in this final, desperate act of defiance and he stood alongside Lieutenant Faisal with a laspistol in his hand.

Kranswar stifled a quiver of his lower lip. In spite of everything, in spite of all the death and horror he had brought upon them, they were still prepared to follow him.

‘Come on then!’ he cried out, turning to open the ornate wooden doors. ‘If they want this ship, they’re going to have to pay for it in blood!’

766960.M41 / Red Six. Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Despite the camaraderie of the pilots’ mess and the close bonds that existed between the men and women of each Naval wing – intensified by the fact that they constantly relied upon each other in matters of life or death – the lot of a Kestrel pilot was a lonely one. Forced to spend hours, sometimes days, alone in the cockpit with only your own dark thoughts for company, it took a certain kind of individual to cope with the pressures, both mental and physical.

As Shira Hagen wrestled with the control stick of her fighter, battling to prevent it from entering a terminal spin, she had never felt so lonely nor had her thoughts ever been darker. Far beyond the range of her vox, she had not had contact with anybody else for over an hour, and other than the occasional brief bloom of fire from the direction of Gaea, the only evidence that she wasn’t out there alone was the daemonic war engine currently pursuing her in a high stakes game of cat and mouse. Every time the blackness of space lit up, she hoped it was one of the Chaos vessels being scattered to the heavens, but the law of averages dictated that at least a few of them had been Imperial ships. The fact that she didn’t put much stock in laws or rules was of little solace.

Coming out of the spin before it could take hold, Shira dipped her wing and banked, tempting the Heldrake with her undercarriage. The creature opened its jaws in anticipation of finally claiming the kill but as its baleflamer spewed molten death, she decelerated rapidly causing the

Heldrake to overshoot her. Much to her surprise, she found the beast was directly in her crosshairs.

The Imperial Navy Academy teaches a pilot many things. The unintentional overtaking manoeuvre that Shira had just performed being one of them, how to escape a terminal spin another, the maximum relative speed at which you can come in for a landing onto a moving carrier yet another. But there were many skills and nuggets of information useful to a pilot that the Academy did not pass on: techniques and technical data that even the adepts of the Machine-God, who tend to and preserve the holy flying machines when they are not performing sorties or missions, did not know about. Secret knowledge that could only be acquired by learning them for yourself at the stick of a fighter or by trading with others of the pilot fraternity or sorority. How to reconfigure an ejector seat so that it doesn't kill you the first time it was activated was one such piece of wisdom. So too was the real maximum speed at which you can land a fighter onto a moving carrier while preserving your own life, though not necessarily the integrity of the craft that delivered you there.

Right now, the one piece of forbidden flying lore that was jumping into Shira's mind, bartered from a ten-year veteran with almost a hundred confirmed xenos kills to his name, was how to reroute energy from the Kestrel's power plant to the lascannons. Unlike the Thunderbolt on which it was based, the spacefaring variant eschewed a combustion engine, replacing it with power cells that gave it a far greater range than a fuel-based drive ever could. Although it ran on an isolated circuit to prevent non-essential systems from unnecessarily draining it, those who had forbidden gen on the inner workings of the Kestrel's electrics could channel the power into the nose cannons and cause an effect not unlike fitting a standard Imperial Guard lasrifle with a hotshot power pack. It would drain the fighter's power plant massively but, as Shira's self-appointed mission was to keep the Heldrake away from the fleet, returning

to the *Revenge* – if there was a *Revenge* to return to – was hardly a consideration.

Pulling a thick grey wire from its port by her knee, Shira inserted the plug into the neighbouring socket and depressed both firing studs. Bright to the point of retina-searing, twin lances of super-heated energy leapt the gap between Kestrel and Heldrake, impacting against the largest of the three wings along its right-hand side. It stopped dead, forcing Shira to pull up sharply to prevent a collision, and emitted a silent wail. As she looked back over her shoulder, Shira saw the ragged gash she had torn in its wing. Eyes burning brighter than the flame from its mouth, the Heldrake fixed Shira's craft with a murderous glare before renewing its hunt.

Good. She had made it angry.

Game on.

766960.M41 / Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

The iron tang of fresh blood filled Kranswar's nostrils, the pained cries of the dying his ears. Struggling to maintain his footing on the metal floor of the corridor slick with vitae, he raised his stubber and directed a shot at the lone Traitor Legionary barring their passage, its gold-trimmed black armour glistening as much as the wet floor. The bullet flew true and straight, striking the Space Marine in the visor over his left eye and shattering it, breaking the spell that had held Kranswar's impromptu militia under its sway.

The journey into the bowels of the ship had been lethal and fraught. Only a handful of the men and women who had followed him off the bridge had made it this far but their numbers had swelled as ratings, stragglers from Imperial Guard regiments and members of the criminal underclass that always took root on a ship the size of the *Revenge*, rallied around the Lord Admiral. Not including the scores of cultists they had exchanged fire and traded blows with, or the half-real horrors that come at

them gibbering and slashing, this was the fourth Traitor Legionary they had encountered, and on each occasion the reaction had been the same.

Awe. Pure, unadulterated awe.

Bred millennia ago to serve the Emperor on His mission to reunite the scattered pockets of humanity spread out across the universe, fully half of the Space Marine Legions had turned upon Him, instead swearing fealty to the Master of Mankind's favoured son, Horus Lupercal. Freed from the restraints of servitude to humanity, their methods of fighting grew ever more brutal and the new gods they venerated revealed to them ever more effective methods of killing and subjugation. Horus's rebellion was ultimately defeated but many of his followers survived, fleeing into the warp from where they could wage a long war, chipping away at the Imperium's defences until one day their blasphemous banners would fly over the great palace on Terra. The traitor blocking the corridor wore the colours of the Black Legion, Horus's old brethren, now renamed and reliveried under the command of his most trusted lieutenant, Abaddon the Despoiler.

Had this Traitor Marine once stood alongside Horus? Had he waged war upon noble Terra, doing battle with beings of legend like Sanguinius, Lorgar and the mighty Russ? Had he been a blight on the Imperium for nigh on ten thousand years, Kranswar wondered? It mattered not. If the three hundred men under the Lord Admiral's command had their way, the black armoured figure's remaining lifespan could be measured in seconds, not millennia.

The report of the stubber echoing along the corridor, the rag-tag band of the *Revenge's* crew surged forwards, swallowing Kranswar up in the throng. The Space Marine raised his bolter with alarming swiftness, and cut down the first few ranks in a shower of blood and limbs, but the mob carried on charging. Weapon still firing, a wall of bodies collided with the Black Legionnaire, sheer weight of numbers pushing him to the ground.

Like a pack of feral dogs they leapt upon him, battering him with anything they had been able to press into service as a maul or shooting him at point-blank range with laspistols and autopistols. A flight officer, his face a scarred jigsaw of lacerations, drove the point of a crowbar through the smashed eye lens, driving it down hard into the traitor's skull and spraying his filthy uniform in a shower of red.

Another Black Legionnaire rounded the corner at the end of the corridor, opening up with a bolter. Some of the charging crowd paused, transfixed by the dark killer before them, but momentum drove those behind them on. The Traitor Marine's rate of fire could not match the rate of attrition, and he too was toppled, drowning under a sea of humanity. Losing grip of his gun, he swung wildly with armoured fists and forearms, each swipe claiming three or four lives, until, battered and bleeding, two surviving Cadians found an opening in the pile of bodies crushing the Space Marine and discharged their lasrifles into him.

Bodies choked the hallway in front of him and as Kranswar climbed over the hill of corpses accompanied by the two Cadians, the lacerated flight officer and a handful of other survivors, the vox-bead in his ear crackled with reports from other ships in the fleet. Sensing its imminent demise, the Chaos fleet had swarmed the *Revenge* and were targeting it with all weapons batteries. The *Stalwart* could not come to her aid as she was currently engaged with the *Might of Huron*, and the rest of the battlefleet were still too far off to lend their strength, since Kranswar had waited too long to recall them from their futile assault. He grinned humourlessly. When he had set out to overload the *Revenge*'s engines, it was purely to prevent it from falling into the enemy's clutches. Now, with so many Chaos vessels in such close proximity, perhaps his ship's final act would be to live up to her name.

Turning the corner from where the second Traitor Astartes had emerged, the doors to the engine room loomed large at the end of the new corridor,

glowing pale red in the reflection of the emergency lighting. Setting off at a sprint, he hadn't made it halfway down when a roar of exertion sounded from behind him. Looking back over his shoulder, the mound of dead crew collapsed as the black armoured figure burst out from beneath the array of limbs and torsos, blood leaking from cracks in his helmet and armour. The two Cadians reacted quickest but were no match for the Space Marine's augmented reflexes, bolt pistol in his hand, and both their heads exploded in a shower of crimson mist before their lasrifles were raised.

Panicked shots whizzed past the Black Legionnaire as the last few survivors fought desperately to fell the brute but none of their shots found their target, unlike the traitor who brought down four of the resisting crew with only three rounds. Suppressing the desire to draw his own weapon and turn and face the Space Marine, Kranswar continued his run. If he could get to the engine room and shut the doors behind him, even the post-human strength of the Traitor Astartes would not be able to tear them open. With just metres to go, he stretched out his hand ready to strike the control lever that would cause the twin doors to swing open and admit him to the sanctuary within, but, heralded by the boom of bolt pistol discharge, the bottom half of his right leg disappeared from beneath him and he sprawled to the floor.

Lifting his broken face from the cold metal, Kranswar crawled forwards, each stretch of his arms taking him closer to his goal. Different noises echoed down the corridor, the sound of a magazine being ejected and striking the ground, followed by the clatter of a new one being driven home. He reached out one final time and, making contact with the door, lifted himself up. The lever was mere inches from his grasp when the bolt pistol rang out again, the round striking him a glancing blow at the base of his spine and dropping him to the floor, paralysed.

Preceded by the clang of metal on metal, the Traitor Marine stalked slowly towards the Lord Admiral's prone body. As the vast shadow fell

upon him, the vox-bead in Kranswar's ear came alive with excited chatter, a myriad of voices clashing with each other over the airwaves. Closing his eyes, Kranswar concentrated, trying to cut through the background noise and zone in on one strong signal. When he heard the voice of the *Stalwart's* chief vox-officer and what she was saying, he wished the traitor's second shot had finished him off.

'Multiple contacts reported. New vessels attempting warp translation in our midst. At least a dozen and none transmitting identification codes,' she practically wept, all hope having long since fled.

766960.M41 / Remnants of Revenge and Stalwart fighter wings. Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Death was never an easy thing to witness. Be it the violent fiery death of an enemy pilot, the gradual demise of a fellow flyer exposed to radiation or blight, or the peaceful passing of a loved one in their sleep, the snuffing out of a life always left a mark on the soul of any who observed it. Strapped into the seat of his Kestrel, weapons systems spent and power indicator insistently flashing at him to warn him that his engine power was almost exhausted, Barabas Hyke reluctantly prepared to watch the death of the *Revenge*.

Like savannah predators circling a wounded herd animal, the Chaos frigates and destroyers lined up for their share of the *Revenge's* carcass. Amazingly, tranches of the Emperor-class battleship's shields still held, and though every shot that struck an unprotected section caused massive structural and collateral damage, the majestic vessel clung to life defiantly returning fire from its few remaining defence turrets and torpedo tubes. Despite being wounded, the *Revenge* could still bite back.

Hyke and the few Imperial fighter pilots who had made it back with the bulk of the fleet cruised listlessly on the periphery of the battle. Like their enemy counterparts, the Navy fighters' guns were dry and their missile racks empty, but whereas the Chaos craft had returned to their hangar bays

content that their part in the battle was over, the Imperium flyers did not have that luxury. Hyke had ordered the Kestrels to attempt to land on the *Revenge* in the desperate hope that they could rearm and repower, but had to rapidly abandon that plan when it transpired both the primary and secondary launch tubes had mutated into vast maws, tongues languidly flicking into the void and swallowing any craft foolish enough to get too close. All that remained now was for their engines to fail, at which point they would drift on the celestial current until dehydration claimed them.

Of course, before that happened, Hyke was going to order all wings to target one of the larger Chaos vessels and attempt to ram it. If they could make it past the anti-fighter defences, then maybe, just maybe, they could exploit a gap in its shields and slam into the hull. Even then, the chances of destroying the ship would be slim, but at least they'd take some of the enemy with them and their deaths would have counted for something.

‘Wing commander? Are you picking up anything odd on your auspex?’ A voice cut across the vox. It was Allonsy from Blue Wing.

‘I’ve been picking up nothing but weird since this whole shooting match started,’ Hyke replied. ‘What’s different now?’

‘I’m getting ghost returns. Ten... twelve at least. Just blinking in and out.’ Allonsy said.

‘I’m seeing them too,’ said another voice. More confirmations followed.

Hyke, who hadn’t so much as glanced at his auspex for hours, such was the effectiveness of the enemy’s jamming, peered down at it. Not believing what he was seeing, he used the sleeve of his flight suit to rub the screen. When that didn’t alter the reading, he finally believed what his eyes were telling him.

‘Throne alive!’ he broadcast over the general channel. ‘They’re going to translate right on top of us. Get out of here now!’

‘They must be addled to exit the warp this close to a planetary body,’ Allonsy added, his engine ports glowing bright orange as they spooled up.

The expansion of humanity among the stars had only been made possible with the discovery of warp travel, the means by which great distances that would normally take many years, perhaps lifetimes, to traverse could be crossed in a matter of weeks or months. It was an inexact science at best, an uneasy marriage of technology and sorcery that was as likely to leave travellers stranded in the immaterium or deliver them to their destination before they had even set off, as it was to get them to the right place at the right time. Because of its unpredictable and hazardous nature, many safeguards were put in place to reduce the risk of warp travel, chief among them never translating inside a system where the potential existed to emerge too close to a planet and be sucked into its gravity well. Whoever had ordered this warp jump was either very desperate or dangerously foolish. Potentially both.

Oily black ripples coalesced in the fabric of space, denoting the points of egress from the warp, a shimmering wrongness that was painful to look upon. Like the cosmos giving birth to vast metal children, ships tore through the gashes in reality, ten green-hulled leviathans materialising in the heart of the Pandorax System, followed in quick order by a sleek, silver cruiser.

Unable to move out of the way quickly enough, Kestrels and Furies impacted against void shields, disintegrating the instant they made contact with the unimaginable energies. Allonsy, who had been running ahead of the main pack of fighters, avoided the initial collisions but, reeled in by a faster moving capital ship, his Kestrel smashed against the prow shields and was wiped out in a tiny explosion that barely registered among the firmament.

The considerably more experienced, or perhaps luckier, Hyke performed a textbook evasive manoeuvre, banking sharply and rising to make use of a clear space at the centre of the newly arrived fleet. Neither experience nor luck could save him from what happened next.

Another, larger return pulsed on his auspex, almost filling the screen. Turbulence engulfed his Kestrel and the area around him undulated sickeningly. Giving the engines every last drop of power left in the cells, he pulled forward hard on the throttle, almost tearing the lever from its housing. The ghost image on his auspex stabilised and he looked over his shoulder in time to see a massive asteroid coalescing into realspace.

The vibration of protesting engines jarring his body as he coaxed them to perform far in excess of their capabilities, Hyke very nearly outran the magnetic pull of the new arrival but, just as he reached the terminator of the thing's gravity well, his engines sputtered and died, no energy left in the power plant to drive them.

As the gargantuan rock sucked him in, crackling shields waiting to consume both man and starfighter, the last thing Barabas Hyke ever saw was a flotilla of torpedoes racing past him, the same green as the ten capital ships and sporting winged sword insignia on their hulls.

766960.M41 / Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

His face a ruined mess, Kranswar regarded the Black Legionnaire with his one remaining eye as another blow rained down on him. His skull audibly cracked this time though his ability to feel pain had thankfully already deserted him. The Traitor Marine kept the human pinned to the engine room door with one gauntlet while he wound back his other, balled into a fist, preparing to strike a killing blow.

Two things happened then, neither of which made any sense to Kranswar in his current state.

Over the vox, a woman started laughing. Not the hysterical, maniacal cackle of one taken leave of their senses but the genuine, happy laughter of somebody experiencing delight. This was soon joined by other voices adding to the chorus, some cheering, others crying but all out of euphoria rather than fear or sadness. At the same time, a bright light bloomed out of

nothingness in the corridor behind the Black Legionnaire forcing Kranswar to close his eye. He did not open it again.

‘We’re saved!’ laughed the chief vox-officer of the *Stalwart*. ‘They’ve come to rescue us all.’

Kranswar couldn’t hear her, just as he couldn’t witness Supreme Grand Master Kaldor Draigo materialise behind the Traitor Marine and strike down his assailant, taking its black armoured head clean off with a single sword swipe. Neither could he know that all over his ship, squads of Grey Knights were teleporting aboard and commencing the operation to cleanse it of the forces of Chaos. On board the asteroid that had been used to ram the *Revenge*, the entire Dark Angels Chapter had already deployed under the command of Lord Azrael to undo the dark magicks invoked to summon and sustain the aberrations of the warp.

He was not aware of any of this because Lord Admiral Orson Kranswar, captain of the *Revenge* and commander of Battlefleet Demeter, was already dead.



CHAPTER NINE

**766960.M41 / Asteroid K27356NV213g (Malefus Murex), Pythos
blockade, Pandorax System**

In spite of the aches in his bones and muscles, and fatigue from the long hours of maintaining his incantation, Cholgar intoned the words with the same vigour he had the first time he uttered them. Thick black blood streamed from his nostrils and hoarfrost coated the hair on his bare arms, chest and face, but not his head which was entirely smooth save for the two nubs of horns at the point where temple became forehead.

Cholgar was the first of his line to be picked out by the gods to receive the blessing of mutation. His father, his father's father, and every male in his family stretching as far back as anybody could remember, had served the Davinicus Lycae but none had ever advanced beyond the grade of footsoldier, their destiny to end their days by an Imperial Guardsman's bayonet or Space Marine bolt shell. Since birth, Cholgar had been marked for greatness, schooled in the ways of sorcery even before he could talk. Nearly two decades on from the day when the tribal elders took him from the crib, he was finally fulfilling his destiny. His sorcery, combined with that of the hundred or so other cultists filling the hollowed-out chamber within the commandeered asteroid, was creating the right conditions for daemons to dwell within the material realm and assail the Imperial vessel.

The man beside him fell, dark blood trickling from every orifice, steam rising from his corpse as it cooled at an unnatural rate. The air around the dead man thickened and churned, and with a tear that sounded like raw meat being pulled from bone, a hole in reality opened through which stepped one of the Neverborn. An ugly hunched thing, it peered around furtively with bulbous green-grey orbs, before taking possession of the frozen cadaver. Running a fat tongue over the broken remains of crag-like teeth, it stepped back through the portal which crackled closed at its passing. That same fate awaited Cholgar, as it did all of the warlock cabal, though each would gladly embrace it when it came. There was no greater glory for a servant of the Davinicus Lycae than to die knowing their sacrifice allowed beings far more worthy than themselves to walk the materium.

Another cultist took the place of the fallen sorcerer and Cholgar felt a pang of jealousy. The newcomer was no match for him physically – he was shorter and weighed at least ten kilos less than Cholgar – but was the bearer of not two, but three vestigial horns, each longer than his own. Such obvious endorsement from the gods no doubt meant he had the pick of mates in the accommodation cells.

Pushing aside his envy, Cholgar returned his focus to the task in hand. His momentary lapse in concentration had caused him to slip out of harmony with the rest of the cabal, drawing the attention of the overseers who kept a stern eye on proceedings. He had just got his chanting back in time when something else distracted him.

The rime of hoarfrost melted, coating his toned body in a wet sheen and the hairs on his arm pricked up. A new smell rose up, overpowering the scent of blood and sweat emanating from the other cultists, the warm cloying of burning ozone stinging his nostrils.

At the very instant Cholgar figured out what was happening, the laws of physics he had been fighting so hard to rewrite punished him to their full

extent.

Materialising several metres above the floor of the asteroid chamber, Brother Balthasar of the Deathwing braced himself for impact. He hit the ground with a moist thud and glanced down to find the remains of something that must have once been vaguely human beneath his feet. Alongside him, a scrawny mutated freak, a concertina of rings around its elongated neck and a trio of horns poking out from a pale, mottled scalp, stared at him wide-eyed. A single burst from Balthasar's storm bolter separated the cultist's torso from the rest of his body.

Around the chamber, similar scenes were being repeated. Scores of Terminator-armour clad Dark Angels blinked into existence over the heads of their targets; those not crushed under the impact of tonnes of ceramite and wargear were cut down by storm bolter, mace or flail. The noise of so many weapons being discharged in the artificial cavern was cacophonous and a rune blinked on Balthasar's visor display to warn him that his armour's noise filters were reaching the limits of their usefulness. It came as no surprise.

A single squad of Deathwing could cleanse an entire space hulk; two could prosecute a small war unaided; five squads – fully half of the Chapter's First Company – would be sufficient to conquer a planet.

Today, for the first time in living memory, the entire Deathwing deployed on the same field of battle at the same time.

The battle, if it could truly be called that, was over in the space of seconds, but that too came as no surprise to Balthasar. Human wreckage lay at the feet of a hundred Dark Angels, the only evidence that any of them had seen combat the crimson smears sullying otherwise pristine tactical dreadnought suits. One cabal of enemy sorcerers lay dead, but many more awaited extermination deeper within the asteroid.

'Onward,' ordered Gabriel, Grand Master of the Deathwing. The sound of boarding torpedoes slamming into the asteroid echoed along the tunnels and punctuated his words. Soon, the rest of the Dark Angels Chapter would

deploy alongside their elite brethren. Gabriel raised his Heavenfall Blade, the black sword in stark contrast to his ancient suit of bone-white Terminator plate. ‘Show them no mercy!’

766960.M41 / Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Where the Deathwing had not encountered any serious resistance on board the repurposed asteroid, Supreme Grand Master Kaldor Draigo and the Brotherhood of Grey Knights under his command had found the exact opposite on board the *Revenge*.

Warp rifts had opened throughout the ship and, maintained for hours by forbidden magicks, the *Revenge* was rife with foes drawn forth from the other side of reality. Entire decks now resembled hellish landscapes in mimicry of those worlds deep within the Eye of Terror. Metal transmuted to flesh, machinery shaped into organics, the laws of nature abolished and replaced by the raw stuff of Chaos. It was impossible to move more than a few metres without having to avoid a corpse, hideously broken, primal fear etched on every face.

A daemon skittered rapidly along the ceiling of the corridor towards Draigo, but with a single word he held it there in place, the squad of Paladins advancing behind him eviscerating the thing with sharp bursts from their storm bolters.

More daemons converged on their position, some loping on spindly, misshapen limbs, others blinking into existence among the ranks of the Space Marines. Regardless of how they got there, their fate was the same. Blades flashed, returning them to whence they came in a shower of gore and a chorus of hellish screams. Words of banishment, harshly spoken, took care of the rest, sucked back through the rents in time and space that had birthed them in reality.

Coming to a fork in the ship’s corridors, Draigo ordered the Paladins to take the left branch while he veered to the right, deeper into the belly of

the ship.

Draigo would not normally lead a Brotherhood into battle himself, but the death of Grand Master Hasimir and the urgency of the situation on Pythos had left him with no alternative but to assume command of the Fifth. With the rest of his Chapter scattered around the Imperium in response to a myriad of daemononic threats, the Supreme Grand Master had not been able to wait for reinforcements from among his own forces, instead opting to enact an old oath sworn to the Grey Knights by the Dark Angels.

Azrael had initially refused to honour the pact, considering it to be tantamount to blackmail. His mind was soon changed when Draigo revealed an interesting nugget of information gleaned from interrogating a Traitor Astartes prisoner and the leader of the Dark Angels committed his entire Chapter to the Pandorax campaign, operational superiority the Grey Knight's sole concession in exchange for cooperation. Though they were nominally allies, the relationship between the two Chapters had always been fractious, never spilling over into confrontation but coming near on more than one occasion. Being forced to operate so closely together would put that to the test once again, more so in light of the circumstances of their alliance.

Already Azrael had begun the politicking. Daemon hunting being their speciality, the Grey Knights were the logical choice to cleanse the nest of daemons the ship had become but, with only a single Brotherhood to face an entire daemon army, they would ultimately need reinforcing. The Dark Angels would make short work of the warlocks and cultists on board the asteroid before coming to fight alongside their psychic brethren, their superior numbers turning the tide of battle and winning the day. Who the glory covered was of no concern to Draigo. Liberating Pythos and resealing the Damnation Cache was all that mattered. Azrael could score

all the points he liked against the Grey Knights as long as the mission was a success.

A noise from further along the corridor gave Draigo pause. The flickering red emergency lights sporadically illuminated a human-shaped figure, curled in the foetal position and weeping uncontrollably. The ball unfurled at the sound of Draigo's thudding footfalls. A man, grey-haired and wrinkled, shivered in fear and looked about to scream when his eyes fixated on the purity seals and holy imagery adorning the Grey Knight's armour.

'You... you're not one of them?' the man said, wide-eyed.

Draigo nodded. 'I am a loyal servant of the Golden Throne and I am here to liberate this ship and her crew.'

'Praise the Emperor! We're saved,' the man said, getting uneasily to his feet. Even at full height he barely reached Draigo's chest. 'Thank you, lord. Thank you.'

Draigo nodded again. The old man set off at pace in the direction from which the Grey Knight had come. Draigo was about to continue his advance when a thought occurred to him, a piece of information he was missing that was not of operational import but useful to know nonetheless.

'What is the name of this ship?' he called after the old man.

'The ship?' the old man said, carefully picking his way through the bodies carpeting the floor. 'It's called the *Revenge*, lord.'

'Of course it is,' Draigo said with a wry smile, heading deeper into enemy territory.

**766960.M41 / Asteroid K27356NV213g (Malefus Murex),
Pythos blockade, Pandorax System**

Balthasar's power fist connected with the Black Legionnaire's head, smashing open the faceplate to reveal the traitor's visage. Ancient features stared back at the Dark Angel, a defiant grin peeling the lips back from

bloodied teeth. Another blow from Balthasar's powerfist quickly removed the smile. The body dropped limply to the ground to join those of his treacherous ilk already vanquished by the Deathwing and the elements of Sixth Company who had joined up with them on their warpath through the asteroid.

'Master Tigrane,' said Gabriel. 'The rest of your company have reached the hull breach and are engaged with traitor forces. Take your men and reinforce their position.'

Though the Master of Sixth Company, along with the three squads fighting alongside him, were already aware of their battle-brothers' situation, Gabriel's instruction was not meant as a slight against Tigrane's leadership or tactical acumen. Both Dark Angels exchanged barely perceptible nods.

'Understood, Master Gabriel,' Tigrane replied, signalling for his troops to move out.

As the green armoured figures made their way out of the chamber, another entered, the dark armour he wore and the crozius arcanum he carried marking him out as a Chaplain. A single black pearl hung from his weapon of office.

Almost twenty Black Legionaries lay dead in the central chamber, joined in oblivion by at least ten times that number of cultists and sorcerers. Interrogator Chaplain Seraphicus moved among the corpses, kneeling beside those in black armour and applying a reductor to their throats to remove their gene-seed. Normally the tool of the Apothecary, when the Dark Angels went into battle against any Traitor Astartes, the brothers of the Reclusiam would also carry one on the orders of the High Interrogator. The fickle nature of alliances among the hordes of Chaos meant that any of the Fallen could have thrown in their lot with any of the countless warbands and armies that blighted the Imperium. Removing the gene-seed of any enemy Space Marine and taking it for testing on the

Rock was the only way to be certain that another name could not be struck from the Roster of Caliban.

All across the asteroid, similar scenes played out.

Finding themselves isolated from the rest of Fourth Company, Sergeant Arion and Third Squad held out for over an hour against a much larger force of Black Legionaries and their daemonic allies. Without taking a single casualty, they killed over thirty Traitor Astartes and daemons before Master Boaz and a relief force showed up to help close out the battle. Such was the ferocity of the firefight that when High Interrogator Asmodai arrived once Fourth Company had moved on, he discovered new niches and alcoves had been torn into the rock from sustained bolt shell impacts.

Master Belial of Third Company, shoulder to shoulder with Ezekiel and three other brothers of the Librarius, fought off wave after wave of Khorne berserkers. Their rage heightened by the presence of psykers among the enemy, they smashed ineffectively against psi-shields before being cut to ribbons by bolt pistols and chainswords. Even bolstered by daemonic servants of their master, they could not topple the Dark Angels' defences. When Chaplain Boreas came later to extract the gene-seed from the dead, he found it hard to distinguish which body parts belonged to which dismembered corpse, the ferocity of the berserkers' assault countered in equal measure by the ruthlessness of the defenders.

But for all the acts of selflessness and heroism, not a single member of the Fallen would be found among the numbers of the traitors that day.

Finishing his ministrations, Seraphicus carefully placed the metal cylinder containing the looted gene-seed into a pouch hanging from his waist. As he made to leave, no doubt to remove more progenoids from the slain, he nodded to Gabriel in the same manner as Tigrane had done, but brushed the first two fingers of his right hand across his left cheek just below the eye. It seemingly went unnoticed by the other Terminator-armoured figures but Balthasar furrowed his brow. Being a member of the

Deathwing made him privy to all manner of Chapter secrets in excess of his non-ascended battle-brothers but he was still on the periphery of the inner circle. Had Seraphicus made some kind of clandestine signal to Gabriel? How much more forbidden knowledge did the Dark Angels have left for him to learn?

Gabriel turned to address the fifty Deathwing checking their gear and cleaning filth from their armour. Azrael had taken the other half of First Company onboard the stricken ship as soon as it had become clear that the battle to capture the asteroid would be swifter than anticipated and now, with the sounds of battle dying away, Gabriel would lead the remainder to join them.

‘Our work here is done, brothers. The Archenemy sorcerers lie dead and broken. Their spells are already fading and the horrors they enabled to gain purchase in this realm weakened by the second.’ Gabriel’s gaze lingered on Balthasar as he spoke. ‘Dozens of the vile Black Legion have been vanquished and their foul barbarism will never again strike fear in the hearts of the loyal. New names will be recorded in the Chapter annals this day, brothers, and we praise them all.’

A great cheer rang out from the ivory-suited warriors. The Master of the Deathwing was still looking directly at Balthasar.

‘But although our fight here is at an end, our Grey Knight...’ Gabriel paused, probing for the right word. The air filled with pre-teleportation buzz. Winds whipped up from nowhere, billowing the robes of dead cultists. ‘...allies still require our aid to cleanse the Navy vessel of boarders.’

Already fading as he spoke those last few words, Balthasar swore that the company master nodded at him right before he disappeared.

766960.M41 / Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Driving the Titansword through the daemon's midriff, Draigo did not stop until the hilt made rough contact with armoured hide. Corrosive black-green bile spilled from the thing's guts and it let rip with a senses-shattering scream as it was torn back to the warp, leaving behind it an oily cloud of foul-smelling liquid smoke.

In all directions, Grey Knights were engaged with the servants of the Dark Gods, but direction was somehow meaningless on the lower decks of the *Revenge*, neither fully existing in the material realm nor completely claimed by the malign influence of Chaos. A daemonette stalked towards him across the part metal, part flesh deck yet, impossibly, it was suspended from the ceiling, lilaceous tongue wriggling loose from its jaw and tasting the battle on the air. Draigo and the Knight of the Flame fighting at his shoulder swung their blades in unison, reducing the androgynous beast to a rapidly fading heap of body parts. Still more daemons came at them, the warp portal above them, yet at the same time below them, vomiting forth more blasphemous specimens.

Flashes of psychic messages flashed across Draigo's psyche from others of the Brotherhood in battle across the ship. Castellan Crowe and a dozen Terminators were locked down on the *Revenge's* hangar deck, a Lord of Skulls and a near-endless tide of Khorne berserkers hampering their attempt to get the flight bays operational again and allow the Navy flyers to land. Justicar Amrythe and his strike squad, tracking a Tzeentchian daemon of no small notoriety, were caught in a localised time loop, reaching the end of the corridor they were advancing along only to find themselves back at the start. Despite being fully aware of their situation, there was nothing they could do about it while the daemon who had cast the spell still lingered on this side of the veil.

Gradually, the nature of the messages changed. Where situations had previously seemed desperate, hope now blossomed in the form of green, black and white armoured saviours. Using their mounts and flyers to full effect, forty brothers of the Ravenwing stormed the hangar decks,

sweeping away the warriors of the Blood God in a hurricane of bolter fire and routing even the vast daemonic engine they dubbed 'Crushing Death'. Freed from their chronologic trap, Amrythe and his Justicars discovered the physical shell of their daemonic tormentor and though they found evidence of their allies' involvement in its banishment, the chainaxe wounds that criss-crossed its avian form were a mystery.

In the midst of their own melee, Draigo saw and smelled the tell-tale signs of teleportation, and in the blink of an eye twenty ivory-clad Terminators were in amongst the Purifiers and Paladins he had led into the depths of the *Revenge*. Without pausing to get their bearings, they opened up with their storm bolters, shredding daemon flesh and thinning out the maleficent horde.

'I am Grand Master Gabriel of the Deathwing,' said the Dark Angel alongside Draigo, who, up until moments ago, had not been there. Gabriel's sword flashed through the air decapitating a leaping daemonette.

'Well met, Grand Master. I am Supreme Grand Master Draigo of the Grey Knights,' replied Draigo, his blade claiming the head of another daemonette in mimicry of the Dark Angel's action.

'No introductions are necessary, Master Draigo. Lord Azrael has briefed me well.' There was more than a hint of sarcasm in Gabriel's tone.

Another Deathwing Terminator moved within earshot, backhanding a nurgling into pulp while his storm bolter whirred as it automatically reloaded. 'Can their witchminds close the breech or not?' he asked bluntly.

'Balthasar...' Gabriel said, not in chastisement. The other Terminator moved away again, blasting away at the swarm of daemons now that his weapon had a full complement of ammo.

'What Balthasar meant to say was, are you and your battle-brothers capable of shutting the warp portal?' If any slight was meant by his question, his face, shrouded under the hood of his robes, gave nothing away.

‘Yes. It’s what we’ve been trying to do for hours. We just need to be close enough to the portal to enact the ritual.’

‘Allow us to clear you a path,’ Gabriel said, sweeping his sword in a wide arc and cleaving a pair of daemons who had got a little too close to him. ‘Deathwing! On me. The Grey Knights need to reach the portal to be able to close it. We will ensure they get there.’

By rote, the nineteen Dark Angels Terminators took up formation around their commander, despatching Chaotic horrors as they moved into position. Without further instruction, as soon as the last Deathwing was in place, they spread out, pushing the daemons back and opening up a protective envelope in their midst.

‘Grey Knights! Forward,’ Draigo called out, thrusting the *Titansword* aloft. He moved into the gap opened up by the Dark Angels. A dozen more silver armoured figures rallied around the Chapter relic, its blade blackened by daemon gore. Gabriel turned his head slightly to address Draigo.

‘Ready?’ asked the Dark Angel.

‘Ready,’ replied the Grey Knight.

As one, a mass of silver and ivory ceramite surged forwards, a blitzkrieg of bolt shells and blades tearing a route through the pressed mob of daemonettes, nurglings and other less identifiable monstrosities. Even corralled by the shield of Deathwing, the Grey Knights were still a potent fighting unit, the heads and deformed bodies of warp fiends exploding in blue flame at a mere thought from the psychically empowered Space Marines. Those few daemons that did break through the wall of Terminators, or leapt over their heads to get at the Grey Knights, soon met their doom on the end of a force sword.

In short order, the phalanx of Deathwing led Draigo and his brothers directly above/beneath the warp rift and the Dark Angels spread out, their escort mission now becoming one of perimeter control. Tirelessly, they

held back the daemonic tide, waves of bloated and spindly bodies smashed apart on a shore of Terminator armour. Balthasar swung unstintingly with his power fist, smiting daemons with every blow, their wrecked forms tossed back against more of their kind. Balthasar's squadmate, Barachiel, left gauntlet shattered and torn, two fingers bitten off at the knuckle, blazed away with his heavy flamer. Daemon-hide burned and shrivelled, greasy smoke billowing as they fled blindly back through the horde, igniting others as they went. Gabriel himself, his black Heavenfall blade rising and falling in ichor-streaked arcs, slew with a veteran's poise, every swing or shot rewarding him with another kill.

At the Dark Angels' backs, the Grey Knights were about their appointed task. Working symbols in the air out of conjured psi-flame, Draigo and two of the Purifiers chanted the Litany of Ensealment while the rest of his brothers vanquished those daemons that were still issuing forth from the tear or any that slipped past the attentions of the Deathwing. Finishing the inverted pentagram that signalled the commencement of the second phase of the ritual, Draigo noticed a change in the mood of the baying horde. The nurglings in particular seemed reluctant to get close to the portal, hanging back and letting the daemonettes get eviscerated on the end of Dark Angels weapons but they too became reticent to attack, forcing the Deathwing to engage them with ranged weapons. The rate of daemons pouring out of the rift slowed to a halt.

Unheralded, a skeletal hand loomed out of the eddies of the warp, bony fingers taking grasp in reality and dragging through the rest of its emaciated body. Five metres tall and entirely devoid of flesh and muscle, a daemon prince of Nurgle strode through into the materium. Wings, their span the equal of the thing's height, unfurled from its back. Glassy orbs in its inhuman skull regarded Space Marine and daemon alike, and its mouth parted in a grin, the stench of aeons' old death emanating from a breathless exhale.

Draigo was the first to speak. 'J'ian-Lo,' he spat.

The daemon prince turned its head to face Draigo, the crack of bone against bone jarring to all who heard it. Its smile widened in recognition.

'Kaldor Draigo. So good to see you again.' J'ian-Lo's voice was like the scraping of a sarcophagus lid being removed. 'Mortarion sends his regards. He did so want to be here to kill you himself but as you made that an impossibility, he allowed me to have the pleasure instead.'

Moving with a speed beyond the ken of even a Space Marine, J'ian-Lo reached out with a gaunt hand and grabbed Draigo by the shoulder. Before anybody could react, both Grey Knight and daemon prince had disappeared.

766960.M41 / Red Six. Adamantium Fields, Pandorax System

Debris clanked against Shira's Kestrel, every tiny impact from planetary and spacecraft debris pocking the hull. She leaned over to peer out of the cockpit. The kill markings she had fought so hard to attain were patchy, many already obliterated by the tiny rocks. Shira cursed. The way things were going she was unlikely to get the chance to repaint them, let alone add to the tally. The large asteroid she was skirting around lit up in the reflected light of balefire, an unnecessary reminder that the Heldrake was still on her tail.

More red lights lit up on her console as she weaved between two more of the enormous rocks before dipping under the wreck of a Navy frigate. Behind her, her pursuer matched the movement of her craft, its wings swinging backwards and forwards in a rowing motion. A chunk of asteroid separated from a larger body, spinning towards the Heldrake. Without deviating from its course, it engulfed the tank-sized splinter in blue flame, utterly vaporising it.

Shira's plan was a simple one. Kranswar's assertion that the fighter-interceptors could cope within the asteroid field had been sound and so she had led the Heldrake into the Adamantium Fields where its greater speed

would be negated. It was far more manoeuvrable than the capital ships of the Chaos blockade but the daemon-flyer was bigger and more cumbersome than a Kestrel and, in theory, should not find it easy to navigate through the mass of cosmic flotsam. That theory had been disproven thus far.

Regardless of whether the Heldrake made it through with her, the final stage of Shira's gambit was to land on Pythos. Despite being in the clutches of an enemy occupation force, she would rather take her chances down there than run out of power in the depths of space and be eaten by a metal dragon or suffocate once her oxygen supply was depleted.

Another ruined ship loomed large in front of her, an enemy destroyer broken apart by a ferocious broadsides attack. Its entire starboard flank was open to the void and an explosion, likely caused by the sub-warp engines taking a direct hit, had gouged through the superstructure right through to port. Seeing the gap, Shira dived sharply and entered a barrel roll, corkscrewing through the hole in the destroyer with barely a metre to spare on either side. The Heldrake once again copied the Kestrel's route, tucking its wings in as it glided through the opening but, being larger than Shira's craft, barely made it. Its sharpened wingtips tore through armoured panels in a shower of grotesquely coloured sparks but momentum drove it through and it emerged on the other side still in one piece. Enraged and still hungry for the hunt, it unfurled its wings and resumed the chase. There was now clear distance between it and Shira.

The rate of impacts against her hull slowed, signalling that she was coming to the edge of the asteroid field. Gently banking around an erratically drifting slab of rock, Pythos, for so long obscured to her, was revealed, the blue and green orb hanging benignly against a backdrop of black. Behind her, the Heldrake broke free of the Adamantium Fields, tiny rocks sliding off its hide like a seabird's feathers repelling water. Shira checked her instruments trying to ascertain the distance left before she

would enter Pythos's orbit, but the auspex, like so many of the Kestrel's gauges and sensors, had automatically shut down to preserve power.

Not daring to open the throttle to its full extent but wary that the Heldrake would soon catch up to her if she maintained her cautious asteroid field speed, Shira pointed the Kestrel towards the largest landmass she could see and coaxed a little more pace out of the engines.

The Heldrake, responding to the brightened flare from the Kestrel's rear, followed in her wake at full pace, long strokes of its wings seemingly pulling at the blanket of space and reeling her in. Without instrumentation to rely on, Shira did a quick mental calculation. If she maintained this speed, and provided the daemon engine could not call on its nefarious patrons for an injection of pace, she should just about make it down to the surface before the Heldrake. Just.

On the threshold of the planet's atmosphere, preluded by a flurry of alarms and warning lights, her engines finally ran out of power.

766960.M41 / Merciless Death, Adamantium Fields, Pandorax System

Malgar Irongrasp had fought enough space battles to know when one was lost. Standing before the oculus on the bridge of *Merciless Death* – literally an eye styled after the Eye of Horus – and looking out over the Fourth, and final, Battle of Sunward Gap, he knew that this time he would be on the losing side.

The wreck of the *Might of Huron* listed uneasily, its contents still being sucked out into the void hours after a Dark Angels battle-barge and the regrouped fighters from the *Stalwart* had pounded it into submission. With the Slaughter-class cruiser's demise guaranteed, the Space Marine ship's assault had been relentless ensuring there was not a scrap of the Red Corsairs' vessel left salvageable. His own ships had fared no better.

Heartless Destroyer had attempted to engage the Dark Angels strike cruiser but, under duress from a trio of Hunter-class destroyers, the Grey

Knights vessel had ghosted in on her blindside and crippled her. *Steel Anvil*, bearing massive damage suffered before the arrival of the Space Marine vessels, struck the final blow, its nova cannon cracking open the *Heartless Destroyer*'s spine and setting off a series of catastrophic explosions.

It was not the first time Irongrasp had lost a ship-to-ship conflict. Six hundred years ago he had tasted defeat in an engagement around Cadia, ironically, to the very fleet he now led. Bending his knee before the Warmaster in exchange for his life and swearing fealty, his new loyalty was soon rewarded when he slew Abaddon's former admiral and ascended to command of the Black Legion's primary fleet. If he survived this battle, it would be his last in Black Legion colours. Abaddon the Despoiler brooked no failure from those who served him and should Malgar escape with his life, the *Merciless Death* would need to find a new banner to fly under.

The opportunity to swear allegiance to a new master soon presented itself to the former White Consul.

'Lord Irongrasp. The *Deathblade* is hailing us,' a hooded acolyte seated at a vox-array called out. The *Might of Huron* was the only Red Corsairs' vessel to have fallen to Imperium guns and the *Deathblade*, along with its sister ship, *No Redemption*, and the assorted raiders and destroyers Blackheart had brought to the battle, were keeping the Chaos forces in the fight.

'Put them on loudspeaker,' Malgar replied. Through the oculus two more of his ships disappeared within coronas of blinding light.

'So near yet so far, Irongrasp. A victory so nearly complete turned on its head by the fickle whim of fate. Perhaps if Abaddon had favoured one of the Four, one of the Four would have favoured him in return. Delayed the Dark Angels flotilla in the warp a little longer? Translated them further out from the Pandorax System, maybe?' It was Huron's voice. Malgar had

initially thought – willed – him dead in the destruction of the *Might of Huron*, but ever the wily operator, he had led his ships from one of the smaller vessels to make himself a lesser target.

‘The day is not entirely lost, Lord Blackheart. The *Merciless Death* is still fully operational and the ships in my fleet are not beyond repair. All are now at your disposal.’ There was no guile in Malgar’s attempt to save his own skin.

Huron laughed. ‘But I need you to cover my escape, Irongrasp. And besides, your ship is no longer warp-capable.’

‘I don’t understand,’ replied Malgar. He soon did.

‘*Deathblade* is readying its plasma batteries!’ said a diminutive crewman, a bundle of cables snaking from his head and chest into the console before him.

‘Divert shields aft,’ Malgar ordered. With the Space Marine fleet attacking the *Merciless Death* head-on, all shield power had been directed fore. Chaos vessels to its rear, the back section of the ship was vulnerable.

Malgar’s order came too late. As crew and servitors frantically scrambled to reroute their defences, the weapon bays of the Gothic War veteran glowed white hot. Lances of superheated hydrogen speared through the void, melting the unprotected hull of the far larger vessel and rupturing its warp drives. The *Merciless Death* rocked under the detonations of multiple explosions, secondary blasts still ripping through it by the time Huron addressed the ship again.

‘See, Irongrasp? I am nothing if not merciful. Your sub-warp engines are still operational and if you’re quick, you can outrun the Dark Angels to Pythos. I’m sure the Warmaster will be pleased to see you.’

Malgar was about to recite a curse, taught to him hundreds of years ago by a Thousand Sons sorcerer, but the line to the *Deathblade* went dead before he could get the words out. Behind the *Merciless Death*, the remnants of the Red Corsairs’ fleet turned and fled, trying to put enough

distance between them and Gaea before slipping into the warp. Malgar briefly considered following them to draw the Space Marine vessels after Blackheart but it would be futile. The Red Corsairs already had a head start and the *Merciless Death* would be presenting its vulnerable rear to the hunting Dark Angels. Instead, he opted to take Huron's advice.

'All vessels. Make for the Adamantium Fields. We're retreating to Pythos,' he voxed to the fleet. If he could salvage some of the Black Legion ships, perhaps it would put Abaddon in a more forgiving mood. If not, at least he would still be alive to barter for his life.

Without question, the bridge crew ran through the drill of turning the huge craft around. Agonisingly slowly, kilometres of captured Imperial vessel swung around in a wide arc, its prow eventually pointing towards Pythos. As the Dark Angels fleet converged on the handful of surviving traitor ships, Malgar ordered full speed ahead, punching towards the sanctuary of the asteroid field.

'Lord Irongrasp. It's the other vessels in the fleet. They're breaking formation,' said a crewman seated before an auspex. His big eyes were completely jet black, giving the impression of his pupils having swallowed both iris and white. Malgar strode from the rail before the occulus, eager to see for himself. At the centre of the auspex sat the rune denoting the *Merciless Death*, its course a straight line headed directly for the Adamantium Fields. Either side of it, multiple smaller icons headed off at diagonals in all directions. At the fringes of the display sat the ominous red markers of enemy vessels.

'Raise the *Helspite*. I want to speak to Shangsiao Zurmgren. Now,' Irongrasp spat.

'They're refusing all hails, lord,' said the vox-operator after several attempts to raise the fleeing heavy cruiser. The *Helspite*'s rune flickered before disappearing from the auspex.

‘*Helspite* has just made warp translation,’ said the dark-eyed crewman. More icons pulsed and vanished in quick succession until the *Merciless Death* was the only friendly vessel remaining.

‘They’ve abandoned us. The cowards have fled and abandoned us,’ Malgar said, bile rising in his throat. With the other ships gone, the already stricken *Merciless Death* had no escort and the Space Marine vessels would be on her in minutes. ‘Launch all fighter wings. Suicide protocols. If any of them try to return to this ship before we are within the asteroid field, you have my permission to shoot them down.’

Moments later the auspex lit up with hundreds of tiny dots, racing towards the edge of the screen. In response, hundreds more in hostile colours swarmed in from the edge, the Imperial fleet scrambling its own fighters to counter the threat. Through the occulus, the Adamantium Fields grew ever closer.

Further explosions rocked the Chaos ship as the swifter Space Marine vessels drew within weapons range. Unimpeded by the suicide pilots now engaged by Imperial Navy fighters, they opened up with prow lances, scorching the *Merciless Death*’s flanks with glancing blows. Irongrasp knew they were not warning shots across his bow; the gunnery teams were finding their range and their next volleys would be deadly.

‘Hard to port!’ Malgar yelled at the steersman. The mutated brute, more beast than man, pulled the ancient wheel hard to the left and the ship followed suit. Bridge crew grasped for anything to steady themselves as the *Merciless Death* lurched sharply. Through the occulus, two bright beams of energy blazed on by, the Dark Angels vessels missing their target thanks to Malgar’s quick manoeuvre. ‘Hard to port!’ he yelled again.

It was a double-bluff and one he’d used to good effect many times before. The pursuing vessels would be expecting a jinking manoeuvre and would place their next shots expecting him to turn back to starboard. By heading further to port, Malgar was not only avoiding their fire but was

moving away from them, putting future shots at the limit of their effective range. The ship pitched again, this time sending crewmen sprawling to the deck and another shot streaked by, missing the *Merciless Death* by a comfortable margin. Before it registered that only a single ship had fired, the prow battery of the other loosed a shot that caught the *Merciless Death* square in the top aft section.

Rocking violently, the ship listed hard under the ensuing explosion, threatening to roll completely before the gravitic compensators kicked in at the last moment. His armoured boots maglocked to the deck, Malgar was the last soul who remained on his feet on the bridge. Ignoring the devastation wrought upon the crew and the fires that had broken out he barked more orders.

‘Steersman. Hard to—’

Twin impacts cut him off, the bridge going momentarily dark before the emergency systems sputtered to life. Despite the gloomy half-light he could see that most of the bridge crew were dead. The slab-muscled steersman lay motionless over the wheel, his bestial head split open from forehead to temple.

Malgar crushed the carpet of bodies underfoot as he made his way over to the steering controls but, as yet another direct hit was scored upon the *Merciless Death*, even his maglocked boots and Space Marine physique could not prevent him from being knocked forcefully to the floor.

Disentangling himself from the jumble of dead crew, he rose to his feet and struggled on across the rumbling deck. Something filled the circle of the oculus that caused him to stop cold in his tracks.

In the final stages of bringing itself to bear on the helpless Chaos ship, the unmistakable prow of a Space Marine strike cruiser loomed large through the huge glass eye. Tiny explosions flared around it where the suicide fighters launched from *Merciless Death* either smashed against the Dark Angels’ shields or were shot down by defence batteries. Movement

caught Malgar's attention, a massive turret rotating until its linear accelerator was pointing directly at *Merciless Death's* bridge.

As the bombardment cannon fired, Malgar Irongrasp – formerly Malgar Eringrisp, White Consuls Master of the Fleet – at last gave in to the inevitable.

766960.M41 / Exterior, Revenge, Pythos blockade, Pandorax System

Kaldor Draigo blinked back into reality, a fleshless hand still gripping him tight.

Instantly, his suit's systems went into overdrive, runes and icons flashing insistently to warn him of massive changes in temperature and pressure. Inbuilt oxygen reserves kicked in with a low hiss and vibrations rattled through his ancient armour as the soles of his feet automatically maglocked to whatever was beneath him. A noiseless explosion bloomed in the distance causing his visors to darken momentarily, sparing his eyes from damage. When they cleared, Draigo realised where he was.

The vast outlines of Imperial vessels swam through the blackness of space, pursuing fleeing Chaos ships and mopping up the last of the enemy's fighters with their turrets. Stars shimmered, their light reflected from the hulls of the spacefaring behemoths and from the Supreme Grand Master's own armour. J'ian-Lo had teleported them both onto the hull of the *Revenge*.

Diago brought the *Titansword* up in a blur of silver. The upstroke caught the arm gripping him at the wrist, almost severing the filthy bones. His captor's grasp relinquished, the Grey Knight reversed his motion and caught the daemon prince's arm again on the downstroke, splinters of radius and ulna floating free in the void. J'ian-Lo's face formed a snaggletoothed snarl, its visage incongruous without the noise of a roar to

accompany it. Balling its fist, it swung its undamaged arm at Draigo's head.

Draigo reacted just in time, the huge knuckle making contact with his pauldron rather than his helmet. He spun at the torso, presenting his other shoulder to J'ian-Lo but his maglocked boots prevented him from being knocked back.

Recovering, Draigo used both hands to slash violently upwards with his weapon, trying to splice the massive daemon through the sternum but his blow was countered. In the blink of an eye, J'ian-Lo's ruined arm reshaped and refashioned itself, flattening and reknitting to form a wide, flat blade of bone. The *Titansword* locked against it, both wielders straining to keep the other's weapon in place, but inevitably the daemon prince's greater strength won out. Overriding his armour's maglock, Draigo took two quick steps backwards. J'ian-Lo's bonesword passed harmlessly through the space the Grey Knight had just vacated and embedded itself in the hull of the *Revenge*.

Too far away to capitalise on the daemon prince's momentary predicament, the Supreme Grand Master instead used the opportunity to assess his surroundings and situation. Crenulations ran for kilometres in each direction, the pattern interrupted by weapons cupolas and sensor arrays until it met either the prow of the ship or the protruding bridge section. The only feature close by that broke the straight line of the hull top was a comms tower, its metallic structure thrusting ten metres upwards from the body of the *Revenge*. Had it been freestanding on the surface of a planet, the comms tower would rightly have been called large but here, in comparison to the Imperial Navy ships and celestial bodies, it paled into insignificance. To Kaldor Draigo it was currently the most important thing in the universe and his best chance of ending the battle with J'ian-Lo swiftly and in his favour.

Breaking into a sprint, Draigo turned and headed for the tower, rhythmically engaging and disengaging the maglock in time with his footfalls, lest he drift off into the void. Freeing its blade-arm, J'ian-Lo grinned and beat its wings to set off in pursuit. The grin soon became another snarl as the daemon prince realised that despite all of the gifts lavished upon it by Nurgle, it too was subject to certain natural laws.

Draigo had surmised that J'ian-Lo had teleported him to the exterior of the ship not only to separate him from his battle-brothers but also to diminish his arsenal. With sound not able to travel in a vacuum, J'ian-Lo's true name would be useless against him, as would any binding or banishing incantations as it was the hearing, not merely the speaking, from which the power sprung. But lack of sound was the sole boon the void afforded the daemon prince, the absence of both atmosphere and gravity making its wings useless and working to the Grey Knight's advantage instead.

J'ian-Lo dipped his head and gave chase on foot. Already a significant gap had opened up between the favoured of Nurgle and its prey, and this lengthened as the skeletal giant struggled to navigate across the *Revenge's* bumpy surface. Whereas Draigo could lock himself to the hull without breaking stride, J'ian-Lo had to grip the hull in its claw-like feet with every step it took, talons biting deep into metal. By the time Draigo reached the base of the comms tower, there was over twenty metres between him and the daemon prince.

Finding hand-holds with the ease an ogryn finds food, Draigo clambered up the outside of the tower, his boots gripping the metal as he went. Even in a full suit of Terminator armour, he had almost traversed the structure by the time J'ian-Lo had reached the base.

Looking up at the trapped Space Marine, J'ian-Lo shook its head in pity. All Draigo's foolish gambit had done was strand him at the top of the tower leaving him at the mercy – not that it had any – of one of Nurgle's

most blessed. Not bothering to clamber up after him, J'ian-Lo started tearing at the comms tower, trying to separate it from the rest of the *Revenge* and send it floating off into space with Draigo still attached to it.

It was only when the shadow cast by the Grey Knight kept getting larger that J'ian-Lo realised that it was the one who had been led into a trap.

The magnets in his soles inexorably attracted to the vast metal hull of the ship beneath him, Draigo dropped, the hilt of the *Titansword* clasped between both gauntleted hands, blade-tip pointed downwards. Too quick for even a daemon prince to react, Draigo's feet made contact with J'ian-Lo's ribcage at the same instant the blade met its throat. Slamming the giant skeleton to the deck, the Grey Knight's blade slipped through the top of the thing's spine, parting its deformed skull from the rest of its frame. It rolled away into a recess between two crenulations.

Lifting himself from the crouched position he'd landed in, Draigo removed himself from the inert frame of the daemon prince and it drifted away from the hull, floating slowly into the depths of eternity. Steadily, the Supreme Grand Master approached J'ian-Lo's severed head, its bulbous eyes flicking in all directions, mouth moving as if in prayer. When Draigo finally came to stand over it, he realised the head was mouthing the word 'please'. Derisorily, the commander of the Grey Knights order flicked the daemon prince's head away with a swift motion of his foot and looked on impassively as the skull followed the rest of the body out into the blackness.

He opened a vox-link to the *Silver Nemesis*. 'Captain Fischer. This is Supreme Grand Master Draigo. Lock onto my position and teleport me back aboard the *Revenge*.'

Seconds later, the silvered form of their leader rematerialized amongst the cadre of Purifiers and Paladins, but the scene Draigo returned to was very different from the one he had been so rudely dragged away from.

The noise of combat had abated, the *whoosh* of flamers cremating the corporeal remains of daemons being the only weapon discharge. The suppurating portal had been closed and some semblance of normality had been restored to the lower decks. Patches of bulkhead still retained a living, fleshy quality, but at least it was now possible to distinguish between up and down.

A cheer went up from the assembled Grey Knights when they realised that their leader had been returned to them and as news spread around the ship of Draigo's safe return, his vox link filled with exclamations of relief and joy. Even those members of the Deathwing who had witnessed Draigo's abduction sent respectful nods in his direction, which he returned with equal respect. In his absence, more Dark Angels had made their way down to the lower decks, and green and black armoured figures moved among their First Company brethren. Spying a group of three figures deep in conversation in a darkened corner, Draigo removed his helmet and made to join them.

As he got within several metres of the trio, one of them, a hooded, blue armoured figure with an augmetic eye, gave a subtle gesture with his head in Draigo's direction, causing all conversation to cease. The other two Dark Angels, a Terminator-clad Deathwing and a robed figure with two spiked skulls decorating his backpack, turned to regard the newcomer.

'Supreme Grand Master,' said the robed figure, a finely crafted combi-weapon slung casually at his hip. His armour was scratched and dented, and the tell-tale bite of a chainaxe had taken a chunk of his left pauldron. His arm hung limply at his side and dried blood congealed over a thick rent in the armour over his thigh. He looked as if he had already waged a one-man war.

'Supreme Grand Master,' returned Draigo.

'Brother Gabriel you have already met, and this is Brother Ezekiel of the Librarius,' Azrael said motioning with an open palm towards the blue

armoured Dark Angel.

‘Well met, Brother Ezekiel. Your reputation precedes you,’ said Draigo, genuinely.

The Librarian’s crude augmetic eye whirred noisily as it focused on the Grey Knight. ‘As does yours, Lord Draigo,’ Ezekiel replied, his gaze switching briefly to Azrael, the ghost of a smile creeping across his face.

‘You look as if you’re going to be keeping your artificers and apothecaries busy for some time to come,’ Draigo said. ‘Unexpected trouble?’

‘Trouble is never unexpected, brother, though the source of this strife was an opponent I had believed long dead.’

Draigo considered pressing for more information but knew it would be futile. Even the Dark Angels’ secrets held secrets.

‘What about you, brother?’ Azrael continued. ‘You too bear the mark of combat. Gabriel tells me that a daemon prince took a shine to you and wanted to keep you all to itself.’

Draigo glanced at the pauldron that Azrael was puzzling over. He hadn’t noticed before now that the blow from J’ian-Lo had dented the ceramite. The perfect impression of a giant fist adorned the plate.

‘An opponent I knew to be still alive but had wished long dead,’ Draigo said, matching Azrael’s reluctance to divulge any more details than were absolutely necessary. ‘Still, that foe is now vanquished and the day is won. You and your brothers have the gratitude of the Grey Knights for your... timely intervention.’

‘The battle for the Pandorax System may be over but the war for Pythos has yet to begin,’ Azrael said, not acknowledging Draigo’s thanks. ‘I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities for you and your brothers to honour the obligation you now owe us.’ Although the word remained unspoken, Azrael had made it quite clear that he considered the Grey Knights to now be indebted to the Dark Angels.

Not wishing to rise to the bait, Draigo bid the three Dark Angels farewell and went to rejoin his battle-brothers.

766960.M41 / Red Six. Upper Atmosphere, Pythos

To anybody left alive on the ground on Pythos, it looked like a meteorite breaching the planet's atmosphere. To Shira Hagen, strapped into the cockpit of the lifeless Kestrel, it felt like she was locked in an incinerator. Her flight suit smouldered, several patches already glowing bright orange with the promise of flame, and sweat dripped from her every pore. Her mouth was dry, her head heavy from dehydration and the massive gravitational forces at play on her body. To top it all, the Heldrake had followed her to Pythos and was still tight on her tail, its powerful wings driving it ever closer to the stricken fighter.

Remembering what she learned on the first day of basic training, and added to over the years with knowledge gleaned from mess rooms and below decks bars, Shira fought against the forces pressing her back in her seat to stick an arm out to release the catch keeping the cockpit shut. She swore, and quickly retracted a burned hand, the atmospheric entry had heated the metal of the craft up to unbearable temperatures. Pulling her hand up into the sleeve of her flight suit, she tried again but the superheated metal had fused to the frame of the cockpit and her only reward was her elasticated cuffs igniting. Patting her arm against her thigh to put out the flames she looked around the cockpit for inspiration, anything that could save her from the twin fates facing her: a crash landing which she had no hope of surviving or being engulfed in daemonic flame. Scores of useless dials and instruments looked back at her.

And also the one thing that might give her a slight chance of survival.

Remembering what she learned on the second day of basic training, and had never discussed with anybody since as, as far as she was aware at least, what she was about to attempt had never been tried by anybody ever before, Shira let a flight suit-covered hand drop to the side of her seat. She

fumbled around for a moment before finally locating the small plastic knob atop the end of a lever. The plastic felt malleable, its chemical structure debasing under extreme heat, but it was still intact and, more importantly, still connected to the wing flaps.

The Kestrel was a space-capable variant of the Thunderbolt fighter-interceptor and their basic STCs were almost identical, so much so that systems which were redundant for void use were still fitted lest a Mechanicus cult adept upset the machine-spirits. The rudder on the craft's tail was one such unnecessary feature (though, if the power plant were still active, one that Shira would literally kill to be able to use in her current situation) as was the ejector seat with built-in parachute (again, ironically useful in her current situation if she could get the cockpit open). But the one hangover from the design of the Kestrel's parent that was most akin to breasts on a fish, were the hydraulic wing flaps.

The only reason Shira knew about them at all was because an instructor had told her class how to use them in the case of coming in for a 'hot' landing. Under those 'rare circumstances' where an Imperial Navy vessel had to make a quick warp jump, all of its fighter wings would have to scramble back to the ship, quite often making landings at speed: a 'hot' landing. The practice was not without risk, and even the most careful of pilots could find themselves planting their fighter into a bulkhead or another fighter. One way of mitigating this risk, according to the instructor tutoring Shira at least, was to operate the wing flaps once you were back in the atmosphere of the ship's landing bay, the theory being that the added resistance would 'arrest the craft's forward momentum'. Up until now, it had been a half-remembered theory somewhere at the back of Shira's mind, but right now her forward momentum could really use some arresting.

Straining her neck to twist around and look behind her, Shira saw the fearsome visage of the Heldrake no more than a hundred metres behind

her and gaining rapidly. Within seconds, she would be in range of the beast's cone of flame and the temperatures she had been experiencing up until now would feel like a particularly inclement day on Fenris.

The next moment, the view from the cockpit turned to whiteout and steam hissed from the Kestrel's hull. She had hit cloud cover.

'Shit,' she croaked, shocked at hearing the sound of her own voice for the first time in hours. 'Closer to the ground than I thought.'

As quickly as they had descended, the clouds parted and Shira's view filled with the emerald and brown of the jungle below rising up to meet her in a deadly embrace. Fighting for all she was worth against G-force, she twisted her veiny neck. The Heldrake had opened its maw, the pre-flame of its balefire evident on its tongue. It was now or never.

Yanking so hard on the lever that her shoulder popped out of its socket, Shira screamed as the flaps lifted, instantly slowing the Kestrel and pushing her further back into her seat. Ribs fractured and her nose started to bleed as even greater forces abused her body. It took every ounce of her being not to black out. Feeling the heat from the Heldrake's breath weapon, she forced her eyes upwards to see the dark, winged shape overshoot her just as it had done out in space. Unlike in space, its scream of frustration was audible and it pulled out of its dive in time to prevent itself from crashing through the canopies of the tall trees below.

There was to be no such escape for Shira.

Closing her eyes as the top leaves and branches loomed large through the smoke-blackened glass of the cockpit, Shira felt the first few impacts against the hull and wings as tree limbs scraped and tore at the body of the Kestrel that had so very nearly got her to the ground in one piece. She screwed her face up, praying to the God-Emperor and anybody else who would listen that the impact would kill her outright.

When the impact came, it was not at all what she had been expecting.

Instead of a thud followed by a tangle of metal and body parts, there was an almighty splash trailed by the sound of steam rising from the Kestrel's hull. Cautiously, still not quite believing that she had survived, Shira slowly opened her eyes. She could not see much through the cracked and blackened plastiglass of the cockpit but she could see, hear and feel water trickling in through the fissures. By some blind piece of luck, or divine intervention, she had managed to bring herself down into an ocean. Or, more accurately, judging by the colour and smell of the fluid filling up the floor of her craft, a swamp.

Shira tried to unclasp her harness but, realising that they too had fused under the heat of entry, pulled out the combat blade from its scabbard at her waist and cut herself free. She vainly fiddled with the now cooled cockpit lock but met with the same result as before. Even jamming her knife into it and using it like a prybar had no effect. Using her one good arm, she pushed against the frame of the cockpit, hoping that she could somehow force it open. Again, her attempt at escape was futile. The water level had risen to cover her legs and she was struck by the realisation that the soothing cool water that was easing the pain of her multiple burns would soon be the same water that would fill her lungs and kill her.

She gave two final bangs against the roof of the cockpit, no more than half-hearted attempts to shove it open before letting her head loll forward and sobbed. It wasn't fair. She had survived the battles in space, outrun and outmanoeuvred a Heldrake and managed to get a powerless fighter-interceptor down to the planet's surface in one piece but in spite of all that, her final moments were going to be spent waiting to drown. Her sobs turned to laughter as she weighed up the cruel irony of it all.

A new noise made her stop crying and laughing altogether. Over the sound of intrushing water, Shira could hear something moving in the water around the Kestrel. Without warning, a gauntleted fist punched through the glass of the cockpit showering her in tiny fragments and causing the water

to flood in at a faster rate. The fist gripped the frame and, after a couple of exploratory tugs, ripped the cockpit away from the rest of the Kestrel. Instantly, Shira was engulfed in the brackish black water. Her first instinct was to kick off and swim away but a massive arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her clear before she had a chance. Belatedly, she held her breath and felt herself being pulled up through the swamp until eventually she broke the surface with a choke and a splutter.

She could hear voices now, muggy and indistinct because her ears were full of water, and she was hoisted out of the wetness and onto soft muddy ground. She tried to open her eyes but glaring sunlight forced her to shut them again. She tried again, this time using her hand as a shield. Rendered as silhouettes against the intense light, two figures stood over her. The first was lithe, taut and obviously female despite her short hair. The other was far bigger, massive shoulder guards and the outline of a backpack clearly indicating he was a Space Marine. Shira instinctively reached for the knife at her belt only to discover it wasn't there, discarded in the cockpit of her sunken Kestrel during her rescue.

The smaller of the two figures stepped forward and knelt down in front of her. Without the light of the sun to frame her, Shira could see that the dark-skinned woman was wearing a green vest and camouflage fatigues, the hilt of a small knife poking out of the waistband. When she spoke it was with a quiet authority.

'I am Tzula Digriiz of the Emperor's Most Holy Ordos,' she said matter of factly. 'Your rescuer here is named Epimetheus and, as I'm sure you've already figured, out he's a Space Marine. Very useful to have around, even if he doesn't generally have much to say.'

Epimetheus stepped forward, the green coated silver of his armour now apparent to Shira. She didn't recognise which Chapter he was from.

'And what about you?' Tzula asked. 'I'm guessing from the fact that you crash-landed here in a fighter and are wearing a flight suit that looks like it

has seen many, many better days that you're Navy.'

Shira blinked for a moment, her eyes still adjusting to the light and the rest of her to her situation. 'I'm Shira. Shira Hagen. Pilot first class, assigned to the Imperial Navy battleship *Revenge*.' She paused thoughtfully. 'At least I was. I don't even know if the *Revenge* exists any more.'

Tzula offered the prone woman her hand, which was part of a crude augmetic that replaced the real limb all the way up to the elbow. Shira gripped it and used it to aid herself to her feet.

'Well, Shira Hagen,' Tzula said turning to follow Epimetheus who was already heading into the thick jungle. 'Welcome to Pythos.'

PART FOUR



CHAPTER TEN

785960.M41 / Thermenos Stronghold. 1,328 kilometres south of Mount Olympax, Pythos

The hellhammer shell struck the daemon in the thorax, tearing through flesh like kindling and exploding its bloated form in a shower of gore. It remained standing for several moments, unaware that its existence had been ended, before collapsing in a smoking heap. Others of its kind simply ignored the dissolving corpse as the army of the Neverborn advanced upon the cave-mouth entrance to the hold.

‘Reload! Reload!’ barked Strike from his command chair in the Hellhammer. Three burly Catachans heeded his command, one operating the mechanism to open the breech, the other two hefting an enormous shell into position. It was a process they had repeated more times than they could remember in the past year.

Forced to flee Olympax, the 183rd had spread to the four corners of Pythos. Those on foot or in the precious few armoured vehicles they retained dispersing across the main continent of Pythos Prime; those on board Valkyries and other flyers making it as far as the outlying continents and islands. Strike, along with the handful of men crewing his tank, the inquisitor, the Space Marine and the xenos, had made straight for Khan’s Hold – one of the largest holds to remain in Catachan hands and barracks

for almost two hundred of his troops. It had taken them thirty days to navigate the swamps and thick jungles, battling as much against the environment as the numerous predators who saw the super-heavy tank as good sport. Catachan through and through, the skulls of three would-be attackers adorned the hull of the war machine.

When they reached Khan's Hold, all they found was a charnel house.

Mutilated corpses lined the approach to the vast mining complex, some impaled on thick wooden stakes, others merely discarded on the padded-down earth that formed a crude road. Only weeks earlier, Khan's Hold had been defended from Abaddon's assault, the first victory of any note for the Imperial forces, but now its defenders lay dead and defiled, the hold itself no more than a burned-out shell.

Other Catachan forces made contact with Strike and as the Hellhammer wound its way slowly through the mire and trees towards Thermenos Stronghold, a remote but relatively easy to defend mine in the south of Pythos Prime, Strike's tank became as much a mobile command centre as it was a fearsome weapon of war. From all over the planet, small groups of jungle fighters reported in. A dozen taking refuge in High Peak, twelve men and women to defend a population of almost a thousand; three Valkyries finding sanctuary at Mount Blizzard, the second largest stronghold on the planet now under the protection of fifty Catachans with air support capability; thirty soldiers of Devil's Brigade footslogging for a month to reach the trio of delver-strongholds sited at Glazer's Plateau.

But the tank became so much more than that too – it became a rallying point, a symbol of Pythos's defiance. It had even gained a name – *Traitor's Bane* in honour of the tally of Archenemy it had claimed in its breakout from Olympax. As it rolled through the boggy jungle, refugees from sacked delver-strongholds and Catachan stragglers flocked to it, vox-operators broadcasting around the clock in an effort to round up survivors.

By the time Strike rolled up the steep approach to Thermenos Stronghold, over two hundred Catachans and armed civilians marched behind him.

Now the war could begin in earnest.

Leading his troops from his remote base, Strike launched a guerrilla campaign against the occupying forces. Small teams of Catachans harried enemy patrols at every turn, striking from deep cover before dissolving back into the jungle, for all intents invisible to the aggressors. Abaddon's force switched tactics in response and sent out larger parties but, with fewer patrols to protect their assets, the Catachan raiders now had other targets to attack. Like phantoms, they operated behind enemy lines, destroying fuel dumps, arms caches and ammunition stocks before anybody knew they were there. There were no great victories, no grandstand moments for history to remember, but these tiny acts of sabotage and resistance were all that was keeping the Catachans in the war, buying time in the vain hope that reinforcements would one day arrive to liberate Pythos.

Despite all these tiny triumphs, this death by a thousand cuts he was slowly eking out on the invaders, three things still hampered Strike in his shadow war.

Whether by mechanical or mystical means, the enemy had been jamming the vox-signals since the dawn of the campaign, and communication over long distances was almost impossible. The Pythosian miners had their own radio communications network but it operated on short range frequencies, which meant that delver-strongholds had to act as relay stations, passing messages forward from station to station until it reached its intended recipient.

It had been almost a year since Brigstone had evacuated the armour and in all that time no Catachan force had had any kind of contact with them. The enemy had not used any of the vehicles against them, intimating that the ships had not been captured, but his non-appearance was suggesting to

Strike that the commander and his precious cargo had fallen prey to one of Pythos's great seaborne predators that made the land-based specimens look like dwarfs.

If the lack of armoured reinforcements was thwarting some of Strike's more ambitious plans to strike back at the Chaos forces, the enemy's ability to bolster their ranks almost at will was amplifying it. The assault on Olympax had only been possible as a result of the armies of the warp being unleashed and Strike had no advance intelligence to either mount an effective defence or carry out a planned and organised evacuation. In a hive city the size of Atika resistance cells should still be able to operate to some degree, no matter how large the occupying force. He knew personally of at least six Catachans who had stayed behind to run insurgency operations after the rest of the regiment had abandoned the capital but, like Brigstone, none of them had been heard from in almost a year.

With the number of warp entities burgeoning in the months since they had set up base at Thermenos, Tzula and Epimetheus had decided to head back to Atika, if not to dam the flow then at the very least to get a handle on the situation. The information they could potentially gather was of vital importance to the resistance effort, but the fighting skills of the inquisitor and the Space Marine had been invaluable since the retreat from Olympax. Strike had objected to their leaving, but ultimately, who was he to question the judgement of representatives of both the Holy Ordos and the Adeptus Astartes?

The pair had barely left each other's side since Epimetheus's miraculous appearance out of the depths of the mountain stronghold – an appearance that the taciturn Space Marine and secretive inquisitor had both declined to explain to him. Though it was beyond all reason that any form of amorous bond had developed between them, it seemed that the armoured giant had assumed the mantle of Tzula's protector.

That protection was something that Strike and the small band of fighters defending Thermenos could do with now. Abaddon had turned his attention from the larger holds and hives and was instead attacking any target that presented itself, regardless of strategic or collateral value. It did not matter if it was a bolthole for Catachan resistance or a safe haven for refugees from one of the cities. The Warmaster of Chaos was dismantling Pythos settlement by settlement and it was inevitable that the time would come when he launched an assault on Thermenos. That time was now.

The dull thud of the hellhammer cannon reverberated around the tank's command compartment, the sound dampeners and recoil suppressors fitted by K'Cee keeping the noise down to tolerable levels. The jokaero, who had not accompanied Tzula back to Atika, loped around the cabin, checking instrument banks and adjusting settings and configurations. Despite all of the enhancements the hairy creature had already made, the tank was still very much a work in progress for him.

More of the disease-carrying monstrosities shambled up the steep approach to the stronghold, seemingly impervious to the las-fire from the assorted Catachans and militia arrayed behind rocks and barricades close to the entrance. In the wake of the daemons, power-armoured figures ascended the slope: Black Legionnaires and unidentified crimson-clad traitors using the horned beasts as a shield of warp-tainted flesh. Sporadic bolter fire forced the human defenders to seek cover, allowing the Chaos vanguard to gain yet more ground.

Ordering his crew to hold until the last possible moment, Strike waited until the front ranks of rotted daemon flesh were within range of all of the Hellhammer's weapons systems before ordering, 'Fire all weapons.'

Flamers and heavy bolters seared and eviscerated the gangly cyclopes, unholy howls heralding them back to whence they came. Lascannons and autocannons targeted the Traitor Astartes, pinning them back and felling several under the withering barrage. Without the enemy's suppressing fire

to contend with, the Catachans and delver militia leapt from cover, setting about any foe not killed outright by the Hellhammer's onslaught. In their diminished state, the fallen daemons were still a formidable threat, slashing away with corroded swords that instantly melted the flesh of anything they came into contact with. One particularly pernicious beast slew nine men before succumbing to its numerous wounds.

Observing from the turret hatch, Strike saw the Traitor Astartes on the move again, clambering from rock to rock on the hillface, using them as cover to reach their objective while the humans were occupied with trying to kill enemies that stubbornly refused to die. 'Advance,' he ordered closing the hatch and returning to his command seat. Tamzarian threw the tank into reverse, moving out from behind the rock wall where it had been hull down and sped down the slope towards the oncoming enemy. Catachans and militiamen threw themselves out of the way as the gargantuan tank moved through them, tearing up the ailing daemons beneath wide tracks.

To the crew inside, it felt as if they were barely moving, the only evidence of progress the gentle jarring every time the Hellhammer crushed a foe. K'Cee's modifications to the tank did not simply extend to the armour and weapons. The Phaeton-pattern Adaptable Thermic Combuster which powered the tank had been souped-up and tuned to such a degree that when Tamzarian had opened her up on one of the plains approaching Thermenos, the Hellhammer had reached a speed of one hundred and seventy-six kilometres per hour before experiencing any significant hull rattle.

Coming to a halt still some fifteen metres away from the new frontline, the tank's Demolisher cannon came to life for the first time during the battle, the siege breaking weapon just as efficient at breaking rocks behind which traitors skulked. Chunks of stone, ceramite armour and body parts were thrown into the air as a result of each cacophonous detonation, dust

and shrapnel raining down on the slope. Using the command vehicle as cover, the defenders of Thermenos lent their weapons to the effort, keeping the traitors behind cover so that the heavy calibre weapon could despatch them with impunity.

His veteran ears attuned to the sounds of battle, Strike thought he heard a noise in between the cannon fire.

‘Cease fire,’ he ordered, much to the puzzlement of the gunners. The big guns fell silent, as did the chatter and whine of the secondary weapon systems. There. Faint, indistinct but undeniably the sound of an engine. He slid back the cover of the view slit but the tiny aperture offered no kind of view. Risking enemy fire, he popped the top hatch and stuck his head out far enough that his eyes came above the top of the rim. The las-fire from the Catachans using the tank as mobile cover had not abated and the Traitor Marines were still hemmed in behind the few rocks left for them to shelter behind. The engine noise was louder now. When Strike moved his gaze to the south-west, the source became clear.

Slamming the hatch behind him, Strike dropped back into the command chair. ‘Enemy bombers at two o’clock. Three of them plus a fighter escort,’ he explained.

The graveness of their predicament escaped no one. Exposed as they were on the side of the hill, the top of their hull presenting as a near-unmissable target, their chances of surviving the next few minutes were almost zero. ‘Get me a firing solution. Now.’ Strike cursed himself silently. Had this all been a ruse to draw him out? The enemy force did seem too small to capture a delver-stronghold and the Traitor Astartes had appeared very reluctant to commit fully to the assault.

With barely the sound of motors and gear whirring, the turret turned quickly, hellhammer cannon elevating to the correct angle. The lead gunner’s targeting array filled with hostile icons and, with K’Cee’s aid, he

finessed the dials and mechanisms until a single target sat between the crosshairs. 'Target acquired,' he said turning to the colonel.

'Fire when ready,' Strike acknowledged. Without hesitation the gunner depressed the firing stud, the muffled sound of shell discharge resonating within the compartment.

One of the large red icons instantly blinked out on the gunner's array. 'It's a hit, chief. We got it!' the gunner called out enthusiastically. His joy soon waned. 'The formation's breaking up. They've split the bombers.'

Strike's heart sank. If the enemy had stayed in formation they stood a chance of taking out both bombers. Having to readjust the turret and firing angle to a greater degree, they'd be fortunate if they downed even one more. Without waiting for an order, the lead gunner and K'Cee had another large red icon in their sights. This time, Strike didn't say anything, nodding his affirmation instead. The only hope left to them was that the final bomber missed with its payload and they'd get one more shot. That still left the fighter escort and, with the top of the tank exposed as it was, they would be like target practice to any pilot who could shoot remotely straight.

The tank rocked gently under suppressed recoil. 'Another hit, chief,' the gunner said grimly moments later. To the amazement of all those cooped in the Hellhammer's command compartment, he added, 'The other bomber's gone too. And the fighters. Every one of them just disappeared from the targeting screen.'

Not waiting for confirmation from K'Cee that the instruments were functioning correctly, Strike lifted the top hatch to see for himself if the enemy flyers were still in the sky. The chorus of cheers from his troops and the militia told him that they weren't before the string of black smoke clouds and tumbling debris became apparent. New engine noise filled the skies now. Louder, faster craft and, after the formation of five black flyers

flew directly overhead and Strike had taken a good look at their markings, friendlier ones too.

As he watched in awe and relief, four of the flyers peeled off, turning around no doubt to strafe the Traitor Astartes still in cover lower down the slope. The final flyer, a miniature cathedral atop its back just behind the cockpit, veered straight upwards before gracefully flipping over in a corkscrew motion and diving towards the side of the hill. The sheltering traitors broke from the protection of the rocks, the steep angle speeding their descent back down the slope and into the suddenly more attractive protection of the jungle. Pulling out of its plummet at the very last moment, the black liveried flyer deposited its payload in amongst the fleeing enemy from a height of barely five metres. The weapon's effect was not what Strike had expected.

Though devastating to those close to the bomb's point of impact, the larger number of traitors at the edges of its radius appeared to freeze, as if time had stopped briefly, locking them in place. Gradually, their progress sped up, but during the glacial seconds before they had returned to normal pace, the four support fighters had turned back around and slain most of them. A handful of Traitor Astartes had survived the intervention from the Catachans' newfound allies and were almost at the treeline where the rocky hill face became undergrowth. Strike was about to order his troops to pursue them when the shade of the jungle was lit up by actinic light, ten figures in ivory Terminator armour materialising in the space between eye blinks. Another eye blink and they had mown down the retreating Chaos Marines with concentrated bursts from their storm bolters.

Fascinated by what had just occurred, it was some time before Strike realised that his vox-operator, Uclaris, was tugging at the leg of his fatigues. The colonel looked down into the darkness of the command compartment, and saw that the sweaty figure of Uclaris was trying to hand him the handset of a portable vox.

‘What is it, Uclaris?’ Strike asked, his attention still partly on the armoured figures down at the bottom of the slope who now appeared to be examining the corpses of the dead traitors.

‘Somebody on the vox, chief. Claims they’re a Lord Azrael of the Dark Angels and insists on speaking only to you.’

787960.M41 / Atika Hive, Pythos

Grigor Mittel, though he no longer remembered that this had ever been his name, carried the ore like he had been ordered to do. The red Pythosian crystal was stained an ever darker shade, his blood trickling over it from wounds sliced into his arms from the rough edges of the unrefined mineral. Just as Grigor could no longer remember his own name, he could no longer feel pain, and his cuts went both unheeded and untreated.

Beside Grigor, others plodded on, identical lumps of rock held out in front of them. None of them spoke; none of them looked in any direction other than straight ahead; none of them interacted with anything other than the precious cargo they had been told to carry from the mines below to the city above. The city. Was this where he had once lived? The surroundings seemed so familiar yet, like his name, it was impossible to recall.

The man in front of him fell, the weight of the ore too great a burden. Grigor stopped before he tripped over the man now lying inert on the floor. Stopping. Starting. Lifting. Those were the few things Grigor remembered how to do.

Noise from further ahead captured his attention like flame does a moth’s and he looked to see two armoured figures moving towards the fallen man. The others alongside him looked too and saw the bloated forms lift the man from the ground and throw him to one side. An arm came off in one of the armoured figure’s hands and he laughed a horrible, wet laugh as he tossed the limb on top of the body. Grigor did not know that the laugh was horrible as he could no longer feel horror. Grigor could not feel anything at all. Not any more.

A woman who had been performing some menial task at the side of the walkway out of the mine moved in front of Grigor and lifted the chunk of ore dropped there by the fallen man. Her clothes were filthy and her hair was a mess but none of this registered with Grigor. He no longer had any concept of filthy or messy, just like he no longer had any concept of wood, the night sky or the colour yellow. As the woman hefted the rock up to her chest, her eyes briefly met Grigor's and the slightest spark of recognition flared between them. It was over in an instant and the woman turned to face in the same direction as the rest of the indentured work party. At a barked command from one of the armoured figures, Grigor and the others moved off, conveying the ore to the waiting transporters.

As Grigor passed under the archway that signified where the mine terminated and the city began, sudden movement caught his eye from an alcove in the rocky walls above. Like the look he had shared with the woman in front of him, it was over quickly and, lacking the faculties to either react to or inform anybody of what he had witnessed, Grigor continued onward.

From a ledge set in the bedrock foundations of Atika Hive, Tzula, Epimetheus and Shira looked on as the procession of plague zombies passed beneath them. The Navy pilot wore a sullen look on her face as a result of having just been admonished by her two companions for wanting to leap down from their hiding place and 'beat the crap' out of the two Plague Marines who had so callously treated the corpse of the dead old man.

'When are you going to understand that these people have been dead for a long time?' Tzula hissed once the last of the zombies and their overseers were gone. 'We can't save them, Shira. They're beyond that now.'

They had been lurking in the shadows of Atika Hive for over two weeks, slowly moving through the shell of the city that now resembled something from within the Eye of Terror more than anything that once belonged to the Imperium of Man. When they had set out from Thermenos many

months earlier they had not planned on adding to their number, but when Shira's fighter put down in the swamps less than half a kilometre from where they had made camp and Tzula was able to convince Epimetheus to go in after the Kestrel and rescue the pilot, two became three. Brave to the point of stupidity and with an independent streak as wide as a Baneblade, Tzula had taken an immediate liking to the younger woman. She'd already proved her worth on the march to Atika and her aim with a laspistol was as good as any Imperial Guardsman, as scores of cultists would attest if they were still in any condition to do so. Her lack of patience was becoming a bind, however.

Unlike Epimetheus, who was patience personified.

They had arrived at Atika a month earlier, but the Grey Knight insisted on taking his time to scout the city and find the best point of insertion to minimise their risk of detection. Eventually locating a sewer outlet pipe that ran into the ocean several kilometres east of the hive, they had crawled the entire way into the city through a stagnant stream of filth and waste. When they made it to the end, Epimetheus had insisted that they wait for three days until he had enough information to determine enemy patrol patterns. Finally emerging from the cess pipe, even the rancid corpse reek of the hive city had smelled like the sweetest air Tzula and Shira had ever breathed.

Despite all the time they had spent together in the intervening months, Tzula still knew very little about the ancient Space Marine. Rather than wasting her time by verbalising ten thousand years of Imperial history, Tzula had let Epimetheus probe her mind to gather the information he needed to get up to speed. In return, he had offered nothing. One evening before they had met Shira, Tzula had deployed some of her more subtle Inquisition interrogation techniques, the kind where the person being interrogated does not realise it is happening. Either Epimetheus was wise

to what she was doing or he had been conditioned to resist neurolinguistic questioning.

The only response she did get from the Space Marine was when she asked if he had fought during the Horus Heresy, and even that was nothing more than a close of his eyes and a slight nod.

‘I know, but I feel so useless hiding out in the shadows like this. Surely there’s something we can do?’ Shira still wore the same flight suit she had been wearing when she had crash-landed, but with adjustments to the legs and sleeves to make it more comfortable to wear in Pythos’s hot climate. Patches of scar tissue puckered over her legs and arms where they were visible beneath the crude cuts of the fabric and her neck looked like that of a much older woman where the healing process had wrinkled the flesh. A belt hung loose at her waist, a holstered laspistol on one hip, her predator-styled helmet on the other.

‘We *are* doing something,’ the normally silent, normally helmeted Epimetheus intoned in a bass whisper. Though Shira would swear that she and Epimetheus had shared many conversations in the time she had been a member of their little band, these were actually the most words the Grey Knight had ever spoken to her, all previous occasions being Shira talking at the Space Marine rather than with him. Yet more testimony to his patience and her brashness. ‘We’re going to find out what’s going on here and we’re going to put an end to it.’ There was an intensity to his words but laced with kindness. He could not chastise the woman for wanting to do something to help.

‘You think it’s more than a mining operation they’re running here?’

Ever since they had arrived in Atika it had been gnawing away at Tzula why the invaders had turned to extracting the Pythosian crystal. There were rare examples of forge worlds falling to Chaos and continuing to produce las-weaponry, but most converts brought their own with them when they turned or looted them from the corpses of dead Guardsmen. Her

strongest theory was that Strike's resistance was so effective that Abaddon's army was forced to resupply and rearm itself from what resources they could find on the planet they now held. That thought at least helped Tzula sleep, on those rare occasions when she could grab rest so far into enemy territory.

'I *know* it's more than a mining operation they're conducting in Atika. This city was built atop the Damnation Cache. A conduit by which daemons can enter the material realm lies somewhere beneath us.'

Tzula looked at him agog. 'You know the location of the Damnation Cache and only now do you decide to share that information? How long have you known?'

'My memory is eidetic so I have "known" its location ever since I first came out of my sus-an coma.'

'You were in a coma?' said Shira, who up until this point had looked on like a child watching her parents bickering. Both Epimetheus and Tzula turned and gave her looks that implied most convincingly that she would be better off keeping her mouth shut for the next few minutes. 'It's just you never mentioned anything about that to me...' she added, sheepishly.

'So if you've known ever since you woke up, why didn't you let Strike know? He could have mounted an assault.' Tzula fought hard to keep her voice at a level that wouldn't carry.

'As brave and able as the colonel and his regiment are, they don't have the numbers to pose any real threat to Abaddon and his army. Strike's guerrilla campaign is the optimum course of action at this point while we wait for reinforcements. Besides, even if the Catachans could fight their way through to the Cache, how would they close it?'

'How would we?'

Epimetheus pointed to the hilt poking out of Tzula's waistband. She reached down with her artificial hand and brushed her fingers over the hilt.

'The blade...'

‘The blade is much more than you know it to be, Tzula Digriiz. I have perused your thoughts and even your considerable knowledge is but a mere fraction of all there is to know of this knife. Its powers and uses are myriad, walking between worlds perhaps its greatest, but its capacity for destruction knows no limits in the right hands.’ He paused. ‘Or the wrong ones.’

‘Corpulax said something similar about the Hellfire Stone. That it was “all things to all men”.’

‘Had the Plague Marine succeeded in planting the blade into that stone, the peril faced by Pythos would be far greater indeed. Your actions in retrieving the knife may be the only reason that we are able to stand here now speaking like this. The only reason that Strike still lurks in the jungle nibbling away at the enemy’s numbers and supply lines.’

Tzula smiled. ‘I was just doing my job.’

‘As you continue to do now by keeping it out of the hands of the Archenemy.’

‘Except we’ve brought it right to their doorstep.’

‘I doubt even Abaddon would think to look for it right under his own nose.’

Tzula gave a whispered snigger. ‘You still haven’t answered my original question. Why didn’t you find out the location of the Damnation Cache sooner?’

A look that Tzula interpreted to be shame blanketed the Space Marine’s craggy, ancient face. He pulled the maglocked helm from his hip and clamped it back into place over his head. Although the rest of his armour still bore traces of green where time had embellished it, the headgear had now reverted to its original silver sheen.

‘I didn’t think anybody would be foolish enough to build a city on top of it,’ he said.

‘But Strike told you he thought the pack of daemons that captured Olympax originated from here.’

‘Like I said,’ he said rising from his haunches, ‘I didn’t think anybody would be foolish enough to put a city right on top of it.’ He moved past Shira and onto the ledge that would eventually lead them down to the mine entrance. The pilot sat there with her jaw slack, the information she had taken in too much to process all at once.

‘And you,’ Tzula said, pointing at Shira playfully with one finger of her augmetic hand. ‘Forget everything you just heard,’ she added, following Epimetheus down towards the hidden depths of Atika.

**788960.M41 / Dark Angels Landing Zone. 1,013 kilometres
south of Mount Olympax, Pythos**

Colonel Strike stepped down the ramp of *Traitor’s Bane* to find his route to the waiting Land Raider flanked by twenty green armoured Space Marines spaced at precise intervals. All of them helmeted, they stood stock still as the colonel crossed the distance between his own tank and Lord Azrael’s.

It had been three days since the Dark Angels’ relief force had landed, and in that time Strike had received reports from strongholds all over Pythos detailing their liberation by Space Marine forces. No corner of the world remained untouched by the Dark Angels presence, and the high count of combat actions they had undertaken since arriving in orbit made Strike think that the entire Chapter had deployed to liberate the planet. Seeing the number of tanks, flyers, heavy weapons and troops that were making planetfall on the southern plains of Pythos Prime only confirmed that.

Overhead, Thunderhawks engaged their retro boosters, slowing their ascent and hovering motionless barely a metre above the savannah, disgorging combat-ready squads of Space Marines before returning to orbit. Some way back from Azrael’s Land Raider, two figures with servo-

arms protruding from their backs – Techmarines – fussed over a newly landed drop pod. After administering the correct blessings and key code, the massive craft opened like a flower blooming to reveal the Dreadnought within. It stomped forward ponderously and, after a brief inspection from the two Techmarines, strode off to join two others of its kind already freed of their confines. Sergeants calmly relayed orders to their squads before mounting Rhinos or bikes and heading off in the direction of their next mission flanked by tanks and land speeders. Sub-orbital jetfighters – Nephilim classification if the vox-chatter was accurate – formed contrails high in the clear blue sky, eyes open for signs of enemy movement and ready to strike should a target present itself.

A loud boom sounded from off in the distance and Strike halted sharply, spinning on his heel in time to witness a mushroom cloud pluming upwards from several hundred kilometres away. Orbital bombardments had been a regular occurrence since the Space Marines' arrival, targeting conglomerations of daemons when the orbiting vessels detected them out in the open, but this was the closest Strike had been to one. None of the Dark Angels honour guard paid it any heed, remaining locked at attention and staring dead ahead.

Moments later, a gust of wind blew through the savannah, swaying the tall grass. The breeze felt cool on Strike's arms, drying the near-permanent sheen of sweat there and he suddenly felt self-conscious; he was about to meet the Chapter Master of the Dark Angels, scions of one of the great founding Legions that pre-dated the Horus Heresy, and he was going to do so in torn fatigues and a blood-stained vest.

When he reached the base of the Land Raider's boarding ramp, he was almost pleased to see that Lord Azrael was in a similar state to him, armour split open in places and once fine cloak shredded and stained. He paused on the threshold, waiting for the Dark Angel to finish speaking to another Space Marine. He kept Strike waiting for what seemed to the

Catachan like an age, motioning to markers on a hololithic map and gesticulating insistently to the other Space Marine. Eventually, Azrael noticed the colonel waiting patiently at the rear of the tank and broke off his conversation.

‘Colonel Strike,’ Azrael said, a smile that was more business-like than warm forcing its way onto his lips. ‘At last I have the pleasure of meeting the hero of Pythos.’ Behind the Catachan, the two squads of Dark Angels broke ranks in perfect choreography and returned to their duties.

‘My lord, this really wasn’t necessary,’ Strike replied.

‘Nonsense. If it wasn’t for the actions of your men and the leadership you’ve shown, there wouldn’t be a planet left for us to liberate.’ It was the other Space Marine who spoke now, and for the first time Strike noticed that he was wearing different armour from Lord Azrael. Not only was it Terminator pattern but it was silver too and covered in strips of parchment and purity seals. It wasn’t just the armour that marked him out as different. He radiated something that made Strike feel uneasy, the same feeling he had felt in his brief time around Inquisitor Dinalt’s astropath, and later, Epimetheus. Was this a Librarian? Strike had already seen Dark Angels in green, black and white armour; perhaps the fabled Space Marine psykers wore silver to denote their rank and station.

‘This is Grand Master Draigo,’ said Azrael.

‘*Supreme* Grand Master Draigo,’ Draigo corrected.

‘Of course,’ Azrael replied.

Though far from being an expert on Space Marines, Strike was an excellent judge of people. Right now, he could not shake the feeling that not only were Azrael and Draigo not of the same Chapter, but neither could stand to be in the presence of the other. ‘Enough of the pleasantries. Lord Draigo and I are about to return to orbit to coordinate the liberation of Pythos and would like you to accompany us to assume command of the Imperial Guard forces that will begin landing in the next few hours.’

‘I am flattered, my lords, but I am only a colonel. Surely there are higher ranking officers in the liberation fleet?’ Strike said, taken aback at the offer.

‘Hundreds of them,’ Azrael replied. ‘But none of them with the jungle fighting experience or knowledge of the terrain to lead this campaign effectively. Up until now this has been your war, Strike. I see no reason for that to change now.’

Strike considered his response. ‘Permission to speak freely, my lords?’ he asked, his voice not betraying the nervousness he felt.

‘By all means. Frankness is a trait much admired by the Dark Angels,’ Azrael said. He regarded the Catachan a little more intently.

‘With all respect, my jungle fighting experience and knowledge of the terrain would be put to better use down here,’ Strike said. ‘If there are others among the regiments in orbit who have led campaigns before, I’d urge you to call upon them to coordinate the Guard effort on Pythos. My place is leading my men from the front.’

Draigo’s face darkened, his brow furrowing in the manner of somebody not used to being told no. Azrael by contrast warmed to Strike in that moment.

‘Your candour is both noted and appreciated, colonel. My battle-brothers who have already fought alongside your men are full of tales regarding their valour and if half the stories they have told about you are true, I would be pleased to keep you at the spearhead of the resistance effort.’

‘Once again you flatter me, lord. I was not without aid though.’

‘You mean Inquisitor Dinalt? It was his distress call that called us here. I presume he is dead, otherwise he would have already made contact,’ said Draigo.

Strike smiled a little at hearing this. Mack’s sacrifice hadn’t been in vain after all. ‘Yes, my lord,’ Strike said, noticing for the first time the stylised ‘I’ of the Inquisition emblazoned over Draigo’s breast. ‘One of his

apprentices turned out to be a traitor and led him to his death. She's dead too along with most of his cohort. His other apprentice, Tzula, is still alive. At least she was the last time I saw her.'

He neglected to mention that K'Cee still survived. He'd left the simian genius back at Thermenos until he could get a handle on how the Dark Angels would react to a xenos life form, no matter how useful and loyal, operating as part of an Imperial Guard command structure.

'And the Space Marine still lives,' Strike added, almost as an afterthought.

Draigo and Azrael turned to each other and locked gazes.

'A Space Marine? What Space Marine?' Draigo asked switching his attention to Strike.

'He showed up right before we made our escape from Olympax. Took down a daemon single-handed and allowed us to escape. I presumed he had been sent in advance of the full liberation force.'

'We made all haste to Pandorax as soon as we received the distress call. *We* are the advance of the liberation force,' Draigo said.

'This Space Marine?' Azrael asked. 'What colour armour was he wearing?'

Draigo shot his counterpart a suspicious look.

'It was green. Like yours but darker,' Strike said gesturing to the Dark Angel. 'But that was just moss and lichen that had formed upon it with age. Where patches had worn away, it was the same colour as yours.' He pointed now at Draigo. 'It was a similar size and pattern too, but archaic. Looked like the same kind you see in the paintings and frescoes of Imperial cathedrals.'

'Did this Space Marine have a name? Do you know which Chapter he was from?' Azrael's latest questions were not delivered with the same intensity as the first, as if Strike's answer had assuaged him.

‘I barely spoke to him, my lord, and his armour bore no heraldry or insignia. In the weeks he travelled with us he spoke almost exclusively to Tzula. Chose to keep himself to himself. I did hear her refer to him as “Epimetheus” on one occasion though.’

Draigo’s face wore a look of shock that passed within an instant. Azrael noticed it, Strike did not.

‘You have our gratitude, Colonel Strike, both for the information you have imparted and your resistance efforts in the months since Pythos fell. Go now and lead your men into glorious battle,’ Draigo said.

It felt to Strike as if he was being ushered away before he could reveal any more about the mystery Space Marine. Not that he had anything else to reveal.

Strike bowed reverently to the two Space Marines, internalising his chastisement at not having done the same when bidden to enter the Land Raider. He was about to leave when he found the courage to speak again. ‘My lords, if I might be so bold?’

Both Space Marines looked at him implacably.

‘You say there are Imperial Guard regiments awaiting deployment from orbit?’ Strike asked.

‘That is correct,’ Azrael said. ‘Three entire regiments survived the void war that allowed us to break through to Pythos and will make planetfall by dusk. A dozen more regiments, mainly Cadian, are due to warp translate in the next day for immediate deployment.’

‘Could I request that the newly arrived regiments be kept in orbit for a few days before entering combat?’

‘I’ll certainly consider it provided you can demonstrate sound reasoning for such a bizarre request,’ Azrael said archly.

‘Travel through the warp is draining for a man, even a soldier of the Imperial Guard. They’re not whole again for some time afterwards. It’s as

if their body has arrived but they're waiting for their soul to catch up with them.'

Strike's belief stemmed from old Catachan superstition but other Guard regiments he had encountered over the years held similar beliefs, and experience had taught him there was more than a sliver of truth to it. It was bad enough that regiments without death world backgrounds were being thrown at Pythos and the colonel saw no reason to compound that misery by sending warp-lagged soldiers into the fray. 'If any were needed for imminent operations, I will gladly send the 183rd in their place.'

'I have witnessed the same phenomena myself among humans who have fought alongside me in the past,' Azrael said. 'Provided your troops will fill in for them, I will acquiesce to your request. Now, was there anything else before you finally take your leave of us?'

'Just one more thing, Lord Azrael. Could you have the fleet scan the Pythosian oceans?'

'Once again, I'm sure you have a good reason for asking such a thing but could you please enlighten me why?'

Strike turned away briefly and ran the edge of his hand against his sweat-slicked forehead. He looked back at the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels before speaking again. 'Because a year ago I sent an entire mechanised brigade to sea and I haven't heard from them since.'



CHAPTER ELEVEN

801960.M41 / The Underhive. Atika, Pythos

Shira stood up in the miners' hut and clasped the fingers of both hands together, raising them towards the ceiling in a full body-length stretch. After weeks of crawling around on her belly and traversing tunnels at a stoop, the discovery of the workers' refuge had been a welcome one and even Tzula seemed to appreciate the respite from sneaking around and clinging to the shadows. The dry ration packs they'd taken with them from Thermenos had run out weeks ago and the food they had obtained in the city above was almost at an end. As well as a concealed shelter, the hut had provided canned provisions and wafers of processed grain that had not yet become too mouldy to consume.

Dropping her arms to her sides and twisting several times at the hip, Shira accepted the remnants of a can of unspecified – and unidentifiable – fruit from Tzula. She sat down next to Epimetheus who was standing at the metal structure's single window, a position he had barely moved from since they entered the hut more than two days ago. It was pitch black both inside and out, no natural light filtered so far down into the tunnels beneath the hive and the miners' discarded lantern was left unlit to prevent it drawing the attention of any passing patrols. Shira assumed that his

enhanced Space Marine vision would enable him to see what he was looking for, whatever that was.

‘What are you looking for?’ she vocalised after spending some time staring at the same point Epimetheus was fixated on but seeing only darkness. Although hidden and muffled by the corrugated metal walls, she was careful to keep her voice as low as possible.

‘Patrols,’ Epimetheus said not averting his stare. ‘In approximately two minutes’ time, two guards will walk along the tunnel that runs alongside the hut. They will be in visual contact for less than thirty seconds but it will be nearly an hour before they pass this way again. Once they have passed and there is clear distance between us, we shall emerge and move further down the tunnel to another hiding place I found yesterday.’

Twice Epimetheus had left the hut, both times shortly after Plague Marines had passed by on patrol and on each occasion he had been gone barely any time at all.

‘You think this tunnel leads down to the Cache?’ Tzula asked, sipping from the last dregs of water in her canteen. This too she offered to Shira when she had finished. The pilot refused, instead slurping the juice from the bottom of the can of fruit.

‘No cultists have come along here since we began our descent and the patrols are more frequent than along any of the other tunnels we tried. Plague zombies are led down here but we haven’t seen any of them come back up, not even transporting ore,’ said the Grey Knight.

‘But the cache is a repository of daemons and thankfully we haven’t seen any of those. It could be something else down there? Something else they’re trying to protect?’ countered Tzula.

‘If it is, we’ll find out what it is and find a way to destroy it if needs be.’

Though stealth had been their watchword since descending into Atika’s mine levels, Epimetheus had begun to communicate more with the two women. Only a week ago he wouldn’t have shared that they were moving

on to their next hiding place until the very last moment and neither would he discuss what he was thinking. He would simply lead and expect Tzula and Shira to blindly follow, in the dark both literally and figuratively. They all knew the risk they were taking just by being here, even Shira who had asked, and been told, about the knife while Epimetheus was away on one of his scouting missions. If they were discovered by a patrol, simply killing them wouldn't be enough. As soon as their disappearance was noticed, the tunnels would flood with Traitor Astartes and the blade would soon be forfeit. The slow, patient approach was the right way to proceed and Shira had learned to accept this, although she still found it difficult.

Epimetheus held up a gauntleted hand to silence his two companions. Tzula froze, the lid of her canteen only half screwed back on. Shira gently pulled the fruit can away from her lips and angled her head slightly so that she could see out of the window. Two beams of muggy brown half-light played across the tunnel floor, widening as the bearers of the sources grew closer. Illuminated solely by the backwash from the torches mounted atop their bolters, two Plague Marines clomped past, their ill-fitting power armour causing echoes with every step. Even poorly lit and visible briefly through the window, the sight of their distended bulk repulsed Shira. She had seen many things she wished she could forget since she had taken off from the *Revenge* and every new day brought with it fresh horrors for her to contend with.

As if caught in amber, the three figures in the hut listened as the echoes grew fainter as the patrol moved further away. When all sound had ceased carrying, Epimetheus lowered his hand.

'Now we go,' he said.

Their progress was methodical as they passed through the dark.

Weapons drawn, one of them would advance a couple of metres being careful not to trip over any rocks underfoot or unduly disturb the scree before halting and allowing the next in line to move up alongside them,

followed by the next. The last to move up would be the first to move on and this pattern was repeated until they reached their destination.

The next bolthole Epimetheus had selected for them was only fifty metres from the miners' hut, but at this rate of movement they would barely make it before the patrol doubled back on itself and came this way again. Better to get there slowly rather than give their presence away.

Shira shivered involuntarily. The modifications she had made to her flight suit had been necessary in the jungle, tolerable in the hive city but, deep below ground level, she regretted the moment she had gone at it with Tzula's combat knife. At least the cold was keeping her alert. Or so she thought.

Creeping up on the spot where Epimetheus and Tzula already were, she continued forward several paces, eyes down so that her dark-adjusted vision could pick out any obstacles. Planting her front foot down, the toe cap of her boot became visible to her. Too late she realised that she had stepped into a beam of light. Snapping her head upwards she was dazzled by the light from a torch, the glare so intense that she could not make out who, or what, was carrying it. She would have bet a month's booze rations it was a Traitor Marine.

+Stay perfectly still and whatever you do, do not discharge your weapon.+ Epimetheus's voice invading her head caused Shira to stifle a gasp, instead coming out as a tiny squeak. +Control your breathing and even if he looks directly at you, do not move, do not turn away.+

Shira did not know what was frightening her the most: the no doubt heavily armed enemy moving towards her or Epimetheus speaking directly into her mind. The wielder of the light and the corrupted boltgun it was attached to revealed itself as another Plague Marine, the beam stabbing like a spear through the darkness and pinning Shira in place. As he moved closer, Shira had to fight for mastery of her gag reflex as the smell emanating from the follower of the Plague God became so thick on the air

she could taste it. Flies buzzed around him like a pestilent cloud and as he drew alongside, oblivious to her presence, several of them landed on Shira and crawled over her flesh. The Plague Marine moved past her and Shira prepared herself for the inevitable shoot-out when he spotted her two companions higher up the tunnel.

+Stay still. Don't move until I say you can.+

Shira had no idea how long she stood immobile in that passage. The clank of armour soon diminished in the distance but it was unbearable minutes before Epimetheus spoke to her again. This time he used his voice.

'All clear.'

Shira gave a long exhale, partly out of relief and partly out of holding her breath for so long. She turned to her companions who were cautiously picking their way over to her, dark shapes camouflaged against the gloom. Epimetheus lifted a hand up in front of him and Shira could see that it was shining with the faintest blue glow, delineating his features.

'Thank you,' she whispered. There was cold steam rising from the Space Marine's chiselled cheeks and dark fluid trickled from one of his nostrils.

'You have a—' Shira said.

Epimetheus swept his hand up to his top lip, catching the drop of blood before it could hit the ground. 'Thank you, Shira,' he said before continuing down the tunnel and waiting for her and Tzula to follow him.

808960.M41 / The Underhive. Atika, Pythos

Tzula lost all track of time during the days they spent below ground. Up in the hive it had been possible to distinguish between night and day cycles, sunlight bleeding in through cracks in the structure where it had been damaged during the initial assault. Now she couldn't tell whether it was morning or night, afternoon or evening. She couldn't even work out the date.

Food and water had been easier to find up there too. Abandoned hab blocks and communal eating areas had offered up supplies, most of it still edible, and Tzula and Shira had been able to refill their packs several times over. Water, while not in abundance in the deserted hive, was still available unlike down in the mines where they had to rely on coming across seams that had worked their way down from the surface. It didn't inspire confidence in her that the water passed through ground that was no longer free of the taint of Chaos, but the alternative to drinking it was to die of dehydration. Each time she woke, she would find herself irrationally checking her arms and legs for scales and from time to time would run her fingers across her scalp checking for horns and protrusions before she realised she was doing it.

Fortunately for her and Shira, Epimetheus had no such base needs, other than a drink of water that by her, possibly flawed, estimation he took every four days or so. He was a Space Marine who, if he was to be believed (and Tzula had no reason not to believe him), had spent ten millennia standing sentinel over the final seal of a gateway into the warp. The thought of that made her astonished that he actually needed air to breathe, let alone an infrequent drink of water.

'Something's happening down there,' the Grey Knight said. They were beyond the mines now and into a new section of tunnels that plague zombie slaves still worked on with crude tools, illuminated by the flickering light of braziers and firebaskets. High above the cavern floor, at the lip of a tunnel system that corkscrewed hundreds of metres down into the bedrock, the three of them could hear the echo of a thousand and more pickaxes tapping away, widening the tunnel that was already large enough to move a small Titan through. The slaves worked unstintingly. Tzula had been up there for hours and in that time not a single one had missed a stroke, carving out rock at a pace to rival industrial-scale mining drills.

She noticed the activity that Epimetheus had referred to. A small band of figures had entered from a side chamber and were awaiting a squad of Plague Marines approaching from the opposite direction, a struggling human prisoner shackled between them. A horde of plague zombies staggered behind them, many gripping pickaxes and other tools – fresh slaves to bolster the mining effort. A grim smile cracked Tzula's features when she realised who was at the head of the first group.

‘Corpulax,’ she whispered venomously.

Shira gave Tzula a quizzical look.

‘He murdered my master and a very good friend,’ she said. ‘One of his agents was responsible for this too.’ She held up her replacement arm.

Shira nodded her understanding. ‘What are they doing?’ she asked.

The cries of the struggling prisoner grew louder, increasing to a volume that battled with the reverberation of tools around the vast underground cave. He pulled at his restraints but his protestations were ineffective. Pulled to the ground by his captors, his ruined face left a bloody smear across the rock floor as he was dragged the final distance to be brought before Corpulax. The smaller, robed individuals flanking him formed a circle around the prone, wailing man and struck up a chant. The sound was distant and faint but Shira clamped her hands over her ears to block out the blasphemous words. Bile rose in Tzula's gorge but she did not turn away, despite knowing what was about to happen.

The incantation ceased and, with a tear of parting flesh and snapping bone, the captive unfurled and unfolded, reshaped like organic putty until he took on a new form. Shira turned her head away, looking towards Tzula with an uncomfortable look on her face.

‘What are they doing to him?’ Shira asked, swallowing dryly.

‘Communion,’ Epimetheus said. ‘It's how the followers of the Plague God communicate over great distances. They create a flesh golem of who

they want to speak to and converse with them directly without the need for an astropath or sorcerer to act as a medium.'

'Who is Corpulax speaking to? Abaddon?' asked Tzula.

'I don't know. Certainly Traitor Astartes of some ilk judging by the shape of the golem, but they are speaking too quietly for even my enhanced hearing to pick out their words above the noise of the tools.'

'Can't you use your psychic abilities to listen in?' Shira suggested.

'It's not that simple. Those are sorcerers down there. Not powerful enough to register my presence but likely more than able to sense me if I start tapping into the warp.'

'We have no way of hearing what they're saying?' Tzula asked.

'Short of going down there and standing right next to them? No.'

Tzula was caught off-guard by Epimetheus's response. It was the first time she had heard him exhibit sarcasm and she didn't need his ability to read minds to know that he was frustrated. 'So we just have to sit here and watch? Spend Emperor knows how many more weeks, lurking in the shadows,' she said with equal irritation.

Epimetheus rounded on her, his previously infinite amount of patience finally having found their limit but aborted his retort. He stared over Tzula's shoulder.

'Where did Shira go?'

Shira crouched at the mouth of the side-tunnel waiting for the procession of plague zombies heading down the tunnel to pass her by. Once the back markers were in line with her, she popped up out of the darkened nook and took her place among their ranks, mimicking their vacant look and shambling gait. Her ragged outfit was covered in dried vomit, filth and burn marks, she hadn't bathed in well over a month and her breath stank like promethium from where ketosis had set in from burning her own body fat for energy. She fitted right in.

Forcing her way to the centre of the mass of slaves, she snatched a pickaxe out of the hands of one of the zombies. He stopped briefly, those

behind him having to change course like a rock splitting a stream. He looked down blankly at his hands, then at his fellow thralls passing him by before continuing on as if nothing had happened.

When they got close enough to the mine face, the mass broke apart, heading for gaps in the throng already at work. Shira attached herself to a group making for an unworked section barely a few metres from Corpulax and the flesh golem. She hoped it would be close enough to hear over the din of excavation.

She was almost in position when one of the sorcerers, a scrawny thing with filed teeth and mottled, almost-orange skin, turned and looked her dead in the eye.

‘She’s going to give us away,’ Epimetheus whispered. He and Tzula had looked on, powerless to stop the hot-headed pilot, as she had pilfered the axe and blended in with the press of bodies. For a while it had looked like her gamble was going to pay off but now one of Corpulax’s spellweavers had taken a very unhealthy interest in her. ‘I’m going to have to ware her.’

She had never experienced it herself but Tzula knew of the process. It was a form of possession practised by the most powerful psykers whereby a vessel, usually willing, would play host to their psyche for a period of time. The psyker would have complete control over the vessel’s body and would be able to see, hear and feel everything he or she could. It was not a safe process. Tzula had heard tales of those being worn never being able to regain their own consciousness leading to madness and even death. Those who survived the process unscathed were still altered, as if they were no longer a whole person.

‘But if you use your gifts, *you’ll* give us away,’ Tzula said.

‘And if I don’t, that sorcerer is going to realise Shira isn’t what she seems. Those plague zombies are under the sway of another’s will. Their souls have been discarded, hollowed out so that their actions can be dictated by a higher power. If I ware her, her signature in the warp won’t

register as her own and there's a chance that sorcerer will assume she's part of the horde. There's no guarantee it will work but if I do nothing, she'll be dead or captured within seconds. Us not long after.'

Tzula felt the temperature drop beside her, Epimetheus's breath condensing as he prepared to hijack Shira's body.

To her credit, Shira did not panic as those yellowed eyes bored into her. The sorcerer sniffed like a feral predator catching the scent of blood on the wind but did not break from his chanting, now a low murmur. The others of his ilk seemed oblivious to their comrade's concerns, eyes fixed on the transmogrified flesh whose form they were striving to maintain.

Shira could never remember what happened next, a six-minute gap in her life that eluded recall for the rest of her life. She was always aware of the presence of that absence but like all holes, it was impossible to grasp.

As all control of herself was stolen from her, the last memory she formed before waking up back on the overlook, Tzula mopping her brow with the hem of a filthy vest, was of Epimetheus speaking softly into her mind.

+This will all be over soon.+

The Davinicus Lycae cultist standing to his left was starting to distract Corpulax. Although he was maintaining the chant needed to keep the doppelganger in the form of Huron Blackheart, the sorcerer had turned away to stare at the plague zombie miners. One in particular was the focus of his attention and Corpulax was about to pause the communion to deal with him when the errant cultist returned his focus back to his appointed task, the sceptical aspect to his expression melting away.

'The Warmaster trusts me, Plague Lord. Why is it that you do not share his faith?' Huron said through lips that were not his own.

Corpulax emitted a moist chuckle. 'The only faith I have is in Great Nurgleth, not in a pirate who switches his loyalty based on which direction the most favourable wind is blowing.'

‘Right now, my loyalty lies with Abaddon. I have already proven my worth to him in this campaign and continue to do so.’

‘Ah, yes. Of course. The cabal you have hidden among the Imperial fleet, sustaining the conditions for our daemonic allies to move freely on the surface of Pythos. Tell me, Blackheart, how did you manage to pull that off right under the enemy’s nose?’

‘Like you said, Plague Lord, I am a pirate. Capturing ships is a speciality of mine and a supply vessel is hardly going to arouse suspicions as long as it keeps supplying the fleet and the Imperial Guard regiments.’

‘That many psykers on board is bound to draw attention. The entire Dark Angels Librarius is here on Pythos and a Grey Knights strike cruiser lingers in orbit.’

‘Abaddon has called upon the services of my cabal because he knows of its power. More than keeping conditions ripe for the Neverborn they are masking their own presence, nestling the ship in a fold in the warp. The Imperial fleet is so large that nobody will notice it missing as long as the flow of rations is maintained.’

Reluctantly, Corpulax showed how impressed he was.

‘All I require now is the taint you promised to deliver,’ Huron continued. ‘I have holds full of food that awaits poisoning.’

‘The first batch is almost complete and will be with you in weeks. Production has been quicker than anticipated and I’ve already switched some of the slaves over to the mining effort.’

‘The Emerald Cave is still not open?’

‘You keep your end of the bargain, Blackheart, and by the time the fleet is wiped out the Cave will be open and its prisoner freed.’

‘For your sake I hope that is true, Plague Lord.’

‘And for your sake, I hope Lord Abaddon grants you a swift death when he realises it is his mantle you covet.’

The simulacrum sneered. ‘All things in time, Plague Lord. All things in time.’

The chanting of the cultists wound down, causing the flesh golem to fall apart, splashing to the floor of the cavern in a wet, bloody mess. The Plague Marines who had escorted the prisoner to Corpulax headed back in the direction from which they came, leaving a trio behind to keep watch on the plague zombie slaves. The Plague Lord, flanked by the robed cultists, returned to the side chamber, lingering on the threshold as the sorcerers walked past him. When the last one reached the doorway, the ochre-skinned cultist who had almost undone Shira, Corpulax placed his skeletal hand on the man’s shoulder, turning him to dust which fell slowly to the floor of the subterranean cavern.

Just as Epimetheus had seen and heard everything Shira had, so too had Tzula. The inquisitor already knew that the Space Marine possessed a prodigious amount of psychic talent, but being able to simultaneously ware somebody and establish a telepathic link with a second person placed him right at the top end of the spectrum. And although she would rather have not heard most of what she had, she could not help but feel uplifted.

Dark Angels. Grey Knights. Here on Pythos. Part of what she felt was naked relief that a liberation army had arrived, but the other part was that Liall’s sacrifice hadn’t been for nothing. She had seen so many good people die futile deaths in her service to the Golden Throne, lives violently snuffed out without achieving any of their potential or leaving a lasting mark. Liall’s victory may have been small, pyrrhic and unsung, but if it led to the reconquest of the planet and the knife being kept out of the Archenemy’s clutches, ultimately it would have been worth it.

None of that would matter if they couldn’t get Shira out of there.

The three Plague Marines prowled the periphery of the enthralled workforce, bloated fingers poised over the triggers of their corrupted bolters. Unstintingly, the plague zombies chipped away at the rockface,

pickaxes rising and falling in a tireless rhythm, never venturing away from the small area in which they operated. The only slaves who did move were those who cleared the rubble away, piling it high off to the sides so that it didn't hinder the miners. And that gave Tzula an idea.

+Be ready to move her,+ she sent over the still active telepathic link to Epimetheus. She picked up a fist-sized stone and held it up for the Grey Knight to see it. Still holding his attention on waring Shira, he nodded his understanding which made Tzula wonder whether he had figured out what her plan was from her gesture or if he had read her thoughts. She reeled her arm back, took aim, and launched the rock silently over the heads of the guards and indentured workers.

In her formative years, as well as the beast riding skills she had developed as a result of her privileged upbringing, Tzula had excelled at most forms of sport and athletic endeavour. Gymnastics had been her forte, making her initial career choice much easier along with making her popular with the opposite sex. Almost as good as her suppleness and flexibility was her ability to throw a ball accurately and powerfully, and before she had taken her first steps along the criminal path, she had rejected several offers to play competitive sport professionally. Opportunities to practise this particular skill set had been few and far between during her time in Dinalt's employ, but thankfully for Shira, the muscle-memory was not easily forgotten.

Catching a high pile of rubble just below its summit, the hurled missile dislodged several larger rocks setting them rolling down the incline, unsettling others as they went. More followed them down until, with a low rumble, the entire pile collapsed burying a group of unaware, unfeeling slaves beneath an avalanche of rock. None of the other plague zombies reacted, continuing about their business as they would for all eternity if their bodies didn't give out first.

Tzula knew that the Plague Marines would not be distracted for long, but that did not matter. By the time they had dug the pickaxes out from underneath the mess of debris and corpses and redistributed them to empty-handed zombies, Shira was already back in the safety of the side-tunnel and making her way back to her two waiting companions.

820960.M41 / The Deathglades. Thirteen kilometres south of Atika, Pythos

Epimetheus had promised Tzula answers once they had escaped from the hive city and now, as he stood guard on their camp perimeter while Shira roasted the carcass of an animal they had captured before night fell, she was determined to get them.

Their flight from Atika had been as stealthy as their insertion, right up until the final few hours. Wanting to sow discontent among the enemy ranks, the three of them had silently murdered a string of cultists, clumsily hiding the bodies in the hope that they would be found once they were clear of the city. With evidence of intruders within the walls of Atika, fewer personnel would be spared for jungle patrols, making their getaway from the capital and return to Imperial lines easier.

The intelligence they had gathered changed everything and needed to be reported to Strike and the newly arrived Space Marines. Rather than hiding in the shadows deep in the bowels of the city, the information they held needed to be shared and acted upon. Strike still believed that the population of Atika was safe in the caverns, but the reality was that all of them were dead, reanimated to serve new dark masters. The site of the Damnation Cache was in those same tunnels but the three of them had not been able to get close to it. Was that to do with the excavation work? The planet was infested with daemons so they must have been getting out from under the city somehow. Huron Blackheart had a coven of sorcerers in orbit making sure that the daemons could exist in the material realm once

they were free of the Cache and, most pressing of all, had set a plan in motion to poison the food supply for the entire human element of the liberation force.

‘So, what did Corpulax mean when he talked about freeing the prisoner in the Emerald Cave? Was that somebody you put there, back then?’ Tzula had so many questions but this seemed as good a place for her to start as any. The Grey Knight turned to face her, unstartled yet she had made no sound in her approach.

He was about to speak, no doubt to fob her off with a cryptic half-answer or point-blank refusal, but when he caught sight of the stern look she was giving him in the wan light of Shira’s small fire, he motioned for her to sit down. She planted herself on top of a fallen log and Epimetheus crouched down in front of her, bolt pistol in hand ready for the slightest sign of danger.

‘You have knowledge of the Grey Knights and have fought alongside them in the past. That much I have gleaned from your memories.’ His use of the word ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ struck Tzula as odd, but that was only the latest question she could add to a very long list. ‘The current incarnation of my Chapter is the militant arm of a branch of the Inquisition known as the Ordo Malleus, a specialist organisation of daemon hunters fiercely loyal to the Throne and humanity.’

Tzula nodded her affirmation.

‘Ten thousand years ago, things were different. Your Inquisition was a fledgling operation, mistrusted even by those who sanctioned it and yet to splinter into its disparate factions. Barely a hundred men and women wore its mark and barely half that again were aware of its existence. One of its primary functions at the time was to root out those sympathisers to Horus who still sat at the heart of Terra and were inveigled in the rebuilding of the shattered Imperium. To find, prosecute and execute all those who would jeopardise its future and seek to plunge it back into anarchy.

‘But these hidden remnants of Horus’s betrayal of the Emperor paled next to the visible ones. Across the galaxy, forces still loyal to the arch-traitor continued to fight the war he had declared, razing planets and claiming dominion over vast tranches of human worlds. The forbidden knowledge shown to Horus that had been the catalyst for his fall from grace bore other more sinister fruit, and dwellers from the other side were now abroad in the material realm. Though many believed the word to be childish and loaded with superstition, they came to be called daemons. Whatever name given to them, their threat to existence itself was all too apparent. At points all across the galaxy, the materium had been worn thin and the veil between realities torn open. The Eye of Terror blinked open, casting its malign gaze on the destruction so freshly wrought and worlds after worlds became conduits for the unreal to enter the real.’

‘Like Pythos?’ Tzula ventured.

‘Like Pythos,’ Epimetheus confirmed. ‘The loyal Legions were diminished, their fighting strength a paltry fraction of its pinnacle and their primarchs dead or at each other’s throats in the power vacuum that followed the Emperor’s internment in the Golden Throne. While the Emperor had foreseen the myriad dangers humanity faced and created the Legions in his own image to combat them, even He could not have anticipated the monstrous forces now unleashed upon the Imperium. While the Legions had been bred to fight wars on the material realm, this new foe could battle on the immaterial front too, rendering Space Marines little more effective than the common soldier when it came to psychic war.’

‘Many of the Legions had once welcomed psykers into their ranks but an edict barring his sons from utilising the potential of their warp-gifted troops had been passed in the years before Horus’s betrayal and endorsed by the Emperor himself. Denied the one weapon that could reasonably have altered the course of the opening stages of the civil war, in time the primarchs came to see its true power and the loyal Legions gladly

welcomed Librarians among their number once again. But one man had always known the capability of that weapon and had foreseen a time when humanity would need to fight the powers of the warp with powers born of the warp.

‘The Regent of Terra, a man who had served at the right hand of the Emperor for as long as anybody could remember, had been gathering to him men and women with particular talents since the end of the Great Crusade. At first working for him in an informal, secretive and ad hoc capacity, with the enemy at the gates of the Imperial Palace he shared his vision with the Emperor and brought before him twelve beings of unswerving virtue who he had recruited on his master’s behalf. Four of those would become the founders of your Inquisition but the other eight, all Space Marines of differing Legions and unparalleled psykers in their own right, would become the eight founding members of the Grey Knights – the first Grand Masters of the Chapter.’

Tzula was rapt. She knew snippets of this from conversations with Lord Dinalt, but to hear it from somebody who had been alive so close to the events, possibly even lived through them, was a singular privilege.

‘For years, the Regent had occluded the moon of Titan from the eyes of both friend and foe, covertly building a fortress-monastery and equipping it with forbidden technologies and secret training facilities to prepare the new Chapter in its role defending the Imperium from daemonic incursion. In addition to the eight, thousands of others had been taken to the hidden satellite to serve as ancillaries, serfs and the recruits that would form the original Brotherhoods. The Regent’s final gift to the Chapter that would be his most enduring legacy was the gift of time. Using his own considerable psychic talents he removed Titan from time as well as space, granting us long years in which to prepare for the longer war that would await us upon our return.

‘When we did finally take our place back in the Imperium, less than a decade had passed in real time, but for the warriors of Titan many centuries had elapsed. Men who were young during the twilight days of the war against Horus were now older than the oldest surviving veterans of the fragmenting Legions. Those eight who had previously worn armour of a different colour had accrued more years than even the most ancient and venerable of Dreadnoughts.’

He paused now, as if what he had just uttered had led him to a new realisation.

‘The galaxy was still in turmoil. Primarchs bickered over how best to prevent a rebellion on the scale of Horus’s from ever happening again, while the defeated traitors preyed upon worlds still loyal to the Golden Throne, as did newly emboldened xenos races. But against this backdrop, the malign influence of the warp had not dwindled – if anything, it had intensified – and the Grey Knights threw themselves straight into the fray. The rips in reality were still shedding horrors, cults had sprung up in every segmentum hoping to gain their patron’s favour by summoning forth the Neverborn, and there were still worlds where doorways remained open into the warp.’

‘Like Pythos.’

‘Like Pythos,’ Epimetheus said matching Tzula’s tone. ‘It was one of the first missions the Grey Knights ever undertook. Three entire Brotherhoods and a quarter of a million Imperial Army soldiers set out to close the Damnation Cache, a warp rift that had been opened during the early days of the war against Horus. It had supplied the traitor forces with allies throughout the campaign, and with turncoat Legions fleeing towards the Eye of Terror the daemons now turned their attention to the worlds surrounding Pythos, seeking to claim them as their own and establish their own debased realm on the material plane. Four entire systems had already succumbed when we got here, and it took years to fight our way across

them and finally reach Pythos, harried every step of the way by a daemonic army that would have rivalled the Ultramarines at their peak for sheer numbers. By the time we made planetfall, our own ranks had already been decimated and the Imperial Army regiments accompanying us were down to less than half strength.

‘The war to close the Cache was long and bloody. For every daemon we despatched, another would step from beyond to take its place while our numbers continued to decline. Faced with certain defeat that would eventually condemn an entire subsector to unholy servitude, Supreme Grand Master Janus took the only course of action left open to him. Ordering all surviving Grey Knights and Imperial Army soldiers to launch a diversionary assault, the Supreme Grand Master led a small group of Grey Knights through the maze of tunnels that led to the Cache, fighting their way through wave upon wave of daemons before finally incanting the ritual of binding and sealing the rift shut. Every daemon the Cache had spewed forth was recalled in that instant, drawn inexorably back no matter how far they had ventured from Pythos. And that should have been the end of it.’

‘The prisoner in the Emerald Cave?’ Tzula said.

‘The entities from the Cache were not the only ones present on this world. Drawn by the promise of a daemonic paradise, others of their kind had sought Pythos out. Many of them were of the lower orders, barely cogent things that served as foot soldiers for those who were especially blessed by their patrons, but one in particular was more formidable than any of the others. A greater daemon who served the Plague God, he tore through us with abandon and still we died even though the Cache had been closed. The thing was nameless to us so we did not have the power to banish him, but our combined psychic might was enough to bind him and seal him in one of the vast chambers. A chamber where instead of red Pythosian crystal, green gems studded the walls.

‘Of the three hundred Grey Knights who had set out from Titan to cleanse Pythos, barely twenty of us survived. The Imperial Army regiments fared worse, wiped out to a man during the final battle to subdue the Great Unclean One. With no athame to keep it permanently closed, it was decided to hide seven seals around the planet, each one different and only able to be undone in a specific order. Over the final seal a guard was to be placed, a volunteer from among the surviving Grey Knights.’

Epimetheus’s story tailed off but Tzula had already filled in the blanks. Except one.

‘What’s an athame?’ she asked.

Epimetheus chuckled, only the second sign of emotion Tzula had seen him exhibit. ‘Such power in your grasp and you don’t even know its name. *That* is an athame.’ He pointed at the blade tucked into her waistband.

‘And this is what we’re going to use to close the Damnation Cache?’

‘No. It’s what *you* are going to use to close the Damnation Cache.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Tzula said.

‘There is a ship full of sorcerers hidden up there enabling whatever crawls from the Cache to maintain its presence on this side of the veil. To compound matters, there are rations on board that ship destined for Imperial forces that will be poisoned by the time they reach them. I am going to go there and destroy it. You are going to return to Strike and inform him that the population of Atika is dead and the city can be bombarded from orbit.’

‘We can get a message to Strike some other way. I’m coming with you.’

‘That message is too vital not to be delivered in person. If we chance a vox-message or courier we risk it being intercepted and losing the element of surprise. I can’t trust getting a message to him telepathically as there are so many enemy psykers on this planet one of them may intercept it

merely by being in proximity.’ He looked away from her. ‘Besides, there’s a strong possibility this is a one-way mission.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Why does it have to be a suicide mission?’

‘Because I have to ensure all of those sorcerers are dead and the only way to guarantee that is to destroy the ship.’

‘But you don’t have to be on it,’ Tzula urged.

‘I have to be certain.’

‘Well, it’s a good job you’ve got no way of getting up there, isn’t it?’ Tzula scoffed.

‘He has a pilot. All he needs now is a ship,’ said Shira from out of a mouth half-full of roasted animal. Tzula hadn’t heard her approaching.

‘How long have you been there? What did you hear?’ Tzula snapped.

‘Emperor. Titan. Daemons. Emeralds,’ Shira was trying to speak and swallow simultaneously. ‘He’s right though. From the sound of things that ship does need destroying before the big daemon pit thing can be closed,’ she finished, gulping down a barely chewed hunk of meat.

Tzula got up and turned her back on Shira and the Space Marine, heading back towards the fire, arms folded.

‘And hey, if I go with him you can be sure he’s coming back,’ Shira added.

Tzula stopped and turned back to the pilot, face split in a wide grin. Shira’s cockiness was becoming infectious.

‘Well, in that case,’ Tzula said. ‘I suppose I’d better tell you where you can find a shuttle.’

822960.M41 / The Deathglades. Forty-four kilometres south of Atika, Pythos

The three of them stood at the crossroads of the jungle trail, an awkward farewell about to take place.

They had travelled together for the past two days, their route shared, but now it was time to go their separate ways; Epimetheus and Shira towards Olympax and the shuttle hidden in the jungle near there; Tzula towards Thermenos and the last known location of Strike and the bulk of the Catachan force. It was dry season on Pythos, a period that lasted no more than a few weeks but allowed the jungle floor to dry out and prevent swamps from turning into lakes and landmasses becoming one with the oceans. The track beneath their feet was scorched and cracked, the cessation of rainfall accompanied by an increase in temperature and a welcome drop in humidity.

Many days' travel still lay ahead of them and the two women had divided the little remaining food and water between them. Tzula had insisted that Shira take more as it would be difficult to hunt and forage around Olympax if it was still held by daemons. The pilot reluctantly agreed but insisted that Tzula take all of the remaining power packs for the laspistols because Epimetheus would no longer be around to protect the inquisitor.

Tzula was the first to break the prolonged silence that hung between them.

'You're absolutely sure about this? It's not too late to change your mind and come with me. Let the Dark Angels or your brother Grey Knights deal with that rogue supply ship instead.' It was half-hearted at best. She knew Epimetheus was following the best course of action and that any delay would put the liberation of Pythos at risk.

'I am certain, Tzula Digriiz.' His verbosity of two nights before had been an aberration and he had barely spoken to either of his companions on their trek through the jungle.

'Try to get him there in one piece.' This she aimed at Shira. The pilot nodded and stepped forward, looking for a moment as if she was going to throw her arms around Tzula and hug her. At the last moment she

remembered that Tzula was an inquisitor and bailed out of the attempted embrace. She thrust out her hand instead, clumsily gripping the other woman's augmented and shaking it weakly.

'You take care of yourself,' Shira said, still holding onto Tzula's metal hand. While circumstance had thrown them together and Shira had nearly got her killed, captured or worse several times over, Tzula had built up a rapport with the woman and would miss her company. If Shira could fly as well as she could talk, Tzula had no doubt that she would get Epimetheus on board that ship.

'I put the shuttle down a couple of kilometres east of Olympax. It's camouflaged with leaves and branches and I activated the cloak. That should have been enough to stop it from being seen by anybody passing that way, but if you're actively looking for it, it shouldn't be too difficult to find.' Shira finally let go of her hand. 'Epimetheus has the access and override codes.'

'How come he gets the codes and I don't?' Shira asked.

'Because they're both thirty digit alphanumeric strings. I can give them to you if you like?'

'No. That's fine,' Shira said. She moved back alongside the towering Space Marine and picked up her pack from the trail. Slinging it casually over one shoulder, she set off along the branch of the path that led towards Olympax. 'See you soon,' she called back to Tzula.

'The Emperor protects,' Tzula replied.

'It has been a pleasure to fight alongside you, Tzula,' Epimetheus said, making the sign of the aquila with his hands across his breastplate. 'The Emperor protects.'

Tzula reflected his gesture. 'The Emperor protects,' she said. Epimetheus turned and, with only a few of his giant strides, caught up to Shira.

Tzula hefted her pack and prepared to follow her own path when she called after the Space Marine. For all his openness two nights before, there was still one question that remained unanswered. ‘Epimetheus?’

He stopped and looked back down the trail.

‘Why have you been so reluctant to see your Grey Knights brothers again?’

Epimetheus grinned. ‘What makes you so certain it is my brothers in the Grey Knights I have no desire to see again?’ he said before catching up to Shira.

As the murk of the jungle swallowed him up, Tzula knew it would be the last time she ever saw him.



CHAPTER TWELVE

825960.M41 / Imperial Forward Command. Thermenos Stronghold, Pythos

‘When are you going to realise your tactics aren’t working?’

Kaldor Draigo slid the data-slate across the unfurled map spread over the table. It came to rest next to the icons of three delver-strongholds, red ‘X’s scored through them to denote their destruction. Azrael picked the tablet up to see the previous day’s casualty figures scrolling across it in flickering green type.

‘Eight hundred lost at Bakira, over three hundred unaccounted for at Awgreave and both holds lost. Abaddon is hitting us where we are weakest and continues to exact a heavy toll. Your rapid reaction approach isn’t working. We need to go on the offensive. We need to take Atika,’ Draigo said, banging his meaty fist against the thick metal table.

The assembled Imperial Guard commanders looked uneasy at this display of dissent, despite having witnessed it almost every day since the Pythos campaign had begun. For months Draigo had been petitioning for an orbital bombardment of the planetary capital, and for months Azrael had ignored him. Early in the fighting it had become obvious to the Grey Knight that the source of the daemonic forces lay beneath Atika and his

preferred strategy was to cut off the enemy's supply of combatants at source. The Dark Angel disagreed.

Atika had been home to the largest concentration of people on the planet and Strike's forethought to send them to shelter in the cave system had likely saved them all. Draigo countered that nothing had been heard from the hive since the day it fell but Azrael argued that until they had conclusive proof to the contrary, they were to assume the inhabitants of Atika were still alive. It was as if Azrael was making a very public show of preserving human life in front of the commanders of the liberation force.

The irony was not lost on Draigo. He knew how ruthless the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels could be to protect his Chapter's precious secrets, how many human lives he would shed to preserve its privacy. Draigo could make informed guesses as to the nature of those secrets, but it was his knowledge of the methods the Dark Angels employed to keep them that had ultimately ensured they honoured the ancient pact struck with the Grey Knights.

'Abaddon is the one prosecuting this campaign, and like myself he is leading it from the front,' Azrael retorted. The battle-damaged state of his armour bore testimony to the amount of action he had seen. 'Rapid reaction achieves two goals. It protects the lives of Imperial Guard troops and it will lead us to Abaddon. If we remove the head of the enemy, the body will soon die.'

'And in the meantime the Damnation Cache keeps building him an army of daemons while we keep chasing our tails,' the Grey Knight scoffed.

As was usual at these strategy discussions, the Imperial Guard representatives were simply bystanders, an uneasy audience to the constant clashes between the two Space Marine commanders. Only one among them had the testicular fortitude to stand up to the Supreme Grand Masters, let alone speak at these meetings.

‘What were the enemy casualty figures for yesterday?’ Colonel Strike asked. Though he had refused the position of overall Imperial Guard Commander of the Pythos Reconquest Force, both Azrael and Draigo had insisted that he form part of the forward command structure on the ground. A Cadian colonel by the name of Kardine sat up in the fleet controlling troop deployments, supply lines and rotations, but for all intents and purposes Strike was in charge of Imperial Guard combat operations on Pythos, albeit in deference to the two Chapter Masters.

Azrael looked at the slate once again. ‘Twenty-two Traitor Legion fatalities. Half that number again in confirmed daemon kills. At least a thousand cultists slain.’

‘We’re not making a dent in their numbers. If we keep throwing men at defending the mines like this, we won’t be able to hold out much longer. Fighting a war of attrition will only lead to defeat.’ The other Imperial Guardsmen seated around the table fidgeted and looked at each other nervously. There was no love lost between Strike and his peers. Since the reconquest force had arrived on Pythos, the Catachans had suffered casualty rates way below those of the other regiments, the enemy avoiding those holds defended by the death worlders. Strike had also refused to rotate his men out and give them downtime back in the fleet, choosing instead to keep them on the frontlines, something the 183rd had accepted without dissent.

‘And what would your suggested course of action be, colonel?’ asked Azrael without malice. The Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels was the arch-pragmatist and, if he could be shown a better way to fight this war, that is how he would fight it. Of all those around the table, Strike would be the most likely to find the key that would unlock the war, Draigo excepted. Though Azrael had an intense personal dislike for his Grey Knights counterpart, his pragmatism did at least allow him to recognise that, in matters of warfare at least, he was his equal.

‘The Space Marine and inquisitor have failed to report in,’ Strike said. Draigo and Azrael both bristled at the mention of Epimetheus. ‘We have to assume that they, like the population of Atika, are dead. I agree with Lord Draigo. An orbital bombardment of the hive followed by a ground assault is the only way we can win this war.’

Whether Azrael would have ever heeded the colonel’s advice would remain another secret of a man who had come to embody the word. A blue armoured Dark Angel strode into the command room, slipping back his hood as he did so to reveal a freshly shorn pate. He was young, no more than thirty certainly, and his intense green eyes seemed to stray off into the distance as if he was looking for something beyond his vision.

‘Codicier Turmiel. You bring news?’ Azrael asked.

The Librarian nodded respectfully to his Supreme Grand Master before doing the same towards Draigo. The Grey Knight returned the gesture. ‘I do, Lord Azrael. We have received a request for reinforcements from Master Gabriel at Mount Dhume. The hold there has been attacked by a small force of Black Legion. They have been under fire for many hours already.’

‘Gabriel has thirty Deathwing with him as well as several thousand Imperial Guard. Why is he requesting reinforcements? Has the jungle heat sapped him of his courage?’ Azrael replied.

‘No, Lord Azrael,’ Turmiel cast his gaze around the assembled Imperial Guard commanders. Strike felt as if the Librarian was staring straight through him, as if he wasn’t there. ‘He has visual confirmation that Abaddon himself is leading the assault.’

826960.M41 / The Deathglades. Sixty-three kilometres southwest of Atika, Pythos

They broke camp as the first rays of dawn filtered through the canopies high above. Tzula put out the dying embers of a camp fire before sweeping

the ashes away with her feet, not wishing to leave any sign of their passing for enemy patrols. Within minutes of waking, they were back on the jungle trail again, following the path to Thermenos that had been revealed by the receding swamp waters.

Her new travelling companions were understandably grim faced, being the last four survivors of the Catachan platoon stationed at Mortenshold, a small delver-stronghold on the eastern edge of the Olympax range. Despite its proximity to Atika, Mortenshold had avoided the attention of the Chaos forces until three nights ago when a Black Legion raiding party, backed up by gibbering warp-bred monstrosities, struck under cover of darkness, killing almost fifty Imperial Guardsmen and the squad of Dark Angels posted with them. Tzula had witnessed the assault from where she had slept that night. At first she had thought it to be an unseasonal storm, mistaking the distant pop of grenade and missile detonation for thunder, but the sporadic flashes of light from high up in the mountains could not be confused with lightning.

She had considered deviating from her route to check for survivors but she knew it would be futile. Experience told her that if the hold was in enemy hands there would be nobody friendly left in there alive. Besides, without Epimetheus around, she was less inclined to do anything that would risk the athame falling into the clutches of the enemy.

As it transpired, the survivors of Mortenshold had found her, rather than the other way around. Late on the evening following the far-off lights on the mountain, just as she was looking to make camp for the night, Tzula was surprised by a knife at her throat and a well-toned forearm at the back of her neck. Fortunately for her, the four Catachans had been stalking her for the best part of an hour without her being aware, during which time the sergeant among them, Magrik, had recognised Tzula from the battle for Atika docks. Rather than being cautious, sneaking up behind her and putting an unsheathed fang to her throat was Magrik's way of saying hello.

None of the banter Tzula would usually associate with a group of Catachans was evident among this bunch, and they tromped through the undergrowth without ever sharing a quip or joke. Their combat readiness was undiminished however, lasrifles raised to just above waist height ready to be aimed at the slightest sign of movement. Enemy units were the greatest danger they now faced in the jungles of Pythos, but although much of the native fauna had been hunted for sport by daemons, many hungry predators still lurked within the bush.

The pink rays of sunrise were giving way to the yellow lances of early morning when Magrik signalled for them to get into cover. The other three Catachans – Trondar, Santarini and the veteran Gdolni – made for the far side of the trail and dissolved into the green. Tzula and Magrik sought refuge behind the thick trunk of an ancient redwood. The sergeant cocked her head, positioning her ear to capture any sound carrying on the almost imperceptible breeze. Picking up on something, she turned to Tzula and motioned in the direction she thought it was coming from.

Had Magrik been a man, she would have been described as grizzled, sharp lines cut deep into a face sculpted by battle. Being a woman, the more patronising way she would undoubtedly be described would be she had ‘had a hard life’. Magrik was a Catachan. She hadn’t lived a hard life, she had lived life hard.

Tzula turned her ear towards the light wind. Almost immediately, she heard the sound of engines. Lots of engines.

Magrik dropped to her haunches, placing her palm on the ground. Whatever she felt vibrating through the jungle floor did not impress her. Rising to her feet, she unclipped a pair of grenades from the bandolier slung diagonally across her torso and passed one to Tzula.

‘War engines. Plenty of them,’ she said in that hushed but at the same time loud tone all Catachans seemed to adopt when combat was imminent.

‘Don’t throw it at the hull because it’ll bounce off. Roll it under the chassis. The armour is usually weaker underneath.’

Abaddon’s capacity to deploy war machines had been remarkable since the earliest days of the invasion and was the primary reason the Catachans had chosen to fight the war in the delver-strongholds which were inaccessible to the daemon engines and other tracked monstrosities. With so many now deployed on the planet, Abaddon must have established a forge on Pythos for their creation.

Across the wide track, the other Catachans followed Magrik’s lead, priming grenades and awaiting their targets. If their attack went true to form, the Catachans would have melted back into the jungle before the front ranks of vehicles were destroyed, barring passage to those behind until the wrecks were moved clear. It may not stop the column’s advance but it would certainly slow it down.

The bass rumble grew louder and the vibrations that Magrik had felt with the palm of her hand, Tzula could now feel jarring up through her legs. Magrik looked concerned.

‘More of them than I thought,’ the Catachan sergeant lamented, picking another grenade from the bandolier. She couldn’t say anything else as the growl of engines became a fully fledged roar, stifling the possibility of any other noise. ‘A hell of a lot more than I thought,’ Tzula saw Magrik mouth.

Sooner than any of them expected, the barrel of something massive poked its way over the brow of a ridge, collapsing trees as it went.

Magrik’s cry of ‘Now!’ lost beneath the din, Tzula stepped out from cover ready to destroy whatever the fearsome gun was attached to.

**826960.M41 / Delver-stronghold 2761/b. Mount Dhume,
Pythos**

The Thunderhawk swung wide around the mountain peak, banking right as it did so and granting Azrael his first view of the battle raging below. Thick black smoke drifted across the shallow incline that led up to the entrance of the mine, billowing from the wrecks of two Rhinos, spiked, corrupted imitations of the Dark Angels' own troop carriers. Black armoured corpses dotted the slope along with countless more Imperial Guard. Much to Azrael's consternation, several in the ivory of the Deathwing also lay among them. Bursts of muzzle-flare highlighted the positions of the traitors advancing towards the hold, their shots returned by a wall of fire from the cave's mouth and from behind cover along the approach.

Alongside him in the cockpit, standing behind the two pilots, Kaldor Draigo witnessed the same scene. The Dark Angels' response had been the very definition of rapid, calling in all available forces from the holds close to Thermenos and being in the air within three hours of receiving the call from Gabriel. Though the entire Chapter was not deploying as it had done to liberate the *Revenge*, over half their number were now in the air above Mount Dhume preparing to defend the hold and kill Abaddon the Despoiler, a blight on the Imperium since the time of the Emperor. At their flanks flew hundreds of Valkyries, their troop holds crammed with Imperial Guardsmen ready to lend their guns to the effort. High above them all, guardian angels in the truest sense of the word, a score of Dark Talons flew escort.

To Draigo's chagrin, his Brotherhood of Grey Knights, seldom used thus far in the Pythos campaign, would not be taking part in the battle.

Ignoring the Grey Knight Supreme Grand Master's request to be allowed time to get his battle-brothers planetside, Azrael had insisted that speed was of the essence, that Abaddon could not be allowed to slip through their grasp. Draigo was convinced that it was only because he was present when the message was relayed to Azrael that the Dark Angel had deigned to allow him to take part in this mission. Had the report come in while he

was with the fleet he would have been none the wiser, another secret Azrael would have kept to himself.

‘I still think this is reckless, Azrael,’ Draigo snarled. ‘You’re committing too large a force. What if this is a feint and it enables Abaddon to launch assaults on those holds you’ve left undefended? Take a look down there. Does that look like an army strong enough to capture a hold from thirty Terminators and a few battalions of Imperial Guard? Or does it look more like an army just strong enough to hold out until reinforcements can arrive to bolster the defenders?’

‘That works in our favour. If he elects to spread his forces so thinly, there is little chance of his forces being strengthened before our battle is through. Even if we do lose a few holds, it will be a small price to pay for the elimination of Abaddon.’

Azrael pointed to a large plateau behind the Black Legion lines. ‘Put us down over there,’ he instructed the pilot.

‘If it even is Abaddon leading this assault,’ Draigo retorted.

‘If the Grand Master of my First Company says that Abaddon is here then he is here,’ Azrael snapped, as if it was his own reliability that the Grey Knight were casting doubt upon.

‘Then the real question we have to ask ourselves,’ Draigo said, making ready his wargear so that he could enter the fray the moment the Thunderhawk doors opened, ‘is *why* is he here?’

Rising from cover, Balthasar’s storm bolter erupted in a hail of shells, scattering the Black Legionnaires converging on his position. Beside him, five Mordians, their once pristine blue uniforms coated in the dust of the distant world on which they had been sent to fight and the blood of their comrades, rose up from behind the upturned mining cart and opened up with their lasrifles. One of the traitors went down under Balthasar’s fire and was finished off by the Guardsmen peppering their fallen enemy with concentrated bursts.

Another of the Traitor Marines, a brute almost the same size in his ancient power armour as Balthasar was in his Terminator suit, tore open two of the Mordians with a pair of shots from his bolter. Convulsing and almost split in half, both men were dead before they hit the ground. Balthasar recognised this one. It was the same warrior who had slain Brother Jephael earlier in the day, mercilessly gunning him down as he rushed to the aid of a stricken Deathwing.

Balthasar grinned. Like all of his order, he strove for vengeance above all else, a vengeance that had grown ever darker as he had advanced through the Dark Angels' ranks. Already he had been made privy to the most guarded secret of his Chapter, that during the galactic civil war of ten millennia ago, over half of what was then the Dark Angels Legion threw in their lot with the Ruinous Powers, shunning both Emperor and primarch. In the few years since he had ascended to the Deathwing, he had already taken part in several hunts for these erstwhile battle-brothers, the Fallen as they are known amongst the Chapter's inner circle, and more than once had returned to the Rock as part of one of their guard details. The Dark Angels were patient hunters, playing the long game of centuries to capture their prey, but sometimes the universe had a way of offering up the chance for instant vengeance. The enemy facing him was not one of the Fallen but Jephael would soon be avenged.

On the periphery of his vision, one of the other Black Legionnaires took aim at Balthasar with his bolter, but the Deathwing raised his storm bolter and obliterated the traitor's faceplate before he could return fire. Drawing his power sword, Balthasar ignited the blade and swung at Jephael's killer, ruining his bolter with the downstroke and gouging a furrow in his breastplate with the return. Bereft of his gun, the Traitor Marine drew the chainblade hung at his thigh and revved it into life, preparing to duel with the Dark Angel.

Seeing what was happening, and eager to grant Balthasar some measure of rectitude for their brother's death, other Deathwings stepped from cover and engaged the now regrouping Black Legionnaires, inspiring more of the heads-down Mordians to abandon their cover and do likewise. Shoulder to shoulder, Gabriel and Barachiel drove back an embryonic counter-assault, shredding three of the dark-armoured traitors with a concerted volley.

Balthasar's sword was a blur of blue energy, sweeping through the air with a crackle of energy. At the last moment, the Black Legionnaire raised his own blade, countering the blow in a shower of chainblade teeth. The two warriors pushed against each other, both weapons protesting at the strain being placed upon them. Though wearing only the ancient armour that may have once been painted in the colours of the Luna Wolves, then the Sons of Horus, the traitor's strength matched that of Balthasar, augmented as it was by a suit of tactical dreadnought armour. Servos and muscles straining, the Deathwing allowed himself to be driven back, overbalancing the Chaos Marine slightly. Dragging his power sword away from the squealing chainsword, Balthasar drew back the energy-tinged blade and swept with it once again. Momentum his temporary master, the traitor stepped forwards into the blow but, in defiance of his bulk, spun away from the Dark Angel's blade. The tip of Balthasar's weapon caught the Black Legionnaire around the waist, gouging a deep furrow in his armour from which spilled crimson that stained the jet of the ceramite.

The traitor did not bellow in rage like a lackey of the Blood God, nor did he revel in his own pain like a follower of the Prince of Pleasure, instead bringing his weapon back to the guard position and awaiting the next riposte like the consummate warrior he evidently was. A moment later, *was* became the operative word.

The ground in front of the Traitor Marine threw up dust where the rock had been turned to powder, tiny explosions impacting every two metres or so racing towards him. The heavy bolter shells reached the Black

Legionnaire and, instead of dust, a cloud of blood and viscera filled the air, a dozen rounds disintegrating him in the space of seconds. His body fell forwards, helmeted head crashing down in front of Balthasar's feet and the Deathwing drove his power sword down into the traitor's skull, being careful to avoid damaging the gene-seed in the throat.

Tugging his blade from the corpse, Balthasar turned to find the source of the Black Legionnaire's demise and found the sky full of Dark Angels and Imperial Navy flyers breaking over the cover of the mountains. At their head was *Roar of Vengeance*, most ancient of all the Dark Angels Thunderhawks and, when he deployed with the Chapter, personal transport of Supreme Grand Master Azrael. As it got closer, Balthasar saw that the barrels of the nose-mounted heavy bolters were still smoking and he raised his blade in salute and gratitude. Being denied his victory in personal combat was not an issue, Jephael's slayer had been vanquished and vengeance belonged to the Dark Angels. As *Roar of Vengeance* swept low, Azrael returned the salute from the cockpit.

Sheathing his sword, Balthasar sprinted down the slope, storm bolter blazing, to help secure the landing zone.

826960.M41 / Inquisition Shuttle Virtuous. Imperial Fleet, Pandorax System

'I still don't see anything,' Shira said, leaning forward in the pilot's seat to peer out through the cockpit window. All around her, lights flashed and dials spun on consoles and instrument arrays, the purpose or function of which she had little idea. The shuttle that Tzula had left in the jungle was a very different craft from a Kestrel and though the principles of flying it were the same, she was sure there were systems that would aid their journey that she was in complete ignorance of. She had managed to get the cloaking system working at least and, as they glided between the monolithic chips of the Pythos Reconquest Fleet, they did so unseen.

‘It’s not what you can see,’ Epimetheus said, standing over the co-pilot’s seat that was far too tiny to accommodate him. ‘It’s what you can’t.’

Shira turned to look at the Space Marine. ‘That’s not very helpful, you know?’ she said.

‘Here. Look again,’ he said.

Shira turned back, feeling a tingling sensation around her eyes as she did so. Although he had only used his powers on Shira on a couple of occasions, she found it disconcerting that he never asked or gave warning that he was about to do so. The ‘possession’ he carried out a couple of days ago was particularly invasive and Shira had not fully recovered from its effects, a weird feeling she could neither pinpoint nor shake.

‘I’m sorry but this *is* necessary,’ Epimetheus said, if not reading her thoughts then certainly sensing her discomfort. ‘Can you see it now?’

A purple haze forming on the periphery of her vision, Shira squinted and, as if looking down a tunnel, the vague impression of... something resolved itself.

‘I think so,’ she said. ‘It’s like somebody has torn off a strip of space and has put it in the wrong place, like it’s not supposed to be there.’

Epimetheus smiled. ‘Precisely. Now, can you take us in closer?’

Up close, the outline of the *Lamentation* – the call sign the ship was broadcasting – certainly resembled that of a Neptune-class supply frigate, but one that had been covered in a blanket made from the void. The dips and grooves of the vessel’s hull could be made out along with the bumps and rises of sensor arrays and comms equipment; it wasn’t so much that the ship was invisible, it was more like space had been wrapped around it.

‘There should be a landing bay towards the rear of the ship. Bring the shuttle down on top of the hull and I’ll insert from the outside,’ Epimetheus said causing Shira to frown. ‘Too risky to attempt a landing on board. If they don’t have the bay guarded, the arrival sensors will trigger on board the bridge and tip them off.’

Satisfied with the Space Marine's reasoning, she slowed the shuttle's velocity trying to find a clear patch of hull to set down upon. Seeing a spot at the very rear of the ship that appeared smoother than the rest, she went to engage the landing gear. Out of habit, she reached down underneath the console to find the release lever but, realising she wasn't at the controls of a Kestrel, sat back up again and studied the myriad controls blinking at her.

'Is there a problem?' Epimetheus said after Shira had guided the shuttle over the rear of the *Lamentation* and turned one hundred and eighty degrees to fly back along the hull.

'No. No problem here,' she said dismissively, eyes flitting this way and that, scanning the unfamiliar icons and runes of the shuttle for any control that might operate the landing gear.

'If you're looking for the landing gear,' Epimetheus said, leaning forwards over the co-pilot's chair and stretching out an arm, 'it's this one here.' He stabbed one of the flashing buttons with a huge finger. The suppressed whirr of three magnetised feet emerging from the bottom of the shuttle followed.

'That's the one I was going to press,' Shira said not very convincingly.

'Of course you were,' Epimetheus replied, smiling. He unlocked his helmet from his thigh and put it over his head, sealing it in place with a hiss of pressure. 'As soon as I'm clear, head back to Pythos and find Tzula and Strike. If this goes to plan, they should be gearing up to assault Atika by the time you find them.'

'But—' Shira said.

'No "buts", Shira. That's an order.'

Leaving no room for protest, Epimetheus stepped through into the shuttle's rear chamber and made ready to disembark.

**826960.M41 / Delver-stronghold 2761/b. Mount Dhume,
Pythos**

The hellhammer cannon erupted into a riot of noise and explosive fury before the Valkyries carrying it had even begun their landing.

In the command compartment Strike directed the crew in the reloading and firing, not aiming for specific targets but instead laying down a carpet of suppressing fire to cover the approach of the combined Catachan and Dark Angels forces. Still several metres above the landing, the four Valkyries that had transported it from Thermenos released the thick metal chains suspending *Traitor's Bane* between them and the tank dropped, cracking open the rocky terrain beneath. Thanks to the impact suppression system that K'Cee had overhauled, to the occupants of the tank it felt as though they had landed on sand. The jokaero thrust out his lower jaw and nodded his head in satisfaction as the tank sped towards the enemy position the instant it was on the ground, all weapons blazing.

A Rhino flipped violently into the air, its flaming husk crashing back down on the two Black Legionnaires who had been using it as cover. The barrel of the Hellhammer's main gun spun to target a second Rhino causing the half dozen traitors behind it to beat a hasty retreat. Two never made it from the armoured personnel carrier's shadow, cut down by bolter fire from a squad of Dark Angels deploying on jump packs from a rapidly moving Thunderhawk. The handful who avoided their comrades' fate were driven onto the plasma cannon of *Corvex*, superheated hydrogen burning through armour and roasting the flesh and organs of those beneath. The Master of the Ravenwing gracefully turned his jetbike through one hundred and eighty degrees, skimming back over the smouldering Traitor Marines to finish off any survivors.

Heartened by the arrival of reinforcements, the Mordian soldiers taking cover at the entrance of the mine charged down the approach, trapping the Chaos forces between a wave of green on one side, a tide of blue on the other. In amongst the Mordians, Gabriel and the Deathwing roused the Imperial Guardsmen, their white armour sticking out like surf at the head of a tidal wave.

The Black Legion caught between them didn't stand a chance.

From a view slit in *Traitor's Bane*, Strike watched as the approach to the mine head became a cauldron of las and bolter fire. With no way out, the few remaining Black Legionnaires attempted a desperate rearguard, fighting back to back, mowing down Guardsmen by the score. But to no avail.

Azrael and Draigo at their head, power-armoured figures pushed through the throng of humans, some shoved bodily out of the way by Dark Angels eager to claim their kills. From the rear, the Deathwing converged, penning in the last few Black Legionnaires.

There were no offers of clemency from either side, no appeals for weapons to be laid down or terms of surrender proposed. Nobody begged for their life to be spared and not a single one of them stopped fighting until the breath had fled from their lungs and their hearts had stopped beating. Less than three minutes after *Roar of Vengeance* had crested the peak of Mount Dhume, the Black Legion had been defeated.

It had been a rout. If Azrael had only brought a third of the force with him – a quarter even – it would still have been a resounding victory, but the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels did not look pleased. Standing over the corpses of the slain Black Legionnaires a heated exchange was taking place between Azrael, Draigo and Gabriel. Enemy bodies were kicked over onto their backs and helmets cracked open with sword tips, revealing their faces for identification. Not supplying the result that Azrael had been looking for, he went face-to-face with Gabriel, simmering resentment threatening to boil over into violence. Gabriel stood his ground. Moments later, Azrael broke off from the confrontation and raised his head skywards.

'Abaddon! Show yourself. Come and face me on the field of battle instead of cowering behind rocks like the craven traitor you are,' Azrael bellowed. He spun around slowly, looking at the surrounding peaks and

outcrops for signs of movement. All about him, human and Space Marine eyes did the same.

The echo from the Dark Angel's words had almost faded to nothing when the silhouette of a huge figure, right arm terminating in a crackling power claw, appeared on a promontory high above the battlefield. He raised his other arm, sword in hand, but it was not in salute. It was in threat. Abaddon brought the blade down in a chopping motion.

Inside *Traitor's Bane*, the hairs on the back of Strike's arms rose and the tang of scorched ozone carried on the air.

826960.M41 / Lamentation. Imperial Fleet, Pandorax System

As he had surmised, Epimetheus's insertion onto the supply vessel had been without incident. The landing bay was empty, save for a few Chaos fighter-interceptors that could be used to eliminate any Imperial craft that took too much of an interest in the *Lamentation* or, more likely, for escape if Corpulax and Huron Blackheart's scheme went awry. No guards had been posted and there was very little sign of recent activity.

Deeper into the ship, things had taken on a very different complexion. Corpses of the crew had been left to rot where they had been butchered, many with wounds to the back of the head and torso where they had been shot from behind. Just as Epimetheus was boarding via stealth, it appeared the raiders who had taken this vessel had done so too. Where wounds from attacks from the rear weren't apparent, throats had been slit to prevent the victim from crying out for help.

But it was the dead who were the lucky ones.

As in Atika plague zombies lurched along the corridors, but instead of rock and ore, they carried vials and containers, food and poison with which to taint the fleet's provisions. Unlike Atika, their overseers wore crimson armour, the red crudely painted over whatever colour their armour originally was.

Red Corsairs. Rather than have Tzula explain who Huron Blackheart was, Epimetheus had been able to extract the information directly from her mind but what he had found there appalled him. Bad enough that Horus had turned half of the Emperor's Legions ten thousand years ago but for it to still happen today, often willingly, was difficult to comprehend. Were the false promises of the Dark Powers still that attractive after all that history had taught? No matter. Vengeance ran in Epimetheus's blood and soon, when the ship was destroyed, vengeance would be his, regardless of the cost.

Epimetheus was forced to keep to the shadows and seek cover in cabins and crew dormitories to avoid detection. Though his desire to throttle these turncoats was immense, the last thing he wanted to do was tip the pirates off about his presence on board and his progress towards his goal was both slow and measured.

His psychic gifts had revealed two locations on the ship where sorcerous activity was at its most intense. The first was amidships while the other was several decks lower down, but both burned like beacon fires in the warp. According to a parchment schematic of the ship he had discovered in one of the officers' cabins, the first was on the route he needed to take to reach the second so that was where he was headed.

The closer he got, the more the ship began to alter. At first, it was simply a rime of hoarfrost dappling the metal of the bulkhead, but this gradually gave way to the metal itself taking on a new aspect and bizarre fronds descending from the ceiling like polyps. The plague zombies and their overseers became less frequent, as if this part of the ship had been shunned due to the changes wrought upon it and their mystical nature.

The psychic resonance grew stronger and Epimetheus drew his bolt pistol, safe in the knowledge that if he were to use it, nobody other than those on the receiving end of the contents of its magazine would be able to hear it. His back to an ice-sheened wall, he sidled along it, approaching an

open hatchway from which he could hear voices. In such close proximity of others gifted by othersight, he had to strain to keep his presence in the warp occluded. Reaching the threshold, he risked a surreptitious glance into the room beyond.

Four Chaos sorcerers stood facing each other in a circle at the centre of the chamber. The walls and floor were even more misshapen than the approaching corridors, and leering daemonic faces filled every surface, observing the scene dispassionately with unblinking, lidless eyes.

All the sorcerers carried staves, as different from each other as their bearers. The one with his back to Epimetheus wore armour of iridescent purple, trimmed with silver and black hair that tumbled over ornate pauldrons. His staff was made of the darkest wood, almost black in colour, and it was inset along its length with human-sized eyes, each blinking out of time with the others.

Next to him was an emaciated figure, his unadorned, unpainted power armour too large for his diminished frame. His face was wrinkled like the bark of a dead tree and his completely bloodshot eyes and the clumps of wispy hair that dotted his scalp lent him the aspect of one who had paid a high price for his dalliances with the warp. The staff in his hand, as simple as his armour yet greyed and carbonised by fire, served to reinforce this.

Opposite him was a sorcerer who was obviously a follower of the Plague God. Though still recognisable as power armour, the plates no longer resembled ceramite and were instead coated in a scabrous material criss-crossed in a network of translucent veins through which flowed pus and other noxious fluids. His face appeared to be was painted white, but just beneath the surface capillaries and burst blood vessels gave it a pale violet hue, the same colour as his staff which looked like a length of solidified intestine.

The final sorcerer stood a head taller than the others, and in him Epimetheus recognised something. Under different circumstances, ones

where the Imperium had not been torn asunder by civil strife in millennia past, the Grey Knight might have called him a kindred spirit, another who could recall times past as if it was only yesterday. The traitor's armour was the exact twin of Epimetheus's own set of Cataphractii but, whereas the Grey Knight's suit was silver tarnished by a few remaining patches of green, the sorcerer's was blue and gold. Even hooded and in unfamiliar livery, Epimetheus could still recognise his features as being that of a Prosperan, one of the Thousand Sons sorcerer elite.

Epimetheus was preparing to burst into the chamber and kill all four of them before they could react when the son of Magnus tapped his ornate staff twice on the floor and uttered a single word in a language Epimetheus didn't understand.

When he swung around the corner, bolt pistol raised, all he found was the after image of teleportation and the whiff of seared ozone.

826960.M41 / Delver-stronghold 2761/b. Mount Dhume, Pythos

A thousand guns were raised and aimed at the same target. Exposed on the outcrop of rock, the Chaos Warmaster, no matter how formidable his reputation, no matter how high his cunning, had no escape.

Escape was not his intention.

In a crackle of warp-spawned lightning, four figures appeared alongside Abaddon. In the same instant that Azrael gave the order to open fire, one of the newcomers, a shrivelled thing in unmarked power armour, erected a protective kine dome, the parabola of blue energy nullifying las-fire and deflecting solid rounds. Almost a hundred Imperial Guardsmen and Space Marines alike had fallen under the reflected barrage before Azrael directed them to cease firing.

Beneath the dome, the three other armoured figures raised staves in the air and commenced a noiseless chant. A violent wind blew through the

mountain approach, kicking up dust powerful enough to tear skin and strip paint from ceramite. Overhead, roiling clouds appeared in the previously clear sky, a purple and grey mass moving as if time had been sped up.

Strike had watched all this unfold from the command compartment of *Traitor's Bane* with a mixture of fear and wonder. He did not need to be warptouched to know that the four newcomers to the battlefield were sorcerers, just as he didn't need the tactical acumen of a Space Marine Chapter Master to know that Draigo was right. They had been lured into a trap.

'Strike,' Azrael's voice blared from the vox.

'Yes, lord?' Strike replied, dropping back into his command chair.

'Target the outcrop. If we can't breach the kine shield then, by the Lion, we can damn well bring him down by other means.' The venom in the Dark Angel's voice was palpable.

'Acknowledged, lord,' Strike said. He turned to his tank crew. 'You heard Lord Azrael. Bring the demolisher cannon to bear and aim for the base of the ridge.'

K'Cee bounded down from where he was sitting and went to join the demolisher gunner at the front of the compartment. Between them they had the firing solution in seconds and, accompanied by the grind of servos, swung the mighty gun around.

'Fire when ready,' Strike called over to them, not waiting for the weapon to be aimed before giving the order. The demolisher cannon fixed into position with a satisfied clank but the next sound Strike heard wasn't the thud of the weapon firing that he had expected. From somewhere above came a noise like cartilage tearing.

'What the—' Strike's question was drowned beneath the boom of the siege cannon discharging. He scrambled back up the turret ladder to inspect the aftermath of the shot only to find, to his confusion and dismay, that the crag was still intact and the five Chaos Marines along with it.

What was more bewildering was that he hadn't heard the detonation of the demolisher shell. He popped the hatch and stuck his head out of the tank.

A sea of humanity, most of it wearing Mordian blue, flowed past the Hellhammer, running in abject terror towards the landing zone. Bolters opened up from the Dark Angels positions and were soon joined by the chatter of heavier weapons. An immense shadow passed over the tank and Strike looked skyward to discover the target of the Space Marines' fire and the source of the Mordians' fear.

Vast wings beating with a sound like thunder, a Skulltaker – or Bloodthirster as Draigo had corrected him on more than one occasion – hovered over the battlefield, demolisher shell in one hand from where he had obviously plucked it out of the air. Half the size again of the one that appeared near Olympax, it snarled in rage before throwing the ordnance down among the fleeing Guardsmen. The ensuing explosion rocked *Traitor's Bane* and showered it with debris, both organic and inorganic, forcing Strike to take cover under the turret hatch. He was about to call down to the gunners to target the daemon with the main gun when more of the tearing noises emanated from the sky. In between clouds the colour of bruises, incisions in reality opened, the stuff of the warp bleeding through into realspace.

It started raining daemons.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

826960.M41 / Lamentation. Imperial Fleet, Pandorax System

The last of the cultists died as easily as the previous eight, the force halberd severing her thread to life as easily as it parted her head from her shoulders.

Already the thick warpfrost was receding from the mess hall they had turned into an improvised ceremonial chamber, and the buzzing Epimetheus felt in his skull when in close proximity to other psykers abated. These nine had been powerful in matters of the warp, of that there was no doubt, but both physically and mentally they had been no match for the Grey Knight. With their demise, the daemons using the Damnation Cache as a conduit into the material realm would struggle to gain a toehold in reality. Now they would have to expend more of their energies merely existing, making them weaker to physical assault. If Tzula had been able to reach the commanders of the Reconquest Force, they now had a fighting chance of taking Atika and resealing the Cache.

With a burst of blue flame from his gauntleted hand, Epimetheus set the corpses alight, taking his leave of the chamber which was already filling with the stink of burning flesh. The cultists had died too swiftly to raise any alarm so he still had stealth in his armoury and reaching the

Lamentation's engines was going to be a lot easier without Red Corsairs guard details stalking him.

Following the source of the constant hum and vibration that reverberated through the ship, Epimetheus slunk through the dark places, avoiding the plague zombies carrying their cargo back and forth, as oblivious to his presence as they were to everything else. The only time he had had to employ violence was when he finally reached the doors to the enginarium and found a guard posted there, the crimson paint doing a poor job of disguising his former allegiance to the Imperial Fists. The Grey Knight called upon his telekinetic abilities to move the corpse of a crewmember slain when the ship was taken. It slammed into the bulkhead with a resounding thud loud enough to be heard over the engines and, while the Red Corsair's back was turned investigating the noise, Epimetheus moved up behind him and opened his throat with a swift motion of his combat blade. He lingered over the corpse a moment, appalled that a Space Marine descended from a Legion who had given so much to stifle treachery could have turned traitor himself, before burning through the lock mechanism with warpfire and pushing open the doors to the enginarium.

The *Lamentation* was a small ship compared to others of the fleet, but the engine needed to power it through the void took up fully a third of its bulk, and the Space Marine felt dwarfed as he stood before the immense throbbing structure. The heat it threw off would have killed an unaugmented human not wearing protective clothing and Epimetheus pulled the helmet from his hip and clamped it in place to prevent his flesh from burning. A bank of instruments sat off to one side, lights and dials gently flashing and spinning to denote the ship was at rest, and Epimetheus strode over to study them. The sheer number of indicators and controls was baffling and it took him several minutes to deduce what did what. Eventually, settling on a T-bar lever that even he would need both hands to operate, he took a deep breath and pushed it all the way upwards.

Epimetheus hadn't been sure what to expect. The very concept of overloading a spaceship engine suggested to him that it would go nova very quickly, melting down almost instantaneously and obliterating the vessel and all on board. Instead, the thrum of the engine rose in pitch and several of the dials crept to the right, moving from sections marked in green through a spectrum that terminated in red.

Epimetheus had been moulded in the image of his primarch, remoulded in the image of the Emperor upon his ascension to the Grey Knights and blessed with enormous psychic talent. When he had set out on this mission he had assumed it to be one-way and was willing to sacrifice his all to ensure its success. If he did not have to needlessly lay down his life then he wasn't going to do so. He checked the dials again to see how fast they were moving and calculated that he had just over thirty minutes to get back to the landing bay and commandeer one of the ships there to try and make it back to Pythos. Hopefully, with all of the confusion a ship blowing up in their midst was going to cause, the fleet would be too busy to notice a tiny fighter sporting the colours of the Red Corsairs speeding towards Pythos. He gripped the lever again and pushed it further upwards, wrenching it from its housing before tossing it away. By the time anybody else realised that the engine was going to blow, they wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

He turned to leave but discovered that he was no longer alone in the enginarium. Clad in red and black armour haloed by a spiked golden arch sat atop his backpack, stood a figure he only recognised from Tzula's memory: Huron Blackheart.

In one hand he held a massive power axe, already activated and bristling with energy, while his other was covered by a taloned power fist, similarly ready for battle. At his feet, a strange creature loitered, its maw a mess of misshapen teeth, its leathery pale orange hide mottled with brown pustules. He could see both of them with his eyes but neither registered as

presences in the warp, which had allowed the Tyrant of Badab to get the drop on him.

‘So,’ Huron said, raising his axe and charging the Grey Knight, ‘who do we have here?’

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Pythos**

The screams of dying men drowned out the wails of the horrors birthing into reality. The daemons were indiscriminate, caring not who they slaughtered and Mordian and Catachan died alongside Dark Angels, no pecking order being applied to the killing. Some turned upon each other, the lure of fresh souls not great enough to outweigh settling old scores or challenging those more favoured by their patrons.

Winged fiends flew overhead, engaging the Dark Talons that still flew air cover, macabre dogfights sporadically breaking out and filling the sky with bursts of explosions and low hanging vapour trails. Thunderhawks struggled to get airborne, their hulls caked with bloated and clawed horrors. Dark Angels armed with flamers bathed them in fire but they too soon found themselves buried under a morass of the Neverborn, stripping away armour and tearing at the flesh beneath. Those Imperial Guardsmen not run mad by the sight of things that should not be walking among them, fought in vain, their lasrifles no match for iron-tough hide. Some had made it back to the shelter of the mine but they were merely delaying the inevitable. As soon as the daemons had massacred those who had stood and fought, their turn to die would come.

Their differences set aside for the sake of battle, Azrael and Draigo fought shoulder to shoulder, the *Titansword* and the *Sword of Secrets* rising and falling in concert, despatching daemons back to whence they came. The Supreme Grand Masters’ armour was streaked with gore, and a heap of rapidly dissolving corpses lay in a ring around them.

It served as no warning to others of their kind as still the Neverborn drove at the two Space Marines, looking for one or the other to falter and grant them an opening.

Behind them, *Traitor's Bane* traversed the slope slowly, the mobile fortress shredding and broiling daemons with its weapons and crushing them beneath its treads, but those it killed were a mere drop in the ocean compared to the numbers still spewing forth from the portals. Realising its threat, a pack of lithe daemons targeted the Hellhammer, their vaguely feminine forms scrabbling over the hull with claws and blades in place of hands.

‘They’re right on top of us!’ Tamzarian called out.

‘We need to burn them off,’ Strike answered. ‘Can we turn the flamers on ourself?’

‘Negative, chief,’ one of the gunners replied. ‘They don’t have the firing arc.’

K’Cee, who had been fiddling with a bundle of cables behind one of the auspexes, loped over to Strike’s command chair and pointed at one of the buttons he had added to the armrest. Many of the modifications the jokaero had made to the tank were purely cosmetic – a flange here, some filigree there – and the number of extra buttons K’Cee had added purely for the sake of symmetry or aesthetics had become the bane of Tamzarian’s life. This one, however, appeared to do something and he was most insistent that the colonel press it. Which he did.

The hull of the Hellhammer lit up as millions of volts of electricity passed through it, frying the boarders and turning their white skin and violet hair the darkest black. Their remains tumbled from the hull, breaking like charcoal on the hard ground.

Enraged, the Bloodthirster turned its attention to Strike’s command vehicle, swatting other winged daemons out of the way like flies as it tore towards the Hellhammer.

‘Target it with the demolisher and hellhammer but stagger the shots by a split second,’ Strike ordered, peering out through the view slit. Two shots followed soon after, their report blending into one due to their proximity.

Without pause, the Bloodthirster caught the first shell in its powerful grasp, its fingers leaving an impression on the tough metal casing but, distracted, it was too slow to react to the second which caught it square in one of its meaty flanks. Time seemed to freeze for a moment, and all on the battlefield stared enraptured as the massive daemon tumbled out of the sky. It twisted mid-fall and landed crouched on its feet, the force of impact breaking open the ground beneath it and felt as far away as Atika and Thermenos. It rose from its haunches and raised its head to the clouds before emitting a deep bellow of rage and pain. It looked back towards the Hellhammer and charged.

Lesser daemons struggled to get out of the way, and those unfortunate enough to be caught in the Bloodthirster’s path were either trampled underfoot or picked up and slung bodily at the tank. Achieving a pace that nothing of its size and bulk should reasonably reach, it launched itself into the air, axe raised above its head ready to smash it through the body of *Traitor’s Bane*.

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‘Not very talkative, are we?’ Huron Blackheart commented, sweeping his power axe through the space Epimetheus had just vacated.

The Grey Knight countered with a riposte from his halberd, the buzz of energy becoming a crackle as the two power fields met. He said nothing.

‘Come now. At least tell me which Chapter sired you so I can have your corpse shipped back to them.’ Huron pulled his axe away and swung again but his blow was again blocked by Epimetheus’s weapon. ‘Or wear your hide as a banner the next time I face them in battle.’

Epimetheus went on the attack this time, a flurry of strikes aimed at Huron's body but each one met by the head or haft of the traitor's axe. Whatever had blinded him to Blackheart's presence was inhibiting him from using his psychic abilities, and the Grey Knight was now reliant on only his skill with a physical weapon to see him through this battle. The creature that had been at Huron's heel was perched on a railing designed to prevent crewmen from falling into the vast chasm surrounding the engine and was looking on disinterestedly. Epimetheus couldn't pinpoint it, but he was certain the wretched thing was blanking out his powers.

'I do not recognise your colour scheme and you bear no markings on your armour. Are you a renegade like me?' Huron said, switching tack and attempting an uppercut with his power fist, which Epimetheus knocked away with the haft of his halberd. 'Because I can always make use of somebody like you, particularly in light of your gifts.'

Epimetheus broke his silence. 'I'd rather die here on this ship than throw in my lot with you.' He gripped the halberd in both hands and was using it two-handed like a staff, blocking Huron's blows with the base and attacking with the head. He struck a glancing blow to the traitor's thigh, cracking the ceramite, but Blackheart immediately retaliated with an attack of his own that struck Epimetheus on the pauldron, taking off the surface layer of verdigris and moss that still coated it.

'Interesting,' the former Astral Claw said. 'Are you an Iron Hand? No, still too much flesh to you, not enough augmetics. A Silver Skull? Perhaps not. You didn't spend months consulting the innards of dead animals before deciding whether to fight me.'

Epimetheus said nothing and let his weapon do the talking instead. Three blows aimed for the head, all parried by Blackheart's axe.

'Or are you a Grey Knight? The Hamadrya here tells me that your psychic abilities are off the scale. Nothing it can't keep in check, naturally, but impressive nonetheless.' Blackheart aimed a blow at Epimetheus's

midriff. The Grey Knight stepped back allowing the power fist to pass through thin air and lunged with his halberd, narrowly missing the traitor's head.

‘Yes, I think that’s it. You are a Knight of Titan. A daemon hunter. Be sure to give my regards to Mordrak the next time you see him. I hear he holds quite the torch for me.’ Blackheart took a step back from Epimetheus, giving himself more room to swing his axe which met with the adamantium haft of the Grey Knight’s weapon.

‘What I don’t understand is the armour. A suit like that is a Chapter relic and should be worn by a Chapter Master. You are certainly not Kaldor Draigo so why do you wear the suit? What marks you out as being so special?’ His axe head clipped Epimetheus’s pauldron again. ‘But that’s not a relic to you, is it? You’ve always worn it. I can smell the millennia on you, Grey Knight. That same stink of the ages that emanates from Abaddon and his ilk.’

Epimetheus’s blows came harder now, his choler up. Had Blackheart really figured all of this out from the state and pattern of his armour or had his familiar read him? If it was powerful enough to suppress his psychic powers, then it was likely able to brush the surface of his mind without him knowing. The Grey Knight was relentless, forcing Huron onto the back foot. The Red Corsair’s swipes were purely defensive now, driven back by Epimetheus’s onslaught.

‘I’ve hit a nerve haven’t I, Grey Knight? Not only are you ancient, but you were one of the first to wear the silver of the Grey Knights. More than that you were one of the—’

Overreaching slightly to block a thrust of the halberd, Epimetheus took full advantage and struck Blackheart on the back of the bicep forcing him to drop his axe. Swinging the pole arm back around low, he smashed the haft against the back of Huron’s calf, dropping the traitor to the floor. In an

instant, Epimetheus was over him, halberd tip poised to carve open the Red Corsair's throat.

Blackheart laughed. 'As much as I've enjoyed our very one-sided conversation, it really is time for me to leave. If you hurry, you might be able to make it back to the hangar and steal that ship you were planning to escape on.' He started to dematerialise. 'Until next time, Da—'

Epimetheus slammed the halberd down but it connected only with bulkhead, Huron Blackheart having already escaped. He flicked the weapon up and around towards the rail but the Red Corsair's familiar had gone too. Warning sirens wailed and emergency lighting kicked in pitching the enginarium into a red gloom. He checked the dials on the instrument array and saw that they had all crept up into the orange zone. His duel with Blackheart had wasted valuable time but there was still a chance he could escape the *Lamentation*.

Locking his halberd to his back, Epimetheus sprinted from the enginarium.

826960.M41 / Delver-stronghold 2761/b. Mount Dhume, Pythos

Tamzarian threw the tank into reverse, desperate to avoid the mighty axe head bearing down on them, but *Traitor's Bane* had barely moved before the Bloodthirster's weapon hit. The clang of metal on metal reverberated around the command compartment but the hull held out, a long dent in the thick armour – much to K'Cee's chagrin – the only damage.

Without waiting for orders, the gunners let loose with all weapons, peppering the daemon's hide with bolter and las-fire and igniting small fires across its wings and torso with the flamers, but this only enraged it further.

The loaders slammed another hellhammer round into the main cannon but just as it was about to be fired, Strike called out, 'Hold your fire!'

The crew all looked at him dumbfounded.

‘We know we can take hits from that thing’s axe. How do you think we’d do against one of our own shells?’ A murmur of agreement and understanding rippled around the compartment. It did not last long.

‘Tamzarian. Full ahead. We’re going to ram it.’

‘But, chief—’ the driver said.

‘It’s not open to debate, trooper. Open that throttle and put us into that Skulltaker. The rest of you, keep those sponson guns firing.’

Slamming the gear lever out of reverse, Tamzarian pushed forward on the throttle, propelling the tank forwards in a burst of acceleration. Smaller daemons caught under the treads but did nothing to impede the Hellhammer’s movement as it sped inexorably towards the Bloodthirster. The daemon did not attempt to get out of the way, did not beat its enormous wings and take to the air but stood its ground. As *Traitor’s Bane* crashed into it, the thing was actually smiling.

The sound of impact was too great for K’Cee’s noise dampeners to compensate for and as the tank ground onwards with the daemon pinned to the front of its hull, the echo still rang out, painful to all those crewing the Hellhammer. The Bloodthirster raised its axe once again, gripping the side of the tank with its free hand, and brought it down upon the turret, shearing off the searchlight mounted there and leaving a gouge in the armour the twin of its earlier blow.

Before it had a chance to bring it down again, Strike smashed his fist into the button on the armrest of his chair lighting up the outside of *Traitor’s Bane* in a nimbus of electrical energy. The Bloodthirster cried out, its body convulsing and shuddering under the massive voltage passing through it. Its skin blistered and smouldered and the hair on its head and face ignited, smoke pouring over the still moving tank.

Without warning, the electrical field cut out.

Strike mashed the button repeatedly but to no avail. The system was as dead as they soon would be. K’Cee tore a cover away from beneath one of

the control consoles and slid underneath it on his back, pulling at cables and wires in an attempt to get it working again.

‘Slam on,’ Strike ordered. ‘Dead halt, now!’

Not questioning the colonel, Tamzarian yanked back hard on the brake lever, instantly bringing the tank to a stop from a speed in excess of a hundred kilometres per hour. Thanks to the jokaero’s ministrations, none of the occupants of *Traitor’s Bane* felt any of the ill effects of such a rapid deceleration. The same could not be said of the Bloodthirster.

It launched from the body of the Hellhammer, velocity driving it through the air for over fifty metres before it hit the ground and skidded the same distance again, bowling over its smaller daemonic cousins on its way. For several moments, it lay there unmoving, smoke still rising from its form. Just when Strike thought it was vanquished, it stirred, dragging itself to its feet and thrusting its fearsome axe towards the heavens. Bellowing a war cry, it dipped its head and charged, the ground beneath it cracking open with every stride.

‘Full ahead. Ram it again,’ Strike said calmly.

In time with the sponson weapons opening up, Tamzarian milked the power plant for all it was worth, launching like a rocket towards the daemon. An unstoppable force on its way to meet an immovable object. Its rage focused on the tank speeding towards it, the Bloodthirster shrugged off the bolter and las-shots impacting against it and built up a head of speed. Mere metres from collision, it threw itself into the air. Axe held aloft in both hands, it drove the warpforged blade down, this time splitting the top layer of armour across the front of the hull. Standing astride the turret, the claws of its feet dug deep into the metal to prevent it from being bucked off as it rained blows down upon the Hellhammer.

‘Any time now would be good, K’Cee,’ Strike said. The jokaero slid out from under the console and gave a frustrated shrug before burying himself in wires and circuitry again.

Across the battlefield, the Imperial infantry and Space Marines were faring little better than the stricken super-heavy tank. The ruined corpses of Mordians and Catachans carpeted the approach to the deliver-stronghold, the smaller winged daemons having taken to snatching Guardsmen up before dropping them from a great height onto their comrades below. Those few able to mount any kind of defence found themselves woefully underarmed, lasrifles virtually ineffective against their daemoniac foes.

Gabriel and the Deathwing had regrouped in the face of the surprise attack, and though they had been fighting to protect stronghold 2761/b for far longer than their brethren, their defence was as spirited as when it first began. Corralled in a circle, their storm bolters glowed red from overuse, forcing them to alternate between ranged and close combat weapons. Several of their number lay dead, their ancient suits of Terminator armour split open by claw and fang, and those who fought on all laboured under grievous wounds.

Above them, the Dark Talons struggled to provide effective air support, harried constantly by the winged daemons still spilling forth from the portals. The handful who had attempted strafing runs soon found themselves the target of daemons on the ground and plumes of thick black smoke billowed upwards from numerous crash sites. The only effective aerial response the Dark Angels had been able to mount was Sammael's jetbike and the destructive power of his underslung plasma cannon, but he now found himself having to cope with the attentions of two bloated monstrosities clinging to the body of the *Corvex*.

Azrael and Draigo had distinguished themselves, as would be expected of Space Marines of their position and status, but even they were hard pressed to fend off such a sustained assault. The Grey Knight bled from a head wound, his Larraman's Organ struggling to seal the deep gouge yet still he fought on, the gore-streaked blade of the *Titansword* keeping the ravening horde at bay. Azrael's cloak was nothing but rags and his armour was pierced across his thigh. The right greave was missing altogether,

stripped away by daemonic claws, and congealed blood coated his forearm. Like his counterpart, he continued to slay the Neverborn with abandon but the weight of numbers was threatening to consume both Supreme Grand Masters.

The Bloodthirster hammered on the hull of *Traitor's Bane*, the rhythmic beating of the axe splitting armour and destroying weapons. Inside, the crew awaited the inevitable while Tamzarian swung the steering controls sharply left and right to throw the unwanted rider from its back. Another heavy blow struck the turret, the rending of the armour as loud as the creature's incessant grunts and cries of fury, quickly followed by another, this time cracking all the way through and sending daylight leaking into the darkened confines.

'Drop the rear hatch, Tamzarian,' Strike called. 'We're going to have to bail out.'

Above him, more light bled in, the Bloodthirster tearing back the torn plates to create an opening big enough for him to get at the nuisance tank's occupants. Fully aware of the futility of the act, Strike drew his laspistol and aimed it at the daemon who was peering down through the aperture. The Bloodthirster snorted derisively and reached down, unbothered by the pinpricks of las-fire aimed at its head and face. Suddenly, as if scooped away by some invisible force, the daemon was gone, replaced by the report of artillery fire. Lots of artillery fire.

Being careful not to slice himself open on the sharp edges of torn armour plating, Strike lifted himself up and looked out from the ruined turret.

Colonel Strike was not a man given over to open displays of emotion – a lifetime in the 183rd and growing up with nine elder brothers for company saw to that – but what he was greeted by as he emerged from *Traitor's Bane* almost made him weep.

Tanks.

Hundreds upon hundreds of tanks.

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All notions of stealth abandoned on his hurried journey back through the supply ship, Epimetheus put two rounds from his bolt pistol through the head of the Red Corsair barring his way.

The plague zombies he had been escorting continued on in ignorance that their overseer had been killed and Epimetheus barged his way through them, causing more than one to spill the container it was carrying, contaminated dry ration packs tumbling to the deck. Unsure of what to do, the mindless slaves looked around aimlessly until they too took bolt rounds to the head, another of Huron's traitors emerging from a corridor and opening fire in the direction of the fleeing Grey Knight. Without breaking stride, Epimetheus turned his torso and fired from the hip, a single shot striking his would-be killer in the throat and felling him. The alarms grew more insistent and a female voice speaking High Gothic intoned a continuous warning, urging anybody left on board to abandon ship.

Rounding the next corner, Epimetheus almost ran into two more Red Corsairs attempting to do exactly that. The first he took down with his bolt pistol, the second with his mind, stabbing out through the immaterium with a psi-lance and lobotomising the Traitor Marine. He hurdled the quivering figure and raced towards the hangar bay. Shoulder barging the doors open, he was instantly assailed by the smell of smoke and the crackle of fire.

The fighter-interceptors that had been berthed here upon his arrival were ablaze, each one at an advanced stage of consumption by the inferno and certainly in no fit state to fly. Around them lay the corpses of cultists who had likely fled here to use the craft to flee the ailing *Lamentation*, skulls ruined by what appeared to be las-fire. At the far end of the landing bay, sitting atop the sleek roof of the shuttle that had delivered Epimetheus here, was the source of this carnage.

‘I thought you’d need a ride back,’ Shira said cheerfully, sliding down from the top of the shuttle onto the already open boarding ramp.

‘And I thought I told you to get out of here,’ Epimetheus retorted, his anger barely tempered by relief.

‘I never was very good at following orders,’ Shira countered, disappearing into the shuttle.

Shaking his head, Epimetheus followed her up the ramp.

A minute later, the Inquisition shuttle burst clear of the *Lamentation* and back out among the fleet. The general vox-channels were abuzz with talk of the supply ship that had seemingly appeared from nowhere in their midst not long earlier, and Shira put out a general call informing the Imperial vessels to avoid it along with a précis of the reason why. Hurriedly, admirals and captains ordered their ships away from the doomed craft.

The two closest frigates had just finished their evasive manoeuvres when the *Lamentation*’s sub-warp engines finally reached critical point and the hijacked ship exploded with the brightness of a small sun. Chunks of debris scattered in all directions, many burning up against the shields of the fleet, accompanied by a cosmic shockwave that buffeted the smaller vessels like a storm surge tossing driftwood.

Shira fought with the controls of the shuttle, turbulence threatening to force it into a terminal spin but, with help from the Ordos-funded automated systems, she retained control and kept the craft level until the swell abated. Once she was certain that the threat had passed, she switched most of the systems over to auto and turned to Epimetheus who was stood at the rear of the cockpit, his armoured form too bulky for any of the seats.

‘I was listening in on the vox-traffic while I was waiting for you. That Catachan colonel you and Tzula talked about has set up a base at one of the strongholds south-east of Atika. The Dark Angels are operating out of there too. Three Navy fighter wings are among the reconquest force and I’m sure they’d be better off with somebody of my obvious skills flying

with them.’ She looked at Epimetheus hopefully. ‘What do you say? Should I make for there?’

The Grey Knight removed his helmet and looked back at her, staring her dead in the eyes. ‘And it has nothing to do with the Heldrake that’s been reported attacking patrols and strongholds across the southern peninsula of Pythos Prime? The one with the ragged wing?’

Revenge. That was exactly the reason why Shira wanted to make for the Imperial base and get back into combat. But she had only found out that ‘Ragwing’, as the vox-operators were calling it, was terrorising Pythos from a broadcast she had picked up less than an hour ago.

‘You know, it’s so creepy when you do that,’ she said, crossing her arms over her chest and gripping her shoulders. ‘So? Shall I land us there?’

The Space Marine looked thoughtful for a moment, weighing up the options. ‘Put us down in the far north of the continent. There are strongholds there that could use our aid.’

This was something else he had got from reading Shira and the vox-chatter she had absorbed. The Dark Angels were concentrating their forces in the south leaving Imperial Guard regiments to garrison the more remote strongholds.

Sighing, she turned back to the controls and adjusted their course.

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Strike clambered from the back of the Hellhammer, following his crew out of the stricken vehicle. K’Cee shambled alongside him, blinking in the daylight after spending so long in the darkened confines of *Traitor’s Bane*.

The rumble of tanks was overwhelming, not only the noise but the nauseating bass rumble that heralded their coming. Scores of vehicles were rolling into the landing zone with many more behind them in an armoured column stretching back as far as Strike could see. Baneblades,

Shadowwords, Leman Russ, Hellhounds, Vanquishers, Executioners; tanks of almost every pattern currently in service with the Imperial Guard. Most sported the camo green livery of the 183rd, but in amongst their number were grey and plain green hulled tanks – Vostroyan and Cadian judging by their markings.

Daemons fell by the dozen to their cannons, returned to the warp in a crescendo of explosive fury. Some of the smaller ones panicked and turned to flee, running into a wall of fire from the Dark Angels and emboldened Guardsmen advancing down the slope. The greater daemons held no such terror of the Imperial armour and sought to engage them, clawing and rending with daemoniac appendages.

A grotesque horned thing, its four arms ending in crab-like claws and vicious spikes, tore at a Hellhound ripping open the crew compartment and slicing at the Cadians inside. The gunner, paralysed with fear, maintained his grip on the trigger of the flamethrower bathing the blessed of the Pleasure God in ignited promethium. The daemon revelled in the pain, moaning in ecstasy as its flesh sizzled and cracked, but its rapture was short-lived. The flames from the engulfed Keeper of Secrets caught the tanks supplying the flamethrower, exploding them in a powerful burst that evaporated the greater daemon and other lesser ones that were caught in the blast radius.

The Bloodthirster that had crippled *Traitor's Bane* was in a bad shape, its left arm and wing shorn away entirely by the tank shell that had flung it from the hull of the Hellhammer. Recovering its axe, it roared in the direction of a Catachan Baneblade, knocking Guardsmen, Space Marines and daemons to the ground with its force. It charged, but got no more than a few metres before more shells struck it, taking its other arm and a good chunk of its torso. It slumped to its knees, bellowing in defiance as more ordnance eviscerated it. Howling its rage to the last, two of the Deathwing moved in and finished the beast off with their blades.

‘Find somewhere to hide,’ Strike yelled to the jokaero over the sound of tank fire. K’Cee was a genius with weapons and machines, but combat was not his forte and Strike still wasn’t certain how the Dark Angels would react to a xenos in their midst. Picking up discarded lasrifles as he went, K’Cee loped over to a large rock and took up position behind it.

Retrieving a heavy flamer from beneath the body of a dead Mordian, Strike burned a path through the battlefield, fighting his way to the two Chapter Masters still battling alongside one another. The way they fought was like warfare made art, each stroke of their swords measured and precise, painting the ground around them in ichor and gore.

‘It seems you’ve found your tanks, colonel,’ Azrael said, ramming the tip of the *Sword of Secrets* into a daemon’s gullet. ‘Or rather your tanks found you.’

‘These aren’t just mine,’ Strike replied, frying a pink multi-limbed monstrosity with a quick burst of flame. ‘Half the armour on Pythos must be rolling in here.’

The advancing column showed no sign of ending. The landing zone was already filling up and the approach to stronghold 2761/b was lined with tanks driving the daemons caught before them onto the guns of the waiting Dark Angels, Mordians and Catachans. Above them, another rent opened in the sky, spewing forth more of the Neverborn.

‘Our reinforcements are finite, but I fear the enemy’s are not,’ Draigo said. A diseased, taloned hand reached for Azrael’s face, but the Grey Knight separated it from its owner’s arm before it could do any damage. The next swing of his blade opened the daemon’s guts, maggots spilling to the ground in a sickening shower. ‘If we cannot get those portals closed, all this will come to naught.’

High above the battle, the four sorcerers continued to weave their debased magicks under the watchful eye of Abaddon. If the recent turn of events had given him cause for concern, he wasn’t showing it.

‘Leave it to me,’ Strike said, breaking off from the two Space Marines and clearing a route with a wide sweep of his flamer. Giving short bursts of his weapon to keep the horde at bay, he crossed the hundred metres or so between him and the Baneblade that had accounted for the Bloodthirster, using the tanks advancing on the delver-stronghold as cover. Other Imperial Guardsmen had the same idea and, behind each one, he found Catachans pleased to see that their leader was not only alive but in the thick of the action.

Reaching the slow moving Baneblade, he clambered up the skirt, his feet finding purchase on the huge rivets holding it in place, and crawled over to the turret. Heaving himself up to the hatch, he banged on it with the butt of his flamer. Almost instantly, the hatch popped open and a familiar face greeted him along with the business end of a laspistol.

‘Good to see you, Brigstone,’ Strike said dryly. ‘I was beginning to think you were going to sit out this entire war.’

‘Sorry about that, chief,’ Brigstone replied, helping the colonel down into the tank. ‘We couldn’t get the damn voxes to work. I think we’re being jammed or something. Been sat twiddling our thumbs on an island in the middle of the ocean for months.’

‘What made you come back now?’ asked Strike. The interior of the Baneblade was almost identical to that of *Traitor’s Bane*, minus K’Cee’s enhancements.

‘We saw drop pods coming down on Pythos Prime and figured it for a liberation force or more enemy troops. Either way, with dry season starting it meant we could get the tanks through the jungle. Hooked up with a couple of mechanised brigades we ran into on the way down. Said something big was going down at Mount Dhume and they were headed here to help out.’

‘Well, you took your time about it.’ Strike’s tone relaxed.

‘Would have been here sooner, chief, but we ran into a bunch of heroes up the road. Thought we were enemy war machines and decided to ambush us. Fortunately, they only took out a few track links but it cost us a good few hours getting them repaired.’

‘How many times do I have to apologise for that, commander?’ said a woman from out of the darkened rear of the command compartment. She stepped forward and Strike saw that it was Tzula. Filthy and sporting a few more scars than the last time he had seen her but most definitely the junior interrogator. ‘Hello, colonel. Still managing to find trouble, I see.’

‘Likewise,’ Strike said with a grin. ‘Are you alone?’ he added, his face becoming grim.

Tzula’s features hardened. ‘Huron Blackheart infiltrated a supply ship in the Imperial fleet and was planning to contaminate our supply line. He had a coven of sorcerers on board masking its presence and maintaining the conditions on Pythos for the daemons to exist in realspace. I’d guess from the rate they’re dying out there that Epimetheus’s mission to destroy it was a success.’

‘Did he...?’ Strike asked.

There was a long pause before Tzula answered. ‘I don’t know. He certainly thought it was a one-way mission.’

Strike nodded solemnly. ‘Well, if he did sacrifice himself, let’s make it count for something.’ He turned to the commander. ‘Brigstone, I have a new target for your guns.’

From his vantage point high up on the mountain approach, Abaddon looked on as his army of daemons was taken apart.

For kilometres in every direction, corporeal metal and daemon flesh clashed, artillery and armour pitched against tooth and claw. It was a sight he had beheld a thousand times before on a thousand battlefields across thousands of years, but very rarely had he presided over a defeat. The battle was still underway and the price exacted from the lackeys of the

False Emperor was high, but millennia of experience cried out to him that the day was lost.

Beside him the sorcerer willing the kine shield into being faltered, the huge exertion too much for a body already wracked by the ravages of the warp. Unnatural smoke poured from the gaps in his ill-fitting armour and issued forth from his mouth, nose and tear ducts. Convulsing maniacally, the moisture in his body fled, his skin cracking and wrinkling like time speeded up. The warp barrier he had erected flickered and died, and his desiccated husk tumbled from the outcrop and turned to dust as it hit the hard ground below.

The other sorcerers looked at each other uneasily but continued with their ritual, not wishing to anger the Warmaster to whom their master had been eager to loan their services.

From the heart of the melee, Abaddon saw the turret of a tank traverse, the super-heavy taking aim in his direction. The commander of the Black Legion took this as his cue to leave, pulling a teleportation activator from a pouch at his waist and slipping his thumb over the trigger stud. This battle was indeed forfeit, and likely it would turn the course of the war for Pythos, leading to the ultimate defeat for the forces of Chaos.

It mattered not to Abaddon. To him the war was merely a distraction that would lead him to a far greater prize.

As the shell ejected from the end of the Baneblade's barrel in a burst of muzzle flare, he stabbed his armoured thumb down on the activator. By the time the round hit, killing the trio of sorcerers and turning the promontory into a shower of debris, Abaddon the Despoiler was already gone.

The Battle for Stronghold 2761/b would last another thirty-nine hours. Azrael and Draigo fought it to the very last second.

Starved of fresh daemons to bolster their forces, those stranded on the material side of the veil became desperate and attempted to break through the rolling blockade of armour moving towards them. Wave after wave of

the Neverborn fell to the Imperial guns but their kindred clambered over the corpses of the fallen, tearing and rending at the wall of steel. Free of the monsters clinging to their hulls, the Thunderhawks and Valkyries took to the air, picking off the daemons from above. The vital role they played in the battle saved many a tank crew, but the losses of Imperial armour were so immense that, a decade later, when an Adeptus Mechanicus team arrived to salvage the wrecks, casualties were measured in tonnage rather than numbers.

The enemy's forces and spirits broken, the battle devolved into smaller conflicts. A pack of Tzeentchian lesser daemons broke through to the minehead and massacred the Mordians taking cover there. Balthasar and two of his Deathwing brethren led a combined force of Catachans and Mordians into the depths of the stronghold. By first light the next morning, not a single daemon still persisted in the darkness.

With air superiority re-established, Sammael hunted down any daemon foolhardy enough to venture off the ground. The deadly plasma cannon fitted to the undercarriage of *Corvex* was fired so often that it overheated and melted down within hours, necessitating a refit from the Dark Angels Techmarines once the jetbike was back on board the Rock. It would be six days before the weapon had cooled sufficiently to be worked upon.

Bereft of his mobile command centre, Strike, along with Tzula and Magrick's adhoc squad, scoured the battlefield, targeting those daemons too nimble for the guns of the tanks. A new honour was added to the 183rd's banner in the days following the battle commemorating their bravery and sacrifice. The colonel's pride was only dented by the loss of Magrick who survived the Battle of Stronghold 2761/b but died of horrific injuries she suffered taking down a daemonette single-handed. Her fang would be ever present at Strike's hip until the war for Pythos was over.

The two Supreme Grand Masters never drifted more than a few metres apart, matching each other kill for kill. Ideologically poles apart, in the

simple matter of slaying the foes of the Imperium, they were entirely attuned. The Imperial Guardsmen who were privileged enough to witness them fight that day would carry with them stories from war zone to war zone of the two killing machines who fought for nigh on a day and a half without pause, putting paid to creatures from beyond nightmare without fear nor mercy.

The last daemon to fall to their blades was an enormous bloated thing, its putrid form generating a miasma of stench and filth that clogged the filters of Space Marine power armour and stripped flesh from bone. With the Imperial Guard ineffective against such a foe, the entirety of the remaining Dark Angels and Draigo engaged the thing for hours, constantly hampered by the smaller daemons and plague golems that separated from the main bulk of the Great Unclean One. Its eventual demise came when a trio of Nephilim jetfighters unleashed their full complement of blacksword missiles, felling the titanic daemon. The two Chapter Masters struck simultaneously, the Grey Knight piercing its chest, the Dark Angel driving the *Sword of Secrets* through its skull. Leaping clear of the flailing horror, it played out its death throes as it melted into a bubbling pool of bubonic sludge, permanently staining the slopes of Mount Dhume.

With all foes vanquished, the Space Marines marched from the field of battle, the veneration and praise of their Imperial Guard allies sounding out across the Pythosian night.

‘Your stubbornness almost cost us this war. It is high time you saw reason and ordered an assault on Atika,’ Draigo said, his voice loud enough to be heard by the Deathwing sitting on board *Roar of Vengeance* waiting for it to take off.

Any common ground the two Supreme Grand Masters had found, any bond they had formed, had been left on the battlefield. Alongside him at the foot of the Thunderhawk’s boarding ramp, Azrael bristled.

‘Next time we’ll be ready for that tactic if Abaddon employs it again. It’s high time the Grey Knights saw action on Pythos instead of kicking their heels up in the fleet.’ That was the closest to an admission that the Dark Angel was wrong Draigo would get, even if Azrael had twisted it to cast the Grey Knights in a poor light.

‘And next time he’ll strike at a more remote stronghold inaccessible to the Imperial Guard tanks and negate that advantage. We have to stop being reactive and take the battle to Abaddon, starting with Atika.’

‘I brought my Chapter here in response to your call for aid to save the population of Pythos, not condemn it. While there’s still a chance that the citizens of Atika still live, I shall not risk a direct assault.’

‘That’s not an issue, my lord,’ said a voice unfamiliar to the Dark Angel. Strike and a dark-skinned woman dressed in Catachan fatigues, vest and bandana approached the idling Thunderhawk. ‘The entire population of Atika is dead. Or as good as,’ Tzula finished.

‘It is good to see you again, Junior Interrogator Digriiz. I had feared you dead,’ Draigo said. ‘My condolences on the loss of your master. He was a fine man and a great servant of the Golden Throne.’

‘Thank you, Lord Draigo. It is my wish to honour his memory by completing his mission here and destroying the Damnation Cache,’ Tzula said, bowing slightly.

‘And you have the... weapon, I trust?’ Draigo said.

Azrael cast a sideways look at the Grey Knight but was not drawn to enquire further.

‘I have, Lord Draigo,’ Tzula said, tucking her hand into the waistband of her fatigues and surreptitiously pointing to the hilt of the athame with her thumb.

‘This reunion is all very touching but if the girl has intelligence regarding the state of Atika then I wish to hear it,’ Azrael snapped.

‘As you wish, my lord,’ Tzula said, bowing to the Dark Angel before explaining what she had discovered in Atika. She spared none of the detail regarding the population’s fate, the plot to contaminate the Imperial rations and the coven hidden among the fleet. When it came to Epimetheus, she said as little as possible.

When she had finished, Azrael simply regarded her with a penetrating stare. ‘And this mysterious Space Marine? This Epimetheus. Where is he now?’

Tzula was about to say that she believed him to have perished in the operation to destroy the hijacked supply ship when Draigo intervened. ‘That’s hardly the issue here, Azrael. The souls of Atika are lost. Even worse, they have been ensorcelled and enslaved to help the Archenemy’s cause. There is nothing to hold us back. We *must* attack.’

Azrael looked to Strike who nodded his agreement with the Grey Knight’s assessment. The commander of the Dark Angels turned and stamped off up the ramp. When he reached the threshold of the troop compartment, he halted and spun on his heel.

‘Very well, but we do this on my terms and at a time of my choosing. Have your Brotherhood be ready for the assault on the capital as soon as I issue the command. You and your men too, colonel,’ he said before the ramp retracted and the hatch slammed shut behind him.

As *Roar of Vengeance* sped its way skywards back towards the Rock awaiting it in orbit, Draigo and Strike were already issuing the orders that would ensure Atika burned.



INTERLUDE

826960.M41 / No Redemption. Geo-stationary orbit around Kylix, Pandorax System

Huron Blackheart materialised in the middle of the *No Redemption's* bridge, a rush of displaced air and crackle of warp energies presaging his arrival. The Hamadrya slunk between his legs, its eyes glowing in the darkened confines of the Murder-class cruiser's command deck. Several of the Red Corsairs present acknowledged Huron's arrival but continued about their business without ceremony.

A figure in battle-damaged Terminator armour, patches of black and yellow still evident beneath the red betraying his former allegiance to the Scythes of the Emperor, approached him. 'Shall we prepare the fleet to make for Pythos, Lord Blackheart?'

'Not yet, Remulus, though the way the war for the planet is turning, we will be needed there before long.' The Hamadrya melted into the darkness as Huron strode forward, casually tossing his axe to the deck. From the shadows twisted, mutated things emerged squabbling over which one of them would transport the precious thing to their master's arming chamber. 'I need to speak with Abaddon immediately.'

'As you wish,' Remulus said signalling to a human member of the crew to carry out their master's bidding.

Blackheart addressed some of the other renegade Space Marines, former Astral Claws and his most trusted lieutenants, but trust was a commodity rarely traded among their number. He briefly appraised them of the fate of the *Lamentation* and issued orders for the next phase of the Red Corsairs involvement in the Pythos campaign while they brought him up to speed with the intelligence they had been receiving from the death world. After several minutes, Remulus interrupted them.

‘We’ve been able to reach the Warmaster, Lord Blackheart.’

Huron dismissed his captains and followed the Terminator over to a flickering hololith, a diminutive facsimile of Abaddon being broadcast from the surface of Pythos.

‘If you’ve only contacted me to gloat about the failure of the ambush at the mine, I shall wipe you and your renegades from the face of the galaxy with such totality that even the footnotes of history books will neglect to remember you, usurper.’ The threat in Abaddon’s voice was backed by a confidence that left none who heard his words in any doubt of their veracity.

‘Far from it, Abaddon. Considering that you have no interest whatsoever in holding the planet, the...’ Huron paused, knowing that if he selected his next few words incorrectly he would likely be dooming the Red Corsairs to a blood feud with the Black Legion that they were not yet in a position to contest. ‘...limited success of your operation has probably extended the war on Pythos, giving you longer to find that what you seek. Or is *who* you seek more accurate, Warmaster?’

Abaddon smirked, a grin that had condemned a thousand worlds crossing his lips. ‘And what would you know of it, pirate?’

‘More than you think. I’ve found what you’re looking for and left him undamaged for you.’ It was Blackheart’s turn to grin now. ‘Better yet, I know how you can capture him.’

The hololith flickered, the image of Abaddon briefly cutting in and out. When it resolved again, the Warmaster's body language had relaxed, his tone conciliatory.

‘Tell me more, Blackheart.’

PART FIVE



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

085961.M41 / Atika Hive, Pythos

Grigor Mittel set down the lump of ore he had carried up from the bowels of Atika and turned to repeat the journey. He did not know, nor care, how many times he had done this before, nor did he have any concept of how long he had been doing it for. Under the possession of the plague zombie virus, he merely existed, held somewhere between life and death to carry out the whim of others.

His body had deteriorated during his long months of servitude, but he had not noticed. Fingers were missing on both hands, the skin on his chest had worn through to bone and the flesh of his cheek was torn, a ragged hole through which his yellowed teeth poked. His clothes, like those of the others who laboured under the curse, were threadbare and frayed, leaving him almost naked, but Grigor did not feel the cold deep down in the mine tunnels. He could no longer feel anything at all.

Something brushed past his arm causing him to stop. He looked to his side to see a woman, though Grigor could no longer distinguish gender just as he had no gauge of age or race, shamle past him. He looked at her, for a fleeting moment experiencing a rush of recognition. She too stopped, turning to meet Grigor's gaze. Their eyes locked, dead stares regarding each other vacantly until, barely perceptibly, the corner of her mouth

turned upwards a fraction. It was a smile, but Grigor could no longer recognise it as such.

The moment was cruelly ended by the lash of the overseer's whip, gouging flesh from Grigor's back and snaking out to rip the woman's hand from the end of her arm. Grigor started to move again, not out of fear or pain but from some base imperative that told him the whip meant move. He stepped over the woman's severed hand, looking down as he did so to see a slim band of metal wrapped around one of the fingers.

Grigor no longer knew that the ring signified the union between two lovers, and he no longer knew that it was he who was wed to the woman, or that her name was Katalina. He could not remember that they had met three years ago when she had joined his mining team along with a new influx of settlers from Gaea. He could not remember that the governor himself had presided over their union or that it had taken place on the Feast of the Emperor's Ascension, revellers greeting them in the streets of the hive city and wishing them well for the future. He could not remember that in the weeks before Pythos fell they were talking of starting a family and of moving to Gaea where they would work on Katalina's family farm to raise enough money to build a home of their own.

He could not remember any of this because Abaddon's invasion had robbed him of everything he held dear, just as it had robbed an entire world of its liberty and its population of their humanity.

He heard another noise now, louder than the whip, and stopped. Everybody stopped. If he still had the faculty for description, he might have described the sound as a high-pitched whine but he did not so to Grigor it was only noise. He looked to the woman, some strange urge compelling him to do so, and she looked back. The noise became something different and he took his eyes off the woman not knowing it would be the last time he would ever see her.

When he looked up, the sky was on fire.

From orbit, the missiles rained down upon the capital of Pythos. The hive city that had stood for over five thousand years was reduced to rubble and ash in a matter of minutes. In the wake of Atika's destruction, the fleet turned its attention to the surrounding swampland and jungle, burning away the forestation and evaporating the wetlands, leaving behind a glassaic plain that tanks could use to reach the ruins of the city now that the rains had come again.

Azrael had been true to his word about assaulting the city, but stuck just as rigidly to his assertion that it would be on his terms. Despite repeated petitions from Draigo, the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels had continued to stall, prosecuting operations against enemy supply lines and concentrations of war machines before committing to the attack on Atika.

Strike was torn. Draigo's aggressive stance had a lot of merit and it would have potentially neutered the flow of daemons from the Damnation Cache a lot sooner, but Azrael's approach had virtually eliminated the threat of allies coming to the aid of the invaders now trapped in the tunnels beneath the rubble. It had also allowed fresh Imperial Guard regiments to make their way to the Pandorax System, along with elements of Legio Crucius who had deigned to send a complement of Warhound Titans to aid in the reconquest of Pythos. On a purely selfish note, Strike had been glad of the extra time to prepare for the battle as it had given K'Cee time to work on *Traitor's Bane* and get the mobile fortress operational again.

Steam still rising from the incinerated ground, the Hellhammer rolled along at the head of an armoured column the likes of which had been very rarely assembled since the days of the Horus Heresy. An entire Cadian armoured division, supported by two mobile artillery divisions followed behind the remaining Catachan tanks, along with a similar sized detachment of Vostroyan tanks. Interspersed among the countless Leman Russ variants were the pride of any armoured regiment, the super-heavy tanks. Many sported the colours of the Cadians, Catachans and Vostroyans but by far the bulk of them were in the livery of the First Palladius

armoured company, nicknamed ‘The Thunderers’ on account of their exclusive deployment of Baneblades, Doomhammers and other gargantuan armoured vehicles. The only things larger on the battlefield were the Warhounds striding along at their flanks.

In the skies over the tanks and walkers, high above the low-lying fog from the cooking off of the swamps, flew close to a thousand Valkyries ready to deliver infantry directly to the frontline. At a higher altitude soared the Thunderbolts and Lightnings of the Imperial Navy wings alongside the Dark Talons and Nephilims of the Dark Angels. Their brothers waited out in space ready to drop from the skies when the time was right but the Chapter’s entire complement of fighter-interceptors and bombers deployed in support of the Imperial Guard.

From the command seat of *Traitor’s Bane*, Strike listened in on the vox-traffic passing between the regiments, formations being coordinated and reports coming in from forward scouts. With visibility so poor, they were reliant on instruments and the eyes in the sky for navigation, but occasionally agitated messages were exchanged between crews who had inadvertently collided with one another. They were lucky they could communicate at all. Another benefit to Azrael’s delay had been the recapture of Hollowfal and an end to the enemy jamming Imperial signals.

An insistent beeping sounded from the vox denoting a priority one incoming transmission. Strike killed all other communications and switched channels.

‘Are your tanks in position, colonel?’ came Azrael’s voice, crackling over the ancient vox-unit.

Strike looked to one of the auspex operators who gave him the thumbs up.

‘Yes, Lord Azrael. We’ll be able to begin bombardment as soon as you are on the ground.’

‘Very well. Commencing deployment now.’

The Battle for Atika had finally begun.

Balthasar swung his blade, paring open the belly of the daemon leaping at him. The thing crashed to the ground with a wail, fading from reality before it had a chance to bleed out. He slashed again, taking the heads from a pair of pale svelte things with malformed claws in place of hands. They too disappeared, leaving no trace of a corpse behind.

‘Save some for the rest of us, brother,’ said Gabriel, fighting at Balthasar’s shoulder. The company master of the Deathwing blazed away with his storm bolter, allowing the younger Dark Angel to pick off any Neverborn that got too close to them.

‘Why don’t you tell that to them? There’ll be no glory left for anybody else at the rate they’re eliminating these things.’ Dragging his blade through the torso of a minor plague daemon, he finished the motion by directing his sword tip to a group fighting several hundred metres away.

Resplendent in their pristine silver Terminator armour, a squad of Grey Knights Paladins put the enemy to rout with their witchflame. Balls of white-hot fire launched from their fists, like heavy flammers given human form, but the devastation wrought by their psychic assault was far in excess of any mere weapon. Those caught by the full blast of the attack were incinerated instantly, ghoulish white outlines of their forms forever etched upon the ground. Even those on the edge of the blast area died quickly, the smallest flame soon spreading and engulfing the larger daemons arrayed against the Imperial forces.

‘If only we’d had a few of those at 2761/b then perhaps our losses would not have been so great,’ Gabriel said, taking aim at a daemon before blowing it apart with two well-placed shots.

‘That sounds like sedition to me, master. Questioning the tactics of the Supreme Grand Master,’ Balthasar teased. While their structure followed the Codex Astartes almost to the letter – ten companies, First Company granted Terminator armour, Tenth Company being the Scouts – the Dark

Angels operated unlike any other Space Marine Chapter. Their First Company – the Deathwing – went to war exclusively in their Terminator armour and it was always painted bone white in contrast to the green and black armour of their brethren in the other nine companies. They were also privy to the Chapter's darkest secrets and, among others of the Deathwing at least, were able to share their thoughts on all matters openly.

‘Lord Azrael and I have already had a full and frank debate about the merits of his tactics that day, Balthasar. Each battle, be it a victory, loss or grinding stalemate, teaches us all something, even the Supreme Grand Master. The day we stop learning is the day the Apothecaries apply the reductor to our corpses.’

Gabriel ceased firing, waiting for his weapon to reload. One of the pink, horned abominations saw an opportunity and leapt at the Dark Angel from his blindside. Gabriel brought his weapon up in a vicious arc, snapping the thing's neck with a sickening crack. ‘Besides, I think you're jealous.’ His weapon barked to life.

‘Jealous? In what way?’ Balthasar asked.

‘I've seen the way you revel in the kill, the controlled fury with which you strike down our foes. You live for battle, Balthasar, and constantly seek better ways to wage war. Your body is already a finely-tuned killing machine, but you know how much more you could achieve if your mind was as potent a weapon too.’

Balthasar said nothing, instead bringing his own storm bolter to bear and ploughing through a throng of daemons, chopping away with the sword in his other hand leaving Gabriel wondering whether he had hit a nerve.

In the troop hold of the Stormraven, Tzula watched the pict feed of the battle taking place on the ground below.

Hundreds of thousands of Imperial Guard marched across the Plain of Glass – as many of the regiments had named it – towards the ring of steel formed by the Imperial armour. With the tank bombardment as cover, they

would soon move up to relieve the Dark Angels and Grey Knights forces already engaged with the daemonic horde, allowing the Space Marines to breach the tunnels beneath Atika and take the war underground. The entirety of the Dark Angels Tenth Company had infiltrated the tunnels over a week ago and, accompanied by Castellan Crowe of the Grey Knights and a squad of Purifiers, had sealed off all routes from the Atikan underhive to the surface bar one. The largest tunnel had been left open to allow the Titans and tanks access to the subterranean battlefield, the big guns needed to handle whatever horrors the enemy kept lurking in the deeps.

Thoughts of the underhive led Tzula to wondering about Epimetheus and Shira, and what fate had befallen them. The Grey Knight never had any intention of joining up with the main reconquest force for reasons Tzula believed she had figured out, but Shira's failure to reappear was a puzzle to her. The Heldrake she was seemingly obsessed with had been spotted all over Pythos, and the junior interrogator thought the pilot would have jumped at the chance to get in the cockpit of a Navy flyer and renew the duel. She had a suspicion they had not been idle. Uncorroborated reports had been coming into Imperial Command for months of a mysterious silver ghost coming to the aid of besieged strongholds, appearing as if from nowhere – or, as one report dismissed on account of the eyewitness's lack of sobriety put it, 'out of an invisible spaceship' – at the eleventh hour and helping to fight off the attackers.

'To arms, brothers,' said Draigo, taking his eyes from the same pict screen Tzula had been watching and locking his helmet in place. The other five Grey Knights seated in the troop compartment did likewise. Tzula fastened the last two clasps on her new bodyglove and checked over her plasma pistol, augmetic arm whirring gently as she did so.

'Lord Azrael has kept you in orbit and out of the battle thus far for fear you would shame his Dark Angels.' Draigo stood up. The other Grey

Knights did likewise. The timbre of the Stormraven's engines altered as it commenced its vertical descent. Still several metres from the ground, the rear hatch descended and Draigo moved to the rear of the hold. 'Let us now make his fear manifest,' he said, leaping from the back of the hovering troop carrier.

The five other silver-clad Terminators followed him down, each one slamming onto the superheated ground below, shattering it like porcelain. Tzula was the last one out of the Stormraven, waiting for it to get closer to the ground before leaping out and landing in a forward roll, pistol raised. She instantly squeezed off a shot, making ruin of a crimson doglike creature waiting to pounce upon her. Gunfire from behind her cut down the rest of its pack and she turned to see Imperial Guardsmen charging through the gaps in the tank formation. She was unable to suppress a smile when she saw it was the Catachans at the head of the charge, their jungle-green attire taking on an orange hue in the light of airbursts and cannon flare from the artillery.

In a manoeuvre that looked like it had been choreographed, the Dark Angels and Grey Knights disengaged from their daemonic foes and pushed on towards the only remaining entrance to Atika while their human allies vacated the gap they had left. The ring of steel broke apart, scores of Leman Russes moving in to supply armoured support to the Guardsmen while the super-heavies rolled in after the Space Marines, mowing down any foe too slow to get out of their way. The artillery continued to shell the area leading to the underhive, clearing the path of daemons for the Space Marines to pass unhindered. Missile batteries launched volley after volley at the airborne horrors, any they missed being picked off by circling Valkyries and Thunderhawks.

Behind Imperial lines, more shuttles and troop landers deposited Guardsmen onto Pythos before speeding back up to the fleet to repeat the process. Where Catachans, Cadians and Vostroyans already engaged the

forces of Abaddon, troops from Krieg and yet more Cadians swelled their ranks. For the first time since the war for Pythos began, the forces of the Imperium outnumbered those of Chaos.

It would not last long.

Struggling to keep up with the massive strides being taken by Draigo and his brothers, Tzula had to break into a sprint, swinging her pistol from side to side, jetting plasma at anything unnatural that stepped within range. The Space Marine vanguard had already reached the vast opening that led down to the mines beneath the former hive city and were engaged in fierce combat with the entities still emerging from the depths. Azrael was at the head of the Dark Angels and quickly renewed his battle bond with his Grey Knights opposite number, the two Supreme Grand Masters picking up from where they had left off at 2761/b and throwing themselves into the fray with ruthless abandon.

The surge of daemons from below was relentless, and though the combined Chapters butchered many, it was not without cost. A Knight of the Flame found himself cut off from the rest of his squad, surrounded by bloodthirsty canids not unlike those Tzula had already encountered. His psychic abilities having no effect on the Khornate hounds, both his flesh and soul were devoured within their fangs before his brothers struck the beasts down in their vengeance.

Nearby, a Dark Angels sergeant in the black of the Ravenwing succumbed to the rampage of a daemoniac chariot, its hideous rider chanting from a blasphemous tome atop a spiked disc drawn along by a pair of noisome serpents on a wave of warpflame. Trying to outrun the infernal vehicle on his bike, the chariot drew alongside, slamming into the Dark Angel and bucking him from the saddle. Before he had a chance to react and lift himself from the ground, the two screaming horrors bathed him in flame, turning him to nothing more than a pile of ash in an instant.

Too fast for the Ravenwing, his murderer could not outrun the tank shell that blew it to pieces while the Space Marine's corpse was still afire.

New combatants started to flood the battlefield from the tunnel mouth, a trickle that quickly became a surge. Moving slowly, their collective consciousness under the sway of a higher power, plague zombies joined the throng of daemons, the undead soon outnumbering the living. Whereas the thralls Tzula had encountered many months earlier in Atika had been benign, these possessed a malevolent aspect, clawing and biting at anybody who got in their way. Individually, it was a simple matter to avoid them, but packed together tightly in packs it was almost impossible to escape their clutches. Thousands of Guardsmen fell to the horde only to be reborn immediately as mindless soldiers intent on killing their former comrades. Grey Knights and Dark Angels too went down under the weight of numbers, armour torn away to allow the plague zombies access to the flesh beneath. Mercifully, the genetic enhancements that protected Space Marines from disease in life continued to function in death, preventing their corpses from reanimating and turning on their brothers.

The tanks turned their guns on the largest concentrations of undead, a ceaseless fusillade ripping open the walking cadavers and tearing up craters into which the mindless slaves fell, clambering over each other in their attempts to scale the sheer walls. Those not killed, who lost limbs or other body parts from the blast, simply carried onwards, crawling in some cases where legs had been blown off. The only ones that stayed down were those who had suffered cranial injuries or lost their head altogether.

In the space of a few minutes, hundreds of thousands of plague zombies spilled out of Atika, the flow showing no signs of abating. In among them, larger figures emerged, firing upon the loyal Space Marines from behind a wall of the undead. Seemingly unnoticed in the melee, the Plague Marines killed almost at will, the little return fire they did receive soaked up by their shields of rotting flesh. But Tzula noticed them, just like she noticed

the taller shape at the rear of the horde, giving out orders and guiding his slave army.

Casually shooting the head from a plague zombie, Tzula set off in the direction of her new target, muttering a single word under her breath.

‘Corpulax.’

085961.M41 / Piraeus Stronghold. 4,218 kilometres north-east of Atika, Pythos

Shira squeezed off her final shot, the laspistol power pack dying along with the cultist she had aimed for. His body slumped to the ground alongside the seven others she had picked off from her vantage point on a ledge several metres above the tunnel. She ejected the spent cell and slammed another one home before dropping to the ground in search of new targets.

Further down the mineshaft, Epimetheus finished his duel with the final Black Legionnaire, his force halberd bifurcating the Traitor Marine with a wail of sparking energy and the wrench of tearing bone. The two halves of the ruined body had not ceased twitching by the time Shira caught up to the Grey Knight.

‘Is that the last of them?’ Shira asked, swinging a boot at part of the corpse and kicking it derisively.

Epimetheus knelt down and rifled through the pouches and containers strapped around the dead Traitor Marine’s waist. He pulled out a couple of grenades and a handful of bolt shells, adding them to his own kit. ‘That’s the last of anyone. I’m not detecting any signs of life, no presences registering in the warp.’

Confirmation, not that either of them needed it, came when they entered the next cavern and found the hold’s defenders dead at the mine face, a desperate last stand that had come to nothing. The bodies of hundreds of Cadian Whiteshields, boy soldiers pressed into the service of the Emperor, lay intermingled with those of the miners, few of them any older than the

Imperial Guardsmen they had died alongside. They had given a good account of themselves – the lifeless forms of scores of dead cultists attested to that – but their defence had been doomed to failure because of the presence of Traitor Astartes among the aggressors.

It was an all too familiar sight to Shira and the Grey Knight. For months they had been operating across the north of Pythos's main continent, responding to distress calls from Imperial Guard and militia units coming under attack from enemy raiding parties. Rather than concentrate his forces on one coordinated offensive against a single delver-stronghold, Abaddon had instead opted to launch smaller assaults against clusters of mines, synchronised so that the Imperial forces garrisoned there could not come to each other's aid. The strategy had been ruthlessly effective. For every stronghold Epimetheus and Shira made it to in time to aid its defence, two more would be lost. With the battle to retake Atika underway, there would be no reinforcements to bolster the Imperial Guard, and despite the Warmaster teetering on the verge of defeat in the war for Pythos, he could still strike with impunity in the north.

Grimly, Shira and Epimetheus set about piling up the bodies ready for burning.

‘So what are you going to do when all this is over?’

Shira's question caught the Grey Knight off-guard. Her chatter was ordinarily banal, often centred around asking him if he had met specific figures from the age of the Horus Heresy, or about Space Marine bodily functions or lack thereof.

‘I mean, when the war is over,’ she added, hacking her way through the thick undergrowth as they made their way back to the shuttle.

‘If all that you and Tzula have told me is true, the war is never over. The Imperium of Man is in a constant state of conflict. There will always be battles to fight,’ Epimetheus answered, hoping that would be the end of it.

‘That’s not really an answer,’ she smirked. ‘Do you plan on rejoining your Chapter or are we going to keep our double act together? The Silver Ghost and his daring sidekick, flying around the galaxy coming to the aid of those who need it most.’

Epimetheus reached out in front of them, grasping a low-hanging bough that was barring their way and tore it from the trunk of the mighty redwood as if it were nothing more than a twig. ‘It is no longer my Chapter. In some regards very little has changed, but the Imperium has moved on in the last ten thousand years. I am a man out of time, a throwback. I probably have more in common with Abaddon than I do the modern Space Marine.’ He stared off into the distance, almost wistful. ‘When the enemy is driven from the face of Pythos and the Damnation Cache has been resealed, I plan to leave here and make my way into the Maelstrom. I shall take the fight to the enemy and do what I was bred to do.’

‘I knew you’d keep our little team-up going,’ Shira said, coming to the shuttle they had left cloaked beneath a gargantuan tree, its trunk as wide as the flyer was long.

Epimetheus punched in a string of numbers onto a barely visible external keypad. The camouflage faded away to reveal the sleek black hull of the craft, its side hatch slowly dropping to the ground to form a boarding ramp. Shira made to climb up it but Epimetheus halted her. ‘It is something I must do alone. The Maelstrom is a deadly place littered with daemon worlds that make Pythos look like a pleasure planet. Without the correct psychic wards in place, its denizens would tear your soul apart as easily as cast eyes upon you. A simple laspistol would be no defence there.’

Shira looked as if she had just taken a punch to the gut. Though he could read minds, reading people had never been one of Epimetheus’s strengths.

In the months he had spent around the pilot, he had learned one way of dealing with her, however.

‘But you are a very good shot with it,’ he said. ‘Almost as good as you are a pilot.’

‘Yeah? Well, you’re a lousy liar,’ Shira sniggered climbing up the boarding ramp. ‘And besides, don’t think you’ll be rid of me anytime soon. There’s still plenty of war left on Pythos.’

Her point was punctuated by the crackle of the vox.

‘This is Lieutenant Korbienev of the Cadian 99th. Murrantz Hold is under attack. I repeat Murrantz Hold is—’ The panicked voice drowned in a sea of static.

‘See?’ Shira said, strapping herself into the pilot’s seat.

Five minutes later, the Silver Ghost was airborne, racing south to do what he was bred to do.

085961.M41 / Atika Hive, Pythos

Tzula was not the only one to notice Corpulax’s presence on the battlefield.

Carving through the plague zombie horde, one of the Deathwing had also spotted the Plague Lord and was making his way to engage him. In their ivory Terminator armour, the Dark Angels First Company all looked alike, except for those few who forewent helmets. Tzula had been trained by some of the finest analytical and observational minds at the Ordo Malleus’s disposal and, being more than a casual observer, had noted the positioning of the three purity seals running along his left greave on the sole occasion she had met this particular Dark Angel. His name was Balthasar. Not that it mattered. She would reach Corpulax first and avenge Dinalt’s death.

Coming up on the traitor’s blindside, she took aim with the plasma pistol and pulled the trigger while still several metres away. Instead of

taking his head off as she'd intended, her shot struck two of the ever-shifting mass of thralls who got in the way.

Corpulax turned to find the source of the attack. When his eyes found Tzula amongst the press of undead flesh, he gave a sickly, wet grin.

'I had a feeling we would meet again, you and I,' he said through a throat full of mucus. 'You took what is rightfully mine and I demand to have it back.'

Instinctively, Tzula looked down at the knife tucked into her belt.

'Have you really been so foolish to keep it on you? Delivered it right into my grasp?' With a gesture Corpulax parted the plague zombies standing between them, giving him a clear view of the junior interrogator. 'Yes you have, and saved me the trouble of torturing you for its location. Bring it here, girl, and your death will be swift. Make me fight for it and you'll beg me to kill you a thousand times over before I allow you to die.'

'It'll be sticking between your ribs before that day ever comes. This is for my master.' Tzula fired again, but Corpulax countered with another gesture, moving the plague zombies back into her line of sight. Broiled necrotic flesh and limbs tumbled to the ground.

'How very touching. You seek to avenge Dinalt's death. You've been spending too much time around these Dark Angels. Vengeance blinds them too.' The Plague Lord's bolter barked to life, forcing Tzula to dive and roll. His gun tracked her movements, the shots felling thralls but leaving the figure in the black bodyglove unscathed. Coming out of her roll, Tzula swung the pistol around but her shot only despatched more of the mindless slaves.

'And what do you know of the Dark Angels, traitor?' Balthasar's shadow fell across Tzula and she threw herself to one side as he opened up with his storm bolter. The shield of walking corpses continued to do their job, gobbets of shredded dead flesh all that hit Corpulax.

‘This one’s not too bright, is he? Or maybe his lust for vengeance has literally blinded him.’ Corpulax opened up a channel through the plague zombies to allow Balthasar a good look at him. The Deathwing hesitated for a fraction of a second, his rate of fire faltering as he saw the Plague Lord clearly for the first time. ‘That’s right, we were once brothers, you and I. You could almost say we were Legion, couldn’t you?’

Balthasar’s fire intensified, but his shots were wayward. It looked to Tzula as if the Deathwing was enraged, fighting angry.

‘Don’t worry. Your dirty little secrets are safe with me.’ Corpulax waved his skeletal hand again, this time making a claw as he did so. Every plague zombie in a fifty-metre radius broke off from swarming Imperial Guardsmen or clogging up tank treads and converged on the Dark Angel and junior interrogator. ‘But you’ll soon be taking yours to the grave, “brother”.’

Balthasar drew his power sword and swung it in a wide arc. Heedless to the danger, the mindless thralls walked onto his blade while others of their kind were shredded by his storm bolter. Tzula drew her combat knife and stabbed away at the cloying mass one-handed, her plasma pistol glowing and dangerously close to overheating in the other. Arms, legs and heads parted company with their owners in a storm of carnage, yet the throng did not abate.

The corpulent black armoured figure moved among his servants, a pathway opening before him then closing just as quickly in his wake. The bolter hung at his side, the mind-controlled crowd his weapon of choice now. As he drew closer to the beleaguered pair, he raised his fleshless hand.

‘His hand! Don’t let it touch you,’ Tzula yelled, straining her vocal cords to be heard over the incessant din of battle.

In a blur of steel and energy, Balthasar brought his power sword upwards, tearing through any plague zombie unfortunate enough to be in

its way before making contact with Corpulax's wrist. The Plague Lord threw his head to the sky and let out a howl, its moist bass momentarily drowning out the sound of artillery fire and daemonic chatter. Balthasar's sword died in his hand, the energy field sputtering and dissipating. Even devoid of power, the blade's sharp edges were lethal, carving up undead as the Dark Angel tried to press home his advantage and plough through the tightly packed bodies to reach Corpulax.

Although his hand had been severed, the Plague Marine retained control of the horde, rotting forms moving into position behind him to cover his escape. Balthasar fought relentlessly to reach the traitor, smashing thralls out of the way with his fists and the pommel of his sword but it was all in vain. For every metre of ground he won, Corpulax drew ever closer to the safety of Atika.

The vox-bead in Tzula's ear awoke. It was Azrael's voice. 'All forces pull back. There are too many of them. We're going to blast them from orbit.'

Still slashing and firing, she started to retreat but halted when she realised that Balthasar was still heading in the opposite direction. 'You heard Lord Azrael. We're retreating so the horde can be bombed from space. You have to move. Now.'

The Dark Angel stopped, nonchalantly swinging an elbow and taking the heads from a pair of zombies who had ventured too close to him. Away in the distance, the red and white Chapter symbol of the Consecrators stark against the black of his relic armour, Corpulax was swallowed up by the darkness of Atika.

'Balthasar,' Tzula urged. Tanks reversed past her at speed, clearing the way for the Space Marines and Guardsmen following behind.

Sheathing his sword, Balthasar turned and ran after the junior interrogator, the deep blue of the twilight sky already streaked by white contrails heralding the death to come.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

152961.M41 / The Underhive. Atika, Pythos

Corpulax emptied the magazine of his bolter into the prone form of the Dark Angels Scout, the shredded body convulsing under every impact. Blood gushed from suppurating wounds, coating the green armour in a layer of crimson and pooling around the twitching Space Marine. Reports of yet more bolters sounded from further along the tunnel, the Scout's squadmates having been cornered by the cadre of Plague Marines accompanying Corpulax and meeting the same fate.

The Plague Lord revelled in the kills, not so much in the act itself but in what they represented. For months the Scouts had been operating ahead of the main contingent of Dark Angels and Grey Knights, locating and destroying ammo dumps, guiding forces to sacrifice sites and reconnoitring plague zombie activity. Seemingly able to become one with the darkness, the Dark Angels Tenth Company struck with impunity, often gone before the Chaos forces had realised they had ever been there, and with a trail of corpses to mark their leaving. These kills were merely five weighed against the hundreds inflicted upon his forces, but it was five fewer pairs of eyes to gather intelligence for the enemy. Five fewer warm bodies that could uncover the location of the Emerald Cave, especially as it was so close to being opened.

The clank of armour heralded the return of the Plague Marines, their bloated shapes resolving out of the gloom, all reloading their bolters. Corpulax made to do the same, reaching down with his free hand to take a clip from his belt only to remember that he no longer had a free hand. All these weeks later it still felt as if it was there. The Deathwing's power sword had cauterised the wound, denying Corpulax the pleasure of having the stump fester as a constant reminder of its loss. Gripping his bolter under his armpit, he used his other hand to retrieve fresh ammo and slide it home before wielding the weapon once again. A sudden noise from the darkness soon had him raising it again.

Oblivious to the gun aimed at her head, the Davinicus Lycae leader was almost forehead to barrel with it when Corpulax spoke. 'You shouldn't go sneaking around in the dark like that, Dormenendra, I could have blown your head off.' This was a stretch of the truth. Corpulax's enhanced vision had identified the cultist leader while she was still many metres away, even in the pitch blackness.

'I beg your forgiveness, Plague Lord. I did not mean to startle you.' The woman's deferential tone drew wet chuckles from the Plague Marines. More followed when she fell to both knees before Corpulax.

'As flattering as it is, I gather you didn't come all the way down here just to prostrate yourself before me. Have you news?' For a cult that had persisted in one form or another since the time of the Horus Heresy, the Davinicus Lycae got through figureheads at a prodigious rate. Dormenendra was the latest cultist to have ascended to the head of the cult, those who had assumed the mantle since Morphidae having either fallen to the predations of the planet, the enemy or ambitious pretenders from within their own ranks. Corpulax had a grudging respect for the woman as, in her case, she had assumed the role by means of the latter.

Dormenendra raised her horned head to look upon the Plague Lord before lifting herself to her feet. Despite the elongated growths from her

temples, she barely came up to Corpulax's chest.

'I do, my lord,' she said. 'The Emerald Cave has been breached.'

In his centuries of existence, Corpulax had seen many things in service to both his masters. As a loyal Space Marine fighting in the name of the Emperor he had witnessed the Exterminatus of worlds, the destruction of xenos races and entire cultures brought to their knees. In his second life, reborn as a scion of the Plague God, he had travelled deep within the Eye of Terror to seek audience with daemons, inflicted pain beyond the ken of man and presided over butchery on an epic scale.

What he saw before him in the Emerald Cave made all that came before it pale as if to nothing.

Colossal in the truest sense of the word, the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave virtually filled its confines. The top of its head – or what passed for a head – almost scraped the top of the cavern, and its corpulent bulk spilled nearly to each wall. Its mottled blubber bubbled and pulsed, a sheen of stagnant moisture, like toxic sweat, reflecting the green light of the glowing gems embedded in the walls. Smaller versions of itself detached from its hide, bursting free from pustules in a shower of stinking fluid. Some were immediately subsumed back into the whole, while others squabbled and fought, trying to catch the attention and favour of their progenitor. Others became food, the host growing fat tentacles and scooping them up, dropping them into maws it could form at will.

Awed at this sight that no mortal – no post-mortal – had witnessed for almost ten millennia, Corpulax fell to his knees as Dormenendra had done before him not an hour earlier. Even fully armoured and with his enhanced physique, augmented greatly by his patron's gifts, Corpulax looked like an ant before a demigod. Curious, two of the recently detached spawn slid down their creator's flesh to take a closer look at the supplicatory figure at his feet, probing and prodding Corpulax with foetid appendages. Where the bickering of its children had failed to gain notice, this pair of errant progeny succeeded and the immense daemon sprouted a plethora of eyes

where its bulk met the floor of its prison, intrigued by the minuscule worshipper.

Corpulax raised his head slightly to be greeted by the wall of eyes. ‘Oh, Great One,’ he said ignoring the attentions of the two smaller daemons. ‘I am here to free you from this prison where you have dwelt ere long so that you may go once more into the galaxy and subject it to your grand design.’

The eyes blinked but registered neither comprehension nor confusion. Corpulax wasn’t even sure how a being such as this communicated. Verbally? Psychically?

He would soon have an answer.

Sprouting a pair of tentacles, the Greater Daemon grabbed the two things harassing the Plague Marine and swallowed them back into its body, their distended forms becoming one with the host again. From the same spot his tormentors had disappeared into, a mouth formed, a fat tongue sitting between two rows of rotten, sharpened teeth. The maw inhaled, drawing in the musty air of the cavern and held it in for a while before blowing it back out again in a green-brown miasma. The cloud enveloped Corpulax, one of the many toxins in the heady cocktail instantly paralysing him, rooting him to the spot where he knelt.

Manifold diseases, viruses and infections coursed through him, mingling freely with those he already played host to, mutating and evolving, giving birth to new forms of sickness never before imagined, let alone unleashed. In the hours before he regained full control of his body, these contagions would ravage him and speak of the great plan that the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave had for the galaxy, septic harbingers of the time of malady that awaited humanity.

Taking brief control of his beleaguered immune system, Corpulax fought against his rebelling body for just long enough to force a smile to his lips.

High above, unseen by eyes either post-human or daemonic, a shape only a few shades darker than the emerald of the cavern walls peeled itself from

the mouth of the tunnel it had used to spy upon proceedings. Turning around in the narrow confines, Scout Sergeant Namaan began the long crawl back to inform Lord Azrael of what he had witnessed.

153961.M41 / Jala Hold. Two hundred and eighty-seven kilometres north-east of Atika, Pythos

Though his oculobe had already enabled Epimetheus to see the damage caused to Jala Hold from over twenty kilometres away, he had still insisted that Shira put the shuttle down so he could inspect it close up.

Thick black smoke swirled around him as he ascended the slope towards the mine entrance, inky fronds dancing around his now almost entirely silver armour as the backwash from the shuttle's engines blew across the rocky approach. Fat flames licked from the cave mouth, the entire underground complex completely engulfed, but of the arsonists there was no sign. Even in his armoured state, the heat was too much for the ancient Grey Knight, and he stood his ground thirty paces away from the blaze, the orange light making his Terminator suit appear bronze as he turned about to survey the devastation. Despite his vision being obscured by the dark plume, he still spotted what he was looking for.

To his left, a blackened figure lay face down on the ground, a pistol clutched in one hand. At first, Epimetheus took the dark hue to be cindered flesh but as he got closer and saw that the Cadian's uniform had not been claimed by the fire, he realised it was only soot coating the corpse. Kneeling down, he rolled the dead Imperial Guard officer over. Unspoilt by the smoke, the front of the man's tunic was torn in five places, dried blood surrounding each deep gash that had been cut all the way through to bone. Four of them ran parallel but the fifth, not as deep as the others, was offset, running across the Cadian's flank where the others had ripped at his torso.

In ancient times, superstitious cultures believed that those who had died a violent death retained an image of their killer upon their retina, a

victim's indictment of their killer from beyond the threshold of life. In the tens of thousands of years that had elapsed since then, that belief had been disproven but it did not mean that the dead man could not tell any tales. Like all superstitions, it had a grain of truth to it and while the eyes of the recently deceased could not offer up the identity of the Imperial Guardsman's murderer, his mind could. Closing his eyes to aid concentration, Epimetheus reached out to read the corpse's mind.

He knew the answer before the image flashed into his mind. It was the same image he had seen from nearly fifty dead men at over a dozen burned-out holds in the past week.

Abaddon.

The Warmaster's actions had ceased making sense. From the vox-traffic he and Shira had been monitoring, the enemy were effectively fighting a last stand yet Abaddon had neither rushed to their aid nor fled the planet, instead choosing to carry out pointless raids on isolated delver-strongholds that no longer held any strategic value. It seemed to be only one group carrying out these attacks, always one step ahead of Epimetheus and always gone from the scene by the time he and Shira arrived, heading to the next massacre. It was impossible to predict the exact location of these attacks, but it was always in the same general direction.

It was almost as if he was being left a trail to follow. A trail that was heading southwards, ever closer to Atika. The Grey Knight was reluctant to engage with the main Imperial Reconquest Force but if Abaddon was planning to reinforce his beleaguered forces beneath the planetary capital, Epimetheus would be left with little option.

Lifting the body up, Epimetheus took a few steps forward and hurled it unceremoniously into the flames, the inferno hungrily consuming it in an instant. By the time he had made it back to the shuttle, even the bone had turned to ash, such was the intensity of the fire fuelled by mining machinery and promethium stores.

‘No survivors?’ Shira asked from the controls. She had asked that question a lot recently and had received the same answer.

Epimetheus said nothing, instead simply shaking his head as he seated himself at the rear of the crew compartment, contemplating the Warmaster’s plan as Shira sent the shuttle skywards.

153961.M41 / The Underhive. Atika, Pythos

The blade slid under Balthasar’s flesh, peeling the skin away from the muscle beneath. Pain suppressors flooded his system along with coagulants and clotting agents as the knife burrowed deeper, probing through the meat of the Dark Angel’s forearm. Finding its target, the wielder twisted the scalpel, loosening the foreign object from where it was embedded between the fibres before stabbing it with the tip of the surgical instrument. Careful not to cause any more damage than he had done on the way in, Apothecary Rephial slowly withdrew the sliver of blight grenade shrapnel, the shard festering and hissing as it made contact with the stale air of the subterranean cavern. He placed it alongside dozens more onto a metal tray beside the slab of stone he was using as a makeshift operating table.

‘That’s the last of it,’ the Apothecary said. His skin was dark orange, weathered and lined, a remnant of his early years on a desert world before his recruitment into the Dark Angels, and his Gothic was heavily accented. The planet had supplied many neophyte Space Marines down the years – Balthasar had served in the same squad as two of them during his time in Fifth Company – and though it had a reputation for breeding doughty fighters, Rephial was the first to join the ranks of the Apothecarion. ‘Try not to stand in front of any grenades for a while, alright?’

Balthasar grimaced, partly out of pain, partly out of the Apothecary’s attempt at a joke. A Space Marine’s lot was a grim one, of constant warfare and eternal strife. Brothers they had served alongside for several lifetimes of an ordinary human could be wiped out in the blink of an eye,

and death's shadow was permanently upon them. It was an existence bereft of levity and any attempt at humour was awkward and forced.

‘It was Master Gabriel who stepped in front of this particular grenade, not I,’ Balthasar said, sitting upright and examining the lattice of cuts across his arms. He patted his face experimentally, not wishing to reopen the lacerations on his cheeks. ‘How is he?’

‘Ask him yourself. He is out of his sus-an coma and Brother Raguel has almost concluded his ministrations.’ The Apothecary gestured to another ad hoc surgical station on the opposite side of the dimly lit chamber.

Nodding his thanks to Rephial, Balthasar slid from the stone table while the Apothecary moved on to treat more of the wounded Dark Angels strewn about his own field hospital. Already close to thirty Space Marines sat or lay on the raised tablets or rough floor and word had come through that more were on their way.

The months since the initial assault had been a bloody grind, the labyrinth of tunnels beneath the former hive city a deathtrap of blind corners, dead ends and cave-ins. Marauding packs of daemons prowled the benighted depths and Traitor Astartes and cultists lay in wait, ready to spring ambushes or collapse tunnels on top of the Imperial attackers. Almost an entire company of Dark Angels had been lost since the underground war commenced, many still entombed beneath rubble. Azrael had redeployed elements of Tenth Company to operate in a purely search and rescue capacity, locating survivors and pulling them from under the rocks.

The Grey Knights had fared little better, the daemoniac host reserving especial hatred for the psychic Knights. In any joint operations between the two Chapters, it was always the silver armoured Space Marines who bore the worst of the casualties rather than those clad in green, white or black. Draigo's Brotherhood was still a viable and potent force but was now down to three-quarters of its initial strength.

It was the soldiery of the Imperial Guard who had fared worst, however. The lack of any natural light this far beneath the surface of Pythos made it almost impossible for the unaugmented humans to fight unless it was alongside armour equipped with searchlights or other forms of illumination. Many of the tank brigades were out of action waiting for the necessary parts to arrive in-system to allow them to be upgraded for underground combat, but some mechanised units were already able to operate in the wider tunnels with impunity. Curiously, the entire armoured complement of the Catachan 183rd had been in the thick of the action right from the start, light arrays based around the abundant crystal found beneath Pythos fitted to all of their vehicles within days of the first shots being fired.

But the war below ground needed to be fought regardless of the conditions and so hundreds of thousands of human soldiers were ordered into the tunnels to bolster the Dark Angels and Grey Knights forces. Many of them would never see daylight again, rent apart by claws of daemons or feasted upon by an army of the undead intent on defending the Damnation Cache and the Emerald Cavern. A high proportion of those who did feel the rays of Pythos's sun on their skin again did so only briefly before being shuttled off back to the fleet where they died lingering deaths on board medical frigates.

The Imperial Guardsmen who had been fighting alongside Balthasar and Gabriel belonged in the former category. Following up on reports from Dark Angels Scouts, the two Deathwing had accompanied a unit of Cadians through a maze of tunnels leading to a sacrificial chamber where Plague Marines and cultists had been seen escorting prisoners. The intelligence regarding the use of the cavern had been accurate but when they arrived, there was no sign of any Traitor Astartes, only a coven of warptouched enacting some form of grotesque ritual.

Their slaughter was straightforward, economical use of the two Terminators' storm bolters turning the stagnant air crimson, but, in a final act of defiance, one of the sorcerers detonated a blight grenade before he perished. Spotting the danger before anybody else, Gabriel put his body between the blast and the unarmoured Guardsmen, bearing the full brunt of the toxic explosion. Despite all of his Emperor-gifted boons, all of his augmentation and conditioning, the Master of the Deathwing was still too slow. The bizarre shrunk head fragmented sending shrapnel flying inexorably towards weak human flesh, killing a few of the Cadians outright but condemning the rest to a slow, agonising death. Still able to walk, Balthasar had dragged the comatose form of his company master back through almost twenty kilometres of tunnels before sending help for the stricken Guardsmen.

‘It would seem you saved my life again, Brother Balthasar,’ Gabriel said as he noticed the younger Space Marine approach. Raguel was pulling shards of grenade from the Master of the Deathwing's chest. His scalpel bore deep into the flesh but the veteran did not flinch. ‘You are making quite a habit of that.’

‘It was you who shielded me from the blast, master. If not for that, Rephial might have had to use his reductor rather than his scalpel on me.’

Gabriel smiled despite Raguel's hand being sunk to the knuckles in his pectoral, probing around for an errant sliver of blight grenade. ‘Let's call it honours even.’

Balthasar returned the grin.

‘The Cadians. Did they...?’ Gabriel asked.

‘Most of them survived, though all were wounded.’ Balthasar didn't need to add that they had likely all died in transit back to the fleet, the merest sliver of shrapnel being enough to seal their fate.

Gabriel sighed. ‘A pity. Sadder still that we did not find any of the Plague Marines the Scouts reported.’

The muscles in Balthasar's cheeks tightened and he broke eye contact with his company master. Raguel at last found the piece of grenade he had been seeking and removed it, adding it to a pile of similar fragments.

'All done here,' Raguel said. His pale skin was in stark contrast to that of his counterpart, his alabaster complexion lending him an aspect not dissimilar to that of a Space Marine of the Raven Guard. 'I'm going to request that you be kept away from the frontline for two days to allow your body to recover. I've spent the past seventeen hours taking almost an entire grenade out of you, and those wounds will need time to mesh.'

'And I shall politely request that Lord Azrael decline your request. You have my gratitude for your care and attention, Brother Raguel, but I must now ask that you leave Brother Balthasar and I to our discussion.' There was no malice to his tone, but he fixed the Apothecary with a hard stare.

Raguel nodded his confirmation and took his leave. It was obvious that the company master wished to talk business. Deathwing business.

'Care to tell me what troubles you, brother?' Gabriel said, lifting himself to a sitting position.

'What makes you think something is troubling me?' Balthasar retorted, a little too quickly.

'You have been in a constant state of pensiveness ever since we came below ground. Distracted. You should have been as quick to react as I to that grenade, but instead you hesitated.' Gabriel paused. 'You act as if you're carrying a burden. A secret perhaps?'

The tell registered on Balthasar's face immediately. 'I had wished to speak to a Chaplain about it but the campaign has not let up for an instant these past few months. The brief time I have spent in the company of our brothers from the Reclusiam has been battling at their side.'

'I am no Chaplain, brother, but I am a capable listener if you wish to unburden yourself upon me. You know that you may speak freely.'

Gabriel's body language relaxed.

Balthasar took a breath. He was a relative newcomer to the ranks of the Deathwing and had only navigated the first few curves of the Dark Angels' inner circle. There were secrets he knew that would rock the Imperium to its core should they come out, but at the same time he had scarcely plumbed the depths of his Chapter's mysteries.

'It was just prior to the second orbital bombardment, when the Plain of Glass clogged with the half-dead. In among the carnage and confusion I saw someone, a black armoured Traitor Astartes who now swears fealty to the Plague God. The inquisitor, she spotted him too and we both engaged him in combat. I severed his arm but he was able to escape before the bombs dropped.'

'You know the protocol for dealing with the Fallen,' Gabriel hissed. 'This should have been reported straight away.'

Balthasar lowered his voice. 'It was not one of the Fallen. Well, not exactly.'

'What do you mean "not exactly"? He was either one of our erstwhile brothers or he wasn't.'

'He was not a Dark Angel who had turned traitor, but he bore the markings of another of the Unforgiven. I saw them as clear I can see you now. The inquisitor confirmed it too when I spoke to her after, but she was unaware of his lineage or affiliation to us. The traitor was responsible for the murder of her former master and she desires vengeance.'

Gabriel's eye were locked on Balthasar. 'Which Chapter?'

'The Consecrators.' There was an uneasy pause. 'I know the protocols for the location, capture and interrogation of the Fallen, but I do not know the procedure when the traitor comes from within our own ranks. What should I do, Master Gabriel?'

'You?' Gabriel said after some thought. '*You* do nothing.'

'But his betrayal is an indelible mark upon our honour. It cannot go unpunished.'

‘And it won’t. There are protocols in place for this eventuality, but your level of ascension is not yet sufficient for you to be privy to them.’

‘But I was the one who discovered him. Surely that—’

‘That counts for nothing. The matter will be dealt with,’ Gabriel interrupted.

Balthasar was about to protest further when Apothecary Raguel approached them again.

‘My apologies, Master Gabriel. Brother Balthasar. We’ve received word from Lord Azrael that the enemy have breached the Emerald Cave. He’s ordered every battle-ready Dark Angel to rally there.’ He looked the company master up and down. ‘I suppose I’d be wasting my breath asking you to sit this one out?’

Gabriel snorted. ‘We shall not speak of this again, Brother Balthasar,’ he said, leaping down from the stone table. ‘Serf! Bring me my armour.’

The stench inside *Traitor’s Bane* was as potent as any of the gas-based weapons the forces of the Archenemy had thus far deployed in the underground war. Tzula had taken to wearing her bandana as a facemask to block it out.

Months of fighting without respite had taken their toll, and the crew of the Hellhammer were filthy and dishevelled. With all water strictly rationed for drinking, none of them had showered in weeks and the reek of sweat freely mingled with the odour of burnt oil and engine fumes. Even if there had been a break in the combat sufficient enough to open some of the hatches and air the tank out, it would have done no good. The still, dank air of the subterranean tunnels would do nothing to displace the smell.

There were small mercies. Imperial tanks – even super-heavy ones – did not come fitted with internal latrines, so certain bodily functions occurred outside of their confines, but that was not without its dangers. Tamzarian and three other crew members had been eviscerated by a lurking lesser

daemon the previous week when they'd left the protection of *Traitor's Bane* to answer the call of nature.

Though the smell was constant and oppressive, Tzula knew that ultimately it was not going to kill her... unlike the pack of daemons that had just detached themselves from the darkness and were clambering over the tank's hull.

The tapping of claws on metal echoed around the crew compartment, audible above the chug of the power plant and the grinding of the tracks. K'Cee had done an almost impossible job in getting the Hellhammer operational again, but the jokaero's hard work was in danger of being undone, something he emoted frantically from the driver's seat he now occupied.

'*Tindalos*, this is *Traitor's Bane*,' Strike voxed. The colonel, replete with the thick beard he had sported throughout the jungle campaign, remained calm. 'Get these things off us.'

'Affirmative, chief,' came the response through the compartment speakers.

From behind the Hellhammer a smaller tank broke formation, overtaking several others in the armoured column to draw alongside the command vehicle. Turning its turret to face *Traitor's Bane*, the Hellhound let loose with its inferno cannon, dousing the super-heavy in flame. While its thick armour plating could withstand the intense heat, the flesh of its unwanted passengers could not and the host of daemons expired in a cloud of fire and chorus of otherworldly screams.

It was a tactic Strike and the other tank commanders had been using to great success since the underground war had begun, albeit one discovered by accident when a Hellhound got a little too close to both a fire daemon and a boarded Baneblade.

'Good work, *Tindalos*,' Strike enthused through the vox. 'Maintain position along the flanks of the column. You too, *Fuego Diablo*, *Fire of*

Sanctity and *Hell's Fury*. We're getting close to the cave now and I don't want you stuck in traffic if we encounter any more of those things.'

Three more Hellhounds separated from the line of tanks running two and three abreast through the tunnels of Atika.

This far down, the passages and caverns were enormous, generations of excavation having bored them large enough for heavy mining vehicles – and by default, tanks and Warhound Titans – to operate unimpeded. Scouts, both human and Space Marine, had reported that there were much smaller tunnels driving deeper towards the planet's core and yet richer mineral deposits. These branches pre-dated the Imperial miners' tunnels by many millennia and were so narrow and low they suggested they were dug by a diminutive race, long since disappeared from the face – and depths – of Pythos, perhaps even the Imperium.

Tzula shifted position within the compartment, keeping her arms out alongside her lest the rocking motion of the tank take her feet from beneath her. K'Cee had improved the handling and suspension to such a degree that *Traitor's Bane* could move at speeds close to two hundred kilometres per hour without the occupants being aware they were moving. Despite their urgency to reach the Emerald Cave, K'Cee had to limit his speed to much lower than that to allow the other tanks to keep up, much to the jokaero's chagrin.

'This is it, isn't it?' Tzula said, gripping tightly to the back of the command chair. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the rumble of engines and hard ground passing rapidly beneath them.

'Feels that way,' the colonel agreed. 'One way or another, this is the final battle for Atika, for the whole of Pythos. For good or for ill, Lord Azrael is committing all of the Imperial forces to this assault, and if what we heard in the briefing is true, that still might not be enough.'

Once the location of the Emerald Cave and the nature of its occupant had been revealed to the Grand Master of the Dark Angels, he had not

hesitated in gathering all forces fighting the underground war, along with many of those tasked with protecting the lone entrance to the underhive, to rally on the threshold ready for an assault on the abomination and its spawn. Even when information reached Lord Azrael during the briefing that the location of the Damnation Cache had also been determined, he did not deviate from his course of action. To the surprise of all the human commanders present, Lord Draigo had been vehement in his support of the Dark Angel's strategy. The denizens of the Cache had been contained to the planet, and the fleet in orbit could blast the planet to smithereens should that situation somehow change. If the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave were allowed his freedom, even Exterminatus would not guarantee its destruction.

Close to a thousand Space Marines, a quarter of a million Imperial Guard and tens of thousands of tonnes of armoured vehicles might not be enough either, but to the two Space Marines leading the Pythos campaign it represented their best chance of victory.

‘Regardless of the outcome, colonel, it’s been a pleasure to fight alongside you. You have the gratitude of the Ordo.’ Tzula held out her unaugmented arm to perform the traditional Catachan salute.

Strike smiled, locking hands and forearm with the woman. ‘Likewise. And the Ordo has my gratitude also.’

‘Oh,’ said Tzula, taken aback. ‘Why is that?’

‘Because if you hadn’t shown up here like you did, I wouldn’t have thought a damn thing was wrong. When Abaddon arrived he would have taken the planet in minutes. And your boy, the astropath, he’s the reason reinforcements ever got here. If not for him, Emperor knows how many worlds would have fallen to the onslaught of daemons.’

Tzula returned his smile and broke off the salute. She was glad that somebody else had recognised how vital Liall’s sacrifice had been. She was about to honour the valour of his men when a screech from K’Cee

interrupted them. The jokaero was slowing the Hellhammer down and gesticulating in front of him. Strike clambered up to the turret and peered through a viewslit.

‘We’re here,’ he said.

Throughout the bloody history of the Imperium of Man, countless battles have been fought: first for the cause of expansion, then to counter betrayal and lastly for the sake of survival. Trillions of souls on all sides of these battles have perished, and the fields upon which their lives were laid down are as varied as the armies themselves. Death worlds. Craftworlds. Tomb worlds. Ice worlds. Desert worlds. Water worlds. Worlds ravaged by the inexorable hunger of the tyranids. Worlds warped by the malign power of daemons and their consorts. On board satellites, orbital stations and spaceships. Even in the void itself. But in all that time there was one battlefield that the Imperium had found itself waging war over less frequently than most.

During the time of the Great Crusade, and Horus’s betrayal that followed, some of the largest and longest underground campaigns found their way into Imperium annals. In the deepest recesses of the Rock, the Dark Angels themselves retained scripture to the war fought in the mines below a planet called Sarosh, where the agents of the warp made themselves known before their true nature was yet fully comprehended. At Calth, the Ultramarines played out a decade-long war of attrition with the Word Bearers Legion after the once verdant planet’s surface was rendered an irradiated wasteland by traitor bombs and missiles. The ensuing guerrilla campaign neutered both armies for the remainder of the Horus Heresy and whittled down the strength of both Legions to a mere fraction of their previous strength.

In more recent times, the Space Wolves had fought alongside the Inquisition across a system called the Hollow Worlds, a string of planets each interlaced by underground tunnel networks, while the Blood Angels,

Exorcists, Raven Guard and Doom Eagles had all experienced subterranean conflict under the auspices of their current Chapter Masters.

Never, in all that time, had a single underground battle been fought on the scale of the one about to be contested beneath the surface of Pythos.

The entire strength of the Dark Angels Chapter, close to nine hundred Space Marines along with the various bikes, speeders and personnel carriers that had survived the war above, stood alongside eighty of their Grey Knights cousins. Behind them came the massed ranks of the Imperial Guard, the few thousand surviving Catachans at the head of a far larger force of Cadians, Mordians, Vostroyans as well as other less distinguished regiments and Pythosian miners who had taken up arms in defence of their home world. Intermingled with the infantry were the tanks and artillery, mobile fortresses and mobile missile platforms ready to rain death down upon the daemoniac host that awaited them.

The stale air above them was displaced by the engines of more than a hundred hovering Valkyries providing welcome relief from the stifling heat for the assembled human troops. Getting them this deep into the mines had been a logistical challenge but, with the caverns now the sizes of small nations, they could fly unfettered to provide much needed air support. Watching over all of this like dark sentinels were the Warhound Titans of Legio Crucius, stationary as they awaited the address of Supreme Grand Master Azrael but ready to explode into destructive life at a mere thought from their noble princeps.

From the promontory where his command Land Raider was berthed, Azrael too looked out over the vast army at his command, all of them waiting to hear his words, to be sent into battle with the inspiration of one of the Emperor's finest ringing in their ears. Although his vantage granted a view over the top of everyone and everything in the cavern – save the flyers and the Titans – he clambered atop the hull of the Land Raider to

provide a focal point for the assembled masses and opened up his vox-link.

‘Loyal servants of the Emperor, today we commence the final battle for Pythos, the last drive to liberate this world from the yoke of daemonic intrusion and banish the aggressors from this planet.’ He did not look upon the Dark Angels as he spoke, nor the Grey Knights. They needed no words of encouragement or comfort to face the horrors ahead. These words were for the human soldiers, those men expected to display the same courage as the Space Marines but without the physical and mental attributes to prevent fear from taking hold of them in the crucible of battle. As far as his enhanced eyes could see, the Guardsmen stood rapt on his every word, the external speakers of the hulking Legio war machines rebroadcasting his speech on their external speakers.

‘Some of you have fought this war for longer than others and have done so with a valour that has become the envy of your peers.’ He looked to the remnants of the 183rd. ‘By rights your war should be over already, and if not for your jungle fighting prowess it would have been long ago, but the Emperor must call upon you again. Will you answer that call, men of Catachan? Will you raise arms once more in the Emperor’s name and vanquish his foes in the name of the Golden Throne?’

The cheer in the affirmative that followed belied the depleted strength of the death world regiment, each man and woman raising their voice to fill the void of fallen comrades.

Azrael turned his focus to the militia. ‘Others have a greater stake in the coming battle than simply eradicating the warpspawn, for some of you call this world home and seek vengeance for its occupation. Let me tell you, men of Pythos, vengeance is the purest of all reasons to wage war and where your lack of fighting experience may fail you, let your desire for retribution spur you on.’

The bedraggled miners, some of them armed only with makeshift hand weapons rather than guns, chanted the name of their planet and the Emperor. A few even called out the Lord of the Dark Angels' name.

'A great many of you have experienced first-hand what the population of Pythos has had to endure for nigh on these past two years.' Azrael's gaze fell upon the Cadians and Mordians. 'You know what it is like for the boot of the enemy to tread roughshod over the soil of your home world, to have your Emperor-given liberty torn cruelly from your grasp. Remember this as you fight. Carry that knowledge in your hearts as you drive these invaders from this world, lest next time it be your own that falls to them.'

There were more cheers. More exaltations of the God-Emperor's name.

At last he regarded his own troops. 'But know that you do not go to face this enemy alone. The Sons of the Lion will be among you and know that we will not falter, we will not break. When your courage deserts you, look to us to lead the way forward and just as we will not fail you, the same is expected in return.'

As one, nine hundred Space Marines gave voice to their primarch's honorific.

Azrael's eyes found the silver-clad figures in the throng. 'Though many of you thought them nothing more than a myth, an order long passed into history or mere children's tales, the Grey Knights fight alongside us all this day and their zeal and proficiency is very real, let me assure you of that.' Draigo looked up from where he had solemnly been staring dead ahead and shared a nod with his Dark Angels counterpart. 'Their psychic ability will shield you from witchery, and their blades and halberds will strike straight and true for the heart of the enemy.'

Cries of 'For the Emperor' and 'Titan' followed in his wake.

'And let us not forget the great Warhounds of Legio Crucius who have so graciously lent us their might. For millennia these noble war engines, these god machines, have routed the foes of the Imperium and struck

terror in the hearts of all those that would oppose them. Truly are we blessed that they take the field with us this day to defend our lives and inspire us all.'

War horns sounded in chorus, their atonal dirge forming the accompaniment for the cheers and chants emanating from below them. They were still blaring as Azrael concluded his speech.

'Let us go now to battle. Let us go now to vengeance. Let us go now to the liberation of Pythos and let us go now to victory!'

Leaping down from the hull, he boarded the Land Raider, the driver heading for the cavern exit while the rear hatch was still swinging shut. Behind the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels, over a quarter of a million men followed into the daemon-infested hell that awaited them.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

157961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

The Caducades Battalion of the Fourth Cadian Regiment had a fearsome reputation for warfare, justified time and time again by their valorous actions in the name of the Emperor. As with all Cadian soldiery, they were taken before puberty and forced to survive on the deadly island chain from which they took their name, but unlike their rank and file counterparts, the men and women of Caducades Battalion didn't just survive against the wild landscape and horrors that dwelled there.

They thrived.

Eking out a wild existence well into their teenage years, eventually the call would come to rejoin the fold and take their place in the elite of the Fourth Cadian. Many answered that call and joined five hundred similar souls in the charcoal grey and tan camouflage pattern only their battalion were allowed to don by order of the Lord Castellan himself. Those who refused to take up the uniform were allowed to remain on the islands, yet another threat for potential Imperial Guardsmen to negotiate.

The roll of honour for the Caducades Battalion could put that of entire Cadian regiments to shame. Their banner sported the iconography of no fewer than three Space Marine Chapters who had granted that honour after fighting alongside them, and the symbols of Battlefleet Cadia and Legio

Astorum sat proudly among them. Before Pandorax, they had fought a brutal two year-long campaign to liberate a string of moons to the galactic east of their home world and, after their arrival on Pythos, were the sole non-Catachan force to suffer no casualties as a result of the lethal plant and wildlife, their formative years having left them in good stead for death world combat.

At the Battle for the Emerald Cave they lasted less than a minute.

The mouth of the cave, and the tunnel leading to it, was more than wide and high enough to grant egress to war machines and flyers, but its girth was finite, allowing only one Warhound or two Valkyries safely through at a time. The infantry of the Imperial Guard could comfortably march through fifty abreast, but with two hundred and fifty thousand souls, along with artillery and armour rolling in support, to get into position the going had been slow. Almost four days into the battle, a fifth of the Imperial forces were still to deploy into the chamber.

The Dark Angels and Grey Knights had been at the van of the assault, ploughing through the ranks of minor daemons at the fore of the enemy and establishing a beachhead from where their human allies could launch their own attacks. Impatient at the delay in getting into the fight, the Caducades Battalion had pushed their way to the front of the Cadian Fourth's number in an effort to be the first of their regiment to reach the staging zone, their ingrained savagery coming to the fore as they clubbed aside their fellows with the butts of their rifles. It was this impatience that would be their undoing.

Screaming battle cries and profanities, the thousand-strong force swept through into the Emerald Cave, lasrifles and autorifles raised to bring death to the enemies they had waited so long to smite. In spite of all Azrael's fine words at the dawn of the battle and the horrors they had witnessed merely by dint of being citizens of Cadia, the first thing they did upon entering the chamber was freeze in terror.

Where the army of the Imperium numbered a quarter of a million, the daemonic horde easily matched it. Bloated things the size of Space Marines shambled awkwardly across the cave, batting aside Guardsmen with pendulous, distended arms and raking at tank armour with broken claws, pestilence dripping from their tips. In among them skittered smaller horrors, emaciated husks with exposed ribs and patchy flesh, mouths stuffed full of multiple sets of crooked, rotten teeth. Their diminutive stature made them no less deadly, however, and their fearsome maws bit through both flesh and steel with ease. Plague Marines too fought among the enemy host, their positions easy to spot by the masses of plague zombies they used as rotting meat shields, firing unimpeded from behind their undead protective walls. It was over all of this that the true source of the Caducades Battalion's fear presided.

Immense in its stature, the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave dwarfed all before it, including the black and white liveried Warhounds of Legio Crucius that were vainly unloading their guns at it. Its hide constantly shifting beneath the miasma of disease and filth that oozed from every pore, the daemon altered its form to respond to any threat ranged against it. A Valkyrie hovered in front of the thing's chest – at least where its chest would have been had it allowed itself form – and prepped its missile batteries to let loose a salvo at one of the beast's many spontaneously generated eyes. Aware of the craft's intent, the area around the organ stretched and transformed becoming a grotesque approximation of an arm that lunged and grabbed the stationary flyer, gripping it so tightly that escape was no longer within its capabilities. With a crunch of metal, the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave wound in the appendage, swallowing the stricken Imperial flyer in a maw that an instant earlier had been the eye they were targeting.

Whether by accident or design, it was the monster's next act that would ensure the Caducades Battalion would never get to add to their roll of

honour. The patch of blubber beneath the pseudo-mouth undulated and heaved violently, the roiling folds of fat swelling the pseudo-lips as if they were trying to contain what was within. With a guttural roar, the maw expelled its contents in a torrent of jet black vomit.

The warpbred physiology of the blessed of Nurgle had taken the remnants of the Valkyrie – its mechanical components, its hull, its fuel, the organic matter of the human crew – and transformed it into something new, something horrific, something deadly. The shower of hot, dark filth cascaded across the Emerald Cave, over the heads of battling Guardsmen and daemons and engulfed the troops of the Cadian 4th's elite battalion along with anybody else unlucky enough to be standing in proximity. The viscous bile clung to them like tar, eating away at the charcoal and tan they so proudly bore and the weak flesh and organs beneath, the battle cries and expletives of moments before giving way to the wails of the dying.

Their banner with its now meaningless honours was the last trace of the Caducades Battalion to disappear, consumed by the corrosive mass of the men and women who had once fought so bravely beneath it.

‘Get those Leman Russ over here and clear the staging area,’ Grand Master Gabriel called out. ‘You there. Have your men fill the breach. Don’t let the enemy retake the beachhead or we’ll never get the rest of our forces through.’

The Mordian major being addressed by the Deathwing stood rooted to the spot, the shock of seeing half his men turned to mush in the same attack that wiped out the Caducades Battalion still sinking in. The trio of Leman Russ showed no such hesitation, firing their engines and rolling towards the sticky remains of the Guardsmen the daemon had wiped out. Their dozer blades already pitted from the four previous occasions they had been called upon to carry out this grisly task. The three tanks pushed

the bubbling goo to one side ready for the Mordians to step in and hold the line.

‘Did your ears melt in the attack, major, or are you intentionally disobeying an order from the Grand Master of the Deathwing?’

Despite four days of constant fighting there was no harshness to Balthasar’s tone. It wasn’t needed. The sight of the ivory-clad Terminator looming over him was enough to scare the Mordian back into lucidity, and within moments blue uniforms filled the void left by grey and brown.

Their reaction came just in time. Sensing an opportunity to stem the flow of Imperial Guard, a phalanx of plague-riddled beasts charged the staging area, tearing and hurling any defenders that got in their way. Balthasar, Gabriel and the rest of the Deathwing squad assigned to secure the cave entrance were the first to react, storm bolters blazing in a withering hail of fire. The front ranks succumbed to the onslaught, but their kindred behind them simply bounded over the bodies and drove onwards. The Leman Russes joined the attack, their turrets having finally rotated into firing position and the drumming of their guns sounded out a tattoo, throwing up daemoniac limbs and entrails with every beat. Emboldened, the Mordians and elements of the Cadian 4th who were flooding into the Emerald Cave opened up with their guns, picking out any of the fiends fortunate enough to avoid the guns of the Dark Angels and the tanks.

Gabriel stood firm, his storm bolter taking down enemies at range, his humming power sword carving through any that ventured into its deadly arc. His armour, already in a poor state of repair before the battle as a result of the grenade explosion, was battered and cracked. The once-pristine ivory was streaked with the red of blood, black of fire and green and brown of daemoniac filth, and the vambrace of his sword arm was missing entirely, the exposed skin a mess of scars and welts where ichor from his victims had gushed down the hilt of his blade. Balthasar noticed

that the Crux Terminatus the Grand Master bore on his left pauldron was cracked and hoped that it was not a poor augur of events to come. But that wasn't all he noticed.

'Master Gabriel!' Balthasar called out, seeing the dark shadow moving through the press of daemons on the older Space Marine's blindside. Scattering the weaker of its kind and panicked Guardsman alike, the hulking daemon pounded over the rocky ground at speed, building to a head before launching its bulk into the air directly at the Master of the Deathwing. At the last moment, Gabriel took two quick steps backwards, the space where the daemon had expected to connect with the Deathwing now occupied by the glowing blue metal of a power sword. The ultra-sharp blade caught the monster square in the gut, momentum passing him through the blade as opposed to vice versa. Without altering the angle of his gun, Gabriel continued to fire as the bisected parts of the daemon passed through its arc, gobbets of rancid matter gouging from its flesh with the impact of every bolt shell. The two separated halves of the beast hit the floor with a wet thud, the unnatural liquids no longer contained within its form leaving a blood-like smear in its wake. They had not yet come to a stop when Brother Barachiel stepped up with his heavy flamer and doused the remains in cleansing fire.

'I think that most definitely squares us now,' Gabriel voxed over a closed channel to Balthasar.

The other Deathwing did not have time to formulate a response. Through the channel created by the forerunner, more of the gargantuan daemons surged forwards, each closer in size to a Dreadnought than the Terminators they bore down on. Storm bolters were mag-locked to armour as power swords and maces were drawn to be wielded two-handed against the rotting hulks.

The first crashed into the Imperial line, Balthasar and Gabriel simultaneously swiping low with their blades and taking the legs from

beneath it. It lurched to the ground with a thud to be instantly set upon by Cadians and Mordians who shot it at close range with their rifles or ripped it open with bayonets.

Not all of the defenders were as successful. Further along the line, Brother Casatiel, a veteran Deathwing Knight of more than two centuries' service, found himself isolated by two of the monstrosities. Valiantly swinging his Mace of Absolution, the robed Terminator stove in the skull of one of them, felling it like so much dead timber, but the other slapped aside the weapon as Casatiel attempted to connect with the backswing. Its other massive arm drove over its head in a windmill motion and smashed against the Dark Angel's head, knocking it back to an unnatural angle with the sickening crunch. The veteran was dead before the daemon's other arm swung back and punched him forcefully from his feet.

Witnessing the demise of the Space Marine, the Catachan crews of the Leman Russ – now abandoned, as deadly to ally as enemy at such close quarters – fearlessly rushed his killer, their dulled blades tip down in their fists. A dozen figures in jungle camouflage assaulted the towering beast as if it were a wall to be scaled like their first day in basic training. Using their knives to gain purchase, they clambered over it, spilling its brackish vitae with every motion of their blades. By the time they had brought it to its knees and Barachiel had bathed it in flame to finish it off, fully half of their number lay dead or dying.

Casualties were heavy but the line held and the staging area remained clear. Brother Golathiel, a Deathwing Knight so large in stature that the Apothecaries speculated he might be a genetic throwback to the days of the Great Crusade, rallied the Mordians at the brunt of the fighting, going so far as to assume direct command when their major fell to one of the massive beasts. Bereft of his mace, the enormous Space Marine took one of the daemons down barehanded, pummelling it to a pulp under a rain of

mighty blows, while the Mordians saw off another through the combined efforts of a hundred men, some of whom survived the encounter.

Dardariel and Mendrion butchered another two between them. Squadmates since their days in Tenth Company, the innate understanding they shared made them a formidable force on the battlefield, so much so that it had not escaped the eye of Master Ezekiel or the brothers of the Reclusiam who had ascended them to the Deathwing as soon as openings became available.

Narcariel. Thaddiel. Paderion. Yimguel. All of the Deathwing handpicked by Gabriel to defend the staging area covered themselves in glory, just as they covered themselves in the rank filth of the enemy. Ten of the brutes fell to the Space Marines and their human allies, putting the smaller daemons to rout, but this was merely a skirmish, one of thousands that formed the Battle for the Emerald Cave, and that was not yet won. For every daemon slain at the hands of the reconquest force, the thing that should not be at the heart of the chamber spawned two more in its place.

Balthasar was mopping up stragglers alongside Barachiel when the vox in his helmet crackled to life with the voice of Supreme Grand Master Azrael.

‘Deathwing. To me,’ he said. His tone was as inspiring as it had been when he had given his speech before the start of the battle. ‘This ends now.’

The heat inside *Traitor’s Bane* was so oppressive that Tzula regretted ever requisitioning a new bodyglove and pined instead for the Catachan fatigues and vest she had worn before the reconquest force arrived.

With so many daemons packed so tightly into the Emerald Cave, Strike had assigned a Hellhound to protect each of the super-heavies from boarders. *Tindalos* ran alongside the Hellhammer, bathing its hull with fire every few minutes to burn away the conglomeration of fiends climbing over its armour, allowing *Traitor’s Bane* to concentrate on mowing down

the enemy beneath its tracks and obliterating them with its fearsome arsenal.

So far the tactic had worked for Strike, but some of the other tanks under his command had not fared so well. Four Stormswords were lost on the first day of the battle through friendly fire incidents, stray shots from the larger tank taking out their escorts' promethium reserves, allowing the daemons unhindered progress through their thick hulls, and the same number of Baneblades – including Brigstone's – had suffered similar fates since.

Fortunately for the affable tank commander, *Traitor's Bane* had been operating nearby when his own vehicle's end came and he now sat at the controls of his commanding officer's tank, manipulating the ancient controls as easily as if he had been fused with the machine like a Titan princeps. At Brigstone's feet, K'Cee slept with his head on a pile of scrunched-up tunics, the three days he had spent at the controls having taken their physical toll on the xenos. Nearby, other crewmen rested now that the operators of the destroyed Baneblade had relieved them. Neither the sound of the jokaero's snoring nor the battle raging outside barred them from the welcome embrace of slumber.

Strike, his thick beard drenched with sweat, peered out through the slit in the turret.

'Are we winning?' Tzula asked from her position at one of the sponson guns. She had felt much like a spare part for most of the action and had been happy to relieve a gunner when the opportunity arose.

'Winning. Losing. Drawing. It depends where you look and how you look at it.' The colonel sounded uncharacteristically philosophical, which Tzula put down to exhaustion. Even the great Colonel 'Death' Strike needed rest once in a while and when the rest of the crew awoke, she was going to pull rank and place Brigstone in temporary charge of *Traitor's Bane* while Strike got some well-earned sleep. Well, she would try at least.

‘We’re keeping the foot soldiers contained but that big bastard keeps spawning reinforcements as fast as we kill them,’ he continued. ‘Unless we take it down, we’re only delaying the inevitable.’

‘The Grey Knights will deal with it,’ she replied, squeezing the firing controls and wiping out a pack of daemons with the lascannon. ‘They did it before, thousands of years ago. I have every faith they can do it again.’

‘The Grey Knights can’t get close enough to it. If you think we’re having a hard time with these monsters, they have it ten times worse. The things are singling them out. Targeting them. They know the threat they pose to their master and are dealing with it.’

Tzula looked out through her own viewslit and made out the silvered forms of a squad of Purifiers, harried by four times their number of daemons, some winged and striking at them from the air. Tzula readjusted her aim and took one of the winged horrors down, followed by another, then another. She couldn’t risk targeting the daemons on the ground in case she hit the Grey Knights, but at least she had helped make the odds a little fairer.

‘So what do you suggest we do?’ she asked. Both Azrael and Draigo would be prepared to hear Strike out if he had an alternative plan and Tzula would lend her Inquisitorial authority if it was required to help change minds.

Strike jumped down from the turret. ‘What if we had a weapon that could kill it? What if we’d had that weapon all along?’

Tzula stopped firing and turned to face him. ‘You mean the athame? The knife?’

‘Why not? If what you’ve told me about it is accurate, then it’s more than powerful enough to cope with that thing. Tear a portal and send it through.’

‘But it could end up anywhere. We might end up trading one war zone for another. Or worse.’

‘Then stab the bastard with it.’

‘If the Grey Knights can’t get anywhere near it, what makes you think we can?’

Strike never got to answer.

‘Chief. The vox-light’s flashing. Somebody’s trying to raise us,’ Brigstone said, keeping both hands on the controls but motioning at a console with his head.

Strike turned away from Tzula and lifted the handset. ‘*Traitor’s Bane*. Go ahead.’

‘Colonel Strike,’ Lord Azrael said over the weak, crackling link. ‘I have need of you. We’re going after the daemon.’

157961.M41 / The Mouth of the Underhive. Atika, Pythos

Lieutenant Rann Oberwald sipped from his mug of recaff as he stood listening to the rain pounding against the tarp over his head. Pythos’s dry season had given way to monsoon season with a vengeance, and even after weeks of constant downpour the sky still had plenty left in reserve.

As part of the Eighth Cadian Recon Regiment, Oberwald had served on three different worlds now – including his own – but he had never experienced rain like this. It didn’t fall as drops but instead in sheets, walls of water cascading from above. It was warm too and despite breaking the oppressive Pythosian humidity, it did nothing to diminish the heat. The one upside to the inclement weather that the lieutenant had found was that men who had spent months fighting on the planet without bathing could now shower at will, much to the relief of all.

Alongside him, two other officers drank from identical Munitorum issue tin cups speculating about the battle taking place many kilometres beneath their feet. All Imperial Guard forces on the planet and in orbit had been called upon for the assault on the Emerald Cave, but Colonel Strike had the prudence to leave a sizable force topside. With only one way in or out

of the underhive, the Catachan hadn't wanted to risk reinforcements sweeping down to surprise them from the rear or, just as deadly, collapsing the tunnel entrance.

The two Cadian recon regiments deployed to Pythos were both the most lightly armed and armoured troops on the planet, and while that had been a boon during the jungle campaign, they were not well suited for the close confines fighting of the underground portion of the war. Lots had been drawn to determine whether it would be the Eighth or Third recon regiment that would defend the mouth of the underhive, with the loser scattering their forces to outlying delver-strongholds to allow Guardsmen better suited to up close subterranean fighting to join the assault. Oberwald was glad it had been the Eighth that had prevailed. Though most of the enemy forces were engaged down below, contact had been lost with many of the surrounding mines and the garbled snatches of vox-traffic the Eighth had been able to pick up gave the impression that the Third had literally and figuratively drawn the short straw.

Oberwald was about to join in the conversation when a new sound became evident in amongst the drumming and splashing of the fat raindrops. Through the falling torrent, he could make out pinpricks of light in the distance. He reached back into the Salamander Scout vehicle to which the makeshift rain shelter was attached and retrieved his magnoculars, setting them to his eyes and adjusting the magnification.

Tanks. No, not tanks, Oberwald realised as the image sharpened, armoured personnel carriers but not like the Chimera variant he rode into battle. These were Space Marine pattern vehicles – Rhinos and Land Raiders. This confused him briefly. The Dark Angels and Grey Knights were fighting in the underhive, so who did these belong to?

He sharpened the magnification and got his answer.

Dropping the magnoculars which smashed on impact with the rocky ground, Oberwald ran out through the rain, skidding and falling in his

desperation to reach a vox-operator and issue a warning before it was too late.

**157961.M41 / Vortras Hold. Twenty-nine kilometres north of
Atika, Pythos**

Shira brought the shuttle around in an arc maintaining the holding pattern she was flying in an effort to find a landing zone. Vortras Hold was perched at the peak of a high mountain, all of its approaches sheer boulder-strewn slopes that made it impossible for any land vehicle to traverse or flyer to put down. Ideally, she would have landed the craft directly in the cave mouth that formed the mine entrance but, like so many others she had seen recently, it was billowing thick black smoke from fires lit in its depths. Considering how difficult it was to get to Vortras Hold, especially in light of the torrential downpour, somebody had gone to a lot of effort to destroy it.

‘There’s nowhere to put down,’ Shira said, taking her hands from the controls for a moment to shrug her shoulders. ‘I could try to land lower down the slopes and let you climb up but we both know you won’t find any survivors. The auspex isn’t returning any signs of life and if this was the work of the Black Legion, they hardly have a reputation for leaving anybody alive.’

Epimetheus considered this briefly. ‘One more pass but lower this time. The smoke is so thick that it may have obscured a landing site. Use the engines to disperse it.’

Shira shrugged again and prepared to do as he asked. A burst of static from the vox followed by a distorted, frantic voice halted her.

‘This is Lieutenant Oberwald of the Eighth Cadian Recon to all Imperial forces. The entrance to the underhive is under attack. I repeat, the entrance to the underhive is under attack. Black Legion.’ A pause, the hiss of interference. ‘Oh, sweet Emperor no! He is with them. Abaddon is here.’

Send help, Throne damn you. We're being massac—' There was a drawn-out scream followed by the hollow fizz of a dead channel.

Shira turned to Epimetheus. She knew how reluctant the Grey Knight was to link up with the Space Marine forces on Pythos, yet here was a distress call that would lead them to the same battlefield.

Epimetheus did not hesitate. 'Go,' he said.

Shira broke the holding pattern and pointed the shuttle south, speeding Epimetheus to a meeting that he had hoped to avoid.

157961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

The plan, though it involved the movement and participation of tens of thousands of troops not to mention Titans, tanks and flyers, was a deceptively simple one and, in principle, Draigo agreed with it.

With the Grey Knights unable to get close enough to the gargantuan daemon to banish it, Azrael had decided to use that to their advantage. Instead of leading the assault on the beast, Draigo and his men would provide a diversion, drawing the bulk of the daemon forces away while Azrael and the Deathwing vanquished the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave. It would also require the Titans and tanks to distract the beast, and the combined forces of the Imperial Guard to keep the smaller daemons at bay while the Dark Angels got close enough.

'And what makes you think *you* can slay this daemon, Azrael?' Draigo said when the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels had finished outlining his plan. 'It would take the Emperor himself to best it in personal combat.'

'Then if that's what it takes,' he said drawing the *Sword of Secrets* from his hip and pointing the diamond-sharp tip at Gabriel's shoulder. 'My apologies, brother. I do this out of necessity and mean you no disrespect.' He stabbed into the Master of the Deathwing's already cracked Crux Terminatus and broke it open, catching the tiny sliver of bright metal that

fell from it. He took a bolt round from a pouch at his waist and raised it to his lips. For a moment it looked to those around him as if he was kissing the shell, but when he lowered it they could see that his acidic saliva had melted away some of the casing. Taking the fragment of shimmering metal from his other hand, he pushed it onto the shell with his thumb, fusing the two together.

‘Brother Gabriel’s armour is the most ancient of all the Deathwing’s suits, forged upon the anvils of the Rock in the days when the Emperor was already interred upon his throne, but the Legions had not yet been divided. From Terra came a gift to all those Legions who had remained loyal in the face of Horus’s perfidy, a section of the Emperor’s own armour so that it may be incorporated into the newly forged Terminator suits of his true sons. The Dark Angels took delivery of the Emperor’s right gauntlet, and over the coming decades over a thousand suits of armour were fashioned incorporating metal from his battle plate in the pauldrons. Many of those suits were gifted to our noble successors when Lords Dorn and Guilliman broke the Space Marines down into smaller Chapters, and though most have been lost down the millennia, some of our brothers still go to battle in armour bearing those original Crux Terminatus.’

Draigo did not think it would be appropriate to point out to his Dark Angels counterpart that *all* Grey Knight Cruxes held a shard of the One True Armour. Nor did he think the time right to challenge Azrael’s use of the word ‘brother’ rather than ‘cousin’ when referring to the Dark Angels successors.

Azrael held the shell between his thumb and forefinger and held it up. ‘This shell is bound with a portion of the gauntlet that struck down Horus. Just as it laid low the arch-traitor so too will it eradicate this putrid scion of the Plague God.’

Awe and reverence passed across the faces of the crowd listening to Azrael’s briefing. The remaining Deathwing – now numbering barely

seventy – were all in attendance along with eight Dark Angels company masters, Dashiel of the Ninth having succumbed to grievous wounds earlier in the battle. Draigo, Strike and Tzula rounded out the impromptu war council.

‘Even if you could get close enough, how do you plan to fire that shell inside it? That thing can absorb tank shells in its flesh and spit them back out,’ Draigo challenged.

Azrael redrew his sword, its blade as dark as midnight. ‘The Heavenfall Blades can part stone as if it were wood. Daemon hide will be no match for it.’ Flanking the Supreme Grand Master, Gabriel and the eight green armoured company masters placed their hands on the pommels of their own swords.

Draigo failed to look impressed. ‘Stone is one thing, daemon flesh is another entirely. The beast is clad in the stuff of the warp. Those swords will be no better than an Apothecary’s needle against it.’

‘And what would you suggest, Grey Knight?’ Azrael said rounding on Draigo. ‘Trapping it down here again so that somebody else can deal with the problem in ten thousand years’ time?’

Draigo bit back a retort. Beside him Tzula was giving him a sideways look. He opened a psychic link with her.

+What is it, junior interrogator?+ he sent.

+The athame. If it can part reality surely it can carve through daemon flesh?+ she replied.

+The knife is attuned to the warp so in theory, yes it could do that.+

+Then we have to use it.+

+You would reveal it to the Dark Angels?+

+What choice do we have?+

Draigo paused, mulling things over. +Be wary. A man like Azrael could put an artefact like that to many uses.+ He broke off the link. Tzula gave him a solemn nod, her face a mask of confidence.

‘Lord Azrael. I believe I may have a weapon that may be of use,’ Tzula said, deftly sliding the athame from where it was tucked into her belt.

The Lord of the Dark Angels looked at her impassively. ‘Is this some sort of jest? If a Heavenfall Blade is incapable of doing the job, what use is that primitive tool?’

‘Please, Lord Azrael. Hear me out.’

Tzula explained to the Dark Angels how she and Dinalt had studied the weapon, sought it out and obtained it from the clutches of the upstart tau in the name of the Imperium. She told them of its purpose and how the enemy had sought it out when she brought it to Pythos, slaying her master and other loyal servants of the Ordos in their desire to obtain it for their own dark purposes. Through it all she was very careful to keep any mention of Epimetheus out of her tale, certain she had fathomed the root of his reticence to join up with the Space Marine contingent of the reconquest force.

When she had finished, Azrael eyed her intently. ‘And you chose to keep this a secret from us?’

‘Oh please, Azrael,’ Draigo interjected. ‘If I didn’t think my ribcage was already fractured, I’d laugh. Don’t you dare to presume to lecture anybody on guarding secrets.’

‘I am an inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus, Lord Azrael. Secrets are my stock in trade as much as they are yours,’ Tzula said.

‘Is there anything else regarding this campaign that you have been keeping from us, junior interrogator?’ Azrael replied. It was obvious to Draigo that the Dark Angel was trying to pry information from her about the elusive Grey Knight. Tzula was too canny to fall for this.

‘Other than the xenos life form I brought here with me that is currently driving Colonel Strike’s tank? No, I think I’ve told you everything.’

Strike shot her a nervous glance.

‘Please don’t mock me, girl. My patience is already worn parchment thin.’ He placed the shell back in its pouch and held out his hand. ‘Now, give me the knife.’

Draigo stepped forward, forming a barrier between the Dark Angel and Tzula. ‘The knife stays with Junior Interrogator Digriiz. Both of us will be accompanying you on the mission.’

The company masters’ hands reached once again for the hilts of their swords. Azrael held up his palm to stop them. ‘As you wish, Lord Draigo, but please, try not to get in our way.’

He dismissed the assembly, Tzula and Strike returning to *Traitor’s Bane* which had formed part of the ring of steel surrounding the war council, the Dark Angels back to the frontlines. As Azrael was about to join them, Draigo, who had hung back, addressed him.

‘A moment of your time, Lord Azrael.’ It was not a request. The Dark Angel approached him, coming to a halt just within what the Grey Knight would term his personal space.

‘Make this quick, Grey Knight. I have a daemon to slay.’

‘I feel it only fair that I deliver you a warning.’

‘A warning,’ Azrael said, a full smile cracking his stern features. ‘What could you possibly want to warn me about?’

‘The knife,’ Draigo said, inching forward so that he was practically nose-to-nose with the Dark Angel. ‘I know of its value and now so do you. As a loyal servant of the Golden Throne, I know you will do all within your power to ensure that it is still in the junior interrogator’s grasp at the end of the battle and that no harm has come to her.’

‘That sounds more like an appeal than a warning.’ The Dark Angel was so close that Draigo could smell the tang of corroded metal still evident on his breath.

‘I’m getting to that part. If the blade goes missing, or the girl dies, I shall bypass Titan on my way back from here and head straight to Terra

where I shall demand, and be granted, audience with the High Lords.'

'I sincerely doubt that the High Lords of Terra would concern themselves over the misplacement of some museum piece,' Azrael scoffed.

'Perhaps not,' Draigo replied, his pauldron brushing against the Dark Angel's as he barged his way past him. 'But I'm certain they'd like to know what you have locked in those dungeons beneath the Rock.'

As he strode away, he didn't need to call upon his psychic abilities to know exactly what Azrael was thinking.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

157961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

The sound of mighty warhorns echoing through the Emerald Cave signalled the start of the final phase of the battle.

Behind the bass fanfare marched the six Warhound Titans in the black and white of Legio Crucius, spreading out across the enormous cavern to attack the beast at its heart from multiple angles. Even stacked one on top of another, the towering war engines would not have reached the gem-encrusted ceiling, and the air above them was thick with Valkyries flying patrols to prevent winged daemons getting too close to the ancient Titans.

Beneath their feet, the super-heavy tanks of the Imperial Guard rumbled into position flanked by a complement of Hellhounds and Demolishers to ensure that their larger cousins did not get overrun. Foot soldiers maintained tight formations marshalled by the green armoured giants of the Dark Angels, picking off targets of opportunity as curiosity got the better of some of the lesser daemons and they ventured too far from their own lines.

Their armour almost the same colour as the Dark Angels under the reflected light of the emeralds, the Grey Knights took up their own position apart from the main bulk of the Imperial Army. Already packs of

the Neverborn were prowling towards them, hackles up in response to the presence of the psychic daemon hunters.

At their head marched Azrael, accompanied by an honour guard of his Chapter Masters and First Company, blades already drawn to face the inevitable onslaught. In among them, two other figures walked, one clad in the silver Terminator plate of the Grey Knights, the other a dark-skinned human woman, dwarfed by the armoured figures around her.

The warhorns ceased and, as one, the Imperial guns opened fire.

The opening barrage was immense. Large calibre weapons sought out the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave, those shells not subsumed into its body knocking away huge gobbets of flesh that turned into daemons before they hit the ground. Mouths formed spontaneously over its hide, some swallowing inbound artillery before spitting it back in the direction it had come from, others forming macabre grins to emote the thing's enjoyment of the punishment being meted out upon it.

In response, those daemons already within the chamber charged the Imperial lines, many of them singling out the Grey Knights, their presence in the warp a shining beacon to those from the other side of reality. From behind the silver armoured figures, tanks rolled, Leman Russ and their myriad variants assigned to augment the psychic Space Marines presenting such a tempting target to the daemon horde. Their main guns blasted huge gaps in the ranks of the Neverborn, and those that survived the bombardment ended up crushed beneath tracks or impaled on the spikes of dozer blades. A few made it through the wall of steel only to run into a wall of psychic energy erected by the combined minds of Grey Knights squads. Fewer still made it past the warp barrier, those that did find their brief existence in the materium ended by the blade of a force sword or halberd.

Tens of thousands of Imperial Guard surged forward to meet the army of lesser daemons head-on, their numbers swelled by the monstrosities raining down from above as the big guns continued to pound away at their

master. The men and women of Catachan, Cadia, Krieg, Mordian and many other worlds besides turned their fear into anger, filling the air with the sound of las-fire and the stench of scorched daemon flesh.

From the flanks of the battle, Corpulax looked on with increasing concern. The lesser daemons meant nothing to him, and as long as the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave could keep supplying an endless stream of them, the Imperial Guard would succumb in the end. The Grey Knights had been neutered, so small a force struggling to contend with the increased attention from the Neverborn and was not able to mount any form of attack on the blessed of Nurgle. Even the Titans and the tanks presented no more than an inconvenience to it and would run out of ammunition eventually, making them easy prey.

But there was one element of the enemy they faced that was starting to pose a real threat. Singular in their purpose, the ivory figures of the Deathwing cut a swathe through the sea of daemons, intent on reaching the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave. Corpulax doubted that even warriors as formidable as the Dark Angels' elite could do the daemon any true harm, but he could not take the risk. He had fought so hard to do his patron's bidding in freeing it and had been promised so much in return. Nothing would deny him his just reward, and if it meant that he had to despatch these Dark Angels personally because the Prisoner's minions were unable to, so be it.

Ordering his cadre of Plague Marines to follow him, Corpulax waded into the battle.

157961.M41 / Approaching the Mouth of the Underhive.Atika, Pythos

Unlike Vortras Hold, the approach to Atika presented numerous clear landing spots, the previously steep and foreboding terrain now vitrified by the orbital assault. Through the torrential rain streaming over the shuttle's

front viewport, Shira could pick out immobile dark shapes on the ground, some of them glowing with the red-orange of a recently extinguished blaze. Sheet lightning panned across the sky, illuminating the scene below and Shira briefly saw that the shapes were in fact the burned-out shells of tanks or personnel carriers. Scores and scores of them.

‘Put us down near the cave mouth,’ Epimetheus ordered.

Shira banked the craft right and was preparing to deploy the landing gear when the console in front of her lit up with flashing lights. An alarm wailed insistently.

‘What’s wrong?’ Epimetheus asked, his level tones in stark contrast to the panic Shira felt rising within her.

‘There’s something coming up behind us,’ she said checking an auspex. ‘Something quick.’

‘Missile?’

‘I don’t think so. A shuttle like this should have automatic countermeasures.’ She checked the auspex again. ‘Besides, this is too big to be a missile.’

‘Can you outrun it?’

‘Judging by the speed it’s gaining on us, no.’ Shira tugged back on the steering controls. ‘But I can outmanoeuvre it.’ The shuttle veered steeply upwards and Shira frantically strapped herself in with one hand while using the other to loop the craft over in a wide arc. Epimetheus didn’t move, the boots of his armour maglocked to the floor of the crew compartment.

Pulling out of the flip, Shira levelled the controls, positioning the shuttle above and behind the craft that had been stalking them. The pursuer was now the pursued. The next flash of lightning revealed the exact nature of what they were chasing.

Irregular gold lattice lay atop a serpentine body of dark metal, a head like that of a dragon at one end, a short tail at the other. Beneath its snaking torso sat two sets of wicked claws, tipped with talons the size of a

normal human. From its flanks, three pairs of reversed wings protruded, pulling back in rhythm and propelling it through the air like an oared boat through water. One of those wings – the foremost on the beast's right – had an ugly hole torn through it, a wound Shira herself had caused.

‘Ragwing,’ she mouthed under her breath.

As if responding to the pilot's sobriquet for it, the Heldrake curved its prehensile body and tucked in one set of wings, gliding back around itself with much greater finesse than Shira had managed with her stunt. Facing the onrushing shuttle, it opened its jaws, the early promise of balefire lapping at its metal jaws. It exhaled before Shira had time to react, the narrow jet of flame heading straight for the Inquisition craft.

More alarms sounded in the crew compartment as the warp-born fire licked over the hull, but Shira entered a steep dive before it could entirely engulf the craft, zipping under the Heldrake. Steam rose from the exterior as the monsoon extinguished the small fires that had attempted to take hold. Her manoeuvre had spared them catastrophic damage but it had placed the daemon engine behind them again.

‘I'm going to pass back around again, low to the ground,’ Shira called back to the Grey Knight. ‘You're going to have to bail out when I'm near to the entrance.’

‘But what about Ragwing? This thing is barely armed and we can't compete with it for speed,’ Epimetheus said.

Shira grinned at his use of the name she had given the beast. Perhaps he had been listening all those times she had regaled him with the tale of how she outran and outwitted it. ‘I survived against this thing the last time I went up against it; this time I mean to bring it down. Unless your psychic gifts extend to sprouting wings, you're no use to me up here.’

Epimetheus nodded. ‘You don't have to go in too low,’ he said, clamping his helmet in place. ‘I may not know how to fly, but I do know how to land.’

‘Oh, that’s priceless,’ Shira laughed, pulling the controls from side to side erratically, weaving the craft in an irregular pattern. ‘Our touching farewell and you finally develop a sense of humour.’ She stabbed at the control for the rear hatch. Warm air and rain blew into the crew compartment seconds later.

‘Good luck,’ she called over her shoulder. The Grey Knight stood framing the open hatchway, his hands gripping the frame. A burst of blue balefire silhouetted him against the darkening evening sky. In a blink he was gone.

Shira hit the door control again and the hatch retracted. Pulling back on the controls, she made for the open skies and away from Atika. As she ploughed the shuttle through the thick grey cloud cover, a familiar voice invaded her mind for one last time.

+Good luck, Shira.+

Epimetheus tucked his arms and legs in as the ground quickly came up to meet him. It had been ten thousand years since he had free-fallen from a moving craft – in the days before he had sworn his new oaths and his gene-seed swapped out for that containing the Emperor’s own biological material – but the memory of it came easily to him.

His shoulder hit first, shattering the glassaic ground under the force of impact and opening a wide crater. Momentum carrying him on, he rolled, limbs still tight to his body to prevent them snapping or snagging until finally coming to rest some twenty-five metres from where he had made landfall. He lifted himself quickly to his feet, drawing his scavenged bolter in the same movement and tracked it around in a full circle, alert for any signs of Abaddon and his Black Legionnaires. Satisfied that there were none, he made his way to the tunnel mouth, weapon still raised and using the steaming wrecks of vehicles as cover.

Eviscerated corpses lay strewn haphazardly across the smooth floor and draped over burned-out frames of Chimera and Leman Russ variants. True

to what he had seen of the Black Legion's handiwork in the preceding weeks, this was a total massacre, though on a vastly greater scale to any of the lightly garrisoned delver-strongholds. Through the lashing rain, as far as even augmented eyes could see, an entire regiment lay butchered, the downpour washing their blood into narrow gullies that bisected the battlefield like veins. *Almost* an entire regiment.

Noise and movement in the distance drew Epimetheus's attention and he raised his bolter to his shoulder, looking out over the wide body and barrel to find its source. Proceeding cautiously, he stepped over the dead as he followed the sound. As he got closer two voices became apparent, one weak and little more than a hoarse whisper, the other deep, resonant and distorted by static.

'Please...' the quiet voice said. 'Ab... Abaddon is in the... underhive. Kill... killed us all. You have... have to stop him...'

'What are his numbers?' came the vox-distorted response.

'They hit... us so quickly. Hard... hard to tell.' The man's voice was laboured. Breathing, let alone speaking, was a supreme effort for him.

'Doz... dozens? Hundreds...?'

The second voice was lower this time, as if the speaker had turned away to address somebody else. The noise in the background sounded like a mighty battle was raging. 'Don't be a fool, Azrael. If the Black Legion are sweeping in behind us, we have to meet their assault.'

Epimetheus could make out another voice replying but his enhanced hearing couldn't discern the exact words.

'Well, you and your Dark Angels can die and your damned secrets with you,' the voice at the end of the vox-link raged. 'I am withdrawing my Grey Knights to meet the threat.'

Epimetheus was now close enough to see the owner of the first voice. A human lay slumped against the side of a semi-intact scout vehicle, a vox-receiver held limply to his mouth. His tunic was soaked, not only with

rainwater but with blood too, the white chevrons denoting his rank of lieutenant stained red. The lower half of his body was missing from the waist down and his face was as pale as the moon rising overhead. He noticed Epimetheus approaching and grew more animated, thick black liquid spilling from his mouth as he spoke.

‘No... no. Sweet Emperor, please... have mercy,’ the man spluttered. As Epimetheus drew nearer, his tone changed to one of serenity. ‘You... you aren’t Black Legion. You’re one of... of them. You’re a... a Grey Knight.’ His eyes grew wide and in that instant he finally gave in to his wounds, one last long exhale presaging his journey into oblivion. The vox, which had remained open, sprang rudely to life.

‘Who is that? Why have you fled the battle? This is Supreme Grand Master Draigo. Answer me, Emperor damn you!’ the other voice boomed. After a pause filled by the static addled noise of combat, it added, more calmly, ‘Lord Epimetheus?’

Epimetheus crouched down, closing the dead man’s eyes with one hand and picking up the vox-receiver with the other. He lingered for a moment.

‘Lord Epimetheus? Is that you?’ Draigo said again.

Epimetheus raised the handset, tiny in his huge hands, but let it drop again. Getting to his feet he opened a mind link with the Chapter Master of the Grey Knights.

+Well met, Master Draigo,+ he sent. +From what Tzula tells me, the Brotherhoods have a worthy commander.+

+By the Throne!+ Draigo’s mind voice was full of reverence. +It *is* you, returned to us after all these years.+

+I am returned to no one. It was my sworn oath to remain here in slumber watching over the seals. Those seals are now broken and, though I am released of my oath, I am still duty bound to ensure that this world does not fall to Chaos and become a haven for the Neverborn.+

+But you are one of the—+

+Who I am and what I was is of no relevance. All that matters now is closing the Damnation Cache and dealing with what was released from the Emerald Cave.+

+You have done both of those things before, but you choose not to aid us in our hour of need?+ Draigo's reverence started to secede to frustration.
+Why do you abandon us?+

+I have not abandoned you. I came here to deal with Abaddon and his Black Legion dogs who are snapping at your heels. You already have the means to vanquish the daemon and close the Cache.+

+The athame.+

+And Tzula. She does not know it, but I have implanted within her the knowledge she needs to use the knife to seal the portal. She will not be able to recall what she has done once she has committed the act, but the information will bury itself in her psyche should it be needed again.+

+And the daemon?+

+Azrael's plan is sound. You only have to get close enough to the daemon to carry it out.+

+How could you know of the Dark Angel's plan? It was never discussed by vox so you could not have intercepted it.+

A pause followed by realisation.

+The scriptures are true.+ The awe returned to Draigo's mind voice.

+Your psychic power levels are prodigious.+

+I have been privy to Azrael's thoughts ever since he arrived on Pythos.+

+Hence your reluctance to reveal your presence to him.+

+What would you know of that?+ Epimetheus countered.

+Not nearly enough. But if you wish to share what you have found in the recesses of his mind...+

Some vestige of Epimetheus's former loyalties rose to the fore. +All men have secrets and Azrael is entitled to his. Just like I know about your

future, Kaldor Draigo, and choose to keep that knowledge from you.+

+My future?+ Draigo sent. +What happens to me in the future?+

+You will find out soon enough as you will be the one to live it.+

Epimetheus replied. +We waste time with this discussion. I will go and hold Abaddon off. You use the time I buy you to banish the daemon and reseal the Cache. Farewell, Kaldor Draigo.+

Abruptly, Epimetheus cut the mind link. Hoisting his bolter in both hands, the ancient Grey Knight set off through the rain in pursuit of Abaddon.

157961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

Blood cascaded from Draigo's nose, the strain of maintaining a psychic sanctuary around himself and Tzula whilst simultaneously battling off a cohort of daemons and engaging in communion was exacting its toll.

In his shadow, the junior interrogator fired away relentlessly with her plasma pistol, each clean headshot accounting for another of the Neverborn. Her bodyglove was torn open across her stomach and thighs and she bled from gashes to her arms and chest. The athame remained safely tucked into her belt.

'You looked distracted for a moment there,' Tzula said, drawing in closer to the Grey Knight to make herself heard. 'Having second thoughts about withdrawing to face Abaddon?'

The *Titansword* flashed through the air, bifurcating a daemon that had strayed within the shield generated by his mind. 'No need. A friend of yours is taking care of that.'

Even in the midst of battle she spared a grin.

Draigo swung his blade again, taking an enemy down on both the front and backstroke. It was like stamping his feet to clear water from a lake; no matter how many he killed, more would flood in to take their place. 'This is getting us nowhere. With me.'

Pushing the boundary of his sanctuary further out, he wielded the *Titansword* one-handed, raising the storm bolter mounted on his other arm and blasted a path through the daemons through to where Azrael was fighting nearby. Gibbering fiends tried to move in to plug the void but fell under the concentrated fire of the Grey Knight and the inquisitor, those not eliminated by plasma blast or bolt shell impaled on the end of his sword or smashed out of the way by storm shield.

‘What changed your mind, Grand Master?’ Azrael scoffed as Draigo took up position alongside him. As they had done several times already during the Pandorax campaign, the *Sword of Secrets* and the *Titansword* rose and fell in union, slick with the gore of daemons. At his other shoulder, Gabriel fought with an identical vigour and relish.

The Grey Knight ignored him. ‘We’re bogged down here. For every metre we take, they push us back two.’

‘If we could get the teleporters to work this far underground this would have been over long ago. What do you suggest, Draigo?’ Azrael sounded as if he was genuinely open to ideas.

‘On the *Revenge*. Your Deathwing formed a cordon around my Grey Knights to get them to the warp rifts on the lower decks. There are more daemons here but you have more Terminators too.’

The Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels thought about this for a moment but no more. ‘Gabriel. Form two circles. You have command of the outer, I the inner.’

‘As you wish, Lord Azrael,’ Gabriel said. At his signal, close to seventy Terminators formed two concentric rings. The bulk took up position in the outer, a smaller number including Draigo, Tzula, Azrael and the company masters, in the inner. It was a formation the Dark Angels had utilised in combat for millennia and it was the work of mere seconds before they were all in position, the gap between the two armoured rings cleared of daemons.

At another signal from Gabriel, the outer circle started to move, not only forwards but in a spinning motion too. The inner circle moved in time with them, guns aimed high to deal with any winged daemons or those scrambling over others to bypass the wall of Terminators. Warp lightning leapt from Draigo's fingertips, turning any daemon it came into contact with to ash. The Deathwing alongside him muttered a curse under his breath and the Grey Knight realised that it was Balthasar, the one he had encountered on board the *Revenge* when he first met Gabriel. The Terminator was helmeted, but Draigo recognised him by the wave of repulsion and unease he emanated.

Their progress through the horde was slow but at least it was progress, each metre hard earned and paid for in the hellish blood of the Neverborn. Barely any ivory remained visible of the armour of the Deathwing, each one of them coated from head to foot in unnaturally coloured gore. Even the silver of Draigo's own Terminator suit was dulled by the foul, stinking liquid.

The Titans and tanks continued to pound away, the colossal daemon seemingly oblivious and impervious to their weapons. Fledgling horrors oozed from his body like sweat, a continual slick that provided fresh fodder for the Imperial guns or new reapers for their souls depending on where they were drawn forth from the immaterium.

As quickly as the Imperial forces had gained the upper hand, the battle turned against them.

Whether it was a reluctance to take any further part in the conflict on the part of its machine spirit, the incorrect prayers incanted over it or simple malfunction, the plasma blaster of one of the Warhound Titans ceased firing. Detecting an opportunity, the daemon sprouted a clump of fat tentacles which it thrust towards the ailing Titan. The war machine brought its other arm to bear but only managed to rattle off a handful of shots before the vulcan mega-bolter seized, the *clack clack* of a jammed

shell issuing forth in place of the roar of full automatic fire. The probing limbs clasped hold of the Warhound, wrapping around its massive arms to stop them from being used as cudgels, acrid steam rising from where corrosive slime met the ancient metal of its body. Servos and motors screeched in protest as the princeps fought to prevent his charge from being dragged into the beast and subsumed into the daemoniac mass.

The fleshy tentacles stretched as the Titan struggled to move backwards until, just as it seemed it was breaking free, the tendrils suddenly withdrew. Momentum did the rest.

Packed tightly into the confines of the Emerald Cave, neither daemon nor Imperial Guardsman could move quickly enough to avoid the felled Warhound. Like one of the mighty redwoods from the jungle above, it crashed backwards obliterating anything unfortunate enough to be caught underneath it. A Baneblade and its Hellhound escort were crushed under the Titan's massive head, the ensuing explosion wiping out everything in a five hundred metre radius and setting light to the prone god machine.

Unfazed by the loss of such a mighty ally, Draigo and the Dark Angels fought on relentlessly but the nature of their enemy changed. Instead of the lesser daemons and spawn of the Prisoner, plague zombies swarmed the twin rings of ceramite, sheer weight of numbers impeding their progress. The Terminator directly in front of Draigo went down, a hole punched clean through his helmet, blood fountaining from the exit wound. His brother alongside him took a round to the shoulder, spinning him backwards but not causing enough damage to remove him from the fight. Draigo followed the report of the bolters back to their source.

'Plague Marines!' he called, spotting the misshapen armoured forms lurking in amongst their undead minions. Almost taking his warning to be an order, the Deathwing shifted their formation, those among their number armed with close combat weapons and storm shields forming a tighter

outer ring to fend off the zombies, the rest firing over their brothers' shoulders at the Traitor Marines.

All forward movement ceased as yet more plague zombies hemmed in the Space Marines, tearing away armour to expose the weaker flesh beneath. Anything became a weapon as Draigo and the Dark Angels swung out elbows and knees, rotted limbs and organs popping with each blow.

The Dark Angel who had taken the shot to the shoulder shuddered as two more rounds found their mark, the first squarely into his chest, the other blasting out the lower half of his torso. Instantly, the plague zombie horde was upon him, dragging him to the ground and revealing his killer.

A rusted, serrated blade in one remaining hand, the Plague Marine strode boldly forward, fixated on Tzula, who had remained by Draigo's side. The junior interrogator let off two quick shots of her plasma pistol which her target evaded with an ease belying his bloated form.

'Corpulax,' she stated plainly to Draigo. The muzzle of her pistol was glowing from overuse and her Catachan blade flashed in her other hand, stabbing viciously at anything that came within arm's reach.

Ignoring the Grey Knight, the Plague Lord carved through the ranks of his own thralls to get at Tzula. Draigo swung the *Titansword* but it snagged against the throng, plague zombies packed in so tight that the dead remained on their feet to serve as further impediment to the Space Marines. Just as Corpulax was about to lunge for the junior interrogator, warp lightning shot forth from Draigo's free hand, knocking the Traitor Marine backwards.

'It would seem there's always a knight around to save you, Tzula,' Corpulax said, disentangling himself from the undead mass. 'And this one wears shining armour,' he added, looking Draigo up and down.

The Grey Knight let rip with another salvo of crackling blue energy from his fingertips, but Corpulax merely waved his hand to dissipate it.

‘My god favours me, Grey Knight. You won’t find me as easy to kill as these daemons or my thralls,’ Corpulax sneered, the knife in his hand lengthening and broadening organically under the malign influence of the warp until it was a match for Draigo’s own blade.

Raising his sword high, the Plague Lord charged the Supreme Grand Master of the Grey Knights, a benediction to his foul master rasping wetly from his dead lips.

‘Right turn, K’Cee,’ Strike called from the command seat.

The jokaero swung the controls and the tank veered off in the direction of the oncoming daemons the colonel had espied through the viewslit. A slight vibration resonated through the tank as the majority of them were crushed beneath the tracks, the combined efforts of the sponson-mounted flamers and *Tindalos*’s main gun accounting for those not flattened.

Traitor’s Bane’s main turret swung around, the hellhammer cannon firing back in the direction from which the tank had come, annihilating a pursuing pack of plague-touched Neverborn. The demolisher cannon did likewise to a second wave of horrors approaching from the front while heavy bolters and flamers continued to despatch anything getting too close.

With almost two full crews on board, *Traitor’s Bane* was operating at peak efficiency, its guns only falling silent when all of its immediate targets had been killed. Leaving K’Cee to drive once again, Brigstone had formed part of the loading team for the Hellhammer’s primary weapon system, and as soon as one empty casing had been cleared from the breech, he was there straight away with a fresh shell.

To Strike, it was just like old times. Brigstone had been a loader on the first ever tank he had commanded, a Leman Russ Eradicator named *Longfang*, and the man’s indefatigability had seen them through many deadly battles. The enemy back then had been orks, rather than the vile servants of the Plague God, and at that moment Strike would have given

anything – even his cherished Catachan fang – to have been back on any of those worlds fighting under open skies instead of trapped deep underground in a ready-made tomb.

‘We’re almost out of shells,’ Brigstone called out to Strike, slotting a massive hellhammer round home with the aid of another Catachan before slamming shut the breech. Crates were stacked precariously around him but only two bore unopened seals.

‘Concentrate fire from the demolisher,’ Strike called back. The secondary gun was a far more common armament on Imperial tanks than the hellhammer cannon and over the course of the Battle for the Emerald Cave, Strike and his crew had been able to salvage a reasonable number of demolisher shells. ‘That should see us through the next few hours.’

Moments later, the ordnance situation became the least of their worries.

A nearby detonation rocked *Traitor’s Bane* with such violence that Brigstone, the other loaders and anybody else not seated slammed to the hard metal floor. Pulling back the slider of a viewslit, Strike witnessed the tail end of the explosion that had engulfed *Tindalos*, a plume of orange flame rising high from its blazing hull. Whether the lightly armoured promethium tank had taken a direct hit, a backdraught had fed flame back along the inferno cannon or daemons had somehow boarded it and detonated it from within was impossible to fathom and irrelevant. *Tindalos* was now a flaming wreck and *Traitor’s Bane* had lost its close support.

Like ocean-bound predators smelling blood in the water, shoals of the Neverborn started to circle the stricken tanks. The heavy flammers, heavy bolters and lascannons swung about to meet the new threat, any daemon caught within their arc of fire either eviscerated or evaporated, but there were too many for even *Traitor’s Bane’s* formidable weaponry to cope with. The ominous scraping of claws over armour echoed through the crew compartment and clawed footfalls tapped out like an agonised metronome counting down the time until the beasts would be within.

Strike mashed his fist onto the control that electrified the hull but nothing happened. K'Cee shrieked and gesticulated from the driver's seat, and though Strike couldn't understand exactly what the jokaero was trying to communicate, he got the gist: it no longer worked.

The xenos's protestations took on a more urgent tone as the sound of tearing metal issued from the rear of tank, shortly followed by the grind of the Hellhammer coming abruptly to a halt. Despite the language barrier, it was perfectly clear to Strike what K'Cee was now trying to tell him: the daemons had taken out the engine.

Launching out of his seat, K'Cee tore away one of the panels below a control console and slid underneath it. He re-emerged moments later and gestured to Brigstone with all four elongated fingers of one hand in the universal gesture for 'pass me a wrench'. Brigstone tossed the tool to the jokaero and took K'Cee's place in the driver's seat, vainly applying pressure to pedals and controls to coax some power out of the dormant war machine.

All the while, the sound of daemoniac clawing and rending grew in intensity.

157961.M41 / Thirty kilometres north of Atika, Pythos

Despite lacking the manoeuvrability of a Kestrel, under Shira's control the Inquisition shuttle was doing things she swore it was never designed for.

Hugging the canopies of the tall trees, she waited for a break in the blur of green rushing beneath her and dropped beneath the cover. She weaved the craft through the thick trunks, sometimes banking the craft onto its side to slip through the tighter gaps.

The jungle behind her lit up in a riot of blue flame, the chasing Heldrake's impatience at finding an opening of its own forcing it to burn a point of egress. The shuttle's auspex flashed repeatedly, alerting Shira that her pursuer was now within fifty metres of her and gaining. It opened its

jaws, the promise of yet more balefire flickering across its maw, and sent a funnel of intense heat in the direction of the shuttle. At the last moment, the broad leaves above her gave way to clear skies and she burst out of the jungle, now ablaze with daemoniac fire, and back out into the rain.

Behind her, the Heldrake wailed in frustration, its vast form erupting from the flame and steam, doggedly sticking to her tail.

For a craft designed to carry some of the Imperium's finest and most loyal servants often into hostile environments, whoever had put the shuttle together had incorporated one major flaw – all of the weapons systems pointed forwards. At first glance, the sleek black-hulled craft could be mistaken for a civilian vessel, having no outward signs of offensive capability. On closer inspection it became apparent that the two recesses on the nose were both lascannons and the exhaust ports protruding from either side were flamers designed to protect the shuttle from interference on the ground. But the real *pièce de résistance* was the hellstrike missile concealed alongside the landing gear.

As with most of the craft's systems, Shira had discovered it through trial and error on those missions where Epimetheus had deemed it too dangerous for her to accompany him. Fortunately, the button she had pressed just deployed the missile and neither activated nor launched it. It was a simple process of elimination that had led her to find that particular switch.

She briefly considered turning the shuttle around and ramming the hellstrike straight down Ragwing's throat, but quickly ruled it out. Not only would she be putting herself directly into the path and range of its flame weapon, but if she missed she would have blown her one chance at bringing the Heldrake down.

But that didn't mean she was entirely without hope or options.

Veering off in a north-easterly direction, Shira flew for all she was worth towards the nearest mountain range. With a snort of warpfire, Ragwing

followed.

157961.M41 / The Underhive. Atika, Pythos

The combination of total recall and enhanced vision made navigating the benighted tunnels beneath Atika a simple task for Epimetheus. He had already walked this way twice, once ten thousand years ago at the head of a hundred Grey Knights, the second time very recently as part of a much smaller group. If he was not familiar with the route or his eidetic memory had somehow failed him, the advanced light-capturing capabilities of his occulobe were revealing the path to him as if it were merely twilight rather than pitch black.

He came to a halt at a flat section where the shaft widened and knelt down, dipping his fingers in a stream of dark liquid running across the stone floor and sniffing them. Blood. Following the trail back to behind a boulder against one of the walls, he found a Cadian in the same uniform as those dead up above, almost split in two from a wound that ran from groin to throat, ran down by Abaddon and his Black Legionnaires as he tried to raise the alarm. Rising from a crouch, Epimetheus swore to himself that this would be the last servant of the Emperor the Warmaster slew on Pythos.

Reaching his full height, a sudden bout of vertigo afflicted the Grey Knight forcing him to thrust out an arm to steady himself. His head ached in a way that his pain suppressors were unable to deal with and a sickening buzzing and tingling lashed across his temporal lobe. Not since the days before the Emperor came to his home world and he swore his first oaths as a Space Marine had he felt pain of this magnitude and had never expected to feel its like again. He pulled off his helmet in case his ancient Terminator suit was malfunctioning, but the pain and dizziness did not abate. He regulated his breathing but to no avail, the pain intensifying rather than dissipating.

Gas, he thought. Either some build-up of subterranean fumes so toxic it affected even a Space Marine's genhanced physiology or an Archenemy trap.

It was a trap, just not the kind Epimetheus suspected.

Turning to head back to the surface, the Grey Knight had only taken a few steps when a shape detached itself threateningly from the darkness. Instinctively, Epimetheus drew upon his gifts but the well was dry, his link to the warp severed. Without flinching, he raised his bolter and put three rounds through the head of his concealed would-be assassin. Two more figures resolved out of the black, one of whom Epimetheus put down immediately, but the other was able to get off a shot before meeting with the same fate as his comrade. The bolt round struck Epimetheus in the knee, shattering armour and bone, dropping him to a crouch once again. More figures shifted in the gloom but there was another enemy he was fighting against. It felt as if his own powers had turned against him, killing him instead of saving him. The closer the shadows got, the more severe the pain became.

Epimetheus squeezed off two more shots, the heavy thud of power armour against rock signifying both were fatal. He was lining up a third when he was struck on the wrist, the shot not penetrating all the way through his Cataphractii plate but enough to send his bolter skidding away down the tunnel. He tried to rise, desperate to retrieve it, but was assailed by more gunfire, two rounds finding their way through his armour at the chest and shoulder, another to devastating effect on his other knee. His secondary heart kicked in and his system flushed with pain-killing agents, calming his physical wounds but doing nothing to intervene in the war within his mind. His brain felt like it was made of glass, every burst of gunfire shattering it.

His attackers revealed themselves, the black armour and gold livery of their battered armour denoting their allegiance to Abaddon and his Black

Legion. Three of them held chains at the end of which were tethered beasts, feral things crawling on all fours. It pained him to do so but Epimetheus forced himself to look upon them. Only then did he realise that they were not animals at all, they were human, or, in the case of one of them, something approaching human.

One was female, completely naked and covered in filth, her hair and nails long and unkempt. Her face could be considered beautiful by human standards but Epimetheus found it difficult to look upon her, her very presence this close to him making him want to completely and utterly destroy her. The other two were both male, in a similar state of undress but whereas one of them had a primitive aspect to his features – as if he was a genetic throwback to an earlier stage of evolution – the other was something different, something not human.

Covered entirely in tough scaled hide, the thing skulked on four simian legs, straining on its leash to reach what it considered to be prey. Its humanoid face showed intelligence and a bulbous tongue ran across twin sets of needle-sharp teeth as if in anticipation of a feast. Its orange, glowing eyes were fixed on Epimetheus, but the Grey Knight could not hold its gaze, convulsions wracking his body the instant he made eye contact.

Blanks.

Though the pinnacle of human power is psychic ability married with the enhanced genetics of a Space Marine, even a being so mighty can be laid low by a blank, an aberration scarcer than a psyker upon the worlds of the Imperium. Able to negate the most potent of mental abilities, the blank – or blacksoul as the Grey Knights referred to them – was uncomfortable for even normal humans to be around, excruciatingly painful for those touched by the warp. At the time of Horus's rebellion, the Emperor maintained an entire cadre of such beings – the Sisters of Silence – but to find more than one in the same planetary sector, let alone the same planet,

was unheard of. This was no freak occurrence; somebody had engineered this. Somebody had brought three blanks to Pythos specifically to nullify Epimetheus.

The Black Legionnaires parted and Abaddon stepped out of the darkness.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

157961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

Steel fashioned on the anvils of Titan clashed against the serrated edge of a blade forged deep within the Eye of Terror, the strength of both wielders locking together the two swords that were anathema to each other. Like oppositely charged magnets each weapon fought to repel the other, the air around the duel heavy with electrical charge and the stink of ozone.

The two warriors broke from each other, Draigo swinging the *Titansword* around and clearing the surrounding area of plague zombies, Corpulax summoning yet more of his thralls to him. Nearby, Tzula lashed out with both combat knife and plasma pistol, keeping the horde at bay.

The din of combat had not subsided, but where the air had once been full of the boom of artillery fire and the discharge of heavy ordnance, now the ululating cries of daemons and low moan of the undead drowned it out. Many kilometres away, the Brotherhood of which Draigo had taken temporary command continued to engage the Neverborn, thousands of them converging on the Grey Knights' position. His Space Marines fought with the same freshness and zeal as they had at the dawn of the battle, but the first inklings of concern were seeping into the psychic link the Supreme Grand Master maintained with his troops. Thankfully few Grey

Knights had fallen thus far but the Imperial Guard tanks had borne the brunt of the daemons' assault, leaving them virtually bereft of armoured support.

Azrael and his Dark Angels fared little better. Those in the immediate vicinity were now fighting on two fronts – up close and personal with the overwhelming press of plague zombies and at range with the Traitor Marines. Not a single Deathwing or company master remained unscathed and Azrael himself bled from a vicious claw wound to his torso. The squads scattered throughout the Emerald Cave found themselves hunkered down behind the cover of transport vehicles or rock formations, any daemons not able to get close enough to the Grey Knights seeking out the Sons of the Lion instead.

It was in the air where the most success had been made. With fewer of the winged daemons than those confined to the ground, air superiority had been established and Thunderhawks and Valkyries rained down death from above while Sammael pursued and eliminated any of the Neverborn with the temerity to challenge their aerial dominance. It had not come entirely without cost, as the smoking wrecks of more than a dozen Imperial flyers bore testimony to.

The Plague Lord came at Draigo again, but the Grey Knight turned aside the blow with his own blade and drove his elbow into the back of Corpulax's head. The *Titansword* flashed with reflected emerald light as it swept in a blur towards the traitor's head but at the last moment Corpulax threw a plague zombie bodily in the way, which exploded in a shower of blood and innards as Draigo's sword connected with it.

Lifting a gore-drenched arm, the Grey Knight opened up at close range with his storm bolter but with a flick of his hand, Corpulax put a putrid barrier between him and Draigo, another coat of stinking crimson atop silver armour the only outcome. Back and forth it went, Draigo countering

every thrust and swipe aimed at him, the Plague Lord sacrificing his thralls to defend the Grey Knight's attacks.

Eventually something had to give.

Unseen among the stack of limbs and severed body parts, a gruesome collage adorning the floor of the Emerald Cave, the upper half of a plague zombie continued its progress towards the Grey Knight. Unnoticed by Draigo, who was too preoccupied by the attentions of Corpulax and his other minions, it dragged itself along on decaying arms leaving bloody smears behind it as it pulled its body closer to its intended victim. Reaching one of Draigo's massive armoured greaves, it raised itself up, biting and clawing at the weak point at the back of the Supreme Grand Master's knee.

Draigo looked down for a split second, drawing his blade backwards and impaling the half-zombie on its tip, but this was the opening Corpulax had been seeking. Spinning his sword so it was point down, he stabbed at Draigo's calf, the serrated edge biting through ceramite and into the huge muscle beneath. Hamstrung, the Grey Knight fell to one knee with a grunt of pain. Corpulax was upon him instantly, sword-tip pressed against Draigo's throat.

'A fine duel, Grey Knight, but there was only ever going to be one victor.' Corpulax applied pressure to the hilt of his weapon, Draigo's armour sizzling under its acidic touch. 'Consider yourself fortunate that I will allow you to live on as one of my thralls.'

A call rang out from where the Dark Angels were engaging the Plague Marines. 'Draigo!' bellowed Azrael, futilely trying to carve his way to his stricken counterpart.

Corpulax's grip on his sword relaxed slightly, grim realisation apparent on his face. 'Draigo? No, this cannot be. The Four have such plans for you, such a role you have yet to play.' He tightened his hold of the blade again.

‘No. I shall not be robbed of this. If you truly are part of a greater scheme then why—’

Draigo never got to find out why. With a crackle of energy, a power sword slid through the air taking Corpulax’s other hand at the wrist, still gripping the sword as it fell to the ground with a clang. Behind the sword came a mass of stained ivory ceramite, crashing into the Plague Lord and knocking him to the ground. The Deathwing raised his sword for another attack but Corpulax had lost a hand, not his senses, and plague zombies flooded in to fill the space between them. Under cover of his thralls, Corpulax got to his feet and retreated through the ranks of the undead. Accepting Draigo’s nod of gratitude, Balthasar set off in pursuit.

Tzula came alongside Draigo again and the Space Marine lifted himself erect, his wound already knitting thanks to his accelerated healing process.

‘How bad is it?’ the junior interrogator asked, her plasma pistol finally having given out, forcing her to resort to a scavenged bolt pistol for defence.

‘The muscle feels like it’s almost completely shorn through and the blade was laced with toxins that are inhibiting its repair.’ He blazed away with the last few shots from his storm bolter until it returned a hollow *clack* signifying it was empty. ‘I can stand but I won’t be able to move freely until an Apothecary has taken a look at it.’

Despite Corpulax fleeing, neither the plague zombies nor his Traitor Marine cohort relented in their attack. A Dark Angels company master in tattered robes was hit in the side of the neck; the arterial flow was quickly stemmed but in his weakened state he was dragged down by undead hands, armour torn from him so they could feast on what lay inside it. Their superior armour no advantage, the Deathwing too fell under fire from the Plague Marines. In the space of as many seconds, three died, their breastplates and helmets giving in under a sustained barrage from a heavy

bolter. It was only the psychic sanctuary Draigo had put back in place that prevented him and Tzula from sharing their doom.

The shift in tactics had come so close to succeeding but the intervention of the Plague Marines had brought them to the threshold of defeat. Their forces already depleted, Dark Angels were dying in droves and still the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave persisted, his ever burgeoning offspring ploughing their way through the mass of zombies to help strike the final blows.

There was one last option open to Draigo. He would probably die in the process, his soul given up as a banquet for those beyond the threshold, but it was the only chance they had.

Sheathing the *Titansword*, Draigo closed his eyes.

Chinks of emerald light filtered in through the roof of the Hellhammer, cracks forming in its armoured hull where talons and claws widened the gaps between plates, tearing away the outer layers to reveal the prey within.

K'Cee worked furiously beneath the console, stripping out wires and fibre bundles, reconfiguring them and soldering them back in place with heat from one of the many rings that adorned his long, slender fingers. Strike and the others knew that the jokaero's efforts were in vain; the daemons had crippled the engine and short of stepping outside their rapidly diminishing armoured cocoon and, getting under the hood, *Traitor's Bane* was not going anywhere.

A loud crunching sound was followed up by brighter green light flooding the crew compartment. Strike looked up to see that a hole the size of a man's head had been gouged through the side of the turret, a pustule-riddled arm reaching experimentally inside.

'K'Cee,' Strike said, gripping one of the xenos's furry knees and shaking it to get his attention. K'Cee shot out from the darkened recess, wrench raised threateningly.

‘We have to bail out.’ Strike pointed to the daemonic limb reaching around blindly above them.

In sheer frustration, the jokaero bashed away at the console with the wrench then paused with a hopeful look on his face that his percussive maintenance had yielded results. When he was certain that even this hadn’t coaxed any final vestige of life out of the tank, he flung the tool at the flailing arm, screeching with delight when it struck the wrist with a satisfying crack.

There was another crunch of metal and the red gloom of emergency lighting gave way entirely to the jade from without, but this breach of their confines was the planned opening of the rear hatch rather than the violent attention of the swarming Neverborn. Brigstone tossed Strike a lasrifle and the two Catachan officers, along with K’Cee, followed the rest of the crew out into the cavern.

Seen through the tiny rectangular aperture of a tank viewslit, the Battle for the Emerald Cave had been a gruesome sight to behold. Exposed to the full panorama, the experience was soul-crushing. The screams of the dying were virtually indistinguishable from the howls of their daemonic killers, sounds that would keep the men and women who heard them awake at night for the rest of their lives. Corpses, both human and warpborn, festooned the cavern floor, the stone dyed a deep red from the blood and other matter that had leaked from the lifeless, the grisly by-product of war. Those wounded that lived on cried out for mercy, for their comrades to grant them a swift end and spare them from the virulent horrors eating away at their bodies, the lingering deaths that would wrack them with pain until they breathed their last.

Smoke hung in palls over the battlefield, endless banks of promethium fumes from the burning wrecks of tanks and flyers. Strike was glad of it, not only to cover their retreat from *Traitor’s Bane*, but for the smell

masking the rank odour of the Plague God's servants and the four days' worth of Imperial dead.

Weapons fire, sudden and loud, drew the colonel's attention. Through the smoke, muzzle flare from multiple heavy bolters and red beams of lascannon fire emanated from the silhouette of what was unmistakably a Baneblade. The daemons closing in on Strike and his crew collapsed under the barrage, the corpses convulsing under sustained fire as the tank's rear hatch dropped to allow the fleeing Catachans on board.

With K'Cee bounding along on all fours several metres back, Strike sprinted towards their saviour, a Mars-pattern super-heavy in the urban camouflage colour scheme of the Tenth Cadian Armoured regiment. He had just placed the first of his standard Imperial Guard issue boots on the metal ramp when a roar from behind him had him spinning, the butt of his lasrifle reflexively coming up to his shoulder.

A horned, one-eyed monstrosity had placed itself between K'Cee and the Baneblade, too close to be targeted by the tank's weapons systems. Strike and the other Catachans opened up with their guns but their shots bounced harmlessly off the thing's thick, rancid hide. It loomed over the xenos and bellowed again, its breath so heavy with stench that what came out of its mouth was the same grey-green as its flesh. Raising its crude, heavy blade above its head, it made ready to finish the jokaero.

K'Cee didn't flinch. Extending a single finger, another of his rings was revealed to be a lethal weapon, a vast fountain of flame shooting forth from it, engulfing the daemon. The creature thrashed and flailed as its mottled skin melted under the intense heat, dropping to the ground with a howl in a futile attempt to douse the cleansing fire.

Seemingly oblivious to what he had done, K'Cee continued to lope forwards without any urgency whatsoever. He clambered aboard the waiting Baneblade which moved off at speed before the rear hatch had closed.

While Strike remonstrated vociferously with the Cadian tank commander who believed the hairy orange alien who had just boarded his tank to be an enemy agent, K'Cee stared back at the rapidly disappearing Hellhammer, wiping the dampness away from the fur on his cheeks.

In the long and storied history of the six hundredth and sixty-sixth Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, what Draigo was about to do had only been attempted on a handful of occasions, each time at great personal cost to the individual performing it.

During the 33rd millennium, Supreme Grand Master Tethys had performed the feat and spent the next one hundred and twelve days in a coma. Upon awakening, his psychic abilities were so diminished that he had to pass over his mantle as Chapter Master and lived out the rest of his days tending to memorials for the fallen in the Dead Fields.

Two thousand years later, a battle-brother of no small potential by the name of Hiermeno would attempt the same feat. His actions that day saved the lives of more than a billion souls who would otherwise have succumbed to daemonic predation but of the Grey Knight himself no trace was left, warp energy burning him out and consuming him entirely.

Most recently, Brother-Captain Stern had pulled off the same feat on a much smaller scale than Draigo was attempting during the cleansing of a world recently emerged from the Eye of Terror. The captain survived his ordeal and ensured the mission was a success, but he and his Brotherhood spent most of the next year on Titan training new recruits while they recuperated from their psychic exertions.

Reaching out through the mental storm raging around him, Kaldor Draigo spoke directly into the minds of his temporary charges, preparing them for what was to come. The Supreme Grand Master felt his resolve strengthen as each Grey Knight of the Fifth Brotherhood accepted what he was about to do unflinchingly and loaned him a small portion of their psychic might.

His eyes firmly closed, Draigo began to chant. The sanctuary he had been maintaining dropped as he diverted his power elsewhere, and a cadre of opportunistic daemons charged him, scenting an easy target. Tzula blazed away with her bolt pistol, taking the first rank down before the gun returned the sound of metal striking metal, her last clip having run dry. One of the Neverborn leapt towards her, and she held her combat blade locked against her chest in both hands – if this was how her battle was going to end, she was going to take her killer with her – but the daemon was barely off the ground when it was torn to pieces by storm bolter shells. She turned to look upon her saviour, the battered form of Gabriel despatching another trio of daemons before tossing the junior interrogator a fresh bolt pistol that had been maglocked to the shattered thigh of his armour.

With the Grand Master of the Deathwing alongside her, Tzula continued to keep the horde at bay. Draigo's incantation grew in volume and the temperature around him plummeted, blue-white frost forming across his worn Terminator plate. A wind blew up out of nowhere so powerful that it pushed and dragged corpses across the floor of the cave and generated tiny tornadoes that harassed both friend and foe alike. The Grey Knight's body convulsed violently, and azure smoke trickled from the joints and cracks in his armour. He thrust his face skywards, muscles taut with warp energy coursing through them, and cried out the same phrase three times over.

The litany he had chanted was in an archaic language, unfathomable by the layperson and difficult to hear. The final five words that he called out thrice over were in High Gothic and all who heard them knew their meaning.

‘Come to me, my brothers!’

With a deafening crack of reality being parted and a blinding flash of intense white light, the seventy remaining Grey Knights of the Fifth Brotherhood appeared at Draigo's side. The displacement of air sent out a

shockwave, a wall of concussive force that knocked all in its path to the ground. Daemons and plague zombies fell in droves, as did the Dark Angels. The Grey Knights sprayed the area with gunfire, slaughtering their prone enemies before they could rise.

Castellan Crowe rushed to Draigo's side, the stricken Supreme Grand Master still on his knees, wisps of blue smoke pouring from his mouth and nostrils. Ignoring the aid being offered him, Draigo stared right past the Castellan to where Tzula had come to rest alongside his Dark Angel counterpart.

'The daemon...' Draigo croaked before collapsing back into Crowe's waiting arms.

Reacting quickest, Azrael hauled himself to his feet before lifting Tzula to hers. Their path to the daemon clear, the inquisitor and the Dark Angel set off to finish the Battle for the Emerald Cave.

157961.M41 / Forty-two kilometres north-east of Atika, Pythos

Diving down into the ravine, scorching balefire licked the rear of the shuttle triggering yet more alarms in the crew compartment. The shrill wail quickly subsided as the heavy rain continued to pummel at the ship's hull, stifling any fire before it could take hold.

Jerking at the controls, Shira jinked the craft from side to side and erratically altered her altitude, sometimes coming within metres of the trees whizzing by beneath her, other times faking that she was pulling out of the gulley altogether. The Heldrake was hot on her tail, so close that every issue from its breath weapon scored at least a glancing hit. The only thing preventing the shuttle from becoming a fireball was Shira's skill as a pilot and the torrential downpour. She didn't know how much longer she could rely on either.

The ravine bent sharply to the right and Shira was glad of the curve, her turn presenting the Heldrake with a smaller target. Practically on its side, the shuttle arced widely around the bend, levelling out high above a new valley. As if to let Shira know that it was still close behind her, the Heldrake sent another blast of blue flame in her direction; not as close as its previous attack but enough to raise the temperature within the craft by double digits.

The combination of inclement weather and failing daylight meant Shira had to rely on her instruments to navigate, and as sensors fed their data into the navigational auspex, a pleasing sight resolved itself on a screen in front of her. The chasm she was in narrowed to a bottleneck, just wide enough for a single craft to fly through, before widening back out again. She was still several kilometres away and wouldn't be able to manoeuvre the shuttle while aiming the missile but this was the opening she had been looking for.

Throwing the shuttle around wildly, Shira called upon every trick in her extensive repertoire to put more distance between her and the faster flying Heldrake. Every extra metre she gained was potentially the difference between life and death, and she fought hard for each one of them. At one point, she flew so close to the trees below that the cover for the landing gear was shorn away and a grating sound echoed around the crew compartment as branches scraped along the undercarriage. Ragwing fared even worse, its claws snagging on canopies in its effort to match Shira's altitude. By the time it had extricated itself from the tops of the trees, Shira was already spinning upwards in a controlled barrel roll.

Coming out of her final flip she checked the auspex again. She had indeed lengthened the gap, but wasn't sure it was enough to keep the Heldrake off her back for long enough to get her shot away. She had done all she could, the rest was up to fate.

Sheet lightning lit up the sky and the outline of the narrow pass loomed large ahead of her. Activating the control to lower the missile into its firing position, she brought the shuttle steady. Under normal circumstances she would have engaged the hunter-killer's guidance system and let that do the hard work for her, but that would tip the Helderake off about her plan; this had to be done manually at the very last moment to maintain the element of surprise. Her finger hovered over the launch button.

More alarms sounded and the temperature rose sharply, the otherworldly stink of warpfire and scorched paint forcing Shira to suppress a gag. She glanced at the auspex again to see the Helderake had eaten up the distance she had gained and was now closer than ever. Whether it had been holding something back in reserve or had called upon whichever foul god it worshipped for its acceleration spurt, she would never know. The one thing she was sure of was that another blast like that would certainly finish her off.

Ignoring the now constant wail of klaxons, Shira hung on until the last possible moment before slamming her fist down on the launch control. The missile left its housing with a *whoosh*, but that sound was soon swallowed up by the louder roar of the Helderake and the crackle of flame engulfing the Inquisition shuttle. Shira pulled back on the controls, hopelessly trying to lift the craft over the shower of rock and scree about to rain down from the mountaintops.

The missile hit home and the twilight sky lit up brighter than a lightning flash, but Shira wasn't paying attention. Her focus was on the two engine status lights that were flashing bright red on the console before her, telling her they were both dead. Debris cascaded down, bouncing off the outside of the powerless shuttle that was heading rapidly for the ground trailing fire in its wake.

The boon of its sudden burst of speed instantly becoming a curse, the Heldrake was flying too fast to avoid the avalanche. Tucking in its vulnerable wings, it darted through the shower of stones and boulders like a rocket, debris bouncing off its form as it cried out in pain, still airborne as it emerged through the other side.

Taking perch atop a nearby summit, the Heldrake looked on as its prey broke through the thick canopies down below before crashing to the ground in a blue streak. From thousands of metres above, the initial fire looked tiny, but moments later the crashed ship erupted in an explosion, a thick column of sapphire flame rising high into the darkening sky.

Satisfied that nothing could have survived the blast, the Heldrake took wing, considerably slower than before thanks to the grave damage inflicted upon it.

157961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

Lungs burning in her chest, lactic acid flushing through every muscle in her body, Tzula fought against her exertions of the past four days with the same determination she had battled whatever the Archenemy had thrown at her.

Already outpacing her, Azrael ran on ahead, his sword lashing out from side to side, killing any foe with the temerity to try and get up. The Grey Knights and Dark Angels provided the pair of them with covering fire, any Plague Marine or daemon not dealt with by the *Sword of Secrets* ruthlessly mowed down in a hail of bolter fire.

Reacting to the shift in the battle, the bloated horror yielded yet more facsimiles, sliding down its blubber to enter the fray and defend their progenitor. They too found Azrael's blade and Space Marine bolters too much of a match for them.

With just a few metres left to cover, half a dozen of the things detached themselves from the base of the host, putting themselves directly in Tzula and Azrael's route. The Lord of the Dark Angels didn't miss a beat,

sweeping out his sword to take out half of them before bundling into the remainder and slamming them hard to the ground.

‘Go! Go!’ he called out to Tzula as she sprinted past him.

The distance to the Prisoner from the Emerald Cave eroded to nothing, and Tzula slid the athame out from her belt, gripping its crude hilt tightly. She blinked – just a standard, involuntary bodily response – and in that instant another of the horrific copies formed to bar her path. Fatty tendrils sprouted from its misshapen body, probing their way towards the inquisitor.

Calling upon years of gymnastics training from some of the finest physical tutors at the Ordo Malleus’s disposal, Tzula pushed down hard on her back foot, launching herself over the top of the newly formed daemon. Her foot landed on what would have been its head, had the thing obeyed any basic laws of physiology, and sprang off again, stifling a scream as the toxic ooze coating its hide ate through the thick leather of her boots and stung her flesh. Somersaulting, she clasped both hands around the blade, stabbing down hard as she emerged from her flip.

The point of the blade parted daemon hide as easily as paper, a long gouge opening up as Tzula allowed gravity to pull her downwards. Filth spilled from the wound and Tzula vomited violently when she reached the ground as maggots, flies and the gestational larvae of things best left unknown gushed from the slit.

‘Azrael!’ she yelled, arm around her gut to prevent any more of its contents from being expelled.

From beneath the triumvirate of daemons attempting to subsume the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels a gauntleted hand emerged gripping *Lion’s Wrath*, one of the most finely crafted combi-weapons in the Imperium and a veteran of even more battles than its current wielder. His hand steady, Azrael engaged the bolter portion of the weapon and squeezed the firing stud.

When she looked back upon the battle in her later years, Tzula was never certain whether she actually witnessed what she saw next or whether the toxic stench from the daemon had caused her to hallucinate.

Time slowed around her, the bolt shell clearing the end of Azrael's weapon seeming to take an age. Muzzle flare issued forth in its wake more like a serene glow than the violent orange expulsion she was accustomed to seeing and the shell shimmered with that same light as it flew inexorably towards the daemon. The part that always gave her pause, always made her doubt the veracity of her own experience when she would later recount the tale, was in that last instant before the round found its mark it appeared to have wings, altering its course ever so slightly to enter through the rent rather than bounce harmlessly off the daemon's skin.

Her perceptions sped up again, the report of Azrael's weapon still ringing in her ears, and she staggered backwards looking up at the cyclopean daemon.

She had seen Neverborn vanquished before, even prior to her experiences of recent months, and no two ever left the mortal realm in quite the same way. Some exploded in a shower of gore, taking with them as many souls as possible in one final cruel act. Others merely dissipated, their passing leaving no trace of their ever existing save the trail of corpses the Neverborn inevitably leave in their wake. Others still go noisily, cursing their banisher, pleading for clemency or offering undreamt of riches and power in exchange for their continued material existence.

The Prisoner from the Emerald Cave did none of these things.

Deflating like a child's punctured kick-toy, the daemon's flesh sloughed from its frame releasing the detritus Tzula had witnessed when she had opened it up. Billions of maggots oozed across the floor of the cavern and thick black clouds of flies took flight, indistinguishable from the palls of smoke hovering overhead. The embryonic horrors flailed on the hard ground, bereft of the amniotic sustenance of their incubator, quickly dying

and becoming fodder for the tide of maggots. Its offspring, those daemons formed from the raw stuff of the host, withered and died in the same way, the toxins that coated them corroding the stone, leaving craters behind as markers of their passing.

Tzula shook her head in an attempt to clear the fog that had gripped her and wiped her stinging eyes. Slightly unsteady on her feet, she made her way over to Azrael who was flicking the corrosive sludge left behind by the dissipated daemons from his greaves and gauntlets.

Tzula was about to laud him for his shot when he spoke first.

‘I don’t care if it was the heat of battle, junior interrogator,’ he snarled, shaking loose a glob of acidic goo from his boot. ‘The correct way to address me is *Lord* Azrael.’

Drawing his sword, the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels headed in the direction of the Deathwing who were dealing with the few Plague Marines and zombies that remained.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Tzula tucked the athame back in her belt and followed him.

157961.M41 / The Underhive. Atika, Pythos

The pain in his head had built to such a level that Epimetheus wanted to grab one of the nearby rocks and break open his own skull to relieve the pressure. The buzzing and throbbing was so intense that he was finding it hard to focus on Abaddon’s words.

‘So,’ the Warmaster said, leaning forwards and gripping the Grey Knight roughly beneath the chin. ‘Which one are you?’

Epimetheus said nothing.

‘Mute are you? I’d make the most of our conversation if I were you, Epimetheus, because you won’t have a tongue for very much longer.’ Abaddon moved his hand away from Epimetheus’s face and turned away from him. ‘I know you aren’t my erstwhile brother because I watched him

die, nor are you one of the other traitors Malcador recruited so that narrows it down.'

Struggling through the agony, Epimetheus locked Abaddon with a baleful stare.

The Warmaster turned back to meet his gaze. 'Have we met before? Did we once fight alongside each other as brothers, you and I, or was it later, trading shots from opposing battle lines?'

Epimetheus maintained eye contact but remained silent. Abaddon switched his line of questioning again.

'Are you the Ultramarine?' He leaned forwards, inspecting Epimetheus's features. 'No. Too obvious. Besides, you don't have that look about you.'

Abaddon peered deeply into Epimetheus's eyes, as if he was trying to see what lay behind them. He started to laugh, coldly and entirely devoid of mirth.

'Oh, the irony...' He leaned in closer, his nose practically touching the Grey Knight's. 'The brother of ten who became a brother of eight. Azrael and his whelps would tear this planet apart if they knew who you were.'

Epimetheus didn't flinch. He held Abaddon's gaze, unblinking.

The Warmaster backed away. Without taking his eyes off the Grey Knight, he gestured for one of his Black Legionnaires to come forward. A black and gold figure emerged from the dark holding out a portable vox-unit which he passed to Abaddon.

'Huron,' he said, the handset crackling as he activated it. 'Get me off this rock. My mission is complete.'

There was a long crackle of static followed by a tinny voice. 'As you wish, Warmaster. The extraction will commence the instant you are back on the surface.'

Killing the link, Abaddon handed the vox back. Epimetheus's brow furrowed a fraction, almost imperceptible but apparent even in the gloom to one with the enhanced senses of a Space Marine.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Epimetheus,’ Abaddon said. ‘The Damnation Cache. The Prisoner in the Emerald Cave. Why am I abandoning this world while there is still a chance that my war could still be won?’

Abaddon crouched down.

‘This was never my war, but it was convenient for me to fight it. Corpulax and his lackeys wanted the Emerald Cave opening to set free the daemon within and gain favour with Nurgle. I doubt that without the aid of my Black Legion he will be successful in that venture but, should his god spare him, the Plague Lord and his warband are bound by oath to join me on my next Black Crusade.

‘The Davinicus Lycae wanted to reopen the Damnation Cache and get their hands on one of those accursed blades. For millennia, they have been honour bound to the Black Legion and all true sons of Cthonia, and they sought our aid in this matter. While the prospect of an endless army of daemons sallying forth into the Imperium is an appealing one to me, using a campaign on Pythos as a distraction to see whether the whispers in the warp were true was an opportunity too good to pass up.’

Epimetheus finally broke his silence. ‘What whispers?’

Abaddon smiled, obviously pleased that the Grey Knight had relinquished his quietude. ‘That a psyker of prodigious power dwelt here. Many took that to mean the Prisoner who you trapped here ten thousand years ago, but the Davinicus Lycae held a different theory based upon the snatches of information that left this world after you first came here. They believed that when the Grey Knights sealed shut the Cache and trapped the Prisoner in his tomb they left one of their own behind to watch over this world. The most powerful among their number. One of their founding brothers.’

Epimetheus’s eyes narrowed slightly.

‘Don’t worry, it’s not *only* your psychic abilities I’m interested in.’ The Warmaster raised a hand to Epimetheus’s neck and tapped it with two fingers right where the progenoid sat beneath the flesh. ‘It’s your genetic legacy I want too.’

The realisation carved through the pain granting Epimetheus a moment of clarity.

The Grey Knight was about to cry out his defiance when Abaddon’s fist made contact with Epimetheus’s forehead and everything went black.

157961.M41 / Forty-two kilometres north-east of Atika, Pythos

The rain had subsided to little more than a drizzle by the time Shira moved out from the crash site.

She had spent her first hour on the ground sheltering at the base of a mighty redwood, partly to be out of the rain, partly to be out of sight of Ragwing who she was convinced would be circling overhead waiting for her to emerge. Confident that she was neither going to get drenched nor be picked off by the enraged Heldrake, she had salvaged what she could from the steaming wreck – which turned out to be very little – and fashioned a basic crutch from twisted metal and fallen branches to allow her to move on the ankle she had broken in the crash. Her ribs throbbed from where the harness had prevented her from dying in the impact and her shoulder was badly bruised from where she had used it to ram open the shuttle door seconds before the craft exploded.

But at least she was alive to take another shot at Ragwing. Provided Tzula didn’t kill her first for breaking the shuttle, of course.

Putting all her weight onto her good foot, Shira began the long hobble back towards Atika.

158961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

Azrael was engaged in deep conversation with Apothecary Rephial as Balthasar approached, prisoner in tow. The two Dark Angels halted their discussion of casualty figures and gene-seed retrieval ratios and drew their weapons as the Terminator drew closer. Gabriel and Interrogator-Chaplain Asmodai did likewise, moving to the Supreme Grand Master's side when the identity of the captive became apparent.

‘Apothecary Rephial, Master Zadakiel and Fifth Company have been leading the clean-up operation for the past day and almost all of them are walking wounded. Have Master Belial and Third Company relieve them and see to their wounds,’ Azrael said, his subtext plain.

‘As you wish, my lord,’ Rephial said. His armour was as battered and gore-streaked as any of the other Dark Angels, his ability to kill the equal of his capacity to cure. As he walked past Balthasar, he gave the Deathwing an appreciative nod.

‘A prisoner for you, Lord Asmodai,’ Balthasar said, tugging on the chains he had used to bind Corpulax and dragging the Traitor Marine unceremoniously to the hard ground. Whereas previously he had only been missing his hands, now both of his arms were gone entirely, the shackles wrapped tightly around his throat. ‘I apologise that he is no longer in one piece.’

Asmodai said nothing, the crackle of his crozius arcanum doing his talking for him.

‘With your leave, my lords...’ Balthasar acknowledged his three superiors before turning on his heel.

‘Brother Balthasar, you should witness this,’ Azrael said. Balthasar halted and spun to face them again.

‘Lord Azrael, he is not ready,’ Gabriel protested.

Azrael raised a hand, bare flesh visible where daemonic acid had corroded his gauntlet. ‘Perhaps not, Gabriel, but he has earned this.’

The Master of the Deathwing nodded his assent, first to Azrael then to Balthasar. Corpulax laughed, the look on his face that of an arrogant victor

rather than a defeated foe.

‘It’s always secrets with you, isn’t it?’ Corpulax sneered. ‘Trying to keep a lid on the shame you’ve borne all these long millennia. Not wanting anybody to know about the Dark Angels treachery, including your own brothers. I was one of you, once, one of “the Unforgiven”, putting my life on the line day in and day out in the name of the Lion and the Emperor, and what did I get for it?’

None of the Dark Angels answered, their visages masks of disdain.

‘I got treated like a child at the supper table, asked to leave when the grown-ups wanted to speak, just like you did to your Apothecary. For years I put up with it, never questioning, never querying. Carrying out my orders even when it meant abandoning the people we were supposed to be protecting to carry out our own petty agenda or entering into conflict with our own allies. And for what? To protect a few pathetic secrets.’

Corpulax laughed again.

‘Do you know what the joke of it is? The punch line to all this? You’re only keeping it a secret from yourselves. You don’t think the Fallen share their path to enlightenment with those who rally to their banners, with those they bend their knee to? All who dwell within the Eye are privy to your secrets, know of your ancient betrayal and what you do with those former Dark Angels you hunt down and capture.’

Asmodai’s crozius blazed angrily.

‘We know about your dungeons, and how you make us try to repent, the “techniques” you employ to extract confessions and assuage your bruised pride. I’ve even spoken to the one you let slip from your grasp, the only prisoner ever to escape from beneath the Rock.’

The Dark Angels looked cagily at one another. The look that passed between Azrael and Asmodai was particularly loaded.

‘More secrets? Or has that not happened yet? The way time passes within the Eye that’s entirely possible.’

He let out a long, wet chuckle.

‘No matter. You can throw me in there, try to break me but it won’t work. My new master favours me and even the worst excesses your Interrogator-Chaplains plan to inflict pale against the pain I have already endured. I’ll bide my time, maybe scream occasionally, sob for mercy, look as if I’m playing along. Then, when the time is right, I’ll disappear. One morning, you’ll come down to my cell, torture implements all clean and ready for another day’s work, and it’ll be empty. And do you know what the *really* ironic thing is?’

All eyes were fixed coldly on the Plague Lord.

‘If my escape fails the first time, the second time, the third, I’ll get more chances. You’d rather die yourselves than let me die without a confession passing my lips.’ The grin he wore was so large that necrotised flesh tore at the edges of his mouth. ‘At this point I would hold out my hands so you could put them in irons but your whelp robbed me of that particular grand gesture.’

Azrael took a step towards Corpulax.

‘Have you finished?’ the Supreme Grand Master said, voice awash with disinterest.

The smile dropped from Corpulax’s face. ‘When you were speaking about the Rock just now, you said “us”. Something about how “you make us try to repent”. What did you mean by that?’

Corpulax bared his teeth again, half-smile, half-snarl. ‘I meant that the only thing that matters to you is securing the atonement of us Fallen.’

It was the Dark Angel’s turn to laugh now. Asmodai and Gabriel followed suit. Balthasar joined in, though he wasn’t sure what was so funny.

‘You used the word “us” again. “Us Fallen”.’ The laughter ceased. ‘What makes you think that we consider you to have fallen?’

‘Because I turned my back on both Emperor and Imperium. I swore fealty to the Plague God and took up arms against those I once fought alongside.’ Corpulax spat at Azrael’s feet. ‘And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.’

‘But why did you turn? Was it for power? Did your rotting deity promise you the means by which to attain all that you desired? Or was it in exchange for your life? Did you fear death so much that you sold both body and soul to prolong your life, no better than one of those plague zombies you commanded? Or were you forced to do it? Did a former master lead you down that path, constantly telling you that it was the right thing to do, all the while knowing that he was driving you towards damnation?’

It was Corpulax’s turn to remain silent.

‘I know that the Consecrators still remain loyal to the Lion and the Golden Throne so you cannot claim that you were led astray, that you believed you were carrying out the will of your master, blind to the truth.’ Azrael moved closer to Corpulax and knelt down so that he could look him in the eyes. ‘You turned to the Plague God for entirely selfish reasons, be it self-advancement or self-preservation. Those brothers of the Dark Angels Legion who betrayed us during the Great Heresy did so because of Luther. Some turned out of loyalty to him, others because they were told that it was the will of the Lion, Luther acting as his hand on Caliban while the primarch put down Horus’s rebellion.’

Azrael got to his feet. ‘Either way, Luther was the catalyst. Without him none of them would have fallen.’ He walked away from the kneeling traitor. Asmodai and Gabriel followed him, leaving Balthasar as a lone sentinel over the prisoner.

‘Though they fell, they were pushed and still have the chance to rise again in death, to denounce their dark masters and recognise the folly of treachery. You were not pushed, Corpulax, you jumped into the arms of

your new god, and for that we do not grant you the honour of considering you among the Fallen.'

None of the three retreating Dark Angels looked back.

'End him, Balthasar,' Azrael said as casually as if he was asking him to check his chronometer.

Before any protest could pass Corpulax's lips, Balthasar's blade had parted the Plague Lord's head from his shoulders.

'That was quite some trick you pulled there, Draigo,' Azrael said as he approached the Supreme Grand Master of the Grey Knights. 'I'd ask you to teach it to my Librarians but I suspect I know what your answer would be.'

Apothecary Raguel finished suturing the wound to Draigo's calf and moved on to tend to the wounds of less seriously injured Grey Knights. Beside him, Tzula handed him back the greave of his armour while she too had her deepest cuts stitched by an Imperial Guard medic.

'I saw the way your Dark Angels fought, Azrael. Not a single one of them needs any tutelage from me.' Draigo clamped the leg piece of his Terminator armour in place and held a hand up to Azrael. The Dark Angel clasped it and lifted the Grey Knight to his feet. Their gauntlets remained locked in a warrior's salute. 'I believe our debts to each other are now paid.'

Azrael smiled. It was a few moments before he spoke. 'Indeed they are.'

'The Plague Lord, Corpulax? Is there any sign of him?' Draigo asked releasing his grip.

'One of my Deathwing has just executed him. Traitors like him cannot be allowed to live.'

Draigo nodded. 'A shame. I would have liked the chance to question him before he was killed. During the final battle he said... things, things about me, about my future.'

‘I’m sure with the application of the correct techniques he would have said a great many things,’ Azrael replied. ‘Come now, Grand Master Draigo—’

‘*Supreme* Grand Master Draigo.’

‘Supreme Grand Master Draigo,’ Azrael corrected. ‘My Ravenwing have cleared a path to the Damnation Cache. The time has come for us to end this war.’

‘Our part in this particular war is over, Azrael. It falls to another to seal the Damnation Cache.’

Both Space Marines looked down at Tzula. Her shredded bodyglove had been abandoned altogether and she was back wearing Catachan fatigues and a grubby vest which was tied off above her torso, allowing air to her freshly sealed wounds. She waved the medic away and sprang to her feet.

‘What are we waiting for?’ she said, pulling the athame from her waistband and cockily throwing it in the air, end over end. She caught it by the handle as it fell. ‘Lead on.’



POSTLUDE

227961.M41 / The Rock. In orbit around Pythos, Pandorax System

An army of Chapter serfs stood waiting at the foot of the embarkation ramp as the rear hatch of *Roar of Vengeance* ground open with a hiss of escaping pressure. Its massive engines spooled down from a growl to a whine, and the clang of Terminator armour rang out over the noise of activity on the hangar deck.

As Balthasar set foot on the Dark Angels spacebound fortress-monastery for the first time in months, five of the serfs approached him in obeisance. He removed his storm bolter and handed it to two of them, before unsheathing his sword and giving it to another pair. To the final serf, a bulky man with the Dark Angels winged sword icon tattooed below one eye, he passed his helm. Each of them bowed before carrying the items back to his chambers. All across the deck, other serfs were doing the same with their particular master's artefacts and equipment.

In honour of their valour and victory on Pythos, Lord Azrael had granted all of the surviving Dark Angels the honour of travelling back to the Rock on board his own personal transport. The ancient Thunderhawk had made fewer journeys than any of the Sons of the Lion would have liked, but Balthasar and his squad were the penultimate group – only Lord Azrael

himself along with an honour guard of Deathwing Knights still remained planetside.

Balthasar looked down at his suit of relic armour, worn into battle by two dozen former warriors of the Dark Angels First Company, and felt both pride and dismay at its sorry condition. Pride that he had lived up to the legacy of its former owners by helping win yet another campaign for his Chapter, dismay that he had allowed it to sustain so much damage in the process. With the vast majority of the Dark Angels already back onboard the Rock, the Techmarines and artificers were likely already inundated with orders for repair and replacement, but his place among the Chapter's elite would grant him preferential treatment. Instead of joining his battle-brothers and returning to quarters, Balthasar set off in the opposite direction towards the forge.

He had barely taken ten paces when two figures stepped out to bar his passage, one in black armour, the other ivory.

‘And where do you think you are going, Brother Balthasar?’ Gabriel said, the condition of his armour the mirror of the younger Space Marine's.

‘I was on my way to visit Master Serpicus in the forge to petition him to repair my armour and wargear.’ There was an uncertainty to Balthasar's voice, he was unsure of the two high-ranking Dark Angels' reasons for stopping him.

‘There will be plenty of time for your plate to receive the attention it requires,’ Asmodai said, his voice a gravelly whisper. ‘Right now, there are things you must know. Secrets we must share with you.’ The Interrogator-Chaplain nodded to the Master of the Deathwing and ran a finger across the cheek of his skull mask, just beneath his right eye.

Shepherded from the hangar deck by both Gabriel and Asmodai, Balthasar took another step closer to the centre of the circle.

227961.M41 / The Governor's Quarters. Atika, Pythos

The stark rays of Pythos's midday sun filtered in through the gaps in the shutters of the makeshift governor's quarters and reflected from every inch of Kaldor Draigo's silver armour. The suit had been cleaned and polished in the weeks since the victory on Pythos, but it still bore the dents and cracks of combat and would require many hours of work once the Grey Knights returned to Titan.

‘And neither the Grey Knights nor the Dark Angels can spare even a single squad to garrison Pythos?’ The new governor's tone was insistent rather than pleading. ‘We have both witnessed the lengths the Archenemy will go to take this world and fill it with horrors. This time we were fortunate that Strike and his men were here and prepared for the assault and could hold out for reinforcements. Abaddon escaped. If he comes back again and with greater numbers, I fear the outcome will be very different. Not to mention the Chaos forces left behind who are already hampering our rebuilding efforts.’

Draigo grinned, impressed at how quickly and firmly the new governor had grasped the nettle of politics. ‘Governor Digriiz, the Adeptus Astartes are not the personal armies of planetary rulers. Colonel Strike and the 183rd will remain here in defence of Pythos and another three Catachan regiments are being sent here to bolster his forces. Two Navy fighter wings will stay behind to patrol the skies and elements of Battlefleet Demeter are to be placed on permanent patrol in the Pandorax System. You know as well as I how dark it has got in the galaxy of late, how stretched our forces are. You should thank the Emperor for what you have.’

Tzula returned his smile. ‘You can't blame me for trying.’

Strike had immediately ruled himself out of consideration for the role of governor the instant offensive operations had halted. When Tzula had pointed out – without going into too much detail – that she had prior experience of ruling over a world, Azrael immediately granted her the role with Draigo's full endorsement.

Though it was not unprecedented for a member of the Ordos to be granted governorship of an Imperial world, it was rare for a junior interrogator to be elevated to such a high post. She had already used her Inquisitorial sway to good effect and the first Departmento Munitorum vessels were even now en route to Pythos to begin the rebuilding process. Within months, new miners would arrive from Gaea and other outlying worlds and she was determined to have the planet back up to full operational capacity before the year was out.

‘Perhaps at least one Grey Knight will remain behind regardless,’ Tzula said, adjusting the lapel of her unfamiliar ceremonial gown with her augmented hand. Gone was the crude bionic fitted by the Catachan medical corps, in its place a sleek, silent limb crafted by one of Azrael’s Techmarines and fitted by a Dark Angels Apothecary.

Draigo’s aspect darkened. ‘Epimetheus is no longer on Pythos. I know that he would rebuff any attempt for me to hail him telepathically, but since our communion I have no longer been able to detect his psychic spoor.’

‘Do you think he has gone into the Maelstrom, as he told Shira?’

‘It is possible, but I sense the hand of another in this. It is not my warp gifts telling me that but rather a feeling I have inside my gut.’

They remained in silence for a moment, Shira stood behind a jury-rigged desk made from an old ammunition crate, Draigo stooping in the enclosed confines of the temporary structure.

‘My Grey Knights and I take our leave of Pythos tonight but before we return to Titan there are still a few loose ends I have to tie up,’ Draigo said eventually.

Tzula knew exactly what one of those loose ends was and, though it made her feel uneasy, as a loyal servant of the Golden Throne she knew it had to be done. What Draigo said next caught her completely off-guard.

‘You have something that is the property of the Ordo Malleus. I will see that it is returned to them in good order.’

‘K’Cee? I thought—’

‘I am not referring to the xenos, Governor Digriiz. I meant the knife.’

‘Oh,’ Tzula said, slightly embarrassed. She had almost forgotten about the knife, having barely given it a thought since... since... since she did *something* with it. She remembered using it to help kill the daemon in the Emerald Cave but what did she do with it after that? The Damnation Cache – how had she closed it? Draigo spoke again and the thought eluded her like smoke in the breeze.

‘May I have it?’ he held out a gauntleted palm.

Tzula pulled back the folds in her robe and slid the athame out from beneath. Gripping the point between the tips of her fingers she placed it in Draigo’s hand. Somehow, impossibly, when she took her own hand away, the blade had grown, appearing to be a perfectly reasonable size in the Space Marine’s enormous fist.

‘And K’Cee? The jokaero?’ she said with trepidation.

‘What jokaero?’ Draigo said, the corners of his mouth upturning slightly. Tzula mimicked his expression. ‘And now to my last few bits of business on Pythos. May the Emperor watch over you and keep this world safe, Governor Digriiz.’ Still dipping his head to prevent it from scraping on the low ceiling, he turned to exit the prefabricated structure.

‘Lord Draigo?’ Tzula said, causing the Grey Knight to stop and rotate to face her. ‘There is just one more thing you could do for me. One last favour.’

‘I have already turned a blind eye to the fact that you are harbouring a xenos – a xenos that should by rights be back under the custody of the Ordos. Please do not push your luck.’

‘Perhaps I misspoke. This favour is not for me, it’s for Colonel Strike and the Catachans.’ She looked him dead in the eyes as she spoke. ‘What

they've endured, all they've been through. They deserve time to grieve properly, to honour their dead in the proper way. Is there any way you could delay mind-wiping the 183rd? They've earned that much at least.'

Draigo considered this for a moment. 'Very well, Governor Digriiz. I'll have Castellan Crowe commence with the other regiments. The Catachans' minds won't be wiped until sundown,' he said before stepping out into the noon heat of Pythos.

The ten-man squad of Deathwing Knights flanked the approach to the *Roar of Vengeance*, maces held high to form a processional archway under which their lord and master could board the Thunderhawk.

As he neared the waiting craft, Azrael noticed the heads of some of his honour guard twitch, turning slightly to look back behind him. Usually, this sort of infraction would result in a stern rebuke at the very least, a writ of penitence at worst, but Azrael would have expected only a single battle-brother to show such indiscipline. This was a whole squad, of Deathwing Knights no less. Curious as to what had distracted such immaculately disciplined and well-drilled Space Marines, Azrael turned around to look.

Just in time to catch a silvered fist in his face.

The blow was controlled, not hard enough to render him unconscious or break any bones, but with enough force to knock him brusquely to his backside. In a blur his assailant was on top of him, gripping the collar of his cloak and snarling.

'What did you do with him, you bastard?' Draigo yelled, spittle trailing from his lips and teeth. 'Is he up there in those dungeons of yours, along with all those others you've collected down the centuries? What do you want with them? What is it that you do to them?'

The Deathwing honour guard surrounded the pair of Supreme Grand Masters, their weapons primed and aimed at Draigo's head. Azrael gestured for them to lower their arms.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Azrael said, trying to remove the Grey Knight’s hands from upon him.

Draigo slammed the Dark Angel against the ground again. ‘Liar! You’ve taken him. I know you have. Were you in league with Abaddon all along? Did he deliver him up to you in exchange for his escape?’

The Deathwing’s guns rose again. This time Azrael did not order them dropped. ‘Are you accusing me of heresy, Grey Knight?’ It was as much a warning as an accusation.

Draigo paused, fully aware of the implications of responding in the affirmative. He released his grip on Azrael and stood up. ‘You figured out who he was, and what he was, and you had to have him to yourself. Pray that I never obtain the proof as the fury of the entire Grey Knights Chapter will make what you faced here on Pythos look like a training exercise.’

‘As I said, Draigo,’ Azrael said, hauling himself upright, ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

As his Grey Knights counterpart marched off into the distance, Lord Azrael of the Dark Angels would have given anything in the universe for the opposite to be true.

Colonel Strike shielded his eyes from the sun and looked skywards as the *Roar of Vengeance* raced towards the heavens. As he watched the vapour trail lengthen and fade, he could not help but feel a pang of jealousy, that the Space Marines got to return home while he and his troops would live out their days light years from Catachan defending a world they should never have been on in the first place. The feeling soon passed when he realised that both the Dark Angels and the Grey Knights would live out their extended lifespans defending countless worlds that were not their own, destined to die at the point of an enemy’s blade, at range by the gun of some unseen killer or in a heroic act of self-sacrifice. That thought also gave rise to envy.

With the Dark Angels gone and the Grey Knights due to leave Pythos come nightfall, the colonel was now back in overall command of the

planet's defence. Most of the Chaos forces had fled the planet but pockets of invaders remained behind harrying the Imperial forces in a guerrilla campaign. Plague Marines still prowled the tunnels beneath Atika, a handful of Black Legionnaires had made a killing ground of a thousand square kilometres of jungle in the southern hemisphere and packs of cultists laid claim to abandoned delver-strongholds and were using them as bases of operation. There were corroborated rumours that a winged daemon engine had taken up home in the Olympax Mountains and was preying on both foot and air patrols.

Strike walked briskly through the city of tents and huts that the Imperial Guard regiments had erected on the Plain of Glass after the war had ended, the heavy kit bag over his shoulder clanking with the sound of metal on metal with each step he took. Soon the temporary shelters would be replaced with more permanent structures and a new hive city built to replace the one that had been destroyed in retaking the planet. In the meantime, tens of thousands of soldiers from dozens of different regiments were living on top of one another, and without a clear and present enemy to fight had begun to turn on each other. In the past week Strike had spent as much time dealing with indiscipline as he had organising troop movements and rotations.

Accepting salutes as he went, the colonel came to the end of the neat rows of tents and canvas gave way to open ground. Soon reaching his destination, Strike dropped his bag to the ground and opened it, revealing the cache of Catachan blades within.

The orbital bombardment of Atika had been brutal and absolute but one tract had avoided destruction in the firestorm. Whether by some error on the part of a Calculus Logi who determined the targeting pattern, a missile malfunctioning and detonating astray or the whim of the God-Emperor himself, the area used by the Catachans as a memorial prior to the invasion, and the land around it, had remained intact. In the weeks since

the war ended, new markers had been added and the red of Catachan bandanas had been joined by Mordian blue, Cadian grey and many other colours as fellow Imperial Guard regiments tied the tunics of the fallen to bayonets and combat blades by way of remembrance.

Strike had just taken the first armful of knives from the bag when the sound of heavy boots crunching over the vitrified approach drew his attention. His vest and bandana drenched with sweat, Brigstone was following the route his commanding officer had taken.

‘I thought I’d find you here,’ Brigstone said drawing alongside Strike. ‘We’ve received word from Lord Draigo and the Grey Knights. There’s to be some kind of ceremony tonight before they leave the planet. Attendance is mandatory, all personnel. Do you think they’re going to honour us in some way?’

Until a few months ago, Strike – like many Imperial Guard commanders – had never even heard of the Grey Knights, yet now they were the subject of hearsay and speculation among the various regiments stationed on Pythos. Some of those whispers and half-truths had a dark edge to them: the Grey Knights killed anybody who laid eyes on them – even Space Marines from other Chapters – to keep their existence secret; anybody fighting alongside them was turned into a servitor after the battle; any world on which they set foot was destroyed to cover their tracks. Strike had heard them all but believed none – if the Grey Knights were going to execute them it would have happened by now. But the fact remained that the Grey Knights obviously went to great lengths to keep their existence clandestine. He had harboured suspicions for a while as to how they maintained their secrecy and had a feeling these would be confirmed before the next morning.

‘I think in their own way they are,’ Strike said regretfully. He handed Brigstone the knives he was carrying and retrieved more from the bag. ‘But for now, let us remember our dead while we still can.’

Strike started off across the memorial field, a sea of glinting blades and fluttering scraps of uniform as far as the eye could see.

Overhead, a wing of Imperial Navy Thunderbolts flew in tight formation, nine craft forming a perfect V shape. As they reached the Imperial Guard memorial, eight of them peeled off leaving just the flight leader to continue flying true and straight. Traditionally only one of the craft would have broken ranks, but the losses incurred on Pythos were such that eight seemed a more appropriate salute.

Besides, the new wing commander of the Pythos Third Fighter Wing was anything but a traditionalist.

Epaulets gleaming under the high sun, Shira Hagen sat in the cockpit of her Thunderbolt gripping the controls to maintain her course. Her new ride was unfamiliar to her, but it had enough in common with the Kestrel that she had been cleared to fly one as soon as her ankle had healed. Rumour had it that the ejector mechanism actually worked on this pattern of Thunderbolt, which given the fates of the previous two craft she had flown, might be useful at some point.

Her new rank and fighter were not the only things that had changed. The instant she had left the medicae on a pair of proper crutches, she had started to ask questions around the Imperial Guard camp about obtaining certain items. The brushes had been the easiest to get hold of, the treadheads in the armoured battalions always keen on marking their kill tallies along their hulls. The paint was a little trickier to come by but after convincing a Cadian quartermaster to join her at the dice table she had walked away with the exact colours she had required.

The vox-link in her newly repainted helmet squawked into life, the tinny hiss of a ground controller. ‘Wing Commander Hagen. Heldrake spotted over the Olympax Range. Second Wing are already engaged but require assistance.’

‘Ragwing?’ she replied hopefully. Her exploits against the daemon engine – along with a recommendation from the new planetary governor – had helped secure her promotion and the legend of the beast, along with the name she had given it, was the talk of the Navy mess halls.

‘Affirmative, wing commander,’ came the crackling reply.

‘Back in formation, Third Wing,’ she said, switching to an open channel.

She looked out of her cockpit to see all eight of her fellow pilots slotting in behind her. Another set of eyes watched on, large and reptilian where once was the image of a pair of hawk eyes, set above a fanged maw painted over the hooked beak. Gone too were the representations of grey feathers, replaced by the likeness of green scales.

‘We have a dragon to slay.’

227961.M41 / The Emerald Cave. Atika, Pythos

It moved on all fours, bounding over the corpses yet to be removed from the killing field and darting between the scorched and mangled ruins of tanks and flyers. Occasionally it would stop to look more closely at one of the abandoned vehicles, sometimes scoring a strange mark into the hull, other times removing some component and placing it carefully into the pack it carried on its back. In the main it ignored them, intent on recovering what it had come down so deep to find.

Its inhuman eyes could see perfectly well in the darkness, but it wore a lamp fashioned from Pythosian crystal strapped to its forehead. To any onlooker it would have seemed as if a miner strayed too far from the pit tunnels, but the only eyes that looked upon it were dead ones and what it sought was far more important – to it, at least – than mere jewels or rocks.

The red beam of light refracted from the emeralds in the wall as it turned to look around, casting the entire chamber in a strange, dull hue. Spotting what it had come for, it emitted a loud exclamation of success and leapt from wreck to wreck, seemingly heedless to its own wellbeing as it slammed against the hard metal.

Halting atop the sheared hull of a super-heavy, it looked along its length, making certain that it had located its quarry. Jumping down, it ran the back of a hairy arm along an armoured fairing, wiping away the coating of soot and daemonic residues. Shining its lamp upon it, two words carefully scripted in High Gothic were revealed: *Traitor's Bane*.

With another screech of joy, K'Cee pulled a wrench from his backpack and set to work at the long task he had ahead of him.

?????.M?? / Somewhere in the Eye of Terror

The heavy door to the cell creaked open slowly, sending two of its occupants scurrying to the corners. If they could, the other two beings in the cell might have done likewise but, fused together and suspended from chains made from an unbreakable warpforged metal, that was beyond their current abilities.

Abaddon stepped into the darkened prison, the amber eyes of one of the xenos blanks regarding him with fear. On the other side of the cell, the female human blank, naked and caked in filth, snarled like a cornered beast. The Warmaster ignored them both, focused solely on who – or, more accurately what – was hanging in the centre of the cell.

His powerful arms bound at the wrists, Epimetheus's similarly shackled feet hung a metre above the cold stone floor of the dungeon. His skin was a ruin of scar tissue, his black carapace having been removed early in his captivity, and his eyes and mouth having been sewn shut with fibre hewn from the sinew of daemons. Behind his sealed lips sat the void where his tongue used to be, Abaddon making good on his promise at the time of capture, and a clean surgical wound ran along the side of his throat where his progenoids had been extracted.

The price in oaths and fealty that the Warmaster had received from Fabius Bile and his ilk in exchange for this particular genetic material was immeasurable. When next he launched a Black Crusade upon the

Imperium Abaddon would not only reap the benefits of that loyalty but, with the blessing of the Four, have new and more powerful troops at his disposal.

And, if his ultimate plan should come to fruition... No, similar ventures had been attempted in the past and come to naught. The Warmaster dealt in practicalities and actualities, not what ifs.

Sensing a presence in the room, Epimetheus twisted on his chains, his enhanced physiology still granting him the strength to do so in spite of the unknowable amount of time he had been in captivity. As he spun above the ground, the true extent of the horrors wrought upon Epimetheus became apparent, driving a smirk to Abaddon's lips.

His limbs removed, the third blank was grafted to Epimetheus's back, one last failsafe should the emasculated Grey Knight slip his bonds and attempt to escape. The man was barely alive, the dull eyes set below a heavy brow barely open, and tubes protruded from holes bored in his torso through which flowed dark liquids, sustaining his hellish existence.

Abaddon drew close to his captive, causing both Epimetheus and the symbiotic blank to flinch. The Grey Knight's nostrils flared. Despite being deprived of most of his senses, he could tell that the Warmaster was near.

Leaning in close to his prisoner's ear, Abaddon whispered, 'Soon, Epimetheus. Soon.'

The breath being forced from Epimetheus's nose became grunts, and he pulled and twisted more forcefully at his bonds causing the blank joined to him to murmur a plaintive wail.

Exiting the cell, the Warmaster left the Grey Knight to struggle against his restraints, safe in the knowledge that he would never be able to break them no matter how long he hung there.

Abaddon had waited ten thousand years to depose the Corpse-Emperor and claim the Throne of Terra. To break one of the founding brothers of the

Grey Knights, to have him bend his knee in unswerving allegiance, the Warmaster could wait for all eternity.

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